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1. INTRODUCTION: THE FAMILY SAGA, A NEW TREND IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

The three writers whom I have chosen to focus upon have been innovative in their way of constructing the new family sagas. Tan, Atkinson, and Roy focus on quests for identity and preservation of their cultural heritage, as well as on the inevitable transformations and constraints due to temporal and spatial changes.

Structurally, they each use innovative storytelling devices such as unreliability, word games and a large number of narrators. Thus, they emerge as products of different cultures, but have many things in common. I will focus both on the similarities of their prose, as well as on what differentiates them from one another.

In this paper, I plan to show how the blurriness of geographical, cultural and linguistic borders can affect the way the characters are constructed in contemporary family sagas. I will also focus on the effects of rediscovering the family past through various original narrative devices.

In the first subchapter of this introductory chapter, I will present a brief history of the family saga, and introduce the theories presented by Maria Roof regarding the new type of sagas of the late 20th century, representative of Latin American fiction. Starting from them, I will introduce my own plan of analysis for family sagas, which incorporates thematic and structural points.

The third subchapter of this introductory chapter deals with a presentation of the methodology used in the thesis.

The fourth subchapter is a presentation of the novels analyzed from the point of view of intergenerational connections.

1.1. Understanding the Saga

Historically, we understand the saga as a genre traditionally associated with early Scandinavian literature. It could be divided into several genres, of which the most direct classification is the mythic-heroic saga (*fornaladarsaga*), and what is commonly referred to as the family saga (*Islendigasaga*). According to Rowe, “scholars attempting to delimit the saga have focused on structure of action, most notably for the family saga” (541). Rowe further mentions Andersson’s “six-part feud structure” as the most widely accepted delineation of the family saga.

Over the years, the term has evolved, has incorporated an additional meaning, which I am concerned with in this paper, that of a novel or series of novels that chronicles the lives of one or several interconnected families through a long period of time, over several generations, and which is concerned both with the public historical events and the private lives of the characters which reflect them. The family sagas usually incorporate several point-of-view characters and various themes: social, economic, political, psychological and romantic.

In European literature, the family saga is traditionally associated with the beginning of the 20th century, when books such as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibaults*, and John Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga* were published. These novels incorporated a vast number of characters, and they told a story that unfolded for generations. The characters were written in a Realist manner, they were well-rounded, three-dimensional, and, due to the transition from the Realist period to the modernist one, their inner life played an important part. The story was about the way these characters handled social, political and emotional changes, in short, about their lives. They represented the centre, and both the author and the reader always bore that in mind. When one thinks of Soames Forsyte, for instance, the rich emotional life of the character comes to mind, his reactions and feelings were as important to the story as the actions themselves. One felt for the character.

On a macro level, they also represented the redefinition of class struggle and emergence of a new political order. Whether covertly or overtly, the characters themselves were direct participants in the movements that shaped the new social and political reality, and they were externally oriented and class-conscious. Thus, *The Forsyte Saga* dealt directly with the rise and fall of the Bourgeoisie, and the socio-political and economic effects were representatives of the genre.

Geoffrey Harvey wrote that,

In reading *The Forsyte Saga*, which deals with the collective life of a family situated in history between 1886 and 1920, we are always at the centre of a continuous movement from a vanishing past to a nascent future; we negotiate transitions between fictional and historical time; we experience the tension between the drive of the narrative towards closure, and the pressure of history that continually forces it open. (127)

The key to the quote above relies on the intrinsic relation between past and future, and on the focus on continuity. As the genre has evolved, the focus has moved to the past and to the way it may influence the present. The future is never mentioned. Linearity is no longer possible and this is also reflected on the narrative level. Though the desire for closure still drives this type of narrative, the impossibility to achieve it is what drives the author and the reader towards a

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fragmented plot, which nevertheless presents a thematically and universally relevant story, while transferring the focus from public to private.

World War I is a key event that delineates the feeling of inadequacy, and that was what moved the narrative from its built-in Realist desire towards a fragmentariness of perception and a quest for identity, towards exploration and participation in the inner lives of the characters without the benefit of an omniscient narrator, and towards the inner turmoil represented by the inner monologue. The characters and narrators became less and less defined, trying to find their bearings in a world that did not seem to make sense anymore. Everything was perceived indirectly, and the feelings of disconnection and detachment became prevalent in Modernism.

