

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION THESES

Anett Schäffer

**Stories Woven Into Spaces:
Portrayal of Cities and Realism in
Contemporary Anglophone and Hungarian
Prose**

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. András Kappanyos

Head of the Doctoral School: Prof. Dr. Gábor Kecskeméti

University of Miskolc, Faculty of Arts

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Historical and Theoretical Models of Modern Literature

Programme

Miskolc

2022

I. The Aim of the Research

We can often read that postmodern literature is “over” and that postmodernism as an era is behind us. Although it is questionable whether we can draw such a clear boundary in literary history and declare the end of postmodernism, it is certain that the attention of readers, writers and literary scholars has shifted to literary works which cannot be described with the definition of postmodern literature and which are linked to realism. We can read about realism in writings about both Anglophone and Hungarian literature and find different concepts about the nature of this realism. One of those concepts in Hungarian literary studies is József Takáts’s *new realism*, which received a lot of attention soon after its publication, and in the Anglophone scene, for example, Madhu Dubey’s *post-postmodern realism* or James Wood’s *hysterical realism*, which was initially an ironic remark on contemporary novels. It seems to be a general trend that the emphasis is shifting to the representation of the world and significant social topics in both Anglophone and Hungarian literature. Realism strongly correlates with the depiction of urban spaces in the novels analysed, since urban spaces are at the centre of the novels and social themes are depicted in relation to these spaces and the movements between them.

The main research question of my dissertation is how contemporary Anglophone and Hungarian novels depict cities and urban spaces and how this is connected to the portrayal of the characters, more precisely to the portrayal of the characters’ identities,

changes in their identities and their identity crises. The urban spaces inhabited by the characters do not merely serve as background in the analysed novels, but also are at the centre of the plot, determine events and impact the identity of the characters. In addition to the analysis of urban spaces and the representation of characters' identities in the novels, the question of how realism has come to the forefront of Anglophone and Hungarian contemporary prose and how this can be connected to the portrayal of space and identity is present throughout the dissertation.

II. Methods and Sources

In the analyses of the dissertation I primarily used the close reading method, but this was complemented by the approaches of comparative literary studies. Reading works of Anglophone and Hungarian literature side by side, examining the common points and differences between them raises questions and insights that would otherwise not be available.

The decision to choose Hungarian and English novels as the subject of the analyses may seem arbitrary at first glance, but I am convinced that this is precisely what can provide the dissertation with a real comparative dimension. The effect of contemporary Anglophone literature is indisputable since these works are not only published globally on the multicultural scene but also appear in large numbers on lists of translated works. Contemporary Anglophone literature is a very important part of contemporary world literature, and certainly a significant reference point. The analysed Anglophone novels are related to different cultural traditions, since Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson are British, Salman Rushdie is from India, Zadie Smith's Jamaican mother emigrated to England, while her father is English, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author. The comparative analysis of the selected Hungarian and Anglophone novels can thus unlock many new aspects. Moreover, the similarities and connections with and between the cited theories also point to the direction that the prominence of realism is a global trend in literature.

In the analyses of the portrayal of spaces I focused on the depictions of cities. I found two different types of portrayals in the analysed novels: the city, which appears to be unified, and so defines the identity of the characters, and the disintegrated city, the districts of which function as separate microworlds, providing different rules and opportunities for their inhabitants. Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Zsuzsa Rakovszky's *The Shadow of the Snake*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and György Dragomán's *The White King* belong to the first type, while Zadie Smith's *NW*, Krisztina Tóth's *Aquarium*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* to the second.

The structure of the dissertation follows these two types. The introductory chapter of the dissertation is followed by the *Theories and Interpretations of Cities* chapter, in which I introduce the relevant correlations of city, society and literature, the differences between modern and postmodern cities, the characteristic figures of the modern city (*flâneur*, *flâneuse* and the man of the crowd), women's role(s) in the city, and how cities appear in literature and literature appears in cities. The following two chapters, *The City Determining Identity* and *The Fragmented City*, which contain the analyses of the novels, are the centre of the dissertation. In the analyses I presented in the first of these chapters, cities are depicted as unified entities. The emphasis is placed on the effect cities have on their citizens' identities, the unique features of cities and how leaving a city or moving between different cities can influence the characters' identities. In this chapter, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, Zsuzsa Rakovszky's *The Shadow of the*

Snake, Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and György Dragomán's *The White King* are analysed. In the novels analysed in *The Fragmented City* chapter, cities are divided into smaller spaces that function as special microworlds within the fabric of the city, mirroring the workings of the city and society. The novels analysed in this chapter are Zadie Smith's *NW*, Krisztina Tóth's *Aquarium*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*. The theme of the latter two novels examined in this chapter is emigration and the spaces of emigrant characters.

