STUDIA UBB PHILOLOGIA, LXIX, 2, 2024, p. 73 - 90
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)
DOI:10.24193/subbphilo.2024.2.04

GLOBAL THREADS, UNVEILING UNEVENNESS: CONTEMPORARY MAXIMALIST PROJECTS INTERROGATING CULTURAL HYBRIDISATION AND MARGINALITY

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Article history: Received 07 February 2024; Revised 28 March 2024; Accepted 11 April 2024; Available online 25 June 2024; Available print 30 June 2024.

ABSTRACT. ***Global Threads, Unveiling Unevenness: Contemporary Maximalist Projects Interrogating Cultural Hybridisation and Marginality.*** Within a frame that emphasizes the tension between the global and the local, this paper aims to investigate the ways in which complex narratives that incorporate the tropes of migration, periphery, and marginality, amongst others, can bring to light aspects of unevenness and cultural and formal hybridisation. Works like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, or Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* employ distinct maximalist modes of inquiry (Nick Levey) to question topics related to inequality, cultural relevance, or representational biases, in a type of novel about which James Wood claimed that it "suffered from an excess of storytelling and an almost paranoid preoccupation with linking up their many subplots in a web of forced meaning." What stands at the core of this article is precisely this impulse to *force* a meaning which seems most frequently disrupted by an anarchetypal propensity to renegotiate a "rhetoric of inclusivity" (Franco Moretti) through which the maximalist author tries to exhaustively encompass the whole world (Levey). By selecting a corpus of maximalist novels to illustrate their evolution from the second half of the 20th century until more recent works, such as Evaristo's, this paper investigates the shift through which these narratives have started to factor margins in, differently and more frequently than in the beginnings of this literary form.

Keywords: *Maximalist Novels; Hybridisation; Migration; Periphery; Marginality; Anarchetype; Postmodernism.*

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REZUMAT. ***Fire globale, dezvăluind inegalitatea: Proiecte maximaliste contemporane care interoghează hibriditatea culturală şi marginalitatea.*** Într-un cadru care evidenţiază tensiunea dintre global şi local, acest text îşi propune să investigheze modurile în care anumite naraţiuni complexe care încorporează figurile migraţiei, periferiei şi marginalităţii, printre altele, pot pune în lumină aspecte legate de inegalitate şi de hibridizarea culturală şi formală. Cărţi precum *Dinţi albi* de Zadie Smith, *Ministerul fericirii supreme* de Arundhati Roy sau *Fată, femeie, alta* de Bernardine Evaristo folosesc moduri de investigare maximaliste specifice (Nick Levey) pentru a aduce în discuţie subiecte legate de inegalitate, relevanţă culturală sau biasuri de reprezentare, într-un tip de roman despre care James Wood susţinea că „suferă de un exces al povestirii şi de o preocupare aproape paranoică de a lega numeroasele intrigi secundare într-o reţea de sens forţat". Miza principală a acestui articol vizează tocmai acest impuls de a *forţa* un sens care pare cel mai frecvent perturbat de o tendinţă anarhetipică de a renegocia o „retorică a incluziunii" (Franco Moretti) prin care autorul maximalist încearcă să cuprindă într-un mod exhaustiv întreaga lume (Levey). Selectând un corpus de romane maximaliste cu scopul de a ilustra evoluţia lor din a doua jumătate a secolului XX până la opere mai recente, precum cea a lui Evaristo, această lucrare investighează schimbarea prin care aceste naraţiuni au început să ţină cont de margini într-un mod diferit şi mai frecvent decât la începuturile acestei forme literare.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Romane maximaliste; Hibridizare; Migraţie; Marginalitate; Anarhetip; Postmodernism.*

Introduction

Considering the contemporary interest and focus on migration, periphery, and marginality, increasingly noticeable in the field of literature, certain types of texts that were hitherto discussed precisely by virtue of their aesthetic complexity or innovation can no longer be analysed solely from the perspective of their aesthetic dimension. Theorised as experimental approaches, which nevertheless had to lay claim to a sufficiently established and authorised literary tradition, maximalist narratives published starting from the second half of the 20th century were legitimised as a form capable of responding to postmodern historical conditions. With a focus on their artistic mastery, these works have seldom been put in the context of their "structure of positionality" (Bhabha 1994, 53), of their place within a world-system in which they are subjected to questions of inequality, cultural relevance, or representational biases.

