

WESTERN MALE EXPERIENCE IN TOM ROBBINS' NOVEL *FIERCE INVALIDS HOME FROM HOT CLIMATES*

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Abstract: *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* (2001) is one of few novels which encompass Tom Robbins opinions and humour filtered through his main characters Switters, a CIA agent and adventurer. The novelists uses first-person narrative to trace the main hero's personal, sometimes very critical and satirical remarks on social and religious issues that trouble a Western male American. Through parody and humour readers give a different perspective on such controversial issues as the Third Fatima's Prophecy or the traditional concept of Christianity. Through subversion of traditional norms held in contemporary Western society Robbins finds answers to questions puzzling the humankind for a long time. At times he fabulates and embellishes the facts with eccentric scenarios.

Key words: western experience, humour, religion, taboo

Introduction

The history has shown us that some of the events are hidden before the eyes of ordinary people. Such was the case of Fatima's Prophecies. The others are full of inconsistencies and veiled by the plurality of interpretations. Religion has always been the subject of philosophical as well as scientific debates, and formed humanity in both positive and negative ways. Tom Robbins in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* tackles many issues ranging from science, religion, philosophy, history, or art. Some of the issues were for a long time kept secret, or were considered mere conspiracy theories. His theories are fictitious, yet provocative and challenging, making readers think and laugh at the same time. Robbins vision of the world is filtered through his characters experiences. Switters, the main protagonist of the novel, travels to exotic countries to experience adventures and find an answer to a multitude of paradoxes in the world, the biggest of which is Switters himself.

Tom Robbins and his alter ego Switters, or where two worlds (should) meet

The novel *Fierce Invalids Home from Hot Climates* is the only Robbins' novel which features the male main protagonist. Other Robbins' novels are full of complex female characters. The author himself said in one of his interviews that "[E]qually important is the fact that employing women as my primary protagonists has allowed me to step outside of myself, to distance myself from my own personality, far more easily than were I to look at events from a masculine perspective. And I've almost always sought to avoid the stain of autobiography." This change in his decision to center the story on a male hero gives insight into Robbins' own very idiosyncratic perception of the world.

Tom Robbins is known to have been for a long time interested in Eastern religion, traveled in Central America, and experimented with drugs. These experiences are an inevitable part of the novel, so readers are often under the impression that the incidents they read about are partly derived from the author's life and partly his own imagination and fabulation. The main character Switters travels in different parts of the world, especially exotic countries in which he encounters people, tribes and communities with either different traditions, customs, and religions, but also same religion but secluded and excluded from the Western world so that they have been transformed into the counterpart of the Western communities, as will be depicted later in this article. He is a CIA agent, but the story does not tell any details about his job, which is understandable as his missions are meant to be kept secret. However, readers meet his companions and colleagues, who accompany him in his travels and make his stay pleasant. They are members of the C.R.A.F.T. Club (a loose organisation of CIA agents who meet up regularly for boozy sessions but Can't Remember A Fucking Thing afterwards) and indulge in a fine food and sexual pleasures. Switters is meditative, introspective person, practicing Zen Buddhism, although he never practices any religion. Religious groups and their doctrines are often the target of his (and Robbins, that is narrators) contemplation and unpleasant remarks, which result from his being fascinated by the contemporary religions and, in his opinion, unexplainable differences among them, as well as his insistence on practical value of any faith over mere belief in one. He states that "To practice a religion can be lovely, to believe in one is almost always disastrous." (246) This statement encompasses a strong ethical dimension full of "terrible truths" (Richards).

Tom Robbins as a counterculture icon experimented with LSD in 1960s, which, as he admits, "changed his life, it was such a rewarding experience...and it was completely true and rational". Readers are similarly exposed to Switters' visions when under the influence of the drug XTC, which bring about his self-awareness. The dialogues but also narrator's rendering (through both indirect speech and free indirect speech, sometimes free associations) of Switters' hallucinations or visions is full of humour, which is the backbone of the narrative:

"I am aware," she [grandmother] said, "of your antipathy towards animals."

"Why, that's slander, Maestra. I cherish all Gods creatures, great and small." It was the XTC that talking. The XTC grinning. (15)

Here Robbins provides an insight into his pacifist views, interest in subjects such as nature or ecology, and insistence on his true experience. Through his visions he comes closer to understanding the universe and its order as well as the position of a man in this chaotic world. Robbins himself speaks of his first vision in his psychedelic experience, when he realized that "every flower has the identity [...] and if you accept something like that, and you really believe it and you see that its true, then it can help you change your life, you get to respect not just the flowers but trees, animals and birds and all of life." (Richards) Understandably, this personal reflection does not take into account the negative effect of the use of drugs on people; however, it shows the close parallels between Robbins life and his characters one.

