

JENNIFER EGAN'S *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*: TUNING INTO THE WORLD OF DISRUPTIONS

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У статті аналізуються літературно-художні нюанси роману Дженніфер Еган *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, що оприявлюють метаморфози постмодерністської естетичної парадигми. Апелюючи до музики як одного з потужних медіаторів між світом внутрішнім і зовнішнім, письменниця робить спробу налагодити діалог із сучасністю, де вибудовується постпостмодерністській місток.

Ключові слова: постпостмодернізм, фрагментарність, “нерозривна історія”.

В статье анализируются литературно-художественные нюансы романа Дженнифер Еган *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, которые представляют метаморфозы постмодернистской эстетической парадигмы. Апеллируя к музыке как к медиатору мира внутреннего и внешнего, писательница пытается построить диалог с современностью, в которой оформляется постпостмодернистское связующее звено.

Ключевые слова: пост-постмодернизм, фрагментарность, “неразрывная история”.

This paper addresses artistic nuances of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, which represent the metamorphoses of the postmodern aesthetic paradigm. Deploying music as a mediator of inner and outer worlds Egan makes an attempt to establish her dialogue with the contemporaneity, which is characterized by a subtle post-postmodern flavor.

Key words: post-postmodernism, fragmentation, “unbroken story.”

American literary discourse of the twenty-first century is marked by the search for relevant means of representation of the environment, inner and outer, which is shaped and arranged, to some extent, by the vast postmodern heritage. While postmodern open-endedness, fluidity, and plurality nourishes the contemporary literary dialogue that involves the discussion how an individual is seen and perceived in the present world, there is a necessity to define and map the territory of the consciousness that is being shaped and influenced by postmodern experience and that is acquiring characteristics that signal fluid metamorphoses of postmodernism. This essay discusses the changes that can be detected in the development of postmodernism. While still being rather productive

for organizing fictional space, postmodernism with its immanent playfulness, self-parody, self-irony, and plurality is challenged by the contemporaneity which is seeking meaningful beacons for existence. In this context, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is rather illustrative – being anchored in the artistry of postmodern technique, this novel gears towards “old themes” of faith, trust, love, and understanding, which lead to the harmonious self.

Carlton Smith and Deborah Paes de Barros in their general description of the current literary changes that are rather symptomatic in terms of the emergence of a new literary paradigm, which at present is awkwardly defined as post-postmodernism, address such thematic elements as place of domesticity, the West, and falling in and out of history. They summarize that a “new reality” is being created: “*This new reality, or “hyper-reality” – the by-product of war, mass culture, runaway mechanization, and our ever-mediated environments – has ultimately found expression in contemporary writers who strive to somehow construct what Larry McCaffery calls a “new realism” – a poetics somehow reflexive with the dazzling and often pernicious “present” hyper-real, and its uncertain, nearly unfathomable future*” [13, p. 13]. The “new voices,” among which they indicate those belonging to Marilyn Robinson, Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolff, David Leavitt, E. Annie Proulx, Denise Chavez, Tess Gallagher, Thomas McGuane, Cormack McCarthy, Richard Ford, Ron Hanson, Jim Harrison, Allison Baker, and Pam Huston (to name but a few from their extensive lists) “*form the concert that is post/postmodern fiction. Bemused, reactive, mock-tragic, and at once somehow transcendent, they (re)(de)construct the contemporary world*” [13, p. 15]. Additionally, the critic David Bennet is inclined to associate a turning point in the development of contemporary literature with the national tragedy of September 11, 2001 when “*irony and cultural relativism became unpatriotic*” [2, p. 8]. Regarding the possible moral and aesthetic successors of postmodernism, he points out truth, beauty, faith in beauty, re-connection with the Western and European aesthetic tradition etc. [2, p. 9] In this context, it is peculiar that when discussing the contemporary literary scope, Hassan coins the notion of “*literature of trust*” [8] to define literature which signals transformations of postmodernism marked by irony, parody, and skepticism. These observations and speculations that might be too bold maintain, however, the literary dialogue concerning the world perception and the status of an individual in the continuum of the changing reality.