The tradition and theoretical frameworks of these narratives are mainly occupied by white male authors whose ambitious projects are more often than not analysed either through the lenses of their role in defining a nation through aesthetic or linguistic means (as can be observed in the case of the encyclopedic novel proposed by Edward Mendelson in 1976), or authors trying to fulfil different versions of artistic nationalistic ideals, as in the case of the perpetual pursuit of "the Great American Novel" (Buell, 2014). The common denominator of interpretative models such as Mendelson's and more recent ones that concentrate on the dimension and the complexity of a literary work is not related only to the intricacies of a postmodern novel. What the systems novels (LeClair 1989), the mega-novels (Karl 1983), or the maximalist novels (Ercolino 2014)—to name just three more recent configurations that approach this type of expansive postmodern narrative—and Mendelson's encyclopedic novel also have in common is a notable lack of fiction authored by women. As an example, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) stands as the solitary work by a female author among the seven primary texts listed by Stefano Ercolino in his efforts to define the maximalist novel.

This gender and racial disparity within the realm of expansive postmodern narratives raises important questions about representation and inclusivity. The critical examination of these literary traditions must extend beyond the exploration of aesthetic and linguistic innovations to address issues of gender and race, thereby enriching the critical discourse and providing a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse voices contributing to the contemporary literary landscape. Recognizing the absence of female perspectives in the discussion of maximalist narratives becomes crucial for fostering a more inclusive and equitable appreciation of the complexities inherent in these works. Building upon Warwick Research Collective's seminal *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Literature of World-Literature* (2015), the present text aims to investigate the specific maximalist modes of inquiry (Levey 2017) employed by three female authors of colour in order to bring to light aspects of unevenness and cultural and formal hybridisation.

Before I proceed with the detailed presentation and analysis of the three novels at hand, it is imperative to embark on a brief exploration of maximalist fiction crafted by male authors. This exploration will specifically focus on those works that hold pivotal positions within a canon of maximalism that has taken shape during the last decades, shedding light on the ways in which this particular subset of literary expression was analysed in order to formulate distinct solutions for a form of fiction that constitutes itself according to an "aesthetics of difficulty." This preliminary investigation aims to provide a contextual foundation, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the novels under consideration and their place within the broader landscape of maximalist fiction.

Relative predecessors

First, it can be stated without any hesitation that Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) serves as the foundational text for all subsequent theoretical developments concerning maximalist novels. In the previously mentioned text, attempting to delineate the characteristics of an "encyclopedic narrative", Mendelson underscores the "special and definable place" that these narratives "occupy in their national cultures" (1267). Positioned at the culmination of a lineage that commences with Dante's *Commedia*—encompassing Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby Dick,* Joyce's *Ulysses*—Pynchon's work demonstrates an "international scope" that deliberately disregards national boundaries. In Mendelson's view, Pynchon is the encyclopedist of the emerging international culture, surpassing the ingrained limitations specific to national cultural contexts (1271-2). Mendelson's list of titles notably lacks contributions from female authors, and the theorist addresses gender-related issues only at a single point in the discussion.

Discussing the encyclopedic impulse and the structuring of encyclopedic information, Mendelson employs the dichotomy between analytic and synthetic modes. Within this framework, he draws a distinct connection between certain qualities and gender archetypes. The analytic approach, characterized by a systematic dissection and examination of components, is linked to archetypally masculine traits. On the other hand, he associates the synthetic dimension, marked by a holistic and integrative approach, with archetypally feminine characteristics. This dichotomous perspective provides a lens through which he examines how gendered perceptions influence the conceptualization and organization of encyclopedic knowledge. In the same paragraph, the critic highlights a "law of encyclopedic form" asserting that "encyclopedic narratives find it exceptionally difficult to integrate their women characters at any level more quotidian or human than the levels of archetype and myth" (1272). This observation indicates not only the lack of female authors or the challenge of incorporating female characters, but also the pervasive generalisation imposed upon women in these "imperial works." These works, according to Mendelson, "assert the claims of a grander imperium than love or the family"—nevertheless normative—revealing a fundamental articulation of this literary object as "strain[ing] outward from the brief moments of personal love toward the wider expanses of national and mythical history" (1272-3).

