

***Through the Arc of the Rain Forest, Environmental Apocalypse,
and Post-Soviet Allegory***

Nataliya Krynytska (Poltava, Ukraine)

I was very lucky to meet Karen Tei Yamashita during The Summer Institute on Contemporary American Literature in 2010, in which I participated representing Ukraine. I'll never forget a sincere conversation with this charming and intelligent woman whose humor, delicacy, and tact adorned the greatness of her talent and the depth of her soul. During that talk I mentioned that the students and teachers in Poltava in Ukraine had very little opportunity to read the contemporary US books in the original. To my great surprise, Karen Tei was so kind to remember that phrase. Since 2010, for many years, she has been mailing her books and the other books she likes to my address enriching the library of our University at her own expense. I am sure I am one of many people all around the world whom Karen Tei helps a lot in her quiet and modest way. I am sure she is one of the best people I have ever met. So, I am very grateful to co-editors Ruth Hsu and Pamela Thoma for the wonderful opportunity to contribute to this volume dedicated to the works by Karen Tei Yamashita, a gifted author and a great woman.

I teach English and English-Language Literature at Poltava V.G. Korolenko National Pedagogical University to the bachelors and masters, whose majors are English and Pedagogy, but the situation in our country like in many other post-Soviet areas does not allow studying Yamashita's works in detail: the low level of English and lack of class hours cause reading primarily the US books translated into Russian or Ukrainian and discussing them in English. Unfortunately,

Yamashita's works have not been translated into these two languages yet, although this author could be extremely interesting to thousands of readers in the post-Soviet world.

Thus, I aim to promote Yamashita's fiction in my country making the connection between her works and the post-Soviet reality and literature. During the optional course for the fifth-year students "Contemporary Literature Studies in the English-Speaking Countries" that consists of 5 lectures (10 hours) and 7 seminars (14 hours) we use "Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory" (Barry 1995, 2002) as guidelines and the works by modern authors who write in English as the texts for the analysis.

I suppose Karen Tei Yamashita's first novel *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* (1990) gives a splendid opportunity for applying various critical approaches.

Firstly, at the lecture I try to present Yamashita's novel to the students paying attention to the plot summary, characters, symbols, settings, themes, motifs, and style using the instructions of "Summary & Study Guide for *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*" (BookRags 2017).

Secondly, during the seminar based on *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* the students are invited to analyze and discuss the text in a group applying search for mythopoeia, structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction, postmodernist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, new historicism and cultural materialism, postcolonial criticism, stylistics, narratology, ecological criticism, comparative studies, etc.

Thirdly, after the seminar the students are asked to do their written individual work. I usually give them different chapters (they cannot be the same for two or more students) from *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* for making the analysis applying all the possible approaches of contemporary literary criticism.

Three years of teaching this Yamashita's novel have proved that the most obvious approach to *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* for Ukrainian students is ecological criticism since environmental problems are very close to the reality, in which our people live. The tragic fact of recent Ukraine's history is the Chernobyl catastrophic nuclear accident that happened in 1986. Living not far from the radioactive zone and witnessing for years the awful consequences of the disaster for the people's health and the environment, our students totally understand the ecological issues of contemporary literature.

In order to help them making the ecocritical studies, I ask the students to read the novel from an ecocentric perspective, with particular attention to the representation of the natural world and to the natural world concepts such as growth and energy, balance and imbalance, symbiosis and mutuality, and sustainable or unsustainable uses of energy and resources.

Then I introduce the tropes of "pastoral" and "environmental Apocalypse", and we search for the mythopoeic elements in the novel. Since all our students belong to the European Christian cultural tradition (although only few of them are religious persons), they often summarize that Yamashita tells a market variant of the Paradise lost. Indeed, from this perspective the plot of *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* can be considered as a decline of the Christian pastoral tradition, the

dream of the Eden. The students notice that the Matacão, an anomalous black substance discovered on the floor of the Brazilian rainforest, forms a plastic paradise full of wonders for the pilgrims and believers. But this false paradise disappears at the end of the novel ruining lives and hopes. To some degree, Yamashita follows the biblical structure telling in her satirical and postmodern way about the Fall of Man and the people's expulsion from the plastic Garden of Eden. Some students pay attention that the parts of the book are entitled symbolically: "The Beginning", "The Developing World", "More Development", "Loss of Innocence", "More Loss", and "Return" (Yamashita 1990). They resemble the biblical motifs from "Genesis" and "Exodus", which might be parodied in the novel.

