

THE KEY ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S WATERLAND*

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Abstract

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), which marks the zenith of Swift's literary career is an outstanding novel with respect to its intricate structure in questioning the problems of narrative. The novel which brings together the elements of familial history, autobiography, natural history and gothic, foregrounds geography as an essential point of reference in order to discuss the topic of history and historiography. The aim of this paper is to expose the metaphorical meanings that are assigned to geography by Graham Swift. The setting of the novel, Fens located on the east of England, provides a rich material to the novelist, for the region is a marshy one that challenges human endeavor to shape it. The natural geography, which stands for reality, is in a constant struggle with the attempts to shape it, which stands for narrative. That is why, it can be argued that Swift plans to lay bare the basic insufficiency of the narrative in a postmodern impulse and this paper will show how geography is made use of in order to substantiate this idea.

Keywords: Waterland, narrative, geography, history, historiography

GRAHAM SWIFT'İN *WATERLAND* ROMANINDA COĞRAFYANIN KİLİT ROLÜ Öz

Graham Swift'in edebi kariyerinde doruk noktası olarak kabul edilebilecek romanı *Waterland* (1983) anlatı ile ilgili problemleri irdelemeye derin bir yapıya sahip sıra dışı bir eser olarak ön plana çıkmaktadır. Aile tarihi, otobiyografi, doğa tarihi ve gotik kurgu gibi unsurları bir arada barındıran roman, tarih ve tarihyazımı gibi konuları ele alırken coğrafyayı temel bir referans noktası olarak kullanmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Graham Swift'in coğrafyaya yüklediği eğretilmeli anlamları ortaya çıkarmaktır. Romanın geçtiği yer olan İngiltere'nin doğusundaki Fens bölgesi yazara oldukça zengin bir materyal sağlamaktadır, çünkü bölgenin bataklık yapısı, kendisini şekillendirmek isteyen insan müdahalesine karşı bir çeşit direnç göstermektedir. Gerçekliği temsil eden doğal coğrafya ve anlatıyı temsil eden insan müdahaleleri arasında sürekli bir çatışma hali dikkat çekmektedir. Bu nedenle Swift'in postmodern bir yaklaşımla anlatının gerçekliği yansıtmadaki temel yetersizliğine dikkat çekmeye çalıştığı söylenebilir ve bu çalışmada da bu fikrin kanıtlanması için coğrafya unsurundan nasıl faydalandığı gösterilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Waterland, anlatı, coğrafya, tarih, tarihyazımı

* This paper is a revised version of my presentation entitled "The Tension Between Man and Nature in *Waterland* as an Instrument of Postmodern Narrative" in 10th IDEA Conference held on 14th-16th April 2016.

Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), which marks the maturity of the author's literary career, received much praise after its publication. The novel was shortlisted for Booker Prize in 1983. David L. Higdon praises the novel by stating that "*Waterland*, his third and most accomplished book, is a truly extraordinary novel, as significant to the 1980s, as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was for 1970s" (Higdon 1991: 90). The protagonist of the novel, Tom Crick, is a history teacher who is forced to early retirement due to a scandal of kidnapping a baby by his wife, Mary. In addition to this, his digression from the curriculum, according to which he has to tell French Revolution, and insistence on telling his own personal, familial and ancestral history is another reason of his forced retirement. According to his account, his maternal ancestors, the Atkinsons, were the owners of an ale company, while his paternal ancestors were drainers and lock-keepers of the Atkinsons. During the course of the novel, he traces the rise and fall of the Atkinson Company along with political and natural occurrences from the 18th century onwards, and his own life which includes such traumatic events as Freddie Parr's murder supposedly by Dick, Tom's brother; Mary's abortion under insanitary conditions which caused her infertility; and the reality that his brother, Dick, is born out of incest between his mother and grandfather. *Waterland* which brought Graham Swift his first success is set in the Fens which is located in the East Anglia. The tensions between artificial and natural *and* real and fantastic are based on Swift's postmodernist preoccupations concerning historiography, memory and reality. The selection of the geography is deliberate in that the tensions are created by making use of the endemic elements of Fens. Especially, as the dominant topographic element, the swampy flat land and its interaction with human agent should be examined. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the natural elements are used to delineate a model of history and to find possible meanings implied by the interaction between nature and human beings particularly in terms of narrating the history and its traumatic elements. Within the scope of this paper, theories about the space and geography will be made use of, for Graham Swift uses geography as an extended metaphor and a resourceful tool in order to consolidate his notions concerning the understanding of historical narrative. As the aim of this paper is to decode the intricate web of relations highlighted between narrative and nature, due attention will be paid to the relation between man and geography since man, with his (in)capabilities of intervening things around him, appears to be a supposed shaper of both reality (in the form of narrative) and geography (in the form of such spatial fixes as land reclamation and artificial channels).