In this paper I will discuss the potential of postmodernism mutations which can be discerned in contemporary American writing. In this context, Jennifer Egan's writing along with works by Jonathan Safran Foer, Jeffrey Eugenides,

and Elizabeth Strout is of particular interest. While the discussion of this contemporary writing can go far beyond the limits of the current essay, I will focus on some elements that might signal the emergence of trends different from postmodernism and thus might contribute to the delineation of the present literary continuum, which is currently defined by an awkward term of post-postmodernism.

In her Pulitzer Prize winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan creates an intricate narrative labyrinth whose unexpected turns and twists allure the reader to launch a journey through time and space in order to get in touch with the self. To keep the reader tuned into her whimsical world, Egan plays extensively with the textual structure and message as if trying to establish an emotional connection with her imaginary vis-a-vis.

Dispersed and scattered throughout the novel, there is the story of Bennie Salazar who in the 1980s enters the music industry as a punk rocker, possessing a unique talent to “*actually listen to the music*” [5, p. 46], and eventually becomes a successful and well-known music producer. His story is intricately connected with the story of his assistant, middle-aged woman named Sasha, suffering from a psychological disorder urging her to steal from people, which veils her excruciating search for the self and for the connection with the Other and the world.

In her novel, Egan tells about a confusing and confused search for the harmonious self through exploring the existence from the perspective of a fragmented and multifaceted chaotic world, which appears to be responsive to postmodern playfulness, ceaseless creation/re-creation, arrangement/re-arrangement, reflecting plurality and relativity.

A Visit from the Goon Squad consists of thirteen chapters creating a fragmented fictional world which functions as a space for traveling. The stories that constitute the novel were written at different times: “*In fact, four of them were written years and years ago, – says Egan. – They were just written as stories, and published, all four. “You (Plural),” “Good-bye, My Love,” “Forty-Minute Lunch”*” [6, p. 84]. Although there are characters that travel from one story to another, it is hardly possible to define them as linking elements since they have strong individual voices, sometimes overpowering, that grants them their unique narrative niche. Regarding this aspect, Egan rather successfully carries out her project to create a polyphonic text: “*I wanted to avoid centrality. I wanted polyphony. I wanted a lateral feeling, not a forward feeling. My ground rules were: every piece has to be very different, from a different point of view. I actually tried to break that rule later; if you make a rule then you also should break it!*” [6, p. 84].

Numerous voices of the novel maintain the Bakhtinian “*dialogic orientation*” [1, p. 279] of the text, which, paraphrasing Bakhtin, uncovers fresh aspects within and outside the fictional world and the text per se. Dialogism, on the one hand, secures open-endedness, which Egan was trying to produce while working on her “*book of stories*” [12, p. 459]; on the other hand, it provides a fluid continuum for the discussion of literary transformations and metamorphoses. In the context of Bakhtinian dialogism, fragmentation, which is reflected in a rhizomatic structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and unique linearity, represented through a tendency to weave an individual story, combine and intermingle to produce an interactive territory nourishing the development of literature.

Each of the thirteen stories centers on different episodes that to some extent shape the characters' lives. Occasionally, these narrative threads interweave producing an atmosphere of unpredictability. It is rather peculiar that for these narrative twists Egan incorporates protagonists rather than events. For example, in the story “*Selling the General*” that resembles an episode from an action movie with a political conspiracy, on the one hand, and a romantic intrigue, on the other, the former successful event-manager Dolly is hired by “*the General*” to promote his public image. When contriving her PR-plan, she decides to invite a young woman who will play the role of the General's girl-friend. This young woman, Kitty Jackson, turns out to be an actress who Dolly never invited to the celebrity party which, ironically, ruined her career. The other story “*Forty Minute Lunch*” portrays Kitty who is interviewed by Jules Jones, a brother of one of Dolly's protégés. These structural intricacies stimulate rhizomatic representations that contribute to the idea of non-linearity, disruptions, and discontinuity as a context for the polyphony. Egan pushes the limits of genre conventions which, of course, is not a literary know-how in the present context of subverted canonized codes and regulations, but which undoubtedly is involved in the contemporary landscape of blurred worlds. In other words, Egan's novel trespasses the conventions of the traditional novel with the linearity as one of its characteristic features.