The novel is a portrayal of two different worlds, one being the consumer world of Seattle, which is the home of the main protagonist and his fellow-companions or next of kin, and the second one populated by eccentric characters (shamans, nuns). Robbins shows various characters and provides his observation on Seattle streets:

The old market, worn half away by dampness and fingerprints, sweat drops and shoe heels, pigeon claws and vegetable crates; soiled by butcher seepage, sequined with salmon scales, smelling of roses, raw prawns, and urine; blessedly freed for the winter from the demanding entertain-me-for-nothing! gawkings of out-of-town tourists, the market bustled now with fishmongers and Vietnamese farmers, florists and fruit vendors, famous chefs and food-smart housewives, gourmets and runaways, flunkies and junkies, coffee brewers and balloon benders, office workers and shopgirls and winos of all races; with pensioners, predators, panhandlers, and prostitutes, and (to complete the p's) political polemicists, punks, potters, puppeteers, poets, and

policemen; with musicians, jugglers, fire-eaters (dry days only), tyro magicians, and lingering loafers such as he seemed to be. (184)

Switters belongs to such chaotic world – he was raised in it and it influenced him. But he knows this world is full false pretense, artificiality and corruption. There are several ways to find an answer to this chaos – to become part of it, to embrace it. This can be achieved through a thorough observation, use of drugs, and free-wandering mind. Robbins argues that there is a “conflict between people who want liberty and who want certainty [...] order and certainty is often the enemy of freedom. If you want to be free, it’s like judo – instead of fighting the enemy you use your opponent’s energy [...] there’s very little certainty or security in life, you can learn to live with it in a harmonious way, you can dance with it.” (“A phone call”) The world of chaos in the Western world (itself represented by chaotic inner world of an ordinary discontent and alienated Western male middle-class citizen) is juxtaposed with the world of order represented by nuns, Bedouins in Syria, or tribes in the Amazon, which serve as both a purgatory and a spell to Switters. In Syria, Switters roams in the desert and meets Bedouins as well as a group of nuns, who were to be persecuted for initiating birth control. In a convent Switters is shown the Third Prophecy of Fatima, whose content does not have an impact on him. He is rather impressed by a pretty nun, with whom he has an intense sexual relationship. The sacred and secular worlds blend in, as highly pious nuns are juxtaposed with the sensuous figure on Matisse famous painting “Blue Nude”, which is later revealed to be a real aunt of one of the nuns. Robbins uses fabulation very often – his mixture of fiction and fact, pop culture and high art, make Robbins’ novel a typically postmodern one, in which various worlds are interconnected and create a coherent unit – within a chaos, which, as Robbins put it, is “a paradoxical nature of universe.”

The two worlds which Robbins portrays are the chaotic and paradoxical Western world and the exotic world, in which mysterious things happen (a Peruvian shaman casts a curse on Switters) or in which Switters happens to find a lot of stimuli for his dissatisfied (and unsatisfied) mind and body. Robbins stated that “paradox is the engine that drives the universe, it’s a matter of chaos and order, it’s not a choice between one of the two, it’s intensity within tranquillity, it’s what I look for in my life.” (“A phone call with Tom Robbins”)

Understanding the complexities of life

The main hero of the novel, Switters, is a very capable man. Despite his carefree nature he gives the impression of a very viable man. He often takes risks, but that derives from his background - he is a CIA agent. He follows his instinct wherever he goes, which causes him to appear in many unpredictable, comic, odd, and even dangerous situations. One time he is attacked by Bedouins, and only his sense of humour, apparent fearlessness, and eloquence in particular help him overcome all difficulties and save the lives of all nuns in the convent. When Switters stays at the convent, the Bedouins with guns appear and knock on the door. The narrator describes the scene: "Before he could pull on his trousers, there was a burst of automatic gunfire. In a flash, he was through the door, stilt-sprinting along a moonlit path in his boxer shorts. The ones with the baby ducks on them." Switters' appearance disarms the men, followed by his brave conversation with them about religion:

"Hey, it's written in the Koran that the gates of Paradise open wide for he who can make his companions laugh." He quoted the chapter and verse, challenging them to look it up. "I was wondering if you boys might be among those favored by Heaven." That threw them into a state of consternation. For a good three or four minutes, they conferred with one another, occasionally scratching their kaffiyehs with their rifles, as if trying to remember a punch line. Finally, the eldest of the trio (all under thirty) stepped forward and announced, "It is irrelevant to Heaven whether or not we can make you laugh because you are not our companion." (283)

This experience encourages Switters to come to conclusions about the role of religion, universe, and humanity, which only enhances his feeling of self-importance. Looking at morality or religion from a completely new perspective gives Switters pleasure, which satisfies his curiosity and enlightens his beliefs.

In any event, I'm being forced to survey the world from a new perspective—you'd be astonished the difference two inches can make—and I'm loath to relinquish the vantage point quite yet. There may be other angles, other takes, whole phyllo pastries of existence I've yet to explore from this sacred height. So, patience, pal. Let me play it out for a while. Let me discover what it is that I've become: synthetic cripple or synthetic bodhisattva. (183)

Comparing himself to either “bodhisattva” or “cripple” Switters demonstrates his ability to understand the complexities of life in wider perspectives, which accounts for a plethora of explanations (some of them being of a very eccentric nature).

