

DCCD 2020

Dialogue of Cultures - Culture of Dialogue: from Conflicting to Understanding

J. FRANZEN'S NOVEL 'PURITY': TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The article analyzes the novel 'Purity' by a contemporary American writer J. Franzen within the transcultural perspective. The author among many other things addresses the issue of mutual interaction of cultures in rapidly globalizing modern world. The analysis of J. Franzen's 'Purity' proves it to be the novel of multiple cultural context where the author depicts historical, political, national peculiarities of different cultures, namely American and German. On this ground we consider this novel to belong to a transcultural work of art. Transculturality in it is manifested in two ways. Firstly, the author addresses the issue of interaction between different cultural codes. Secondly, J. Franzen draws a parallel between the power of totalitarian states and the power of the Internet in modern world as both of them seem to possess similar features: transparency of private life, individuals dissolving into a mass, social hierarchy, the cult of personality, social control and hypocrisy. The author clearly criticizes any forms of totalitarianism. A transcultural approach allows the readers to avoid possible pitfalls while reading works of fiction explicitly or implicitly demonstrating various cultural patterns. In terms of transnational cultural processes taking place nowadays, the analysis of literary works reflecting transcultural tendencies appears to be progressively relevant.

2357-1330 © 2020 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: J. Franzen, modern American fiction, transculturality.



1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, we can witness one of the global trends in the development of human society: migratory processes and associated with them social, ethnical and cultural changes have become ubiquitous. People's lifestyles increasingly cross the borders of national cultures, which necessarily implies a significant complication of their ethnic and cultural identities. More and more people realize that their cultural and national identities cannot be equated. An identity becomes mixed and complicated: the picture of the world becomes either polyphonic ("multiple identity"), i.e. each structural component does not violate its independence, or hybrid – a new form of a mixed cultural identity. However, the terms 'mosaic' and 'collage' identities are used more often, since globalization processes enable both world cultural integration, and an individual's ethnical and cultural differentiation (Astaf'eva, 2012). In other words, people around the world are beginning to adopt an innovative transcultural orientation and attitude.

Another modern tendency that defines cultural changes in the world is globalization, which manifests itself as follows: this is subjective corporate aspiration of the oligarchy to seize the world power over the heads of governments, national structures, lifestyles and mindsets based on a purely commercial and potestarian basis (Vaschenko, 2015). With the advent of a multipolar world, the traditional division into 'core' and 'peripheral' countries, into self-enclosed 'home' and 'Other' cultures is being eroded.

This tendency is closely connected with the ever-increasing development of digital communication systems and technologies, Internet addiction, unification of information shared by people from different countries and cultures.

Physical and virtual mobility, cultural interactions of people foster the following important changes in culture. Firstly, there is a close interconnection and mixing of cultures in modern world. Secondly, the national cultures themselves are characterized by a high degree of hybridization, since each culture incorporates elements of other cultures, as well as elements of the universal cultural code.

2. Problem Statement

These trends in world culture, their reflection in literature, require new theoretical approaches, new terminology, new methods of interpreting fiction. Contemporary researches of culture and literary studies argue that the concepts 'interculturality' and 'multiculturalism' are no longer able to provide an adequate understanding and interpretation of modern works of fiction as they do not deal with fast-changing transformations in cultures and literatures. In this regard, the concept of 'transculturality' is being increasingly used in culture and literary studies (W. Welsch, E. Berry, M. N. Epstein, G. Dupuis, Ch. Brosius, R. Wenzlhuemer, M. Herren, M. Rüesch, Ch. Sibille, M. Juneja, M. Tlostanova, O. G. Sidorova and others).

The concept of "transculturality" was devised by Welsch (1999). According to Welsch (2001), there can be two levels of transculturality: macrolevel: the altered cut of today's cultures and microlevel: transcultural formation of individuals. One of the prominent researches of transculturality Dagnino (2013) argues that "the term transcultural <...> is used in two ways: (a) as a mode of reflexive identity and

cultural orientation <...>; and (b) as a critical perspective that sees cultures as relational webs and acknowledges the transitory, confluent, and mutually transforming nature of cultures” (p. 130).