As Nick Levey shows, the prominence of American authors in relation to the maximalist production of fiction "is perhaps also explainable by the fact that America is the symbolic homeland for the excesses of material and informational consumption that typify standard accounts of the postwar world"

(21). In the realm of American maximalist literature, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* stands as an unparalleled benchmark, rivalled, perhaps, only by the delayed reevaluation of William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), often regarded as a precursor not only for Pynchon but also for Davis Foster Wallace and other writers who published after the 1990s. In the 1980s and 1990s, against the backdrop of a "systemic distrust" regarding the "centripetal forces that give national imaginaries continuity and contour as ideological fictions" (Buell 2014, 15), the very idea of an American literature was challenged, thus questioning the established norms of the traditional narrative structures that had long defined American literary identity. In response to this intellectual and creative upheaval, novel forms began to surface, expanding the boundaries of literary expression. Within this transformative landscape, two noteworthy examples stand out, each contributing to the diversification and redefinition of American literature during this period. As with Mendelson, Pynchon also serves as the "gold standard" for Buell, and is similarly regarded as such by Ercolino, LeClair, or Levey (referring specifically to the theorists mentioned earlier). However, what the last three have in common is a shift in emphasis to the more recent maximalist novels written by Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace.

Spanning half a century of American history, the non-linear narrative of *Underworld* (1997) revolves around Nick Shay, the director of a waste management firm and a late 20th-century citizen deeply fixated on a baseball game from half a century earlier. Amidst the intricate tapestry of interconnected epic threads, Nick Shay grapples with the complexities of an unhappy marriage, embarks on the reconstruction of his genealogy, and questions the nature of his identity, juxtaposing it with his national identity, reminiscent of a modern Leopold Bloom (Morley 2006). In a departure from his predecessors who often framed the quest for identity within grand narratives aimed at restoring national grandeur, DeLillo introduces an *underhistory* (O'Donnell 2000, 156). *Underworld* shifts its focus to the nuances of everyday life and seemingly mundane narratives, diverging from the grand narrative that traditionally shapes America in its geopolitical struggles, particularly against the backdrop of the Cold War.

The representation of official history in the novel becomes only indirectly symptomatic of the actions and events unfolding. A character within the novel explicitly articulates this theme: "You can never underestimate the willingness of the state to act out its own massive fantasies" (1997, 421). The characters in DeLillo's narrative find themselves bewildered by the intricate geopolitical scenarios and critical events, such as the Soviet thermonuclear experiments, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Vietnam War (Nagano 2010, 241-256). It is precisely this deviation from a functional or authorized historical framework, the disruption of conventional narratives and the necessity of a reassessment of the impact of ideology and history on the shaping of a nation's

collective or partial consciousness that legitimizes DeLillo's "counterhistory" (DeLillo quoted in Ercolino 2014, 82), making it critical in the evolution of further maximalist projects.

David Foster Wallace distinguishes himself from his predecessors[2] by projecting the action from *Infinite Jest* (1996) into a dystopian future where the United States of America, Canada, and Mexico coalesce into a North American super-nation named O.N.A.N (Organization of North American Nations). The narrative primarily revolves around a junior tennis academy, reflecting Wallace's autobiographical connection as a former junior tennis player, and a rehabilitation centre for substance abusers. *Infinite Jest* weaves together four main narratives, creating a challenging fictional landscape in which the identification of a dominant thread becomes a difficult quest, indicative of the novel's rhizomatic structure.

The first narrative introduces a group of radicals from Quebec ("The Wheelchair Assassins") planning a coup d'état. The second narrative focuses on Boston residents undergoing recovery at the Ennet Clinic due to drug and alcohol abuse. The third narrative immerses readers in the competitive and idiosyncratic environment of a tennis academy run by James and Avril Incandenza, while the fourth narrative centres on the Incandenza family, particularly the youngest son, Hal, who can be considered, albeit vaguely, as the novel's main character. These threads intertwine through a film titled "Infinite Jest," the creation of James Incandenza. The film possesses an enchanting allure that leads viewers to lose interest in all other aspects of life, eventually culminating in fatal consequences. This convergence of storylines, unified by the enigmatic film, construct a multifaceted novelistic exploration of characters, themes, and of the profound impact of artistic creation on the human psyche. The novel's monstrousness lies in its expansive size and its exploration of a dystopian universe characterized by anomalies. While *Infinite Jest* satirizes consumerist society and the film industry, Wallace's problematization introduces the concept of an "apocalypse by absorption" (Fest 2012, 291). The novel contends that infinite accumulation is essentially impossible, providing a unique lens through which the American author challenges prevailing notions of commodification

[2] I use the term "predecessors", even though *Underworld* (1997) was published after *Infinite Jest* (1996), as is well known that the relationship between the two authors involved a type of master-disciple dimension. The two corresponded regularly, and DFW referred to DeLillo as a master, the former's manuscript archive proving the meticulousness with which he read and annotated his books. See G. Foster, "A Deep Insider's Elegiac Tribute: The Work of Don DeLillo in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest", *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 2016, and D. T. Max, "Final Destination" in *The New Yorker*, June 11 & 18, 2007. Moreover, at the time of the publication of *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace's second book, DeLillo had already published eleven novels, none of them comparable in ambition and achievement to *Underworld*.

and abnormal expansion specific to late capitalism, through which an artefact can end up devouring its viewers.

