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Immigrant to a terrorist: on liquid fears in Hari Kunzru's Transmission

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss Kunzru's novel in the context of Zygmunt Bauman's theories concerning "liquid modernity". The article focuses mainly on the exploration of fears which haunt modern man on the individual and collective level. The main character's act of transmitting a computer virus is seen as an act of protest against unequal treatment and economic exploitation, expressing fear of exclusion, becoming a social outcast and a "wasted life". In the consequence of the global chaos, which ensues when Arjun Mehta loses control over the virus, the protagonist's position changes: a Third World immigrant worker is turned into a global terrorist, thus reflecting Western society's fears of the Other, who may introduce destabilization and be a cause of a "collective catastrophe". Finally, it is argued that the novel comments on modern man's condition of uncertainty and a decreasing ability to predict the consequences of one's actions in the globalizing world.

Key words

Liquid modernity; fear; uncertainty; globalization; protest; immigrant; terrorist

The intensifying and speeding up impact of worldwide interconnectedness is felt all over the globe. Since 1960s when Marshall McLuhan coined the term a "global village", an unprecedented pace and scale of this phenomenon has been observed. The development of technology, communication and transport allows for close connections and frequent interactions between the most remote places on the planet. The significance of global flows cannot be overlooked or belittled because of "the sheer speed, scale and volume" which results in disjunctures that need to be tackled globally (Appadurai 1996: 37). In the world which is increasingly one of the global flows and exchanges, one notices increasing fluidity and

instability of life structures which mark the contemporary moment with uncertainties and anxieties about the present and the future.

Hari Kunzru's second novel *Transmission* (2004) is a novel deeply preoccupied with various aspects of the interconnected world. It discusses the implications of the globalizing world: opportunities and fears generated by the globalizing processes. In this article I would like to focus on the representation of different forms of fear presented in the narrative, and examine them in the context of Zygmunt Bauman's theories of liquid modernity. The novel can be interpreted as announcing the triumph of "liquidity", that is instability and uncertainty. The condition of liquidity is envisioned as a predominant source of fears. The issues of migration, one of the constituent features of global flows, play a significant role in the representation of individual and collective fears. The novel depicts an immigrant as a subject whose position is particularly unstable and uncertain, which is a source of his fears. At the same time an immigrant is regarded as a threatening, destabilizing element that generates fears on the collective level, in a large community, and who can easily be regarded as a threat. Kunzru puts a critical perspective on the question of terrorism, presenting it not as a real danger to the nation's security but as a tool used by countries to authorize their power in the times when economic and social safety can no longer be guaranteed and the issues of safety are shifted to the personal sphere. Finally, it is argued that the theme of prevailing uncertainty is reflected in the form of the narrative, together with the themes of globalization and interconnectedness.

The fluidity of our times has been well defined by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. His term "liquid modernity" denotes the contemporary times, characterized by others as postmodern or late modern. Bauman uses the adjective "liquid" or light to indicate the contrast to the earlier phase of modernity, which in his words was "solid" and heavy, in other words defined, localised, territorialised. With this metaphor Bauman describes the effects of globalisation, nomadism, new technologies and information systems. What he means by it is the current speed of changes taking place in our everyday reality, linked with the constant movement, constant *flow* of people, goods and information on an unprecedented scale, which results in an inability to preserve stable forms of social life and frequently individual life: "a condition in which social forms … can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them, and once they are cast for them to set" (Bauman 2007: 1). In other words, ours is "the era of instantaneity" (Bauman 2006b: 15), the current world is one of the temporary, short-term projects, fragmented lives which demand individuals to be flexible and adaptable. Temporariness leads to focusing more on the dissolution of various structures (projects, relationships) rather than on their preservation, and so uncertainty and unpredictability become inseparable components of liquid times:

> Trustworthy calculations are increasingly difficult to make, while foolproof
> prognoses are all but imaginable: most if not all variables in the equations

are unknown, whereas no estimates of their future trends can be treated as fully and truly reliable.

(Bauman 2005: 1–2)

The feeling of uncertainty generates liquid fears. Temporariness of social structures, a feeling that everything can be easily cancelled, made redundant and discarded is a source of our anxieties. Not only objects, things we use are threatened with waste disposal, also human lives can be made redundant. The threat of becoming "waste", unneeded and therefore meaningless, is omnipresent (Bauman 2004).

In Bauman's view, globalization, which is a phenomenon contributing greatly to the liquidity of the times, is one of the major sources of fears. The sociologist views globalization as "negative". He describes it as "unchecked" and highly selective because, for example, trade, capital, information or terrorism are not dispersed equally (Bauman 2006a: 96). What is more, interconnectedness makes modern societies subject to external forces, incomprehensible and beyond any control. This generates a state of uncertainty and a sense of defenselessness and vulnerability, which makes societies "horrified by their own undefendability and obsessed with the security of their borders and of the population inside them – since it is precisely that security *inside* borders and *of* borders that eludes their grasp and seems to stay beyond their reach forever" (2006a: 96–97). Bauman draws attention to the fact that in the situation when the global free markets cannot be controlled, and so economic security cannot be provided, the states come up with a new idea of "personal" security. It is "the Other" that modern societies should be afraid of: an outcast, a criminal, an asylum seeker, a terrorist, in other words someone who could threaten our corporeal safety, our possessions, or our immediate surroundings. The state promises to take care of the new danger, which is how it attempts to authorize its power (2006a: 147–159). For Bauman, the rise of global terrorism is just another sign of "how insecure we feel living on a negatively globalized planet" (2006a: 99–100). Frequent invocations of the terrorist threat are a sign of anxieties shared by Western wealthy societies which are unprepared for any disruption of their stability and well-being.