The works of many contemporary writers in one way or another inevitably develop and promote transcultural sensibility: “a transcultural writer is a writer who, by undergoing a transpatriation process, has developed a transcultural sensibility and expresses it through her or his writing” (Dagnino, 2016, pp. 74-75).

The focus of the “transcultural” artwork is on the dialogue between different cultures. The form of that dialogue can be seen as constant constitution of cultural “mosaics”: its fragments can coexist or mix and they create a unique “pattern” for each literary work. So, we can say that any contemporary literary work should be studied and analyzed through the framework of transcultural perspective which “sees cultures <...> as metamorphic, confluent and intermingling processes where individuals constantly interfere with them, are transformed by them and, ultimately, imaginatively write about them” (Dagnino, 2012, p. 4).

3. Research Questions

Reading any text of fiction, even if the reader and writer belong to the same culture, live in the same country and historical period, means crossing the borders of cultures. The readers who identify themselves with certain cultural landscape and share certain value and behavior attitudes get acquainted with a set of different attitudes presented, one way or another, in a work of fiction. But if the author’s ethnic identity, experience, cultural practices are different from those of the reader’s, and in a literary work he or she presents multiple lifeworlds and cultural settings, the reader inevitably gets more sensitive to the diversity of cultures.

A positive for readers result of immersing in the dialogue of cultures can be explained as follows. The readers expose themselves to diversity, flexible character identities, differences and similarities between their own culture and various cultures presented in the work of fiction. This ultimately leads to developing their transcultural sensibility. However, negative consequences are also possible – cultural misunderstanding, observation of polarities and tension between cultural values and up to the latent but no less dangerous intercultural conflict (Ter-Minasova, 2000). In this regard, a transcultural approach allows the readers to avoid possible pitfalls while reading a work of fiction. G. Dupuis explains this idea in the following passage: “Transculturalism takes place when at least two – and sometimes three or more – cultures are not only engaged in dialogue, but partake in a more profound and often contradictory process, in which enlightenment, understanding, and continuous reassessment of identity are at play. The ultimate aim is to transform each other’s identity through a long, arduous, and sometimes painful negotiation of Otherness” (Dupuis, 2008, p. 500).

The examples of transcultural literary works are the early twenty-first century novels, for instance ‘White Teeth’ by Zadie Smith (2000) and ‘Americanah’ by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2013) and some others in which the authors explore the complexities of the characters’ identity (Stephan, 2020). Tahir Shah’s ‘The Caliph’s House’ (2007) also depicts a transcultural identity construction: “Tahir Shah provides new narrative lines that delve into questions of alterity, mobility, and negotiating difference when crossing borders” (Sbiri, 2020, p. 12). In the novels mentioned above the main characters are

immigrants and the plots center round their acculturation within a new society. But there are cases when an identity construction is taking place in some other context, for example in the situation of interaction between different cultural codes. The research question of the present work is what transcultural modes of creative expression enable the writers to depict the transnational cultural processes of modern world.

4. Purpose of the Study

With this transcultural context in mind, we argue that an American writer Jonathan Franzen in his novel 'Purity' (2015) among many other things addresses the issue of mutual interaction of cultures in rapidly globalizing modern world. This novel can be seen as transcultural if we consider the following definition: "we can define a transcultural work of fiction as a work that transcends the borders of a single culture in its choice of topic, vision and scope and thus contributes to a wider global literary perspective" (Dagnino, 2012, p. 4). Thus, the purpose of the article is to analyze J. Franzen's 'Purity' as the novel presenting a dialogue of cultures, as well as to identify the text elements that characterize it as a transcultural work of art.

5. Research Methods

The main research method in this study is the method of hermeneutic interpretation of units at different levels of the language system, referred to the features of idiostyle of J. Franzen.