Drawing from the examples briefly addressed above, I would like to assert that I consider maximalist narratives to represent the literary form which best illustrates the cultural and literary landscape of late capitalism. Before moving on to the three novels that represent the main objects of inquiry for this text, I would like to emphasize, once again, that some of the most important aspects of maximalism involve a formal flexibility, a deviation from structural norms which may sometimes be framed as anarchetypal, corresponding to the "decentred and multiple subject of the contemporary world" (Braga 2006, 254). In what follows, I try to correlate the maximalist form of the novel to a "peculiar plasticity and hybridity of the novel form [that] enables it to incorporate not only multiple literary levels, genres and modes, but also other non-literary and archaic cultural forms . . . in order to register a bifurcated or ruptured sensorium of the space-time of the (semi-)periphery" (WReC 2015, 16).

The centre and the process of double peripheralization

Rather than setting up a dichotomy where Zadie Smith, Arundhati Roy, and Bernardine Evaristo are positioned as direct counterparts to DeLillo, Wallace, and Pynchon, my intention is to establish a sense of contiguity within the realm of maximalist productions. The works of these authors should not be viewed as inherently antithetical or in conflict. Nevertheless, a specific symmetry is present in my selection, and I will briefly elucidate this choice with the aim of providing a justification that extends beyond personal preference.

First of all, my selection is unequivocally grounded in gender considerations. As previously noted, the body of maximalist novels traditionally scrutinised in theoretical discussions predominantly consists of works written by men. Consequently, considering this gender disparity, it is imperative to address this imbalance comprehensively. Acknowledging this disproportion extends beyond a mere brief mention; it necessitates active participation in more extensive dialogues aimed at redressing and rectifying this inequality.

Secondly, the authors I have chosen in order to investigate the ways in which complex narratives can bring to light aspects of unevenness and hybridisation do this by virtue of their own racial positionality. From the standpoint (Harding 1986) of their racial identity, all three authors can provide nuanced portrayals of social, cultural, and artistic contexts that encompass themes of migration, periphery, and marginality. In this regard, their works serve as important sources of insights into the complex intersections of race, offering narratives that explore the intricacies of identity, displacement, and the dynamic interplay between core and periphery within the contemporary world-system.

Furthermore, I deliberately selected three authors who can be perceived as equivalents to the three discussed maximalist male authors, particularly concerning the centrality of the literary culture in which they are immersed. It is unnecessary to emphasize the significance of both the American literary scene and market, or the pivotal role played by British literary institutions. The prominence of these cultural contexts is self-evident, and the chosen authors operate within these influential spheres, contributing to and engaging with two literary landscapes that hold immense sway over contemporary discourse and readership.

Nevertheless, viewed through the lens of the combined and uneven development theory, the three female authors of colour whom I have selected might embody a process akin to what is referred to as "peripheralization." This outcome arises from their gender and racial identity within a literary field and sub-domain—specifically the maximalist canon—largely dominated by male figures. Considering that

> some of the most significant literature from the core countries emanates from the semi-peripheries or peripheries of those countries: marginalised class, ethnic or regional positions . . . the 'unevenness' characteristic of (semi-)peripheral literature will also be discernible in literature from the core formations that is nonetheless 'peripheralised' by its relatively disprivileged (or provincial) location within the highly mobile and scalar 'centre'. For of course the unfolding of combined and uneven development produces unevenness throughout the world capitalist system, and not merely across the divide represented by the international division of labour. (WReC 2015, 55-57)

Taking this into consideration, it is imperative to recognize that Zadie Smith, Arundhati Roy, and Bernardine Evaristo all write in English, the most widely spoken language globally. Additionally, they enjoy the privileges afforded by one of the most robust and performant literary systems worldwide. This linguistic and literary context amplifies their reach, enabling their narratives to transcend geographical boundaries and resonate with a diverse and expansive readership, making them relevant and intriguing participants within "a literature that variously registers this combined unevenness in both its form and its content to reveal itself as, properly speaking, world-literature" (49), even more so as they undergo a process of double peripheralization described above.[3]

[3] It might be interesting to explore the possibility of maximalist novels undergoing a parallel process of peripheralization due to their intricate and demanding form, given the constant shrinkage of attention span (Bradbury 2016). On the other hand, given the fact that Amy Rhodes, the head of marketing for the company that first published *Infinite Jest*, "stated that the publicity campaign of the novel was orchestrated precisely around its imposing dimension, promoted as a clear sign of its importance" (Frank Bruni quoted in Ercolino, 22), it would be equally entertaining to question the dynamics of a literary market that affords such a strategy.

