

TRAVMA ÇÖZÜMÜ OLARAK ANTI-NATALİZM

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Öz: Kolektif ulusal travmayı tasvir eden 11 Eylül sonrası çağdaş Amerikan edebiyatı, iyileşme anlatılarının ortaya çıktığı bir alan yaratmakla kalmadı aynı zamanda, küresel ölçekte travmatik stres etkenlerinin de yeni bir bağlamda düşünülmesine neden oldu. Asıl travmaya karşı henüz tanık olunmamış olan travmanın alanına geçiş yapmak, travmatik olayla yüzleşmeyi reddeden disassosiyatif ya da tecrübeyi Amerika Birleşik Devletleri sınırlarına hapseden istisnacı bir tepki gibi okunabilir. Jonathan Franzen'in 2010 yılında yazdığı *Özgürlük* romanındaki disassosiyatif ayrışma, travmadan kaçınmak yerine, gerçek ve olası travmayı kişisel ve kolektif düzeylerde içerir. Franzen romandaki olay örgüsünü ve çeşitli travmatik olayları nesiller arası travmanın aktarılışına, kayıp, ihanet, yas, küresel nüfus yoğunluğu, küresel ısınmaya da değinerek açıklar ve hepsine nihai çözümü sunar. Anti-natalizm: üreme karşıtı görüş. Anakarakter Walter Berglund tarafından sunulan ve karakterlerin bazıları tarafından örneklenen, bazıları tarafından da karşı çıkılan şekliyle üreme karşıtı görüş, karakterlerin kişisel travmalarıyla ve küresel düzeyde insanlığın kendi durumuyla gerçekçi bir biçimde yüzleşmemesinden yola çıkarak, kaçınılmaz bir sonuçtur. Aslında, bu görüş, Water Berglund'ın da, çoğu insanın olduğu gibi, sezgilerine aykırıdır fakat kişisel trajik kayıpları ve uğradığı ihanet görüşüne bir temel oluşturur ve onu meşru kılar. Bu çalışma, Franzen'in romanı ekseninde, anti-natalizmin (üreme karşıtı görüşün) insanlık, gezegen ve doğa için yapıcı bir onarım süreci olarak nasıl sunulduğunu inceliyor.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Anti-Natalizm, Travma, 11 Eylül Romanı, Jonathan Franzen, Nüfus Yoğunluğu.

ANTI-NATALISM AS A REMEDY FOR TRAUMA

Abstract: Post 9/11 American literature dealing with a collective national trauma created a new venue not only where healing narratives emerged but also to ponder on a whole new scope of traumatic stressors on a global scale. Expanding into the realm of the yet unwitnessed as opposed to the original trauma may read like a dissociative response, that refuses to face the immensity of

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the traumatic event or an exceptionalist response that confines the experience to U.S. borders. Rather than avoidance, however, the dissociative split in Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010) harbors real and possible trauma both on a personal and collective level. Franzen expands an event into transgenerational trauma, loss, betrayal and grief, global overpopulation, climate change and presents the ultimate solution to all. The solution, anti-natalism, is perpetuated by Walter Berglund, one of the main characters who experiences a tragic betrayal; although counterintuitive to him and everyone else around him, appears to be an inevitable consequence given the characters' inability to come to terms with their own personal trauma and the human condition on a global scale. Through Franzen's novel, I will present how anti-natalism emerges as a constructive remedy for nature, human beings, and the planet as a whole.

Keywords: Anti-Natalism, Trauma, 9/11 Novels, Jonathan Franzen, Overpopulation.