The reading of the novel requires a continual search for paralleled literal and metaphorical meanings. In that respect, the Fens is not only a spot on which the Atkinsons could establish a lucrative business of brewing, but also an amorphous geography which would enable the foundation of their empire and patriarchal order. The transformation of the Atkinsons from animal breeding to agriculture in the mid-18th century is also suggestive of

transformation of humanity into patriarchal communities from more egalitarian ones, if not matriarchal ones. Austrian historian Gerda Lerner's insights into the power relations regarding the means of production may be useful to understand the anthropologic connotations of Atkinson entrepreneurship. In her hypothesis, she states that:

In hunting/gathering societies [...] the social relations among men, women and children are unstable, unstructured and voluntary. [Later] Women's reproductive capacity is recognized as a tribal source [...]. This occurs with the development of agriculture. Material conditions of grain agriculture demand group cohesiveness and [...] household structure. [...] Since the amount of food depends on the availability of labor, production becomes chief concern. This has two consequences: it strengthens the influence of older males and it increases the tribe's incentive for acquiring more women. (Lerner 1986: 49)

Even if one cannot deem the former occupation of the Atkinsons as strictly hunting or gathering, the nature of their former occupation requires less labor power that needs to be procured from women. That is why, their decision to move to the Fens can be read as a re-enactment of historical process of patriarchal discourse in a micro level.

"Traditional historiography reconstitutes past in order to define present" (Bircan and Kadiroglu, 2014; 8) and many of the other analogies between different eras of the human past is not so latent as the abovementioned analogy and these mainly serve to the establishment of a cyclical model of history. In the novel, this approach is embraced largely due to express an uncertainty about and an incredulity towards a deterministic understanding of history, or a model of history based on the idea of advancement, in a postmodern sense. The cyclical model of history is expressed in several ways. On the one hand, the narrator indicates the repetitive struggles of mankind within his own species and on the other hand, he tells the repetitive struggles of man against geography through references of the history of the Fens in which his paternal ancestors participated either in drying and shaping a formless geography or in sabotaging land reclamation.

To testify the former model, he emphasizes how Hitler's military operation echoes that of Napoleon and also makes a deconstruction of the word "revolution" while teaching French Revolution with regard to the prefix in the word and with regard to the fact that an emperor is deposed, only to be replaced by another. It is also important to note that Tom Crick's early ancestors were "water people" and continually sabotaged the operations of land reclamation during the 18th century. This strife suggests a critique of dialectic which is assumed to be the source of progressive model of history, for neither "land people" nor "water people" can prevail for two centuries, leaving the topography in a heterogeneous state. However, Hegel's view of Nature, which also connotes a clear distinction between man and nature endorses the narrator's point of view:

Abstractly considered, historical change has long been understood in general as involving a progress to something better, something more perfect. Changes in the world of nature- infinitely varied as these might be- reflect nothing more than an eternally repeated cycle. In nature, there is nothing new under the sun, so that the many-sided play of natural forms carries a certain boredom. (Hegel 1988: 57)