We also analyze the novel under investigation through the framework of transcultural perspective which, according to Dagnino (2012), can be described as "a transcultural model of analysis and debate, where cultures are read in their organic movements and mutual interactions" (p. 4).

The reader nowadays can misunderstand and misinterpret the works of the past eras due to social, political, and everyday changes that inevitably lead to changes in worldview and aesthetic preferences. When reading foreign literature, both past and present, cultural differences also play an important role. As a result, the perception of the cultural border-crossing narrative requires the reader's cultural sensitivity and respect.

First of all, the reader or investigator needs to determine the role of different cultural patterns in a work of art: their description can be either central or secondary task for the writer; certain cultural landscape can serve to present different issues; the author can write about their own culture or about the culture they are for some reason interested in; the writer can have special relation to or special opinion about the culture(s) described. In addition, different cultural patterns can be incorporated into the work of fiction both explicitly, when the author emphasizes their role through comments and / or reasoning, and implicitly, when they are barely noticeable and serve as a background. The latter case requires the most careful reading; otherwise border-crossing cultural patterns can be missed or misinterpreted.

It is also important to determine if the participants of the "conversation" – the author, the reader and the characters of the work – belong to the same culture, different cultures or their identities go beyond the limits of one culture. According to Schulze-Engler (2009) "the transcultural potential of texts lies in their impact on the reader as well as in the modes of representation required to approximate the cultural complexity they engage with" (p. 14).

6. Findings

Different researches describe modern American fiction as ‘late postmodernist’, ‘post-postmodernist’, ‘digimodernist,’ ‘New Sincerity’, ‘metamodernism’ and even ‘Cosmodernism’, suggesting that it is now “undergoing a reactionary return to Realist aesthetics” (Savvas & Coffman, 2019, p. 196). Another tendency of modern American literary texts which is generally acknowledged by researchers is their transcultural character. According to Sidorova (2012), including many various components into the scope of American literature of the late twentieth century and creating on this basis transcultural patterns is an undoubtedly productive trend.

All of the above mentioned characteristics can be traced in the novel ‘Purity’ by Jonathan Franzen, whose aim was to describe in a realistic manner current American attitudes and give a broader picture of American society within the globalized world in the new age of internet totalitarianism. In this regard, the novel can be considered among other things to be the text with transcultural potential.

The novel inspires a great deal of interest in terms of literary criticism. Various interpersonal, social and political ideas and concerns that frame the novel receive much academic attention. The novel addresses the following issues: identity formation of a person, family and love relationships, globalization of the world, the threat of nuclear war, challenges of the Information Age. Sharpe (2018) asserts that “Franzen’s most recent novel, *Purity*, weaves together his critical interest in the legacies of leftist efforts in the 20th century with the dynamics of transparency and techno-consumerism, which have allowed the Internet to take on a newly totalitarian scope as a mechanism of cultural control” (p. 2).

The genre and composition of the novel can be an interesting subject for further investigation, since its specific features fit into the postmodern paradigm. Sari (2019) states that: “the complexity of *Purity*’s narrative structure is a way of unveiling a complicated set of relations between characters and how their individual stories intersect with one another” (p. 106).

The subject of this article is only one aspect of this multidimensional novel, namely transcultural perspective, as the author, being American, depicts personages belonging to different cultures, namely American and those of socialist Germany.

The characters of the second chapter belong to different segments of the German Democratic Republic. The author and his characters live in different time periods; they gained their experiences within different linguistic, cultural, social and historical environments; they are also representatives of different political systems – a free democratic country and a country ruled as an authoritarian state. The nature of the dialogue in this chapter is far from being friendly, appreciating and respectful, on the contrary, the author expresses his rejection of the socialist system in general and socialist Germany in particular. As one of the scholars observes, Franzen in this novel criticizes the totalitarian regimes of Europe developed after the Second World War (Gruzdeva, 2017). However, such an interpretation of the Germany’s history helps J. Franzen reveal the main idea of his novel – the corrupting influence of any form of totalitarianism on the development of individual’s identity and interpersonal relations.