While discussing the postmodern mutations and the potential replacements of postmodernism, I would like to place Egan's artistic arrangement of “*old topics*” (love, compassion, happiness, dreams, loneliness, innocence, self, etc.) in new contemporary context, which will help highlight different avenues of the postmodernism transformations. In *A Visit From The Goon Squad*, various “*classical*” postmodern techniques – non-linear narrative, mosaics, fragmentation, disruptions and discontinuities, plurality, relativity, open-endedness, to name

but a few – reflect the world as chaos; nonetheless, they also turn into a device to shape a message which is different from the postmodern irony and which contributes to the delineation of Hassan's "*literature of trust*" that implies actualization of "old topics" (faith, trust, love, understanding, et.) avoiding, however, in a postmodern manner, pathos and closure.

Jennifer Egan's novel can be epitomized in the following bitter phrase voiced in an emotional and vulnerable tone by the aging and deteriorating former rock-star Bosco, who nevertheless is desperately seeking a pompous comeback: "*I want interview, features, you name it,*" Bosco went on. "*Fill up my life with that shit. Let's document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that an expression?*" [5, p. 127]. Implied in Bosco's naive lamenting time perception and understanding foreshadows a conspicuous space for the representation of an individual and his/her life that is contextualized in some temporal episode. When referring to "old" themes and topics, Egan makes an attempt to explore an individual's existence through the prism of contemporaneity. To fulfill her project, she turns her novel into a universe where the old and the new, which neither clash nor confront, combine and subsequently contribute to the creation of the text whose fragmented nature with its paradox, absurdity, chaos, and inconsistency becomes a vehicle for self-actualization, self-identification, and self-quest. These themes and motives that are deeply rooted in American literary tradition imbue the contemporary search for the harmonious self.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Egan puts her characters into different time and space environments. While traveling back and forth within a few decades, characters also encounter different geographical contexts; thereby motion/movement is incorporated into an existential quest. When Sasha was seventeen, she left home and disappeared for almost two years, during which she would intermittently contact her family to request money. By accident, Sasha's Uncle Ted meets her in Naples; on seeing her, he realizes that "*she had grown up*" [5, p. 216]. Obviously, Sasha changed, but Uncle Ted changed as well – both got older. Coming of age and aging as one of the motifs of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* accompanies traveling through time and space. These parts, highlighting some episodes that signal the character's changes and metamorphoses, either external or internal, emphasize restlessness, frustration, dissatisfaction, and longing for something that, borrowing Egan's expression, has not happened yet. It is probably one of those narrative nuances, which "push" the story and its protagonists while illuminating narrative and existential vital energy.

In "Safari", the characters, one of them being Lou, a successful music producer who happened to meet Bennie when he was a novice in the music industry, are transported to Africa. Lou is traveling with his two children who are witnessing their father's relationship with his new young lover who is trying to somehow secure a comfortable life of luxury and entertainment without losing tempting pleasures of independence and non-commitment. An exotic safari trip reveals insecurities, psychological disturbances, "family ties" absurdities and perversions, as well as characters' inner vulnerability regarding inner peace and harmony since they neither possess nor acquire either of the above.

Through temporal and geographical perspectives, Egan explores an individual's changeability that to some extent shapes his/her perception and understanding of the self and the Other, which the characters "weave" into their life-stories. Without defying Lyotard's "*incredulity toward metanarrative*" [11, p. XXIV] this strategy of structuring multiple elements of a story seem to imply a condition different from postmodernism with its imminence of doubt and indeterminacy. Thus, narrative chaos is gradually getting organized, both structurally and thematically, without losing its intricate complexity.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad* Egan, guided by "*curiosity and desire*" [12, p. 454], explores modern life in which she functions as a participant and an observer. Trust, lack of trust, or complete loss of it, doubt, confusion, nostalgia, depression, and despondency permeate an intricate narrative web of stories. Nonetheless, Egan's drive and curiosity also seeps into her fictional world adding tones different from the pessimistic ones. Applied strategies of all-inclusiveness and "*both-andness*" [4, p. 417] impart relative integrity and continuity exemplifying an attempt to tune into the fragmented and disrupted world.