Introduction

Freedom recounts the transgenerational trauma of Walter, Patty and their two children Joey and Jessica by delving into the familial pasts of each character by formulating a backdrop of the psychoanalytic repercussions of immigrant grandparents, overly ambitious, alcoholic or negligent parents and the overarching traumas that lead to negative identity formation on the part of the characters by setting themselves as antithetical to their predecessors. Only after the generational resentment subsides through acceptance of personal limitations if not forgiveness of the past mistakes, are the characters set free. When Patty asks her mother why she has never showed up at any of her basketball games when she was young and she replies: "I guess my life hasn't always been happy or easy, or exactly what I wanted. At a certain point, I just have to try not to think too much about certain things, or else they'll break my heart" Patty thinks: "It wasn't a lot, it didn't solve any mysteries, but it would have to do." (Franzen, 2010, p. 530) Patty accepts that when she was raped in high school, her father, a lawyer who does pro bono work for the disadvantaged and is highly revered by the community, refused to press charges for fear that her rapist's parents' political alliance with his own would be disrupted. "...the feeling of injustice" Franzen writes, "itself turned out to be strangely physical. Even realer, in a way, than her hurting, smelling, sweating body. Injustice had a shape, and a weight, and a temperature, and a texture, and a very bad taste." (Franzen, 2010, p. 44) In a similar vein, Walter accepts that his seemingly eternal clash with his son has to be resolved by accepting Joey's unethical transaction of scrap

parts to be used by the U.S. army during the invasion of Iraq, parts that are too defective to even be justified by Republican warmongering. What is considered to be a cardinal sin by a liberal environmentalist like Walter is accepted and Joey can only find absolution for his mistake by being accepted by his father, his nemesis. Walter even accepts a part of the proceeds as donation to be used in his campaign against overpopulation. Similarly, Walter accepts his wife's ultimate sexual betrayal of himself with his best friend whom he had competed against all his life. Their daughter Jessica accepts his father's relationship with his much younger assistant Lalitha which takes place after Walter's discovery of Patty's betrayal, Walter and Patty's consequent temporary separation only after Lalitha's tragic death in a car accident. Lack of forgiveness yet prevalence of acceptance, accentuates the irreversibility of the traumatic past that becomes ingrained in the ways the characters interact with the external circumstances either via a written testimony –a large section of the book consists of Patty's autobiographical account composed at her therapist's suggestion entitled "Mistakes Were Made"- or via recollection and concretization of the principles of idealistic notions relished in the past such as Walter's struggle to save the Cerulean warbler, a small songbird native to America, whose habitat has rapidly been destroyed by human intervention and later initiating the Free Space movement addressing what he deems to be the root of all environmental issues: overpopulation. Acceptance on an individual level, renders the character free of entanglements of the past yet freedom for the universe is dependent on absolute solitude. Having no more people on it. So, freedom for the earth and freedom for the individual are mutually exclusive.

When the general attitude towards limits to growth are taken into consideration, from the neoconservative and exceptionalist tendency to interpret freedom as entitlement regarding politics and particularly the War on Iraq, to Walter's born again Christian neighbor's anthropocentric fallacy when she responds to Walter after he asks her to keep her cat indoors for the sake of the local ecosystem seems only natural. "Well I'm sorry, but my children matter more to me than the children of some bird. I don't think that's an extreme position, compared to yours. God gave this world to human beings, and that's the end of the story as far as I'm concerned" (Franzen, 2010, p. 543) she retorts, and it becomes clear that "*Freedom* examines the microcosmic desire to impact our spaces, from killing birds to killing Iraqis - for ourselves, for our families, for our friends - as indicative of an intrinsic and destructive passion for exercising our freedom in ways that make no one free." (Narcisi, 2015, p.

69) Walter however, despite being the only self-proclaimed misanthrope in the novel, by all accounts is the only character striving to improve the lives of other people as well as other species. He clearly identifies with the warbler, the not yet endangered songbird, insignificant to the rest of the world, defenseless against human progress, restless for being robbed of its habitat yet unaware of its own impending doom.

In an effort to grant Patty's wishes of being a full time mother, Walter takes a respite from his ideals of limits to growth in every sense of the word when they were still young, ranging from economics to population, a discussion that ceased to take place among the general public since 1970s. Only after two decades of resentment surfaces in the failure of Patty to reciprocate Walter's passion, he starts working at a conservationist trust as the executive director led by a businessman with ties to nonrenewable energy industry. By Walter's account "billionaires tend to care. They've got a stake in keeping the planet not entirely fucked, because they and their heirs are going to be the ones with enough money to enjoy the planet." (Franzen, 2010, p. 212) In return for a preserved yet limited park for the warbler to survive, significant amount of land will be drilled for coal, a county of two hundred families replaced, for the notorious mountain top removal mining with devastating effects for the environment. Despite the businessman's capricious yet still sincere consideration for the warbler, the preservation site seems to be a smokescreen for profit. Walter and Lalitha fail to completely justify it to themselves that a large scale compromise can actually address the root of the problem. By referring to four causes of Aristotle, material, formal, efficient, and final, he concludes that the final cause for most global problems is that there are too many people on the planet consuming up the environmental resources at an irrevocable speed.