How do these three works of fiction engage with the margins? In what manner do their modes of representation distance themselves from maximalist works written by men, as illustrated earlier? How do they interrogate forms of cultural hybridisation and how does their structure (or the destitution of traditional structure) register the combined unevenness at the margins and peripheries of the world-system, even while activating at the core of a performant literary system?

Frames of reference

Even though these works unfold with intricacy and depth that resist facile summarization, I will try to offer a description for each of them, emphasizing the most important aspects in each case. The aim is to illustrate the shift through which these narratives have started to factor margins in and to speculate on the instances of (semi-)periphery more frequently than in the beginnings of the maximalist form.

In 2000, as a recent undergraduate at Cambridge University, Zadie Smith published her debut novel, *White Teeth*, an intricately crafted work of fiction that explores the complexities of three distinct cultures and follows the interconnected stories of three families across three generations. The Iqbals, Samad and Alsana, are Bangladeshi immigrants, parents of twin sons Millat and Magid. The Joneses, an English-West Indian family with one daughter, are linked to them through the friendship that the male figures from each family (the aforementioned Samad and Archie Jones) established while fighting together in the Second World War. The Chalfens constitute the third family in the narrative—white Londoners, intellectuals, a subtle counterpart for the previous two families. Notably, their eldest son is enrolled in the same state school attended by the children of the Iqbals and the Joneses.

In what was described as a "multicultural mosaic where Englishness is dislocated and even close to complete erasure" (Cuder-Domínguez 2004, 183), Smith depicts a "hybrid Commonwealth" (Gilroy 2001, 60), where the intersecting lives and contradictions of the characters mirror a myriad of themes, including history, racism, imperialism, generational dynamics, legacies of Empire, genetic manipulation, and the dynamics of contemporary urban spaces (McCallum qtd in Ashcroft et al 2012, 485-6). *White Teeth* sold more than 2 million copies worldwide and garnered enthusiastic reviews, earning several prestigious literary awards, notably the *Guardian* First Book Award and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction.

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Fiction* (2017a) represents a different type of work in an author's literary trajectory. Considering the various

ways in which cultural forms, particularly the novel, can be employed or shaped in terms of expectations and reception, it is worth mentioning the significance these titles hold within each author's career. This exploration not only sheds light on the authors' creative evolution, but also enhances our understanding of the positions these works occupy within their broader literary journeys. If, as we have seen, *White Teeth* is a debut novel that succeeds in establishing an author still highly relevant after more than 20 years, *TMOUH* represents the next step after this sort of recognition. During a 20-year hiatus in literary fiction, Arundhati Roy published more than 15 works of non-fiction on politics and culture, becoming one of the most relevant voices addressing problems related to India (the Kashmir separatist movement, the Indian government's nuclear policies).

Roy's first novel, *The God of Small Things*, won the Booker Prize in 1997 and was ranked as one of the most influential Asian novels. Set against the backdrop of social and political upheaval in post-colonial India, the novel delves into themes of caste discrimination, societal expectations, and the profound impact of historical events on individual lives. Roy's non-linear prose and oscillations between the past and the present contribute to the novel's depth and complexity. Following the same non-linear structure, but also amplifying the formal oscillation that interlaces various characters and storylines across different regions of India, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* navigates through decades of political and social upheaval, with the central focus on Anjum, a transgender woman, and the eclectic group of individuals she encounters in a graveyard that becomes her unconventional home. After getting familiar with Anjum and the fight she is waging against heteronormativity, her plot is abandoned, and the second part of the novel (interestingly enough, the two parts equate with three voices that tell the story, thus setting up the first, and most obvious, formal asymmetry of this work) explores the story of Tilottama, an architect loved by three men, a possible alter-ego of Roy herself. "The multi-focal narrative", in which Roy mixes and includes gender identities and secret agents, outcasts and postcolonial sensitive topics, is "loosely tied together by a foundling" (Iyer 2018, 166).