The title of the second chapter – *The Republic of Bad Taste* – sets up the reader’s anticipation for a satirical narrative. The whole chapter is devoted to description and denunciation of the totalitarian system where an individual’s free development was practically impossible, all aspects of people’s life were regulated by the Communist Party and marked by various restrictions of society. Even the best and most

honest people were forced to surrender to social control and total hypocrisy, forget of personal liberty and free life choices.

The author shows that the totalitarian system inevitably destroys people's lives and personalities: those who accepted the system turned into hypocritical monsters, those who could not and did not accept it became renegades, outcasts, were imprisoned in the Stasi's dungeons or mental hospitals. To Franzen (2015) opinion, everyone, without exception, turned out to be broken in that country – both politically reliable people and rejected by the system *political lepers* (p. 112).

Franzen (2015) reveals the fact that socialist ideas permeated all the institutions, including universities. The author describes a situation of pure absurd when teachers of the English Literature department were forced to align their subject with general system settings. The protagonist's mother, a university professor and qualified specialist in English literature, strictly observed requirements of the socialist society. In her interpretation, the famous play by Shakespeare *Hamlet* is ... *a parable of false consciousness and its downfall* (Franzen, 2015, p. 104). The interpretation of the classical tragedy in terms of socialist realism cannot but leave you with a bitter laugh, even though it's clear that Franzen gives it in a somewhat hyperbolic form.

The novel also presents the life of the Communist party elite, Andreas's stepfather and his family being an example of this segment, which could enjoy the benefits of socialism, however scarce they could be. Belonging to the elite required total political reliability, which, according to the author, is based on lies. Born to such an elite family, the protagonist had access to everything that was difficult for others to access – rare books, prestigious university education, material benefits. But life did not bring him joy, as, according to the author, *he lived in a vast proletarian desert of time and boringness* (Franzen, 2015, p. 110). Talented and extraordinary people in the Republic had plenty of time and no possibility to actively engage with the world around them, which sometimes led to mental health problems. The privilege and exclusive position of the protagonist within society, had led him to alienation and loneliness, had affected all his further life, even when he lived in another country, belonged to a different system, occupied a different position.

The author exposes the GDR social practices to destructive criticism using epithets with a negative connotation, he makes the very definition of "socialist" sound negative: Andreas's female classmates – *Boring. Stupid. Socialist* (Franzen, 2015, p. 120), the country's authorities – *the stupidest, boringest, meanest, ugliest, most stink-cowardly self-satisfied philistines the world has ever seen* (Franzen, 2015, p. 155).

Paradoxically, but even the socialist system collapse, the fall of the Wall, the newly acquired freedom, contrary to expectations, did not bring satisfaction or relief to the main character as well as to many other characters of the novel. They were the product of their time, so everything they felt at that moment was loss, uncertainty, anxiety and fear.

So, the dialogue between the USA and the GDR cultures in the J. Franzen's novel has an explicitly negative tone. However, the task of the author is not limited to the satirical denunciation of the totalitarian socialist system. His task is much broader – to draw a parallel between the totalitarian state and the totalitarian nature of modern institutions and, above all, the totalitarian power of the Internet.

The *Moonglow Dairy* chapter describes the life of another protagonist of the novel – Purity – in Bolivia. However, instead of the expected dialogue between the American and Bolivian cultures, the reader sees life routine of a certain community – *the Sunlight Project*, one of the largest and well-known global information leakage Internet companies. The structure and organization principles of this community resemble the structure of a socialist country in miniature. The idea the project staff are obsessed with is clearly reminiscent of the utopian socialist idea – *making the world a better place* (Franzen, 2015, p. 243). The very name of the project "Sunlight" echoes the slogans of communism, screaming about the sunlight of the future.