It should be noted that Kazumasa Ishimaru's fall and loss of consciousness in Chapter 1 are connected with the appearance of his strange alien satellite, the ball that attaches itself to his head and serves as the quasi-omniscient narrator of the novel. This ball is like Kazumasa's halo, and after its death the Matacão disappears as well. Again and again, the loss of holiness leads to the loss of the Eden in our world. Again and again, humans strive for the Paradise, like Kazumasa and Lourdes in the final.

We discuss that the environmental values in Yamashita's work include need for balance, harmony, diversity, caring, equality, naturalness, and self-control. Following the traditions of the soft science fiction and magical realism, the writer defends these values, as opposed to inanimate manifestations of technological progress. This approach lies within the frame of the first wave of ecocriticism, but

in the future I plan to apply the ecocritical approach of the second and third waves to *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* in class (Slovic 2010).

For the students of post-Soviet countries it seems very helpful to make intertextual parallels between Yamashita's novel and *Roadside Picnic* (Russian: Пикник на обочине), a famous short science fiction novel by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky (1971). It is based on the aftermath of an extraterrestrial visit (called the Visitation), which led to the appearance of six Zones, dangerous and mysterious places, visited only by *stalkers* – courageous thieves that go into the Zones to steal the artifacts for profit. Many post-Soviet students are familiar with a 1979 science fiction film, *Stalker*, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, with a screenplay written by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky, that is loosely based on the novel, and the video game series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* that is heavily influenced by *Roadside Picnic* and the Chernobyl disaster. The US students might watch a 2017 American TV series pilot *Roadside Picnic* directed by Alan Taylor.

A few motifs and images are similar in two novels: the devastated lands, extraterrestrial mysteries, human mutations, mean people getting profit from devastation, disabled children (Gilberto in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* and “Monkey” in *Roadside Picnic*) whose relatives hope to heal them with the help of the magic land (the Matacão and the Zone) that is actually a rubbish dump, and even the alien spheres (Yamashita's ball and Strugatsky's wish-granting “Golden Sphere”).

At the end of the novel Redrick, the protagonist of *Roadside Picnic*, makes his only wish achieved through life-long suffering: “HAPPINESS FOR

EVERYBODY, FREE, AND LET NO ONE BE LEFT BEHIND!” (Strugatsky 2007, p. 145). The dream of the idyllic happy world survives in these touching words of undefeated hero.

Both the Strugatsky brothers and Karen Tei Yamashita proved to be tragically prophetic: the Soviet writers predicted the radiation zone in Ukraine after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, and the US author foresaw the catastrophic plastic pollution of present times. Both works can be considered from the postcolonial view: Brazil in *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest* as a postcolonial locus refers to the US imperialism in the same way as the Zone refers to the unknown alien civilization that used the Earth as a place for picnic and polluted it. To some degree, the Zone became an allegory for the future Chernobyl zone in Ukraine that is also a post-Soviet imperial legacy since the dangerous experiments initiated by the experts from Moscow led to the catastrophe on our land.

Hence, the reinterpretations of the environmental apocalypse presented by these authors from different hemispheres are rather didactic because they teach us keeping the balance with the nature till it not too late. As far as I can judge, the students treat Karen Tei Yamashita as a very inspiring, up-to-date and “upgraded” author whose experiments with the form and genre delight and astound them. She is a person who is able to look back to the past in order to improve our future. Due to such wise and intelligent people our globalised world has a chance for survival.

Works cited

Barry, P. 1995, 2002, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Second edition, Manchester University Press, viewed 7 July 2017,

https://archive.org/stream/BeginningTheoryAnIntroductionToLiteraryAndCulturalTheory/PeterBarryBeginningTheorybyMohamedMbarki_djvu.txt.

Slovik, S. 2010, “The Third Wave of Ecocriticism: North American Reflections on the Current Phase of the Discipline”, *Ecozon@* 1, no. 1, pp. 4-10, viewed 7 July 2017, <ecozona.eu/article/download/312/283>.

Strugatsky, A. & B. 2007, *Roadside Picnic* (S.F. Masterworks), Gollancz, London.

Summary & Study Guide for *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*”, viewed 7 July 2017, <http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-through-the-arc-of-the-rainforest/#gsc.tab=0>.

Yamashita, K. T. 1990, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*, Coffee House Press, Minneapolis.