Finally, *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) is Bernardine Evaristo's eighth novel and arguably her most distinguished work to date. Following a cast of twelve female characters across more than a century, the "vigorous, polyphonic, free-flowing" (Murphy 2019) work of fiction represents Evaristo's absolute literary outbreak, as the co-winner of the 2019 Booker Prize, alongside Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*. The novel does not follow the basic typographical rules of its genre, that is Evaristo chooses to explore the intersectional experiences of her characters without capital letters, without full stops, in lines of different lengths that set a reading pace contrasting the one that would be required in the case

of a work of literature involving various racial, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as reflecting the complexity of contemporary British society.

The primary characters (those after which the chapters of the book were named) are mostly black British women, navigating the British patriarchal society and somehow connected (not only symbolically but also physically) by *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, the latest production of Amma (a lesbian socialist playwright). The trajectory of each character is as diverse as it gets, including racist positions (such as Penelope's), harmful love relationships, or migration experiences that weave through intergenerational stories, contributing to a narrative deliberately avoiding any "overarching story" (Frazer-Carroll, 2019).

The refinement of realism

As previously asserted and as the concise introductions to the three titles which stand at the heart of this text show, it is noteworthy that these works have not only swiftly gained prominence but have also consolidated their positions at the very core of the world literary system. In my perspective, these novels represent more than individual successes; they epitomize a distinctive and pertinent paradigm for maximalist writing in the post-2000s era. The ascent of these works to literary eminence not only attests to their individual artistic merits, but also signifies a broader cultural and literary shift. By delving into the nuanced complexities of their narratives and thematic explorations, these novels not only captivate readers but also leave an indelible mark on the evolving literary landscape, contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding maximalist literature in the 21st century.

Yet, reinforcing the structure of their intersectional identities, I have previously alluded to the potential (semi-)peripheralization that these authors might be subjected to. This aspect calls for a deeper exploration into the dynamics of how their unique positionalities, marked by intersecting factors such as race and gender, could influence their reception within literary circles. However, my main interest here is to address the ways in which

> the narratives of (semi-)peripheral authors who hew quite closely to the line of the dominant realist traditions display irrealist or catachrestic features when registering the temporal and spatial dislocations and the abrupt juxtapositions of different modes of life engendered by imperial conquest, or the violent reorganisation of social relations engendered by cyclical crisis. (WRec 2015, 72)

This notion of "irrealist aesthetics" can be framed not as an indication of a devaluation or "depreciation" of realism, but rather as a nuanced evolution or refinement of it. This reinterpretation occurs within the specific context of

combined and uneven development, where the conventional boundaries and structures of realism are reexamined and adapted to address the complexities inherent in this dynamic and multifaceted world of hybridity and excess of narratives (WRec 2015, 70).

Perhaps the more resonant label that was applied to Smith and other novelists that began publishing their works at the cusp of the new millennium was that of "hysterical realists" (Wood 2000). The narratives, *White Teeth* included, are characterized by their extensive and meticulously detailed descriptions, intricate plot structures, and are populated by a considerable number of characters (all of which might seem specific to classic realism). However, as "the stories and substories sprout on every page . . . in the pursuit of vitality at all costs" (Wood 2004, 178 qtd in Ercolino 2014, 158), these works become both exhaustive and lengthy, and the realist conventions are weakened. Another element that might contribute to this "realism plus" (Pope 2015, 169) in *White Teeth* is the complex timeline that pervades the seventies and the eighties, while also including events from 1857 and 1945. The sense of irreality could thus be prompted by this "endless web of meaning" (Wood 2000, 3) that is randomized through a peculiar postmodern method in "fortuitous encounters, lucky escapes, accidents, coincidences, unforeseen circumstances, fatalism, tensions between those who believe themselves pre-saved and other the unsaved." (Pope 170).

"'Irrealism' should not be opposed to realism, but rather seen as the critical, rather than conformist, impulse at its heart," (Menozzi 2018, 7) is a definition that could very adequately be applied to *White Teeth*. The quoted fragment, though, can be found in a text that questions the realism in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Motivated by an incessant desire to elucidate India to non-Indian audiences, authors writing in English such as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Jhumpa Lahiri may inadvertently engage in a process of anglicization and homogenization, says Meenakshi Mukherjee, when talking about "an anxiety of Indianness" (2000). Perhaps tributary to her political activity in the twenty years between the two novels, Arundhati Roy "straddles the boundaries between fiction and polemical prose . . . the novel's sprawling form is not failure of craft but a deliberate aesthetic choice which reflects the author's engagement with the challenges of telling a story of the nation from multiple minoritarian perspectives" (Iyer 166). "How does one narrate a fragmenting nation?" asks Iyer in the same text, a pertinent question that might seem directed against a synthetic realism of the type defined by György Lukács in his *Studies in European Realism* (1950).