This project is headed by the protagonist of the chapter *The Republic of Bad Taste* – Andreas, who has passed a difficult path to this position. The project participants, though not without irony, call him 'Dear Leader' (both words begin with a capital letter), which resembles people's attitude towards the great leaders of totalitarian states. Everyone obeys the leader, follows his instructions, even their sympathy or hostility depend on his decisions.

The atmosphere prevailing in the community also resembles the atmosphere of socialist countries – surveillance, denunciations, exclusion of any criticisms addressed to the Leader and the Project, even in the form of a joke. *Why even stay here if you're just going to be negative?* (Franzen, 2015, p. 252) – the question posed to Purity by one of the participants in the Project, accurately describes the environment they live in.

As in a totalitarian state, Andreas having become a popular person, the head of the organization, feels lonely. That is what he says in this respect: *Everything conspires to make the famous person ever more alone* (Franzen, 2015, p. 259).

The most obvious similarity between the totalitarianism of socialist countries and the Internet is expressed in the words of the protagonist Andreas about his attitude towards both systems: *I got trapped into this job. I hate the Internet as much as I hated my motherland* (Franzen, 2015, p. 275).

In the sixth chapter *The Killer*, the author draws direct parallels between power of a totalitarian state and the Internet, which is explicated by several phrases uttered by the main character Andreas in his internal monologues. For example: *If you substituted networks for socialism, you got the Internet* (Franzen, 2015, p. 448).

The functionary in a social country is practically no different from the functionary in the Internet community. According to Andreas, the public speech of a modern Internet functionary *was a smarmy syrup of convenient conviction and personal surrender that he remembered well from the Republic* (Franzen, 2015, p. 448).

The novel explicitly compares the totalitarian state and the totalitarianism of the Internet, the main similarities between them being *the characteristic annihilation of the distinction between private and public; the dissolution of the individual in the mass* (Franzen, 2015, p. 465).

At the end of the novel, the main character Purity leaves the *Sunlight* project, realizing that the atmosphere in *Moonglow Dairy* is not healthy, the project's activities are useless, and its organizer and leader Andreas seems increasingly insane to her. Andreas himself comes to understanding that his new life as the leader of the most famous world company, in fact, is no different from life in his socialist homeland, it is worthless and leads to loneliness. This understanding, as well as the psychological trauma

of the past, causes a severe mental disorder and leads Andreas to a tragic end. The author does not say what happened to the company after losing its 'Dear Leader'. But the fact that Purity (a pure personality) left the company, and its leader's spiritual failure inspire the reader with hope for positive changes.

7. Conclusion

So, modern societies are increasingly becoming 'a transcultural space', where "the energies – in the form of ideas, sympathies, artworks – circulate, taking and giving aspects of all they touch, thereby dissolving hierarchies and binaries of identity. In transcultural space every difference co-exists" (Baranay, 2016, p. 125).

Global trends in modern society, globalization of the world, emerging of transcultural modes of creative expression and multiple cultural context of almost every modern literary work necessitate new theoretical approaches and interpretive keys. The transcultural approach seems to be more attuned to contemporary outlooks and highly relevant in this respect.

Transculturalism in the novel 'Purity' by J. Franzen is manifested in two aspects. Firstly, the author presents the dialogue which can be described as a dialogue-confrontation between the democratic Western culture and the culture of a socialist state. The intercultural dialogue in J. Franzen's novel is presented in the form of direct denunciation of totalitarianism in all manifestations. The GDR is shown as an example of a totalitarian state, an example that serves as a warning that any forms of totalitarianism are unacceptable.

Secondly, the transcultural work of fiction addresses issues of global literary perspective, in case of the novel under investigation this issue is totalitarian power of the Internet and its practices. J. Franzen shows that rapidly globalizing modern society seems increasingly similar to the totalitarian state. The novel reveals the fact that cultures of different countries are getting steadily more and more united across the Internet space.

In terms of transnational cultural processes taking place in modern world, the analysis of different literary works reflecting transcultural perspective seems progressively germane.

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