The origin of Walter's causality is that existence of our own species is traumatic on others and the planet. The realization of the futility of his endeavors is diminished by the forcefulness of human greed, unethical nature of his compromise to capital, inability to maintain a sense of moral consistency as one relates to the his environment. The inner moral inconsistency on an individual level leads to a cognitive dissonance when the prioritization of one's conception of freedom intersects with the survival of another's in turn leads to an inability to perceive earth as a planet with limited resources. The prioritization hierarchy also lends itself to ethical conundrums such as when Walter traps and surrenders the neighbor's cat Bobby to a kill shelter on account of his killing birds and orphaning their offspring. The same conundrum surfaces when despite

his organized plan to eradicate the final cause of all that is wrong with the world, he wishes everyone else could breed a little less so that he could breed once more, with Lalitha. As he had been trying to convince Richard Katz to make an appearance at their Youth Camp to make not having kids cool once again and to write songs called “Two Kids Good No Kids Better” (he is aptly surnamed Katz, reminiscent of the feline predator Walter captured), his rock star best friend however, the relentless realism with which he broached the subject matter was not forgiving of even his own instincts.

Kids have always been the meaning of life. You fall in love, you reproduce, and then your kids grow up and fall in love and reproduce. That’s what life was always for...But the problem now is that more life is still beautiful and meaningful on an individual level, but for the world as a whole it only means more death. And not nice death, either. We’re looking at losing half the world’s species in the next hundred years...First we’ll get the utter wipeout of the world’s ecosystems, then mass starvation and/or disease and/or killings. What’s still normal at the individual level is heinous and unprecedented at the global level (Franzen, 2010, p. 222).

Richard reminds him of the more integrated perspective on how capitalism generates imperviousness to any discussion about limits. Limits to economic growth or reproduction. Although of the two, Richard is the one who refrains from having kids, perceives any effort for redemption futile and reads Thomas Bernhard, Austrian author known for his pessimistic view of life and futility of human struggle through existence. Richard in other words is already on board with his actions, he merely deems it a vain effort to convince the universe to follow through. Ironically, his first band was called the Traumatics. He chooses to overcome pain through acceptance of the rock star fame that he inadvertently accomplishes whereas Walter, undertaking an impossible mission counterintuitive to him as well as the crowd he is preaching to, exposes himself to an influx of suffering. In Walter’s words, “Richard going back to his music, Richard getting great press for being far more offensive than Walter, Richard charming Connie...while Walter was left behind with the dead and dying and forgotten, the endangered species of the world the nonadaptive...” (Franzen, 2010, p. 480)

1. World Sadness vs. Personal Trauma

The traumatic scale with which the attacks of 9/11 percolates into the lives of the characters in *Freedom* is negligible. In fact, apart from two references, both regarding Walter and Patty’s son, Joey, the global trauma is largely absent from the novel although the events take place extend

from before and after the day in question. Joey Berglund, a college student at the time, goes to attend a lecture on the morning of the attacks and finds the auditorium empty. His frustration with the inconvenience of the disruption of his personal routine, a sense of urgency to regain an immediate return to normalcy personalizes and diminishes the tragedy to a nuisance. Only through others' reactions does he come to appreciate the bearing of the global turning point. Nevertheless, his unethical transactions and subsequent profit are only rendered possible in light of military operations succeeding 9/11. The collective trauma is transformed into an individual success story which he only comes to deny after he comes to the realization that he cannot dodge the moral consequences of his actions by political justifications.