Nevertheless, Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* best illustrates what Filippo Menozzi describes as a process of "reframing realism", going against the idea that "reality is linear, coherent, and easily captured by documentary representation" (Menozzi 3). The "epic scale of what is really going

on" (Roy 2009, xi-xii) is not a matter of documentation or collecting facts with "factual precision," but has instead more in common with the "'fighting realisms' whose investment is not merely in mapping present realities but in the revelation of possible futures and emergent social orders" (WRec 77). It is interesting to speculate on the fact that this reframed realism—Menozzi goes further in defining an "aesthetic of the inconsolable" (7)—might perhaps be amplified by a chronological shuffling that Roy employs even from the very beginning of the book. I am here referring not only to the numerous interruptions and digressions in Tilottama's story narrated by Biplab Das in the second part of the novel, but also to a mechanism of reversal which enables the reader to see the effect before the cause, in what I would audaciously interpret as that Lukácsian "concealed totality of life" (2003, 60) in a postcolonial context.

Regarding Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*, the situation looks less complicated. The novel corresponds to what might seem to be a "clean" realist fiction. Nonetheless, there are certain aspects of this work that deserve to be explored further. The British author self-described her style as fusion fiction, a technique that implies "a hybrid 'disruptive' style that pushes prose towards free verse, allowing direct and indirect speech to bleed into each other and sentences to run on without full stops" (Bucknell 2019). To a certain degree, this hybridity is precisely the feature that subverts the classic realism. For, in this polyvocal novel, the underlying cohesion that usually describes a realist work (however complex and labyrinthine) is corrupted by an anarchetypal impulse, grounded in experimentalism, openness and decentring.

The latter is discernible in Evaristo's fusion fiction through her intentional avoidance of metanarratives and through the deliberate omission of assigning a central role to any singular character. Even though the book begins and ends with Amma's play, there is no evident imbalance in the space of representation that each of the twelve protagonists receive. Additionally, the question of realism might be addressed from another point of view to which I will refer just tentatively, due to limitations of space and objective. At some point, it might be challenging to investigate the ways in which what is commonly read as realism is transformed by the usage of free verse, or the flexibility of such a form to accommodate what Bucknell calls "multiple fabricated realities" of Evaristo's characters.

Margins and Ethical Commitment

Earlier, I said that I consider the maximalist form to best describe the contemporary world, its multitudes and depths, as well as its propensity for hybridisation and amalgamation of information and detail. Capitalizing on maximalism as "a mode of inquiry linked to excess and giganticness employed

to give attention to the overlooked and trivial" (Levey 2017, 161), this part of my text aims to deal especially with the overlooked hypostasis that the selected authors try to make sense out of, addressing questions related to marginal experience, fragmented identities, in-between states and the role that polyphony still plays in articulating these aspects in their fiction.

Establishing the centre or the core of a maximalist novel is, as we have seen, a difficult operation. However, as Zadie Smith herself affirms, at the centre of *White Teeth* sits Irie (the daughter of Archie and Clara Jones), who falls in love with Millat, the son of Samad and Alsana Iqbal: "The reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about her, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy which is in a lot of writing of my generation of my peers, about the centre always being slightly displaced and there are a whole myriad of reasons for that" (O'Grady 2002). The displacement and the indeterminacy that describe this generation of young writers correlate with a general sense of identity fragmentation, best illustrated in Smith's novel by the characters' attempt at "shaping their sense of identity and ramifying across the generations" (Dawson 2007, 152), which generally results in amplifying an existential split. Samad's struggle to impose an ethnic and religious identity on his sons, or Marcus Chalfen's project of eliminating the chaos and the randomness end up reiterating the same "instabilities . . . in cosmopolitan identities . . . [as well as an] unexpected political outcome of diasporic hybridity [that] undermines facile models of both genetic and cultural determinism" (165).