In addition to the primary sources of the dissertation, my main sources were writings about contemporary literature and literary theory, theoretical texts related to the topic of cities and the theme of identity, novel analyses, and reviews.

III. Results and Their Usability

The present dissertation can be seen as a search for the directions of contemporary Anglophone and Hungarian literature along the main questions of how cities and urban spaces are depicted, how these depictions are related to the portrayal of the characters' identities, changes in their identities and identity crises, and how it can be connected to realism's "return" in a reinterpreted form. Cities are central themes of the novels analysed, since they do not merely function as background, but also play a key role in the portrayal of the characters.

I classified the novels into two separate categories depending on whether they depict cities as unified entities or they are divided into smaller spaces, which function as separate microworlds. In the case of the first group, the focus is on the unique features of the different cities, the identity-shaping effect of living in a city and the movement between the different cities. In these novels, which I analyse in *The City Determining Identity* chapter, in addition to the issue of identity, which plays a central role in every one of the selected works, more general, larger social issues are portrayed such as the position of women throughout history, the impact of war and the totalitarian state on individuals. However, the novels focusing on smaller urban spaces, which are analysed in the fourth chapter, focus more on the division of society. In fact in the novels depicting emigration (*Americanah*, *The Golden House*) analysed in the same chapter, the journey itself is of no importance, and the novels do not even describe it. The focus is on

the smaller spaces the emigrant characters inhabit and can call their own in the destination countries.

The novels analysed in *The Fragmented City* chapter take place in the present or in the recent past, as opposed to the novels depicting unified cities which take place in historical eras or an uncertain age. This could show that the disintegration of cities into smaller spaces is related to the 20th–21st century, and this disintegration may be the legacy of postmodernism. The development of the identities of the characters in both groups of novels is linked to the cities and urban spaces where they live, which they visit, leave and return to. The urban space is the most defining element of the novels, the centre of the plot and provides the basis of the portrayal of the characters.

The identities of the characters in the novels analysed are neither definite nor constant: dubious origins, family traumas, foreign environments, stereotypes complicate and question the stability of their identities or prevent them from creating new identities. All of the novels seem to revolve around the question of how and why one's identity may change or why one might face an identity crisis. The novels often refer to that on the level of the narration and most frequently with characters who think about their own identities. The doubts of these protagonists and the questioning of the stability of identity could indicate fundamental tendencies in contemporary literature. As storytelling has gained more importance in contemporary literature, in contrast to postmodernism's focus on narration and textuality, character portrayal has also become a central

part of the novels. In the novels we can find characters whose identities change or are destabilized, characters who struggle with belonging to certain social groups and with social expectations.

All the novels analysed focus on storytelling, but also make use of the postmodern experience and/or use postmodern narrative techniques. The realism of these novels is not primarily based on the representation of the world in the traditional sense, because they constantly question that representation with unbelievable characters and events (*The Passion, Nights at the Circus, The Golden House*), elements from fairy tales (*Aquarium, The Golden House*), or by making the time and place of the novel uncertain (*The White King*) and with the playful, nonlinear narrative techniques.

The current topics of the novels can be summarized as: the expectations women face and its effects, being a woman in different historical eras (*The Shadow of the Snake, The Passion, Nights at the Circus, Aquarium, NW*); the questions of gender identity (*The Passion, The Golden House*); the structure of the society and the injustices of the class system (*Aquarium, NW*); the connection between the past and present, the (im)possibility of telling the past in one unified narrative, the subjective nature of truth (*Nights at the Circus, Aquarium, The White King*); the reinterpretation of the nature of emigration in the contemporary world (*Americanah, The Golden House*). All of these are linked to the representations of cities and urban spaces and the question of how individuals are connected to these spaces, in other words, how an individual's opportunities, social

status and identity are defined not just by when they were born, but also by where they live.