In his book *Liquid Fear* Bauman proposes to investigate fears on two levels: collective and individual. Fears of the first type emanate from the horror of the collapse of civilized life, organized and predictable. They could be called fears of a "collective" catastrophe: "fears of a breakdown or a catastrophe that may descend *on us all*" (2006a: 18) and which may happen due to a financial, nuclear, ecological, or social crisis, in opposition to "fears of a *personal* catastrophe", which he describes as fears of "becoming a selected target, earmarked for personal doom", "of being thrown overboard", "of being left behind", "of *exclusion*" (2006a: 18). The feeling of insecurity, which translates into fears, is inescapable, it affects individuals and whole communities. In the time when global forces are in operation every aspect of life is threatened by "liquidity", in other words only provisional arrangements.

The feelings of uncertainty and fear emanate already from the opening pages of *Transmission*. Kunzru goes along well-known lines in the development of the plot in the novel – he offers a narrative of the unfulfilled American Dream, with a common theme of the clash of immigrants' dreams with reality. What propels Arjun Mehta, an Indian immigrant, to come to the United States, is a certain illusion of America, a fantasy of an immediate success achieved due to one's determination, hard work and commitment to one's job. This illusion is shattered as soon as the protagonist puts his foot on the ground of the chosen country. Mehta, a well-educated computer programmer, finds out that he is not a crucial specialist for the American IT industry and America is not really lacking in specialists of his kind. From this time on his life is full of uncertainty: he is forced to wait for a job offer just like other Indian immigrants lured by the same promises of the American Dream and he experiences long periods of unemployment, because out of the first twelve months he works only three and a half. When at last he is lucky and receives a job at Virugenix, a global computer security specialist, it turns out to be only temporary. The short period of stabilized life comes to an end when in the face of an economic crisis the company starts to lay off its workers and Mehta is threatened with redundancy.

For fear of being discarded Mehta is induced to act. He feels he is treated unfairly – the company wants to fire him in the first place because he is an immigrant, as he later explains: "But they still said I have to go because of first in and first out and being foreign national and all" (Kunzru 2005: 227), so he protests against this situation. In a desperate attempt to improve his situation at work, he designs a mischievous plan. He releases a computer virus, which he plans to eliminate and thus prove indispensable at work and worthy of further employment. The virus, however, gets out of control. It multiplies, interferes with the numerous computer systems, and in the end the interconnected world is taken over by chaos. The once innocent, dreamy boy Arjun is eventually wanted – not by top firms or beautiful women – but by the FBI. In the most unexpected way Arjun is called one of the top world terrorists. The man, who just wanted to get his job back, in the same city and with the same company, through his desperate attempt to prove useful for his company, suddenly wreaks havoc all over the interconnected world.

This is the moment in which the structure of the novel finds its explanation: the three seemingly unconnected plots of Arjun Mehta, British entrepreneur Guy Swift and a popular Indian actress Leela Zahir, finally intersect. Arjun's actions affect the lives of the other two characters. Guy's company *Tomorrow** is negatively affected by the virus blocking its computer systems. Guy himself is in a difficult situation, as he is found in the midst of an immigration raid (Operation Atomium) with no identification, and due to chaos he is identified as an Albanian national, "suspected pyramid fraudster and failed asylum seeker in Germany" (263). After being interrogated by the Belgian police he is deported to Albania. At the same time, Leela Zahir, Arjun's movie idol, suffers from an emotional breakdown. Arjun has used her name and her image for the virus: a little figure

of Leela appears on a computer screen whenever it becomes infected. Leela feels ashamed of this situation, which affects her acting and, among other causes, leads to her escape from the site of shooting a movie and from her demanding mother. At first the plots appear to be unrelated and completely independent from each other, they may even produce a feeling of incoherence and dissonance. Yet, when they suddenly intertwine and when Mehta's story takes up the leading role (his misfortunes shape the lives of people he has never met), it is clear that such is the intention of the book. This structure expresses the major assumption of the novel concerning globalization: we are all connected, even though we may not realize this fact. The most remote places and the most distant people may have an influence on each other. Whatever we do locally in the environment we know may have a global impact on the subjects we do not know. And most importantly, the remoteness of the effects of our actions may increase the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety also about our own condition.