Rhizomatic structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* accompanies an intention to start creating one's own story, "*unbroken story*" [10, p. 149] through acquiring harmony with the self, with the Other, and with the world. In Egan's interpretation, desire and striving for harmony, which, however, can be dormant or vigorous, passive or intense, is something that is inseparable from human nature. Manifested through the novel's temporal disruptions which create a chaos, this idea is also galvanized by a diverse array of stylistic references ranging from Proust's *In Search Of the Lost Time* to *The Sopranos* and PowerPoint templates. When working on the novel, Egan was reading Proust. She was intrigued by the way he renders time: "*He tries, very successfully in some ways, to capture the sense of time passing, the quality of consciousness, and the ways to get around*

linearity, which is the weird scourge of writing prose” [6, p. 85]. On the other hand, Egan was “crazy” about *The Sopranos*, she was fascinated by “the polyphonic quality of that show, and the way peripheral characters would become central characters” [6, p. 84]. And finally, in the PowerPoint application, she found “an achronological option, for multiple chronologies” [6, p. 86]. By mixing different resources, Egan produces a narrative territory which is opened to all-inclusiveness and creates a continuum for an individual’s traveling in search for harmony beyond time limits while creating/re-creating life stories.

In a fragmented and disrupted world, Egan makes an attempt to find “new seriousness” [7, p. 448] through harmony which would give some cohesiveness and “unbrokenness” to the life story. To tune into the world’s disruptions, Egan resorts to music. In the novel, characters’ lives are represented in fragments which are chronologically mixed. Narrative chaos mirrors the concept of time which is perceived in terms of non-linearity which Egan copies, reproduces, and transmits through music: “I don’t experience time as linear. I experience it in layers that seem to coexist. I feel like 20 years ago was really recent even though I was much younger and had a different kind of life. Yet at the same time I feel like I’m still kind of there. One thing that facilitates that kind of time travel is music, which is why I think music ended up being such an important part of the book” [6, p. 85]. In the novel, music is presented as an inseparable part of modern life and thereby modern life is interpreted through the prism of music, particularly rock music, which, I would say, becomes Egan’s voice in the novel.

In *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, music, rock genre in particular, not only stylistically decorates the novel but also serves to advance the theme scope of the narrative. When speaking about music, Egan humbly confesses: “I think people reading the book tend to assume I’m more of a music geek than I am” [9, p. 67]. However, it is not only the novel’s numerous musical allusions that reveal her knowledge and understanding of the music making and music industry but also her exquisite artistry to interpret modern life in terms of and through the contemporary music: “In the era of iPods, I think we all feel that more than ever, – says Egan. – We create playlists that, at least in my case, have a lot to do with songs that have meant a lot to me at different moments” [9, p. 67].

The playlist of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is rather diverse – there are references to the music industry of the 1960s and 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. What is peculiar for Egan is that for her novel she deploys both music per se and music production, the latter even more so. It gives her an opportunity to observe changes and metamorphoses that to some extent reflect personal and public dimensions from inside and outside.

Being an accompaniment for changes and metamorphoses, music opens up the narrative to the “old” theme of an individual who searches for harmony meanwhile realizing that he/she lives in the world which demands some mental, psychological, and spiritual exertion to learn how to deal with its mutability and uncertainty. On the one hand, music, primarily contemporary, represents noise, on the other hand, it also provides a fragile link to harmony, although lost and not yet found. Before getting settled down, Sasha goes through turbulent teenage years of confusion, hectic twenties and thirties, contributing to her habit to steal from people, which, according to her psychiatrist Coz, can be healed when she starts “caring again about the things that once guided her:” music, friends, and goals which she set up for herself (finding a band to manage, understanding the news, studying Japanese, practicing the harp) [5, p. 6–7]. In order to stay in music business, Bennie little by little disconnects with his friends, with his wife and children. Ironically, over the years even music that used to maintain his drive for life loses its charm for him because trying to reach the audience at some moment he realizes that he has “to feed the people shit” [5, p. 312]. Fatigue, tiredness, boredom, and a sense that something that was of vital importance had never happened, or probably, had not happened yet, imbue his emotional state while he is aging. Nevertheless, music keeps playing and thereby nourishing that hope for something that did not happen yet.