The realism of these novels primarily comes from their themes, since the attention is turned towards the portrayal of questions and problems relevant in the contemporary world. The general questions of human existence are present but do not play a major role. Realism is apparent in these novels and strongly correlates with the depiction of urban spaces. In these works of contemporary literature, the city is the place where social problems can be presented. They continue the legacy of both modern literature and postmodern literature, the latter of which echoes in the narration of the novels and in the breaking up of the world into little pieces. These contemporary urban novels connect realist themes to the city and to the space that represents not only the diversity of the contemporary world but also the social questions of the present age.

The findings of the research can be useful both for Anglophone and Hungarian literary studies. It shows that we can draw a connection between the portrayal of urban space in contemporary Anglophone and Hungarian novels and the novels' connection to realism.

IV. List of Publications Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

SCHÄFFER Anett. „The Narrative of New York: Space and Narration in Salman Rushdie’s *The Golden House*”. In *Tavaszi Szél 2021/Spring Wind 2021: Tanulmánykötet I.*, szerkesztette MOLNÁR Dániel és MOLNÁR Dóra, 525–534. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2021.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „Városok, szobák, ruhák: Mintázatok Rakovszky Zsuzsa prózájában”. In: *Reáliák: A magyar próza jelene*, szerkesztette VÁSÁRI Melinda és DECZKI Sarolta, 226–240. Budapest: Kijárat Kiadó, 2021.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „A globalizált világ emigráns regénye: Tér, test és identitás Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie *Americanah* című regényében”. *Műhely* 43, 5–6. sz. (2020): 86–90.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „Identitás és Északnyugat-London: Az identitás alakulása Zadie Smith *NW* című regényében”. In *Testek és szövegtestek*, szerkesztette SCHÄFFER Anett, BABOS Orsolya és SZOLNOKI Zsolt, 79–91. Pro Scientia Füzetek 6. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetemi Kiadó, 2020.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „Terek és testek Rakovszky Zsuzsa költészetében és prózájában”. In *Testek és szövegtestek*, szerkesztette SCHÄFFER Anett,

BABOS Orsolya és SZOLNOKI Zsolt, 50–60. Pro Scientia Füzetek 6. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetemi Kiadó, 2020.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „A kelet-közép-európai disztópia valósága: Dragomán György: *A fehér király*”. *Literatura* 46 (2020): 196–213.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „Városok, szobák, ruhák: Mintázatok Rakovszky Zsuzsa prózájában”. *Literatura* 45 (2019): 152–166.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „A város mint identitásképző elem Rakovszky Zsuzsa prózájában”. In *Miskolci Egyetem Doktoranduszok Fóruma, Miskolc, 2017. november 30.: Bölcsészettudományi Kar szekciókiadványa*, szerkesztette SCHÄFFER Anett, 63–69. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem, 2018.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „»Az ember játszik«: Identitás Jeanette Winterson *A szenvedély* című regényében”. In *Tavaszi Szél 2017 Konferencia/Spring Wind 2017: Konferenciakötet II.*, szerkesztette KERESZTES Gábor, 72–78. Budapest: Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2017.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „»Miért, hát ki vagy te?«: Az identitás alakulása Rakovszky Zsuzsa *A kígyó árnyéka* című regényében”. In *Miskolci Egyetem Doktoranduszok Fóruma, Miskolc, 2016. november 17.: Bölcsészettudományi Kar szekciókiadványa*, szerkesztette MAJOR

Ágnes és KÁLI Anita, 65–71. Miskolc: Miskolci Egyetem Tudományos és Nemzetközi Rektorhelyettesi Titkárság, 2017.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „A londoni kirakós: Zadie Smith: NW”. *Alföld* 68, 12. sz. (2017): 99–103.

SCHÄFFER Anett, „»A Piccadilly Vénusza«: Város és identitás Angela Carter *Esték a cirkuszban* című regényében”. *Studia Litteraria* 55, 3–4. sz. (2016): 135–148.