In one of his attempts to define history, Tom Crick propounds that “my humble model for history is land reclamation” (Swift 2010: 334). As David Malcom, in his *Understanding Graham Swift*, observes “the motif of land reclamation underlies the entire text” (Malcolm 2003: 107) Tom’s proposal of such a model is one of the most concrete textual foundations of this paper. This geographical reference is meant to underscore the incredulity to a progressive model of history. In order to prove his thesis, Tom reminds the reader of the agent of “silt” and its operation of building and destroying at the same time. Furthermore, although his early ancestors sabotaged the land reclamation, their sons were later employed to drain the land by the Atkinsons, which blurs the difference between the Cricks and “silt”. (However, the occupational change of the Cricks should not be understood as an indication of homogeneity in their attitudes to the geography because, as Tom Crick states, they are “amphibians” (Swift 2010: 20) in that during land reclamation they are intimately related to water). So that, the theory of cyclical history eventually leads to man’s neutralization into geography and thus into Nature which is the ultimate reality for Tom Crick.

The reason lurking behind such an attitude can be said to be stripping man of his cultural constructions and the meanings ascribed to them and consequentially deducing the impossibility of narrating a ‘nothingness’. In that respect, the meanings ascribed to historical events in the curriculum of history course concerning public sphere are treated in a way that trivializes their assumed grandeur. For instance, Tom Crick ignores the symbolic meaning of the Storming of Bastille and foregrounds that only seven prisoners were released on 14th July 1789. (Swift 2010: 181)

The selection of the Fens as the setting of the novel serves to this purpose, for the marshy ground of the region does not promise any prospects of a construction (be it literal or figurative) on a solid basis and also the flatness of the district offers nothing to relieve the human eye. The psychological effect of topographical flatness on the inhabitants is expressed as follows: “To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality. The great flat monotony of reality; the wide empty space of reality. Melancholia and self-murder are not unknown in the Fens. Heavy drinking, madness and sudden acts of violence are not uncommon. How do you surmount reality, children?” (Swift 2010: 24). Indeed, the drinking habit of Freddie Parr and his father, Thomas Atkinson’s sudden violence on Sarah, which left a permanent damage on her wits are implied to be the psychological results of the geography of the Fens. For that reason, the people of the region are

prone to superstitions, story-telling and narrativization of real events in a fairy-tale atmosphere in order to make sense of environment and diminish repercussive effects of traumatic experiences. When the region was submerged by flood waters and when the Atkinson Brewery burned down, rumors of the appearance of Sarah Atkinson's ghost diffuse among the inhabitants of the Fens and in both of the cases, the mechanism at work is to cope with reality by taking refuge behind the superstitions.

A similar attitude can be observed in narrator's explanation of his wife's, Mary's, infertility. Although the real reason of Mary's infertility is the under insanitary conditions during adolescence, Tom Crick prefers to tell the case of abortion in a fairy-tale atmosphere by resembling Martha Clay (the abortionist) to a witch and himself and Mary to the Hansel and Gretel. Turning events into fairy-tales is symptomatic of narrator's traumatic past. As indicated by the psychological experiments, "trauma, by its nature, breaks the continuity and smooth flow of daily life. This break is expressed in the stories trauma survivors tell about themselves and their lives [...] [in these patients] there is disruption of the narrative of the traumatic event; in addition, there is disruption of on a more general level of the whole life story of the individual" (Tuval-Mashiach; 2004: 281) These disruptions can be observed in Tom's sudden transitions from mythologized versions of his familial past into verifiable scientific observations on Nature between chapters, which results in a stylistically incoherent novel.

