COSMOPOLITANISM AND SPATIAL METAMORPHOSES:

JACK KEROUAC AND MIRCEA CĂRTĂRESCU

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Abstract: This article investigates Jack Kerouac's On the Road and The Dharma Bums, as representative novels of the movement known as the Beat generation, alongside Mircea Cărtărescu's Orbitor. Aripa Stîngă (Blinding. The Left Wing), which encapsulates the literary principles of the 1980s generation. These two particular types of narrative literary text will be examined in contrast, focusing on the assimilation in Romanian literature of the Beats' rise against the establishment and focus on the city as a metamorphosing site of cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: cosmopolitanism, the Beat generation, the 1980s generation, space, metamorphosis

The fictional explorations of the city have made possible a cosmopolitan vision of the world which encompasses a wide range of cultures, languages and religions. Challenging the traditional understanding of community in the twentieth-century, the novels of Jack Kerouac present America as a complex discursive and geographical space in which identities overlap, deracination is romanticized and the marginal is valorized as a symbol of authenticity. Thus, novels such as *On the Road* or *The Dharma Bums* could be considered emblems of the emerging global cosmopolitanism. In his turn, Mircea Cărtărescu, one of the most prominent figures of the cultural resistance movement of the 1980s, brings a cosmopolitan impetus to Romanian literature. Inspired by the Beat culture's rejection of the establishment and turn towards new spatial and social practices, Cărtărescu portrays in *Orbitor. Aripa Stîngă (Blinding. The Left Wing)*,a deconstructed postcommunist cityscape of Bucharest which accommodates not only marginal and cosmopolitan spaces, but also oneiric universes set against the gloomy socialist architecture. The metamorphosis of the urban milieu will be examined as an extension of the ideological shift towards a cosmopolitan representation of the city in the postwar and post-revolutionary imaginary geographies.

Cosmopolitanism has been used to describe a wide variety of concepts in socio-political theory. In *A Dictionary of Globalization*, cosmopolitanism is defined as "the notion of a community of humankind that transcends local particularities, political and cultural norms and has a moral status of its own" (Wunderlich and Warrier 88). However, the development of the specific philosophy associated with the cosmopolis as a single community started from the Stoics. In ancient Greek, *kosmopolítes* was used to designate a citizen of the world, someone who considered the entire humankind as more meaningful than his or her own city, group, region or state. This involved the unity of all men as rational beings within the universe and as common citizens of the world. The original meaning of the term could be resumed in the phrase of Seneca ''the whole world is my country'' which has become the modern mantra of cosmopolitan thought. Inspired by Stoicism, Immanuel Kant writes in the eighteenth century that the "cosmopolitan condition" is a specific antidote to the rule of despots and the "barbarous freedom of the already established states" (12). His moral cosmopolitanism states that all rational beings are members in a single community. An equally notable figure is Cloots who continues his idea and advocates the abolition of all existing states and the establishment of a single world state, a "republic of united individuals".

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Thus, initially, cosmopolitanism primarily promoted human rights and an egalitarian, heterogeneous society.

Contemporary theories of cosmopolitanism seem to have extended its focus to a greater tolerance in view of an inclusive, borderless society in the context of a globalized world. In a promotion of openness to difference, Kwame Appiah, has proposed a "rooted cosmopolitanism". This concept links particularism and universalism in an oxymoronic definition: "cosmpolitanism is a double-stranded tradition: in a slogan, it is universality plus difference" ("Education for Global Citizenship" 92). Appiah is against a "malign universalism" that is intolerant to differences and in favour of "conversation between people from different ways of life" (*Cosmopolitanism* xxi). It is precisely this interethnic, interreligious dialogue and cultural tourism that characterizes the Romanian writers of the generation of the 1980s and their precursors, the peripatetic Beat generation. Major Beat authors like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs favor open literary forms based on spontaneity and the full expression of personal emotions which is equally linked with spiritual and cultural openness. Jack Kerouac, describes the Beat generation in the following terms:

> The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had [...] in the late Forties, of a generation of crazy illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way [...] *beat*, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction. (Kerouac, "The Origins of Joy in Poetry" 47)