Pondering on the link "between the inner world of memory and the external world of historical events by focusing on the experience of pain", Pickering and Keightley on their discourse of trauma conclude: "This premise is untenable because pain cannot provide such links – it can only be experienced physically by individual bodies – and because nations in themselves cannot remember any more than they can think or feel." Nature's trauma, although undertaken and internalized by Walter, in a similar manner, unless its effects are rendered into the collective consciousness, becomes palpable in the perception of environmental issues as their hierarchy shifts through decades. Antropocene a belated term for a long-lasting fact signifies the immeasurable impact of humans on the ecosystem. "...the Earth system is not just a set of constraints on human activity as implied by limits and boundaries; the content of the system is affected in fundamental ways by what humans do" (Dryzek, 2013, p. 37). One obstacle against a collective struggle for the solution of the final cause is cognitive dissonance, and establishing a dissonant relationship with the universe by consumption, destruction and growth yet maintaining the will to survive regarding oneself and one's offspring. The refusal to accommodate conflicting thoughts and information that would inevitably lead to a change in behavior. The other phenomenon is called fetishistic disavowal. As reappropriated by Slavoj Žižek, originally a Freudian term, fetishistic disavowal, occurs when there is a split in the subject in terms of his perception of the reality he is faced with. The subject might witness the repercussions of violence and destruction first hand, might even formulate the ramifications of destruction upon himself yet still makes a conscious decision to ignore it. "Would the watcher be able to continue going on as usual? Yes, but only if he or she were able to somehow forget –in an act which suspended symbolic efficiency- what had been witnessed...I know, but I don't want to know that I know, so I

don't know. I know it, but I refuse to fully assume the consequences of this knowledge, so that I can continue acting as if I don't know it." (Zizek, 2008, p. 53) Thus, the futility of Walter's mission, as in two and a half weeks, the world population increases by seven million. Seven million times 9,441 metric tons of carbon dioxide that can never be recalled. On the other hand, it indeed is more efficient for Walter's movement to try and make not having children cool again rather than bombarding them with information about the detrimental effect of human existence on the universe. That would simply have been disavowed by human psyche. As he believes such a movement could only spread from top down, as a result of his disillusionment with the cause as well as the compromise he had made to save the Cerulean warbler and his consequent press release where he frantically admits "we are a cancer on the planet" (Franzen, 2010, p. 483), his crowd shifts to a grassroots crowd with anarchical tendencies. World Watch director in 2012 voiced a similar opinion when he said at the launch of the State of the World 2012 report: "Growth is the economy of the cancer cell. The last 50 years have been about human rights, now we must move to human obligations. Climate change is not the problem -the planet has a fever- it is merely a symptom of a bigger problem." (<http://worldwatch.org/node/10496>) Therefore, what seems to be the ramblings of a nervous breakdown is the reflection of a politicized argument which already had become a part of environmental discourses on a global scale. On a local level, in a West Virginian context however, it does not resonate well. Before coming to terms with the consequences of his admittance, his plans are disrupted with the tragedy of Lalitha's car accident and death when the personal trauma that he had externalized by identifying with nature that only wanted to be left alone, and the songbird who only desired to maintain its habitat and mate, once again is redirected to a single object and thereby internalized. After the loss of his wife to his lifelong rival Richard, he lost Lalitha, his only attempt at a redemption towards himself, to cease to be a caretaker for life –first his parents, then his wife and children- and enjoy guiltless pleasure without additional responsibility. At first "his 'world sadness'" seemed "inextricable from his 'life sadness'" (Gram, 2014, p. 298) and the latter seemed dependent on the former. With Lalitha's death, his life sadness is centralized around a personal trauma and partially disintegrated from his world sadness.

Historical references to environmental activism throughout the decades are rampant in the novel. Club of Rome, a think tank founded in Rome in 1968, seeks holistic solutions to global challenges by bringing together science, politics and activism with particular pertinence to the limited

nature of planetary resources. Sierra Club, a progressive and preservationist organization founded in 1892 and currently running a campaign called “Join the Fight: Protect Our Planet from Trump”, has been exploring ways to push agendas for responsible trade, and fights against overpopulation and climate change. Negative Population Growth (NPG) is another nonprofit organization established in 1972 aiming at maintaining population at a sustainable level after interim period of stabilization; no growth. Along with a national population policy, NPG offers a compensated repatriation policy for illegal immigrants and responsible population and immigration policies for the United States. The only remedy to avert climate change and global warming, according to NPG is curtailing population growth. (<http://www.npg.org/ads/apr2017-ad1.html>)