In the context of hope, a fragment about Scotty Hausmann, Bennie’s friend, is rather illustrative. After struggling for years to have a musical career, Scotty Hausmann makes an impressive appearance on stage, “unlashing something strong, charismatic, and free”: “Anyone who was there that day will tell you the concert really started when Scotty stood up. That’s when he began singing the songs he’d been writing for years underground, songs no one had ever heard, or anything like them – “Eyes in My Head”, “X’s and O’s”, “Who’s Watching Hardest” – ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one’s data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure” [5, p. 335–336].

Music connects the above mentioned stories of Sasha, Bennie, and Scotty. It is quite peculiar that it serves not only to provide the context and background for the stories but also to render emotions triggered by changing environments. Music implies harmony as destination for Egan’s characters that seem to chaotically travel through time and space. In the novel, an ample scope of rock-music reinvigorates an “old theme” of the harmonious self in the modern

context of discontinuities and disruptions. In Egan's interpretation, life consists of fragments, thus she leaves it up to the reader to weave the final stories. Having long passed his career triumph, Bennie, in spite of the fact that he has to "feed the people shit," stays in the music industry, still trying to find ways to make *his* music. There is little information about Sasha's life after she left Bennie's office. It is rather peculiar, however, that Egan represents some glimpses of Sasha's story in PowerPoint presentation created by a twelve-year old Alison, Sasha's daughter. According to the PowerPoint, Sasha is happily married and has two children. Sasha's journey through spiritual indeterminacy takes her to some relative stability anchored in her family. Far from being a panacea, the family, however, generates a context for hope and vital connections with the self and the world. Although it is up to the reader to fill up narrative gaps, the PowerPoint presentation contains creative energy that combines fragmentation and linearity, thus reflecting the novel's overall strategy, structural and thematic, where disruptions and fragments are combined with continuity and cohesiveness. In the PowerPoint section, Egan reveals Sasha's muffled desire for harmony and connection. While describing the family life in a rather subversive teenage manner, Alison mentions her brother's obsession with analyzing the pause of every song he likes. Apparently, his father is somewhat concerned about his son's hobby: "Should we encourage this?" he asks, "How is this helping him connect to other kids?" [5, p. 277]. Sasha, however, genuinely believes that they should encourage their son because music "connects him to the world" [5, p. 277]. Music, even rock music, which sometimes aestheticizes noise, brings quietness and silence to the self and to the soul, which are striving for harmony.

Multiple narrative lines of Egan's novel open the narrative space to diverse thematic messages, which are centered, however, on an individual searching for characters' essential harmony. Egan turns the narrative territory, which is primarily organized according to the postmodern templates, into the space where she reincarnates "old themes" – love, compassion, happiness, dreams, loneliness, innocence, self – and makes an attempt to "weave a new unbroken story." Thus, the novel that structurally gears toward postmodern schema, acquires attributes that signal the emergence of the message which differs from postmodern sensibility and which turns toward Hassan's "literature of trust," that implies the post-postmodern stage. Egan, while pursuing faith and trust, further develops the tradition of "apostles of hope" [3, p. 539] – Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. Arranging her artistic universe and defining the contours of contemporary world, Egan continues this trend deeply rooted in American literature when she makes an attempt to find ways to get "tuned into" the disrupted world and to sustain productive and harmonious energy.

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ІЗОМОРФІЗМ РОМАННИХ ПОЕТИК ЛАНДШАФТУ (на матеріалі романів Ж. Грака "Узбережжя Сірту" та Н. Був'є "Інструкція з використання світу")

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Мега статті полягає в окресленні деяких методологічних підступів до вивчення визначальних художніх (наратологічних і стильових) параметрів розбудови ландшафту у перспективі порівняльної поетики романного письма двох франкомовних прозаїків, що з них кожен украй потужно заявив про себе у межах питомої національної літератури жругої половини ХХ-го ст. Особливу цікавість становить спроба розробки нетрадиційного (пре-)текстоцентричного підходу до аналізу специфіки ландшафтної складової авторських романних диспозитивів Ж. Грака та Н. Був'є.

Ключові слова: поетика, ландшафт, претекст, ізоморфність.