This statement points to some of the movement's central aspects, such as transgression ("crazy illuminated hipsters") and a preoccupation with the "down and out" society. Beat authors often view these marginal segments of society as presenting relevant cultural and spiritual aspect, suggested here by his use of the terms "illumination". The Romanian writers of the 1980s "purposefully assimilated and adapted Beat political views and postmodern thought in general" (Dumitru 278). Focusing on the Beat influence, the anti-establishment position of the Romanian movement is visible in the defiance of the *grand récit* promoted by communism "through a politics of rock'n roll body writing and jouissance" (Roman 47). Thus, the Romanian writers of the post-revolutionary period detach themselves from political manipulation, proletarian culture and elitism. Theirs is a profoundly subjective literature which emphasizes individual experience and aims to recover in writing the immediate reality. The senses and the imagination together with irony, parody and kitsch are used as intermediaries to deconstruct the socialist realism.

The propensity for exploring the margins of Romania society, in the same manner the Beats display a fascination with the American subcultures and countercultures, can be attributed to the fact that in both cases the writers themselves were marginal figures. Before becoming a writer Kerouac had dozens of informal jobs, moonlighting as a gas station attendant, dishwasher, cotton picker and fire lookout. Professor Mircea Cărtărescu equally had a direct insight into the life of middle-class intellectual families whose artistic pursuits were smothered by mediocrity. The works of the 1980s generation began to take shape in the context of a wide gap between the social classes, poverty and a lack of pillars of moral integrity. That being said, both authors write a semi-autobiographical fiction inspired by their own experiences of the metamorphosing city.

In this respect, in the novel *On the Road* the characters display an attraction towards African-American culture, a fascination with the West and its bohemian artist communities. Mexico is seen as a source of authenticity. *The Dharma Bums*, which is dedicated to seventh-century Chinese poet Han-Shan, continues the spiritual search for "IT", exploring cross-cultural interests such as Buddhism or Asian poetry while equally presenting city life. As Călin Cristea reinforces, the works of Mircea Cărtărescu, Traian Coşovei or Florin Iaru are

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rooted in surrealism and the Beat generation inasmuch as they write a literature centered on their resounding surroundings and on the provocative aspects of the real in its entirety (Cristea qtd. in Crăciun 118). Indeed, through their peregrinations across Bucharest, Mircea, Anca, his mother Maria, his father Costel, and their friend Mioara meet colorful characters, from Communist State Security officer Ion Stanila to Cedric, the jazz singer who arrived to Bucharest from New Jersey during the Second World War, from the woman who gives birth to a butterfly to Herman, the eerie neighbor portrayed as the gatekeeper to other worlds. Of course, *Orbitor* equally exhibits an overt interest in religion and most importantly in the connection between the human mind and the universe. Religion, in any of its forms, constitutes for Mircea, the protagonist, "antenele insectei, palpii omizii, ochii deschişi ai presimţirilor, prin care atingem? atragem? gonim? omorim? iubim? divinitatea ce se apropie" / "the antennas of the insect, the palps of a caterpillar, the opened eyes of premonitions, through which we touch? lure? chase? kill? love? the approaching divinity" (143). References to Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islamism, the psychedelic attraction to the teachings of Krishnamurti and Ma-harishi, Hare Krishna and Shiva are scattered throughout the novel. Although religion is plagued by an "eternal schizophrenia" (143), it constitutes the gateway to a superior form existence which transcends all cultural and spatial barriers.

In the novels *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums*, the focus remains on the fascination with transcending spatial and spiritual boundaries and on life in cosmopolitan centers. Ritzer considers that cities are "inherently global, because they encompassed a range of cultures, ethnicities, languages, and consumer products"(281). In *On the Road*, the narrator, Sal Paradise, shows a fascination with the division between the east and the west that makes New York, Denver and San Francisco the final frontiers of the American West. *The Dharma Bums* follows Ray Smith's travels to San Francisco, across the country to see his family in the mountains of North Carolina, back to Corte Madera to live with Japhy Ryder's in a shack. Sal's 1947 trip to the West is described in retrospect as „the greatest ride in all my life" (17). As he and Dean Moriarty cover "the whole mad thing, the ragged promised land" (76), they encounter various figures, from cowboys, vagrants and drug addicts to students of Nietzsche, Mexican immigrants, coal-truck drivers, poets and jazz musicians.