While it has always been a key feature of the family saga that the private lives of individuals reflect these changes, the move since then has been towards a more indirect participation, as the characters themselves are less well-rounded and their symbolism less evident at first.

For a long time, after World War II, the saga stopped being a popular genre. Then, in 1981, Salman Rushdie brought it back into focus with *Midnight's Children*, and Isabel Allende continued in 1982 with *The House of the Spirits*.

The reasons I am focusing on these two particular authors are the following: Rushdie's novel was, at the time, extremely controversial, but it earned him critical acclaim, a Booker Prize, and media attention; Allende is a widely read Spanish-language female author, and *The House of the Spirits* is her most popular book. Both of these narratives are sagas. Where do they differ then, from each other, as well as from the traditional sagas of the beginning of the 20th century? And, more importantly, how did they manage to gain so much popularity and critical acclaim?

I will not make an in-depth comparison between the two novels, as this is not my purpose here. I will merely state the fact that they both deal with stories of characters caught in turbulent times for their country, and that they both employ magic realism as a narrative device. What makes them so different from traditional sagas is the fact that, while reading them, one feels that the characters no longer take center stage. Their novels are revolving around mood and stories, not people. Allende, for instance, focuses all her stories on fragmented moments pieced together, that Galsworthy might have skipped over, and then, short, narrative passages, describe actions on which he might have lingered on for a hundred pages. This makes for a distinctive reading, as the characters have little to no time to develop in front of the reader. The action, however, unfolds with much more urgency and intensity. Thus, Allende and Rushdie manage to convey stories of countries, of entire nations, with the help of the characters whom we come to understand, albeit on a much less complex level than we did the Realist ones.

I believe it is this very type of writing for the sake of a mood, and of a story, which has made sagas popular again. Postmodernist fiction tends not to have an ending, so the idea of prolonging the story for a few generations of characters is comforting for the reader, who feels he is granted time to get acquainted with the characters, even if this might be just an illusion. Furthermore, with the inevitable long time span that sagas incorporate, at least some stories are bound to find closure. The social and the political elements also take center stage, mirrored in the way individuals deal with certain ideologies or changes in the political climate. That is probably the reason why the genre is mainly used by South American and Oriental writers. The political upheaval of the previous century can provide a lucrative framework for the stories, and the cultural background provides an interesting system of beliefs that, combined with the use of magic realism, feels distinctly foreign and exotic to the average reader who is not familiar with the culture in question; from a native reader, it elicits a response of identification and belonging. Thus, it appeals to both types of readers in the process.¹

Huysen argues that “The turn toward memory is subliminally energized by the desire to anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space (“Present Pasts” 36). I plan to use this concept to demonstrate that the saga, as a narrative genre, fulfills the same role, bringing together family members and bridging the gaps.

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith argue that “Preoccupations with the gendered politics of decolonization, exile, migration, and immigration have given rise to questions about the archive and about the transmission of memory across spatial and generational boundaries” (Hirsch and Smith 3).

The bond is stronger in the first person narrations, but there is always a distinctly feminine point of view, even in the ones where there is third-person narration.

Bhabba stated that “The recognition that tradition bestows is a partial form of identification” (2). In restaging the past through a minority lens, the new family sagas create new points of view, not just on the family past, but also on the new revised version of the identities of the characters in relation to their tradition. In my opinion, this applies both to the culture of the margins that two of the writers belong to, as well as to the so-called dominant cultures, as is the case with Kate Atkinson.

¹ Parts of this chapter were first published as article with the following bibliographical citation: Zainea, Lavinia. “The Deconstruction of Family in *The God of Small Things*”, Eliana Ionoaia ed. *Publish or Perish. Between Cultural Studies and Literary Criticism*. Mustang and Integral Publishing Houses, Bucharest, 2016, pp.149-161.

