KILLERS AND BODIES IN CONTEMPORARY WORKS OF FICTION

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Abstract: Spirituality and truth, the questioning of life's meaning in an ambiguous world, the cause and consequences of revenge are intimately tied to the theme of justice. Every action is followed by a reaction: should certain rules and codes be breached, punishment usually follows. Codes of honor bind communities together where everyone should look out for one another. To betray someone is dishonorable sometimes to the extent at which murder happens. Tribal justice in the form of honor killings claims the lives of many victims. In the 21st century national borders are being replaced by the global state, where cultural features tend to become mixed up, leaving questions of national pride and native cultural traditions open for debate.

Keywords: the theme of death, spirituality, honor, justice, destiny.

Cultural traditions inherited and learned: honor and shame

Cultures create bonds between emotions and socially enforced laws. Individuals and societies develop together in geographically shared spaces with various amounts of love and fear, building their own mythologies and assigning meaning to their common experiences. Honor killings can be traced back as far as the ancient sacrifices brought to appease gods or the voluntary victims "purchased" by a society, a group of people before consecrating it and worshipping it in lengthy orgies until they were finally given opium, strangled and dismembered. The religious significance attributed to such death contains an element of celebration, an optimistic view of death as a return to Mother Earth, which is why in certain cultures bodies were buried in the fetus position – being thus returned to the source of life. There is little, if any, evidence that religious structures are a creation of a certain type of civilization or given historical periods. This is why they can never be said to be permanently valid, they co-exist with the predominant ideologies in a given space and time. Rene Girard (1972) believes that all human institutions originate in rituals. The religious domain circumscribes the commemoration and perpetuation of a unanimity deeply rooted in the killing of a scapegoat. Thus, human beings are slowly released from the grasp of the Sacred, creating the institutions and principles that define humanity.

Ancient beliefs have evolved from prehistoric times preserving certain elements, such as rituals and principles abided by in various communities. Human sacrifice, understood as a ritual, has practically disappeared. However, there are cases where, based on cultural tradition and probably religious beliefs, the practice of killing human beings, known as ritual murder still continues. There are a number of roles played by members of societies. We differ from one another based on our individuality, gender, hierarchy, games and environments. The five social roles interact, create and shape the beliefs of the societies the individuals represent. Buchholz (1961), Brennan (1985), Kao (2000), identify an ideological gap between the East and West, visible in politics, social and economic issues as well as in other aspects of community life. Whether by choice or forced by circumstances, people have been known to

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exit their native lands and relocate in other countries, such as the Syrians in the present, escaping from the conflict in the area.

The UK has been described as one of the favorite target countries of migrants coming from the East. To start with, Nadeem Aslam portrays immigrant life in England in his novel *Maps for lost lovers*, where we encounter Chanda and Jugnu, who have disappeared from an English town and they haunt the lives of the characters until the end of the novel. Aslam's writing depicts the attempt to create a link between the Pakistani and British cultures, between unforgiving, narrow-minded religious beliefs and the heartbreaking humanity of Kaukub, a woman who equates sex with shame and sin and condemns all transgressions. In a strikingly similar fashion, Elif Shafak's heroine, Esma, a young Kurdish woman in London ponders upon the roles of men and women in her culture, stating that honor is reserved to men, while women have shame.

The uprooted

Somewhat paradoxically, certain factors that influence the movement of people from their native lands to Europe, the United States or elsewhere include (religious) persecution, abuse, oppression and war. Religion and economic migration seem to be present in many works of fiction, such as Andrea Levy's *Small Island,* Karel van Loon's *The Invisible Ones,* Marina Lewicka's *Two Caravans.* Asian and Eastern European migrants mainly emigrate for economic reasons, while some unfortunate refugees like Danuta Reah's Farah Jafari in the novel *Not Safe* find their death. *In the Sea there are Crocodiles* brings to light another reason why people leave their countries: handling fear and searching for a place where life is liveable, a book in which Fabio Geda describes the five-year journey of a young boy from Afghanistan to Italy where he seeks political asylum. This story about friendship showcases the ordeal that the young refugee goes through: physical misery crossing borders squeezed into hidden places in lorries or trekking across mountains. The theme of negotiating for a better life is also found in Nii Ayikwei Parkes' anthology *South of South* where the search for a new place to live consists of a mix of myth, money, family ties, opportunities and love. Kim Thuy's flow of tears, blood and money, *Ru* (lullaby) is a story about giving up one's roots willingly, without regrets and raising a child with autism. It is a book about the celebration of life's flow with all its wonders, beauty, sorrow, pain and joy.