Nevertheless, there seems to be an equal amount of interest given to both urban and provincial cosmopolitan zones. The protagonists do not follow the standard pattern of moving from a provincial to a cosmopolitan zone. In this case, cosmopolitanism does not have a home. According to critics, "[a]s opposed to exclusive urban-centered cosmopolitanism, the cosmopolitanism Kerouac seeks is conversant with styles and spheres of interest that exist outside the city" (Arthur 40). The "routes" are seen as the solution, as the literary and figurative lines that go across and link provincial and cosmopolitan zones. In his journeys Sal Paradise listens to the stories of travelers who provide alternatives to traditional communities, encompassing the spirit of the West. Cărtărescu seems rather concerned with finding his roots in the confined city.

The traveling ban imposed by the communists does not seem to be a restrain for young Mircea. Although he cannot go beyond the boundaries of Romania, Mircea, as a child and a teenager, deconstructs the urban topos of Bucharest, releasing himself from any marks of the communist regime, and transforms the city into a liminal space, at the border between reality and fiction, the local and the global. From the window of a flat situated on the fifth floor on Ștefan cel Mare Street, Mircea observes the whole Bucharest, from the profane layer of existence of humankind, to the sacred dimensions which the mind cannot comprehend, but can only assume. The city invades his vision and his thoughts, mediating his train of thought. There seems to be an intimate relationship between Mircea and his surroundings. Despite the awareness that his reminisces are mostly dreams because another flat is blocking his vision, he accepts that he is fantasizing but chooses never to wake up from this dreamlike, or rather

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visionary state of mind (197). In his mind's eye, he knows every nook and corner of Bucharest. The roof of every building, every tree, store and street trigger a new memory. As a child with a lust for knowledge, he consoles himself that he can see the entirety of the world in books. Still, even this medium poses certain restrictions. Since his early years, Mircea must envision the world using his imagination:

> Mai mult îi plăceau alte cărţi: *Drumuri europene* şi *De la Polul Nord la Polul Sud.* Astea aveau în mijloc poze: prima avea poze din Londra,din Viena, foarte frumoase, iar cealaltă poze cu foci, cu pinguini şi cu vînători debalene. Dar toate pozele erau alb-negru şi cenuşii, abia se desluşeau. Şi paginilecu ele se lipeau, fiindcă erau mai groase şi lucioase.
>
> (*Orbitor* 243)
>
> (He liked more other books: *European Roads* and *From North Pole to South Pole*. These books had pictures in the middle of the pages: the former had pictures of London, Vienna, very beautiful, and the latter had pictures of seals, penguins and whale hunters. But all pictures were black and white and grey, you could hardly distinguish them. And the pages which had pictures stuck to one another, because they were thicker and shinier.)

As a teenager, Mircea realizes that he can best uncover the world through inner journeys. Bucharest metamorphosizes before his eyes. From a bleak metropolis faced with shortages, filth, ruins, slums roamed by gypsies and paupers, hunted by the image of soviet soldiers and symbols of Ceaușescu's government, Bucharest is transformed by the imagination into a fantastical universe, a repository of hidden and forgotten worlds. Therefore, Bucharest may be perceived as a liminal space where spatiality and subjectivity are deconstructed and reconstructed. In the works of both Kerouac and Cărtărescu, the city is an extension of the individual inasmuch as it is in a state of metamorphosis, continuously transgressing its physical limitations.

The protagonists are no longer anchored to certain regions. They provide delocalized personal narratives which reveal that identity is no longer bound to local particularities. A truly "global community" can be found on the road as a special manifestation of cosmopolitanism. Several figures are used to define the cosmopolitan way of living and thinking. For instance, Mississippi Gene is introduced as a vagrant, "crossing and recrossing the country every year [...] only because he had no place he could stay in without getting tired of it because there was nowhere to go but everywhere, keep rolling under the stars, generally the Western stars"(*On the Road* 23). Gene exemplifies an ideal model for Sal, being everywhere because he has nowhere to go. The homelessness of Dean provides a basis for his nomadic behavior and separation from community. Constantly being in a vehicle, the protagonists of the novel are simultaneously nowhere and everywhere.