In 1996, Maria Roof draws a comparison between the Chilean author Isabel Allende and the Caribbean Maryse Condé, focusing on the contribution both these authors brought to development and reinvention of the family saga (Roof 289). The two write in different languages (the former in Spanish, the latter in French), but they have various common traits characteristic for this type of prose.

Roof considers that the main trait that can be attributed to this new type of prose is the redefinition of the notion of family and a newly placed focus on individual identity, with a different perspective on the family nucleus, which is now multicultural and untethered by race, gender, and class. Another characteristic is the recovery of family history, achieved by the reintegration of lost family members, and this is accomplished with the help of women narrators, which allows for “the creation of an encompassing collective memory in support of solidarity” (Roof 289).

Thus, she brings forward the premise that “Since it is family which gives meaning, the recuperation of the family memory involves the construction (through fiction?) of the missing members” (Roof 285).

Maryse Conde and Isabel Allende use the trope of the family to define a key subject position for women in altering the direction of their societies. Their narrators are gendered characters, women who “must interpret family history from bits and pieces of incomplete histories and propose a new, more inclusive definition of family to promote unity and heal the wounds of the past” (Roof 287). For Allende, “women are in a position to effect change because they have a natural sense of common identity” (Roof 287).

As I will demonstrate throughout this paper, this characteristic is true of all the three analyzed authors, to varying degrees. Amy Tan is aiming to create a bond between generations by appealing to female solidarity and understanding, which, despite several intergenerational conflicts, permeate her novel.

For Atkinson and Roy, the fragmentariness is more obvious, as individual characters try to escape traumatic roots and move away towards a better understanding of individual autonomy, while integrating their past experiences, navigating through worlds of deceit to find ways to escape a disruptive relation to their past. It is the women’s role to reinterpret and reinvent the notion of family and recall the past.

The family, centred on the women, “offers a number of advantages to novelists interested in cultural change” (Morris 18).

To novelists who wish to disrupt the status quo, the fact that the family is the site where values and behaviours are reproduced generation after generation, is not a liability, but an advantage, for there are no more crucial circuits to reconfigure. And, finally, for novelists interested in extending the definition of “family” beyond its familiar white, middle-class, heterosexual configuration,

the range of possible familial associations is limited only by the invention and variety of the people who compose them. (Morris 19)

Kate Atkinson (born 1951) is a British novelist who gained critical and commercial attention with her first novel, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995), for which she won the Whitbread First Novel and Book of the Year Prizes. Several other novels dealing with postmodern themes, as well as a series of books of detective fiction, followed. She was appointed MBE in 2011, according to the author's personal website.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on her first two novels, *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* and *Human Croquet* (1997).

Behind the Scenes at the Museum, henceforth referred to in the abbreviated form of *Behind the Scenes*, has been labelled as “a multigenerational tale of a spectacularly dysfunctional Yorkshire family and one of the funniest works of fiction to come out of Britain in years” (Macintyre, in a review for *The New York Times*). It deals with the life of various generations of characters (mostly women) belonging to the same family.

A Chinese American writer, Amy Tan was born in 1952. Her writing relies on the rediscovery and integration of her own past. She stated that “there is a quality about the writer's voice that has to do with his or her whole life, that you can't capture in the stylistics of the prose” (“An Interview with Amy Tan: Fiction — ‘The Beast That Roams’”).

Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong credits her enormous appeal to a conjecture of factors that saw an increase in the interest of Asian American literature, as well as to the universality of the themes she introduces. She goes to say that while “Tan has often been presented in the media as a meteoric individual talent, bursting full-blown from obscurity onto the literary scene” (50), the sociohistorical context and the theme of the relationships between mothers and daughters are responsible for her public and critical success.

She has stated in interviews that she is also very interested in voice and story as narrative terms and that she finds the “voice” to be of the utmost importance in creating and understanding a work of fiction.²

² “I also started reading some books about fiction [...]which kept using terms like character, plot, story, voice. The one that interested me the most was voice. What is voice? Does it come before story or does it create the story? What are the elements of it? How do you get it? How do you create your own voice? How do you see it somebody else's work? And also what is story? Is story character? Is it plot? Is it emotion? How does it shape itself? Does it come by our knowing motifs or themes from the beginning or does it create itself?” (Tan: Fiction—“The Beast that Roams”).