The meaning of life and death

Western societies, though deeply affected by spiritual crises attribute certain functions to religion today, among which Wunenburger (1990) identifies: the symbolic, the mundane, the cultural and the ritual function. They cover a substantial need of the human being to transcend the immediate reality. While the West suffers from an increasing weakening of the spiritual belief in 'the beyond', with little importance in our lives, the East still seems to foster beliefs in *djinni*, even though they are generally believed to be hostile towards humans. *Djinni* exist and Auntie Banu, the soothsayer, captures one and sometimes (reluctantly) talks to it. There are moments when Shafak's character will even be approached by the supernatural creature in order to reveal the atrocities she is afraid to ask about. The magical realist descriptions of Asya's home in Istanbul are powerful. The passages about the gloomy fate of Armenians are shocking, as Armanoush finds a country in denial about the genocide, and tries

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to make her cousins understand how much the past is affecting the present. The life and eventually the death of her step father at the hands of a family member reinforce the belief that one cannot escape from destiny, even if Mustafa tried to break the fate of the men in the Kazanci family by leaving Istanbul at a very young age. Perhaps this is a sacrifice that is needed to bring peace to a family with secrets and so many intricate relationships and to prevent more rage and revenge.

The reign of blood seemingly ends when the sultan has decided to stop murdering women at the beginning of *Arabian Nights and Days*, but the blood continues to flow. Evil spirits instigate crimes, whereas good spirits perform acts of kindness and help unite two young lovers. The significance of the many layers of narrative in Mahfouz's novel seems to weave around the conflict between enduring values and superficial ones. In the beginning of the novel the sultan Shahriyar has threatened to murder Shahrzad, if she does not please him. Shahriyar's reputation for cruelty is based mainly on the routine killing of young virgins who fail to amuse him. While Shahrzad is ultimately saved by producing a son for the sultan and becoming his wife, the sultan's willingness to wait until the birth to pass judgment is due to her success in entertaining him with a series of stories. The stories serve the purpose of prolonging, perhaps altering the fate of their narrator.

The need to let go of the past is also implied by the sultan's transcendent dream-like experience toward the end of the novel. He is transported to a heaven-like place, escorted to the royal palace and married to the queen. Upon telling the queen of his unprecedented happiness after (what appears to be) several years of marriage, she says to him, "You will know true happiness when you forget the past completely" (p. 226). Shortly after, his curiosity leads him to enter a forbidden chamber, where he is seized by a giant. After begging for mercy, he is placed on the ground and his dream abruptly ends. Now, Shahriyar finally sees himself for what he is: an aging vagrant living in the periphery of the kingdom he once ruled.

Conclusions

Does an awareness of the decay our physical bodies are subjected to when we die give meaning to life? And how important is our physical presence here? The measure of meaning that we assign to the role of our bodies in our earthly lives is highly influenced by the ancestral heritage we receive over generations and preserve in our cultural norms and ways of life. The interactions of these views are sometimes clashes of cultures from the East and the West and literature keeps a fine record of them. Literary characters are profoundly human and seek answers to the questions of life's meaning and the existence of something greater beyond our material reality. Whether there is a spiritual realm beyond the physical one that we see around us or if there is a Divinity, are questions that belong to a range of issues that contemporary works of fiction address. And in the migrating communities value questions relating to our conduct towards other people and what kind of social structure will best facilitate happiness are even more acute.

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