The occurrence of these disruptions also lies at the core of the fictional geography of the Fens. When the map of England is closely examined, one cannot see any place called Gildsey at the riverbank of Great Ouse River, which is the center of Atkinson Empire or River Leem which is said to have been opened up by the Atkinsons for the trade of ale to Norfolk. The disruption from real space into fictional ones eliminates the element of 'place' which is one of the vital elements of modern historiography, which jeopardizes the credibility of the whole familial history.

According to Daniel Lea, "Fenlands represent a contested space wherein constitution and dissolution are in a continual conflict" (Lea 2005: 80), which prompts the reader to ponder on the symbolic importance of the River Leem and the metaphorical meaning of water. Of all imageries employed in the novel, "water" seems to be the most recurrent and the most effective one in expressing the narrator's theories on the problematic bond between history and reality. The co-existence of land and water in the swampy topography stands for the co-existence of fiction and reality, respectively. It needs to be noted that Tom acknowledges "in every myth there is a grain of truth" (Swift 2010: 216) as much as the idea of the inevitable fictional elements in historical account. That is why, the exact of location where his early life is set is at the confluence of a fictional and real river.

However, a loose and unsubstantial ground can be said to be the last place in which the project of a commercial empire can flourish its discourse,

by its very nature. Stephan Schaffarth rightfully labels the region as “chaotic” one that is civilized by the Atkinsons (Schaffarth 2003: 90). That’s why, Josiah Atkinson orders to his son, Thomas, to open up a new river and drains the region, and thus separates land from water, to provide with a firm ground for the empire. What’s at work at this point is not obliterating water or its metonymic counterpart, reality, but to keep it in check. The natural history of the Fens shows the propensity of the Great Ouse River to overflow now and then, effacing any structure painstakingly constructed by the humans. Within the interchangeable use of “reality” and “water”, Ouse becomes the ultimate reality not only because it contains water but also because really exists. For this reason, the fictional River Leem functions as a safety fuse in case of overflow of real River Great Ouse. Yet, the natural cycle proves the fragility of imperial discourse and ‘the structurality of the structure’ with its constant threats to submerge it, as it can be seen in the major flood cases which interrupt economic development of the Atkinsons.

The rise of the Atkinsons is made possible by what David Harvey calls ‘spatial fix’. (Harvey 1989) The term refers to any attempt of capitalistic entrepreneurship on geography in order to solve its inner contradictions. That is why, William Atkinson projects to drain the region and form a navigable river to consolidate the marketing of their products:

‘The man who [...] has the keys of the river will bring wealth to a wasteland. And himself.’ Thomas looks at the map and his father. The keys of the river? He sees no river; only a series of meres, marshes and flood lands through which perhaps a watery artery is vaguely traceable. Whereupon William, pipe-stem back in the corner of his mouth, utters a word which falls strangely and perplexingly [...]: ‘Drainage!’ (Swift 2010: 73-74)

The logic at work in this project is a reminder of the ‘abstract space’ introduced by French geographer and sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his *The Production of Space*. According to Lefebvre, abstract space is the space of capitalism and, among other characteristics, it has a geometric formant. (Lefebvre 1991: 285) That is to say, abstract space necessitates the obliteration of any heterogeneous ‘structure’ in order to make it measurable, calculable, and thus, exchangeable.

To this end, Thomas Atkinson collects books on geography in his library. However, what is more striking at this point is that he also adds volumes of books on brain and nervous system to help his insane wife:

Where once [pores] over the topography of the Fens and innumerable complexities of drainage, flood control and pumping systems, he will pore over the even more intricate topography of the medulla and the cerebellum, which have, so he discovers, their own dependence on the constant distribution of fluids. (Swift 2010: 85)

The apparent parallelism between geography and narrative is at work in the given quotation. The manipulation of geography, which, in turn, serves

to the expansion of the Atkinsons becomes a model for the human brain and nervous system, and vice versa. The message which is conveyed here is the fact that the structure of human brain enables mediation during the process of transposing reality into the narrative form. Like the process of drainage which renders the environment usable and 'legible', brain converts the inexplicable reality (mostly traumatic in *Waterland*) to legible texts.