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* follows the same logic of uncovering crises in identity, in-between states and, most importantly, the spaces of precarity (Mendes and Lau 2019, 5) inhabited by her compelling characters that seem to shift permanently between structures of existence (see, for example, Biplab Das multiple identities, or Major Amrik Singh's misleading testimonies, framing the vacillating game of military and political power that unfolds in Delhi and Kashmir). Roy's novel takes the sprawling form of a fragmented, digressive narrative that is able to question marginality, to challenge the representation biases of caste and of the hijras through its multiplicity of "polyphonic stories of precarious figures struggling to survive on the margins of Indian society" (Gorman-DaRif 2018, 2).

I previously mentioned that Roy's multi-focal narrative is tied together by a foundling. As Irie in *White Teeth*, Miss Jabeen the Second acts as a metonymic plot device that underscores the impossibility to reclaim a stable, fixed identity. Taken under the care of a diverse cast of characters representing various marginalized typologies, she embodies a replacement for Miss Jebeen the First and becomes the subject of their persistent articulation of care. Moreover, what lies at the heart of Roy's novel is a sort of tension between the possibility to

embody everyone and everything and the ambition to avoid any levelling that would domesticate the hybrid postcolonial condition. At the end of this "book of porous borders" (Roy 2017b), a cisgendered Syrian Christian woman and a transgender Muslim are brought together by the same imperative that finally offers a transformative solution for the narration of a fragmented nation:

> How
> to
> tell
> a
> shattered
> story?
>
> By
> slowly
> becoming
> everybody.
>
> No.
> By slowly becoming everything. (Roy 2017a, 442)

This passage creates an excellent transition to *Girl, Woman, Other* in terms of how the hitherto marginalized communities can be factored in by means of a communitarian machinery that underscores the socio-cultural context of each intervention. Evaristo manages to formulate individual voices without threatening their difference. The shattered story mentioned in Roy's case is here the story of racial exclusion, that can be overcome only through a reassessment of the past through the present and the future. It is what Shirley King does, as a teacher, when she realizes that her mission is to encourage her pupils to "avoid repeating the mistakes of the past and to deepen our understanding of who we are as the human race." The strategy applied by Shirley is that of making history *"fun* and *relevant"* as "we don't exist in a vacuum, children . . . we are all part of a continuum, repeat after me, the future is in the past and the past is in the present" (Evaristo 2019, 221).

This mantra-like guidance that emphasizes the need for awareness regarding the errors of the past (the element that ties future and present together) is realized through a fun and relevant approach to history. As a tactical operation, it seems to reverse the "proportion of boredom in the ratio of boredom to interest" that Sianne Ngai attributed to authors of "sprawling and encyclopedic works" (2015, 140). Evaristo's characters are interesting, their voices (from 19-year-old Yazz to 93-year-old Hattie) are extremely idiosyncratic and actual, subtending the themes of race, gender, sex, politics, or marginality with a

noticeable ethical commitment. It is precisely on the matter of this ethical impulse that I would like to end my analysis on these three exuberant novels. They all share this tendency of questioning the status-quo, of tackling subjects that deviate from the centre, of questioning representational biases through the means of a "*defamiliarization* of the real" (Ercolino, 163).

Conclusion

It is, of course, complicated to discuss maximalist novels extensively and to try to encompass their information and meaning in all their complexity. What I wanted to achieve here was addressing the ways in which complex narratives that incorporate the tropes of migration, periphery, and marginality, amongst others, can bring to light aspects of unevenness and cultural and formal hybridisation. My aim was to investigate the shift through which recent maximalist narratives have started to factor margins in differently and more frequently than the pioneers of this literary form. To accomplish this, I provided an overview of notable pre-2000 maximalist novels by Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and David Foster Wallace and, subsequently, I delved into the nuances of three post-2000 novels by Zadie Smith, Arundhati Roy, and Bernardine Evaristo.

In the case of the three male authors, the frame of reference was that of an American literature that seems to perpetually entertain the idea and the model of a Great American Novel. As a result, we are witnessing the creation of a space adequate for a debate involving the national and post-national dimensions of narratives, doubled by the tropes of information (and its uncontrollable proliferation), of alternate methods of articulating history, and of (almost) apocalyptical consumerist dynamics. The transition to what I consider to be a new mode of building maximalism in fiction was illustrated through works of ambitious and sprawling configuration written by three women of colour. In their cases, the most interesting aspects were those of a potential refinement of realism and the ethical processes through which marginal figures and identities can be investigated without affecting their specificity along the way. It goes without saying that numerous other inferences could be made starting from these works and the associations between their thematic, stylistic, or ideological particularities, and I am hopeful that the present paper will unfold in a more extensive study in the future.

„This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalization, UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P4-PCE-2021-1234".

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