Amy Tan's first work, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) is a challenge to the novel as a "narrative paradigm" (Jameson, 151) in several ways: form, narrative structure, and narrative techniques. It is not a novel in the sense that only one story, "his story" is presented; it is a work of sixteen "her stories." (Shen 3)

Tan's desire is to give power to the women's voices and create a way for their private stories to be known. She has received considerable acclaim both for *The Joy Luck Club*, as well as for the novels that followed it. For the purpose of this thesis, I will also focus on her second and fourth novels, *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001). The reason I am focusing on these particular novels is the innovations they bring to the genre I am discussing and the perceived similarities from a structural and thematic point of view present in them in comparison to the others I am analyzing, as representative and for the new family saga.

Arundhati Roy (born 1961) is a winner of the Man Booker prize for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). The novel arrived at a time when the context had begun to be extremely favourable to Oriental writers. Merrit Moseley considered it to have "verve, an exotic vividness, and an original setting" (678), while Truax opined that "the quality of Ms. Roy's narration is so extraordinary -- at once so morally strenuous and so imaginatively supple -- that the reader remains enthralled all the way through to its agonizing finish" (Truax, in a review for *The New York Times*).

Roy is a renowned political activist who focused on human rights after the appearance of her first literary work, and who only recently published her second novel in 2017, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

1.2. Introducing a Structural and Thematic Analysis of New Family Sagas

As Roof insists on the thematic similarities between the women writers of contemporary sagas, I have chosen to draw from her list and expand it, focusing both on thematic relevance, and on narrative choices and techniques.

In order to accomplish this, I have chosen to pick Amy Tan, Kate Atkinson and Arundhati Roy as not only innovative and popular writers in promoting this type of fiction, but also because, despite their different cultural backgrounds, the themes, techniques, and influences visible in their works have helped spark new interest in the subject, as well as provide a simple pattern that can be used to study it. It can be argued that they popularized the saga while bringing their own personal touch to it.

As such, I propose the following scheme which can be used to differentiate between the early sagas and the ones that I call “new family sagas”, which also constitute a prolongation and, at the same time, a consequential break with postmodernism.

1. The novels have different voices and perspectives, as opposed to a semi-omniscient narrator. All of them exhibit unreliability.
2. The novels are made up of fragments; they are puzzle-like in their structure, as they ultimately function as a mirror of reintegration.
3. Close reading is required, and the reader becomes an active participant.
4. Lost family members are reintegrated. Family rediscovery is a way of preserving the past and evolving towards the future, maintaining links in a world constantly torn by insecurities and discrepancies. It is a way of being constantly in the past, which becomes much more important than the present or the future. In this way, they continue the modern and postmodern tradition.
5. Chronology is not always respected. Narrators jump back and forth in time, expecting the reader to keep up with the story.
6. Language is used as a tool of both reintegration and alienation, creating and breaking barriers within the same family. Each character is lost in his or her language-coded acceptance of the world.
7. The new sagas are women-centric. They focus on:
 - mother-daughter relations;
 - generational conflicts and reluctant understanding;
 - sibling rivalries that can quickly devolve into tragedy;
 - the conceptualization of being a mother, a sister, a wife, a daughter.
8. Intertextuality becomes the key to understanding the inner lives of the characters. The authors use the various intertextual connections to weave individual escapist havens for them, and to provide the reader with a cultural puzzle.
9. Space and place are important in forging identities. Characters are in constant search for a home, provided by the link to a family, the need for a sense of place; borders become diffuse, and alienation starts to dissolve the characters’ sense of self. The constant search for a home is both spatial and temporal.
0. Memory is used to reintegrate the missing pieces through the discovery of the “family past”.
0. The novels appeal to a variety of readers and are easily translated.

In the chapters to come, I will examine the way these tools are presented and integrated by the authors I am discussing.

In my thesis, I thus plan to address the innovations that Atkinson, Roy and Tan bring in writing the contemporary family saga.

1.3. Methodology

Starting from the ideas exposed above regarding the themes and construction of Kate Atkinson's, Arundhati Roy's and Amy Tan's new sagas, I will rely on close reading of the texts, while also placing them in a cultural context, in order to demonstrate the shift in paradigm.