It is a humour which both Robbins and Switters need in their lives for their survival, but which also contributes to ones feeling in peace if it is combined with “primitive man’s organic wisdom and extradimensional pipeline.” By “primitive wisdom” Robbins implies beliefs or traditions not corrupted by narrow opinions. Switters says: “the union would result in something truly wondrous and supremely real, the finally consummated marriage of darkness and light.” The parrots squeaks “People of zee world, relax” symbolically outlines the path the Western man should follow in order to find happiness and liberation, and revitalize his/her soul.

Another concept Switters centers his personal religion is based on “breaking the taboo:

Taboos were superstitions with fangs on them, and if not transcended, they punctured the brain and drained the spirit. A taboo was a crystallized knot of societal fear and must be unraveled, cut through, or smashed if a people were to set themselves free. Ancient Greeks had a concept they called “eating the taboo,” and the *agorhi* sect in India took a similar approach. As a path to liberation, these golden Greeks and holy Hindus would deliberately break any and all of their culture’s prevailing taboos in order to loosen their hold, destroy their power. It was an active, somewhat radical method of triumphing over fear by confronting that which frightened: embracing it, dancing with it, absorbing it, and moving past it. It was a casting out of demons.
(137)

Robbins often subverts the norms of (not only Western) society, religion, ethics, and literary conventions. His description of nuns with erotic overtones is highly daring: “Her breasts and buttocks were also quite round, but Switters didn’t notice that. He would have sworn under oath that he didn’t notice. Why would he have noticed? She was a middle-aged nun.” Switters breaks a taboo – he has a sexual relationship with one of the nuns. He feels remorseless, as his act can be justified by the fact that “the nuns had been recently defrocked” and, being excommunicated by Vatican, have free will to decide about their intimate life. Moreover, the story is connected with factual information about Matisse’s painting *Blue Nude*, but the real story is changed: Matisse’s night nurse, a twenty-one year

old student Monique Bourgeois would sit as a model for his paintings in 1943. When her duties finished, he asked her to pose for him, and she agreed. Monique later joined the order of Dominican nuns and was given the name of Sister Jacques-Marie. ("The Personal Life of Henri Matisse"). But it is also nuns who behave in rather an eccentric way:

"Switters jumped to the conclusion that the sisters were practicing witchcraft, that he'd stumbled upon some arcane sect that was combining Catholicism with Wicca. However, as the nuns, one by one—some eagerly, even vehemently, others with obvious reluctance—hurled or gently dropped their habits into the bonfire, he realized that something of a different nature was transpiring here. He couldn't guess what the ceremony was about, but it was no eye-of-newt sabbat." (232)

Robbins character admits he cannot understand their ceremony, not nuns explain it to him. Through this atypical image of a ritual conducted by the group of nuns, Robbins mocks the religious practices, which is fully expressed in nun's disapproval with Vatican prohibition of birth control. Consciously or not, Robbins foreshadowed the events which were to come only ten years later. In 2011 many groups of nuns tried to discuss such questions with Vatican. "The Vatican accused the group of promoting 'radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith' and 'corporate dissent' against church teachings, like those prohibiting the ordination of women to the priesthood, same-sex relationships and artificial birth control" (Goodstein). Similarly, and coincidentally, Robbins discloses the Third Secret of Fatima, which was revealed in 2000, the year the novel went to print. The author could not have known the facts, therefore, the story features the version of the prophecy that is really ingenious: "a certain unexpected wisdom and joy will come upon a segment of the population that has survived the earlier sorrows, but, alas, the Word that brings about this healing will be delivered to mankind neither from Rome's basilica nor from a converted Russia, but from the direction of a pyramid." (335) Despite the fact that Robbins presented his readers with fictitious yet possible explanations to various factual events, he combined expertise in the field of religion with his wit, thus creating a marvelous and complex narrative which not only entertains his readers, but also engages them to confront their own understanding of the world they live in with realities which make this world mysterious, paradoxical, or not accessible to mortals.

Conclusion

Tom Robbins in his novel *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates* presents various topics, such as religion, sexuality, mythology, or politics. His character, a CIA agent called Switters, travels to different continents for various purposes. In one of his visits to Syrian desert he falls in love with a nun who reveals him the Third Secret of Fatima. In South American jungle he meets a shaman who casts a spell on him – he cannot touch the ground, so for the rest of the travel he is in a wheelchair. In Seattle he discusses his philosophy about sexuality or CIA plans with his friend Bobby. Switters learns that one of the nuns he meets in Syria was the model for Matisse's painting *Blue Nude* in 1943, the painting his grandmother owns. This interconnectedness is the backbone of Robbins' narrative. The Western world is linked with Eastern world, spiritual with secular, sensual with ascetic, real with mysterious, factual with fictitious. His philosophy based on taking things with humour, following his instincts, and embracing chaos and order in all their manifestations helps him find the core of the universe and brings about his happiness and ultimate equilibrium in his life.

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