The cosmopolitanism of the Beat writers does not resume to a physical crossing of the boundaries, but to a greater extent supposes an interethnic dialogue. In *The Blackwell Companion to Globalization* it is mentioned that while "'locals' are rooted in a culture that is more geographically bound, cosmopolitans interact with global cultural centers and serve as the primary mediators in the creation of creole cultures" (Caldwell and Lozada 502). Indeed, the African-American culture is represented through jazz, the reason why Sal wants to "exchange worlds with the *happy*, true-hearted Negroes of America" (170) Fetishizing and romanticizing African-American culture's marginality, the Beats project jazz clubs and black communities as spaces of their own fantasies and ignore the fact that African-Americans were perhaps not content with this assigned marginal status. Jazz is portrayed as a source of vitality and change in the context of white cultural exhaustion in addition to providing a road toward "IT." Dean venerates the musician Slim who "goes every direction, he lets it all out, he knows time, he has nothing to do but rock back and forth. Man, he's the end! You see, if you go like him all the time you'll finally get it" (118). Dean and all the audience, appears to be in a trance that puts them in a primitive, or, as the Beats regarded it, authentic state of mind. The

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Beats find inspiration in the seemingly unmediated flow of jazz improvisation, using in their writings the same technique of spontaneous, genuine, rhythmic, improvised, unrestrained creation. The music from a jazz clubs in San Francisco is described the following way: "Slim goes mad and grabs the bongos and [...] beats and yells crazy things in Spanish, in Arabic, in Peruvian dialect, in Egyptian, in every language he knows, and he knows innumerable languages." (166) Jazz appears to transcend linguistic, racial and national barriers. In Romania of the 1980s, rock'n roll is used as a means of blurring the lines between highbrow and lowbrow culture as well as transgressing the lines between the local and the global.

It is interesting to note that during communism, the nationalist rock'n roll of the Cenacle was inspired by Romanian folklore, American rock and the hippie movement. The music combined literature and politics with the aim of providing a means of resistance to the communist ideology. Arguably, any Western product was given at the time positive connotations by the counterculture. In concord with the ideas of Kant, cosmopolitanism was used as an antidote to the "barbarous freedom" (Kant 12) of the established totalitarian regime. As Ion Zubașcu's song goes, "Dacă sufletul tău înțelege/ De la rock pînă la imnuri și rugi/ Te salut, tineret în adidași/ Te salut, generație în blugi"("If your soul understands/From rock to hymns and prayers/ I salute you, youth wearing Adidas/ I salute you, blue jeans generation"). Thus, the protest music of the 1980s Romania channels that of the 1960s America to subversively transmit a message of solidarity with the Western ideals. In their hearts, the citizens of communist Romania are citizens of the world.

According to Denisa Roman, postcommunist popular culture as "an *information, consumer-oriented, synchronic/diachronic transtemporal, and global-local transgeographic pastiche"* (51). Indeed, Mircea, the protagonist of *Orbitor*, preserves from his childhood spent during the communist regime, memories of distinct products and places which stand out in his stream of memories. He recalls using Hardmuth pencils, a filthy elevator with a Stifter&Co. label covered in grease. The child used to eat Turkish delight, draw cowboys, read Shakespeare, Balzac, Lermontov and Karl May among other writers. The music of Mircea's childhood were nationalist songs endorsed by the communist party or traditional folk songs. They are, nevertheless, evoked with irony. Following a memory of him watching a subtitled Dino Risi's *Venice, the Moon and You* without understanding any of the plot, the thought brings him to a recollection of his equal bafflement in front of the songs and paraphernalia used by the communists. The praises brought to the communist regime make no sense to the boy who mechanically learns the songs without paying much attention to the lyrics, which all sound the same anyway:

> Şi în cîntece se spunea că ar trebui să fie toţi recunoscători partidului şi să-i mulţumească, dar nu puteai înţelege pentru ce, decît aşa-n general, pentru viaţa cea bună: "Partid iubit, îţi mulţumim/ Şi-ţi mulţumeşte ţara toată,/ Stegarii tăi noi vrem să fim/ Sub flamura-ţi înflăcărată." Toate cîntecele de la cor erau aşa. Unele erau foarte frumoase, doar cuvintele lor, dacă te gîndeai la ele mult, ajungeau de neînţeles, ca atunci cînd spuneai des şi repede lapte-lapte-lapte-lapte, şi-ţi dădeai seama că de la un timp spuneai lap-telap-telap-telap, fără să mai ştii ce spui. (*Orbitor* 233)
>
> (And in the songs we were told that we should all be grateful to the party and give thanks, but one could not understand for what, unless it was just in general, for one's good life: "Cherished party, we thank thee/And the entire country thanks thee/Your standard bearers we want to be/ Under your blazing pennant". All the songs performed by the choir were the same. Some were very beautiful, only that their words, if you thought too much about them, would become incomprehensible, like when you said often and fast milk-milk- milk-milk, and you realized that after a while you said instead m-ilkm-ilkm-ilkm, without being aware of what you were saying anymore.)

Sal Paradise compares himself to the marginalized others. Sal wants to adopt the roles of the racialized other. Sal states: "I wish I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (170).

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When he is mistaken for a Mexican, while living with Terry he comments "and in I way I am" (90). In the trip that Sal and Dean take to Mexico, the region becomes a projection of their own desires, "all Mexico was one vast Bohemian camp" (90*)*. Thus, the characters identify with communities other than their own and express openness to new experiences and cultures.

In *Orbitor*, there are digressions throughout the novel which invite the reader into the underground jazz-filled world of New Orleans. Mircea evokes his mother's memories about Cedric, a drummer who arrived in Bucharest during the Second World War. A parallel between Bucharest, green as absynth and New Orleans, golden like the cerebrospinal fluid (310) unravels. The elements of the fantastic which protrude from the descriptions, may be interpreted as portraying bleak Bucharest and exotic New Orleans as mirroring marginalized locations. Cedric enthralls Maria and Vasilica by telling stories about the charming French Quarter, the magic powers of Monsieur Monsu, a black albino, demons and spells. He is described as an elegant, charming young man, with a gold chain at the wrist and fashionable, pointed shoes. Moreover, he spends a large amount of money on delicacies like lobsters and impresses by having the audacity to drink flaming beverages (55) He displays the same disinhibition of the jazz players encountered by Sal and Dean. He is ascribed positive connotations since he is a source of fascinating tales about inaccessible places:

> Cedric le povestea cum era în New Orleansul natal, în cartierul franţuzesc, le vorbea de palmieri şi agave, de saxofoanele care ardeau şi ţipau în mii de taverne, de Bourbon Street, pe unde trecea în fiecare primăvară procesiunea carnavalului Mardi Gras, şi mai ales de sinistrele ritualuri Voo-Doo ale negrilor adunaţi în apropierea oraşului şi făcîndu-şi vrăjile sîngeroase sub lună, împodobiţi cu măşti din pene de papagal. O luă la dans pe Vasilica, încercînd s-o înveţe paşii de foxtrot. (*Orbitor* 310)
>
> (Cedric would tell them stories about life in his native city of New Orleans, in the French Quarter, he would speak to them about palm trees and agaves, about saxophones which burned and screamed in thousands of taverns, of Bourbon Street, where Mardi Gras took place every year, and especially about the sinister Voo-Doo rituals of the Negroes gathering near the city and performing their bloody spells under the moonlight, adorned with masks made of parrot feathers. He took Vasilica for a dance, trying to teach her the foxtrot steps.)