The theories that I am going to employ in the process are mainly, but not restricted to:

1. Narratology
2. Space Studies
3. Postmodernism
4. Cultural Identity and Memory (with a focus on feminine perception)
5. Pragmatics
6. Translation Studies

In my thesis, I plan to use approaches first introduced by the authors below, while adding my own contribution and insisting on the validity of the concepts I borrow from them or reconceptualize. My approach will be based on text in context, where the text comes first.

The reason for this is that I feel that the return to the family saga and its newfound popularity is dictated by context, by a desire on the part of authors to return to a traditional form of storytelling, while dealing with the lack of order and shifting cultural identity in a world affected by constant change. This is visible both on an individual and on a societal level. As such, I will deal with topics such as individual and cultural trauma, moving spatial and temporal paradigms, woman-centrality, private and political spheres. Because of this, I will focus on theories related to Cultural Identity and Memory, Trauma and Space Studies.

At the same time, the style of storytelling does not revert to the saga of Realist tradition, but it becomes fragmented, the narrative voice is unreliable, and the characters in the novels are in constant disagreement with each other, and refuse to communicate clearly. It is a saga highly influenced by postmodernism, which struggles to find an ending in the past. That is why I will also focus on a narratological and pragmatic approach, while choosing to show the postmodernist traits that have influenced this new narrative strategy.

I will deal with Wayne Booth's concept of an unreliable narrator and place that in the context of Atkinson's novels, as well as Amy Tan's. From Mieke Bal's narratological approach I will borrow the idea of focalization and her interpretation of voice in the novel, developed from Genette's, as well as her idea of "thematized space."

In *God of Small Things*, Roy uses the point of view of child-characters, which is rendered through a different language than the one used by the

omniscient narrator, the narrating agent. Estha and Rahel are thus focalizers. In fact, child focalization is present in all the novels analyzed, whether combined with a homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator. The language created is an *antilanguage*. This is linked to the notion of unreliable narrator as well, since a lot of the time the various perspectives on an event are not superimposed and the reader (or, if such is the case, other characters) have to choose their own version of the story. In *Human Croquet*, as well as in Amy Tan's novels, there is focalization on various characters.

Anticipation is also a key to all the novels, as a chronological order is not respected and the reader is constantly transported from one timeline to another.

I will also use David Harvey's idea of "relational space" (Harvey 139), who argues that perception and the way one relates with space and time are more relevant than the concepts in their absolute form. They are internalized, and unconscious and subconscious manifestations play an essential part. This is also an idea advanced by Mieke Bal.

Harvey states that "space and time are internalized within matters and processes" (Harvey 138). In Amy Tan's sagas, China is a space that acquires mythical proportions in the stories that the mothers tell their daughters. *The Joy Luck Club* (henceforth *Joy Luck*) has a unifying role in space and time, and the narrative voices coalesce in order to create this effect. The conflicting theories regarding narrative voices, mainly represented by the dissenting opinions of Gloria Shen and Brian Singer, will also be presented, and I will take a stance on the matter, arguing my view in the process.

I will also put forward the idea that America is viewed as such a mythical place through the lens of pop culture. This is evident in all the three authors, where characters view it as a place of escape towards a better future. All three authors try to formally debunk that myth, while not always succeeding. In *God of Small Things*, Rahel's new life is futile and empty. The family nucleus is broken in *Behind the Scenes* when members depart, but at the same time, when the symbolic link between Betty and Bunty is broken, it is understood that the former will have a better life.

In Harvey's opinion, which I will adopt, "the sense of belonging and not belonging (and hence of identity and otherness) is closely intertwined with ideas about place and territory" (Harvey 170).

In Atkinson's novels, space is viewed both textually and intertextually. Using Appadurai's concept of "mediascape" (Appadurai 1996:33), I will focus on the characters relation to culture and their influence, drawing on British and American culture. I will use Huyssen's concepts and prove that the family saga fulfills the same essential role as a literary genre, by reestablishing family connections and integrating the individual inside the family nucleus.