The function of the sluice gate that Henry Crick operates resembles the relationship of the River Ouse and Leem. That is to say, this mechanism controls the water level to render the river navigable for the trade, which is just another attempt to tame water, nature and reality. (A sluice gate has a vertical blade which lets the flow of a deep current when it is lifted up to a certain level and controls the flow) As the operator of the sluice, Henry Crick, as it were, also controls the amount of reality that can be exposed. The function of Henry Crick strikingly resembles the function of circuit breaker within an electric system. For instance, he objects Tom's attempt to educate his brother –Dick-, for he is probably afraid that Dick may find the truth about his parentage if he can be educated. When Tom explains the moment in which Dick learns the truth and runs away to commit suicide in the river, he especially lets the reader know that the sluice is left deserted (286) because he and Henry run after Dick. Thus, he figuratively expresses that, from this point on, there is no one to control the reality to keep Dick in check.

However, traditional power relations between man and nature as subject and object, respectively, is also subverted through nature's own discourse of neutralizing, equalizing and leveling. Although the narrator refrains from attaching meanings to anything, his tendency to personify the elements of nature as active agents naturally turns them into subjects wielding power on human objects. In *Nature as Subject*, Eric Catz's focus on the connotations of the "imperialism" implies a postmodern reversal of these power relations:

[The] sense of imperialism is connected to environmental policies because the relationship of power need not be located in the exclusive domain of human beings, human institutions, human nation-states. Imperialism expresses a relationship of power and domination, but the entities on either end of the power relationship can be either human or non-human. (Catz 1997: 135)

Drawing from Catz's argument, nature's 'imperialist' disposition can be best observed in Henry Crick and his ancestors' 'confinement' to the sluice gate on the River Leem to continually observe the water level. Their confinement implies the fact that even at the times when the water does not expand its literal boundaries, it has a certain delimitative impact on the personal liberties of the individual.

Under the light of these, it can be concluded that Nature is given a fixed will which is disposed to equalize any human construction and this

will is fixed in a cyclical model. It has been observed that the drained region of the Fens and the river is, as human constructions, no different from the narrative and also grand narratives. In this respect, the Atkinson family turns out to be a perfect embodiment of grand narratives which aim to obliterate heterogeneous structures. It has also been understood that as an intrinsic part of the grand narratives, the idea of advancement towards a better world seems questionable in the novel. By foregrounding the similar paradigms from different points of history, the narrator sets the same model for human deeds, as well. Through this parallelism, along with certain analogies between human and natural world, he seeks to lay bare the illusion of the binary opposition of nature and human construction. Water, with its liquid form and resistance to being shaped, becomes a master key in the hands of Graham Swift in his endeavor to show the impossibility of transforming reality, as it is, into narrative form. It has also been observed that the occurrences of the traumatic events in the familial history operates as a supplement to this idea due to their resistance to be put into a realistic and logical narrative form, which results in their expression as fairy tales.