On the Road can be described as a pilgrimage where Sal and Dean are searching for "IT", a form of spiritual enlightenment or genuine connection with the universe that escapes the conventions of middle-class American. The experimentations with Buddhism in which Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder engage are a relevant example of cosmopolitanism. If one would expect the two to travel abroad in order to practice the religion in a monastery, the novel introduces an American version of Buddhism. Japhy is a woods boy raised in Oregon who learns Indian mythology, Chinese and Japanese to finally become an Oriental scholar. Asian culture provides an inspiration for the art and the practices of the Beats. The mentality of a Dharma Bum is "charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquility and wisdom and ecstasy" (*The Dharma Bums* 5). They are liberated from the confines of society, focusing on anti-materialism and pacifism. Although a clear explanation of the term "Dharma bum" is not provided, Ray describes himself to have the same pursuit as "an oldtime bhikku in modern clothes wandering the world [...] in order to turn the wheel of the True Meaning, or Dharma, and gain merit for myself as a future Buddha (Awakener) and as a future Hero in Paradise" (*The Dharma Bums* 5). Still, the Buddhism that they adhere to is rather a deformation of the original religion. Ray "didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism was just interested in the first of Sakyarnuni's four noble truths, All life is suffering"(*The Dharma Bums* 12). This idea may point out to one of the disadvantages of the spreading of culture in a global age – its distortion. Nevertheless, the Beats appear to have borrowed from Buddhism the elements that corresponded to their need for meaning.

Likewise, Mircea tries to uncover forbidden spaces of being and becoming. The fusion of instances of existence provides a more profound understanding of the world. His pursuit is

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summarized in the following manner: "a regresa, a te întoarce, a coborî în miezul arhaic al minții tale, a privi cu ochii unei larve umane, a gîndi ceva ce nu e gîndire cu un creier care nu e încă un creier, şi care contopeşte într-un miez de plăcere sfîşietoare" /„to regress, to go back, to descend into the archaic core of your mind, to look with the eyes of a human larva, to think whith a brain which is not yet a brain, and which melts into a core of excruciating pleasure" (*Orbitor* 218). Behind the palpable city lie manifold oneiric universes. The protagonist taps into the universal memory, in search of new perceptual horizons:

> Numai acolo este ieşirea, la intersecţia comisurilor ţestei, doar pe acolo poţi ieşi din acest univers şi-l poţi privi, în fine, ochi în ochi, creier în creier, buze în buze, zîmbet în zîmbet pe Cel ce te aştepta, într-o lume densă, într-o lumină densă, purtînd pe creştet, ca o sferă de diamant, al şaptelea Chakra, Shahasrara, arzînd orbitor, orbitor, orbitor... (*Orbitor* 342)
>
> (Only there is the exit, at the intersection of commissures, only there you can exit from this universe and see, at last, eye to eye, brain to brain, lips to lips, smile to smile the One who is waiting for you, in a dense world, in a dense light, wearing on the head, like a diamond orb, the seventh Chakra, Shahasrara, burning, blinding, blinding, blinding…)

The Beats expressed in their works a desire to communicate and trade experiences with various cultures in order to achieve beatitude, the ultimate bliss in a Buddhist context. The cosmopolitanism that Jack Kerouac expresses in *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* manifests interest towards bohemian cultural centers, especially New York and San Francisco, equally including provincial areas. Nevertheless, the emphasis is placed on the road with its delocalized personal narratives that seem to allow simultaneously an inventory of America and a vision of the world. The novel has references to cultures from the main continents of the world, ranging from the jazz music of the African-Americans to the Oriental American Buddhism. In Romania, the 1980s generation assimilates some of the practices in writing of the Beats, mixing them with the postmodern thought. The Bucharest of Mircea Cărtărescu's *Orbitor* is a Borgesian space of metamorphosis which can accommodate the immediate reality and oneiric spaces, communist ideology and Western influences. The revolt of the human being against the enclosed spaces of totalitarian regimes translates itself into the transformation of the city, which becomes a fantastic, oneiric, liminal space of initiation. Thus, the city transgresses its material condition and turns into a construct of the mind which can metamorphosize the traces of socialism into multicultural, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic structures. The blending of languages, religions, even identities and the transcendence of boundaries make the three novels emblematic for cosmopolitanism.

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