2. Anti-Natalism

Another reason why his Free Space movement was doomed to fail regardless of the interruption by a personal tragedy is anti-natalism as he argues for it whether for environmental purposes or to cease suffering altogether is counterintuitive. From Sophocles to Schopenhauer, from Buddha to Zapffe, anti-natalism was presented either directly or by implication as a capacious remedy to prevent more suffering that would result from coming into existence. By no means did it emerge from a misanthropic sentiment, on the contrary, as a preventative measure to avoid harm and suffering. David Benatar, professor of philosophy, in his influential work on anti-natalism, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* published in 2006, endorses the idea that no reason to bring a child into existence is morally justifiable and that existence is always a serious harm. His conclusion is based on the premise that there is an asymmetry of pleasure and pain. The presence of pain is bad and the presence of pleasure is good; the absence of pain is good even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence is a deprivation (Benatar, 2006, p. 30). Person who is brought into existence will inevitably suffer even if minimally, yet in the absence of existence, there is no entity to be deprived of pleasure. To compare two states, one need not necessarily make the person worse off, but it is sufficient ground for comparison that the final state is bad. People do not have the moral obligation to bring happy people into existence yet they have a moral obligation to refrain from causing pain. He also distinguishes between lives worth starting and lives worth continuing. Some lives might be so predominantly painful that non-existence can be preferable, so the life

might not be worth continuing. He does not condone suicide in any other case, since it is painful to end one's life and it extends suffering to loved ones. According to Benatar although most lives are worth continuing, no life is worth starting; in fact, to bring someone into existence is to inflict unnecessary harm.

Benatar refers in passing and in footnotes to other species as well. "...the picture becomes still more obscene" he asserts, "when we consider the suffering of the trillions of animals who share our planet –including the billions who are brought into existence each year, only to be maltreated and killed for human consumption and other use." (Benatar, 2006, p. 89) Natural disasters, environmental degradation, disease ravages compromise the factors that retrogress human life quality which to Benatar, is already much lower than we rate it to be. Since he discerns existence would not even have been justifiable regardless of significant improvement on that already misconceived and overestimated quality of life, the alleviative measures for pollution, global warming, greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, overpopulation, or any one of interrelated environmental issues are redundant. Benatar avoids any implications of speciecide, instead proposes a voluntary phased extinction yet admits that it is unlikely yet insists that its counterintuitiveness does not provide sufficient ground to render his conclusion invalid. What Benatar lacks in environmental consideration, Walter's concerns complement by the embodiment of all the symptoms in the Warbler. The familial traumas of all the characters also justify each of Benatar's questions.

3. Freedom and Extinction

Patty does not have children because of a moral obligation to bring happy people into existence. She has children to fulfill her dream of being a stay-at-home mother, unlike her own mother as a result of the negligence of whom she had suffered while growing up. To undo or disrupt transgenerational trauma in line with Benatar's premiss that you can never have a child for child's sake. Walter has participated in creating children to help Patty realize her dreams in the meantime sacrificing or indefinitely postponing his own, to build a stable family unit defined by sustainability and responsibility unlike his own family. Joey becomes a Republican to spite his father by becoming everything he is not; Jessica is dedicated and career oriented and complements her mother. And all these processes of negative identity formation leads to growing pains as a natural part of life even in the absence of a significant traumatic experience like Patty being raped. These growing pains is part of why Benatar reaches counterintuitive conclusion by not asking the question "is

it worth it?” but rather “is it ever necessary?” The bottom line is existence itself is a trauma. The exception in Franzen’s *Freedom* is that internal trauma is projected on the planet’s and its other inhabitants’ predicament. Walter’s focal interests, the fate of the Cerulean Warbler’s and the songbirds of North America become extensions of his own trauma and the resolution or a deconstruction is inevitably self-reflexive. Franzen’s social novel does not only aim at centralizing a neglected political and environmental issue by providing means of identification for the reader, but by spotlighting her into questioning the root and the repercussions of her own personal existence.

Kaynakça

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