Genişletilmiş Öz

GRAHAM SWIFT'İN *WATERLAND* ROMANINDA COĞRAFYANIN KİLİT ROLÜ

Graham Swift'in *Waterland* (1983) adlı romanı, yazarın kariyerinde bir doruk noktası oluşturmuştur. Romanın temel dinamiğini, dünya siyasi tarihi ve özellikle de romanın kapsadığı zaman diliminde Fransız İhtilali'ni anlatması gereken bir tarihi öğretmeni olan Tom Crick'in bunun yerine kendi aile tarihini anlatması oluşturmaktadır. Hikâye ilerledikçe, söz konusu aile tarihinde coğrafyanın göz ardı edilemeyecek bir unsur olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. 18. yüzyıldan başlatılan aile tarihi, İngiltere'nin doğusunda yer alan ve sulak arazilerin en temel özelliğini oluşturduğu Fens adlı bölgede geçmektedir. Tom Crick'in anne tarafından ataları olan Atkinsonlar bu bölgeye sonradan yerleşen ve bölge üzerinde çeşitli mühendislik müdahalelerinde bulunarak bölgeyi tarıma ve nehir ulaşımına açan ve ayrıca bira üretiminde adeta bir tekel haline gelen ailedir. Atkinsonlar'ın kapitalist girişimciliğin beden bulmuş hali oldukları ve aile tarihinin 18. yüzyıldan itibaren başlatılması beraber düşünüldüğünde, roman, bir bakıma, kapitalizmin İngiltere'deki yükselişini de anlatmaktadır. Tom Crick'in baba tarafından olan fakir ataları, Crickler, ise Atkinsonlar'ın açtığı nehir ulaşımının sürdürülebilirliğini sağlayan bent kapağı bekçileridir. 20.yy'a kadar getirilen aile tarihi anlatısı artık bir yandan da Tom Crick'in kurgusal otobiyografisine dönüşür.

Bu makalenin amacı, en genel haliyle, romandaki coğrafya ve tarihsel anlatı unsurları arasında kurulan ilişkileri açığa çıkarmaktır. Bu bağlamda coğrafi unsurların, gerçeklik ve anlatı arasındaki ilişkiyi irdelemede eğretilemeli olarak kullanıldığı görülmüştür. Doğa tarihi üzerinde de eğilen romanda en sık tekrarlanan imge olan "su" kontrol edilemez yapısı ile "gerçeklik"

unsurunun bir temsili haline gelmiştir. Fens bölgesinde insanları müdahale- si ile gerçekleştirilen drenaj işlemleri çoğu kez bölgenin su altında kalması ile sonuçlanmıştır ki bu da romanda tarih ile ilgili olarak ortaya koyulan iki tezi destekler niteliktedir. Birincisi, insanlığın tarihsel 'ilerleyişinde' gelişim diye bir olgunun olmadığı ve tarihin döngüsel bir modelde, tekrarlanarak yaşandığı fikridir. Roman, bu şekilde, bilhassa modernitenin yüzyıllardır ortaya koyduğu gelişim fikrini bir üst anlatı olarak görerek bu konuda kuşku- cu bir yaklaşım getirmektedir. İkincisi ise, anlatının gerçekliği aktarmada her zaman için yetersiz kalacağı düşüncesidir. Sudan arındırılmış Fens bölgesi ve bölgedeki nehir, birer insan yapısı olarak anlatıdan farksızdır. Kapitalist gi- rişimciliği temsil eden Atkinsonlar'ın kendilerine ait bir üst anlatı yaratabil- meleri için öncelikle, üst anlatılara özgü olarak, 'diğer' unsuru yok sayma- sı ve homojen bir yapı oluşturmaları gerekmektedir ki Fens bölgesinin batakl- ık yapısı toprağın ve suyun heterojen biçimde karışmış haliyle Atkinsonlar için uygun bir altyapı sağlamamaktadır. Ancak coğrafyanın kırılğan ve asil doğasına dönmeye meyilli yapısı da kültürel bir yapı olan anlatının yetersiz- liğini ifade etmek için kullanılmaktadır. Bunlara ek olarak, Atkinson ailesinin geçmişte yaşadığı travmatik deneyimler de bu tartışmaların odak noktasın- da bulunmaktadır. Tom Crick'in atalarından Sarah Atkinson'un kocası tara- findan dövülerek konuşma yetisinden yoksun bırakılması veya Tom'un eşi Mary'nin neredeyse çocuk yaşlarda sağlıksız koşullarda yapılan kürtaj sonu- cu kısır kalmasının Tom tarafından masal haline getirilerek anlatılması anla- tının doğası ile ilgili tartışmaları beraberinde getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Waterland, anlatı, coğrafya, tarih, tarihyazımı

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