   Mehta is an illustration of an individual whose position is controlled by powers above him and who experiences fears generated by the uncertainty of his situation. He fears becoming redundant because it means for him exclusion from social life – from the patterns of production and consumption. Losing a job means for him expulsion from the right category of people, while simultaneously being caught in the wrong one. Bauman, who appreciates employment in general (he calls it "the key" to resolution of personal identity, individual and social security), observes that the unemployed, in other words the redundant, find themselves in a difficult position, because the "destination of the redundant is the waste yard" (Bauman 2004: 12). It is almost impossible to return from the waste yard to everyday activity, redundancy is close to the state of social death – it signals and sometimes leads to the end of one's activity. Mehta's fear is intensified by the fact that he is an immigrant, which makes his position particularly vulnerable. He is subject to the dealings of the new global empire – the United States, which has no formal colonies but rests its power on economic domination and control (Bysiecka-Maciaszek 2007). Mehta is determined not to lose his job, for it means life for him in its many dimensions: as a foreign national with a work visa he knows that only work justifies his residence in the dreamland – the US; next, it provides his subsistence, and finally, it maintains the illusion that it is possible to become successful in America. As an unemployed immigrant, thus bringing no visible benefit for the host country, he is completely powerless and insignificant. In this case he can as well as disappear, which indeed happens later in the novel.

   The uncertainty of Mehta's situation is represented by his mobility. From the moment he chooses to go to work to the US he is a victim of globalization, a powerless pawn moved around by those who are in power, constantly unsure of his final destination. His mobility is dependent on others, both in terms of legal permissions he has to obtain as a foreign subject (Mehta is part of the so-called "brain drain" – skilled immigrants allowed to enter the United States), and in terms of financial means, whose lack prevents movement. He is assigned to work in various places in the US rather than permitted to search independently for

a position or to choose a place of work, and only a job can bring him money to live on, since his own resources soon finish. And so Mehta is obliged to wait for the decisions of others, unsure of what the future will bring. The difficulty of his position (uncertainty and inferiority) is juxtaposed in the narrative with the easiness of travel experienced by a character from a parallel plot, Guy Swift. These two characters represent the polarization of the globalizing world: the poor Third World immigrant, whose mobility is constantly restricted, and a member of an elite global class who can move freely from one destination to another. Swift, as it is symbolized by his name, is able to move "swiftly" anytime and anywhere, with an opportunity to plan his itinerary and sufficient means to cover his expenses, whereas Mehta for the most part of the stay in the US is immobilized and uncertain of his next move due to his inferior position of an immigrant worker. The connection between their mobility and their position reflects Bauman's argument that in the globalized times mobility is a symbol of status, a privilege, and power: "In 'liquid' modernity, it is the most elusive, those free to move without notice, who rule" (Bauman 2006b: 120) and in another place: "Speed of movement has today become a major, perhaps the paramount, factor of social stratification and the hierarchy of domination" (2006b: 151).

The narrative explores not only the fears of an individual but it also lays bare fears felt on the collective level. Mehta is the element that brings to light fears latent in American society – a fear of chaos, disorder, breakdown of established rules and norms and links them to the influx of immigrants. As the novel represents a connection between terrorism and migration it has been read as a response to post-9/11 paranoia (Connell 2010; Liao 2013) but the extension of the theme found in the development of Guy Swift plot, with a more general look at wealthy European societies and their fears, suggests more generalized statements. Consequently, the narrative may be read as a commentary on the fears harboured by Western civilized societies, not only by the US but also west European countries. These are fears of a collapse of the values of order and stability, routines and predictability. They may be generated by migration. As Jef Huysmans' study shows in European Union migration is envisioned as "a force which endangers the good life in west European societies" (2000: 752), while "experiences of economic and social uncertainty are translated into opposition to and fear of immigrants and asylum-seekers" (2000: 769). Bauman offers an interesting explanation of this phenomenon. A growing fear of the Stranger, the Other, is in his view a new strategy that states adopt to assert their power: as their sovereignty is waning because of the new "openness" of societies and it is no longer possible to guarantee economic and social safety for their citizens, the states shift the focus to the problems of "protection against dangers to *personal safety*" (Bauman 2006a: 148).

The extreme measures undertaken by the US government against the poor, naïve and desperate immigrant expose the fears of American society. Sending the virus is the protagonist's act of protest and self-defence, motivated by his fears and desperation but hiding no malicious intentions; all that happens later can be read as the triumph of uncertainty. Mehta's goal, however naïve, is never to ter-

rorize: "I meant to cause a little disruption, just a small problem, because then I could step in and solve it and be the hero" (Kunzru 2005: 227), in a general climate of fear his explanations are ignored and Mehta is hailed a terrorist. To emphasize the irony of the situation the narrator quotes Mehta's thoughts, which is highlighted with italics: "At that moment he understood. Sooner or later they would find him and then life as he knew it would be over. *All I wanted was my job back. All I wanted was to work and be happy and live a magic life in magic America*" (148). Mehta inspires fear because his action is treated as threatening the state stability – it is viewed as disobedience. He refuses to accept the fact that he has become useless for the local economy but fights to change his situation. He violates the pattern of his mobility: he does not leave the company as it is demanded from him, on top of that he unintentionally initiates action which is beyond any control. Finally, Mehta's protest (realized by sending the virus) and the state's reaction in the form of accusing him of a terrorist attack discloses one more thing – the state does not wish to intervene in the economic matters of its residents, this is why Mehta's case is never examined. In the face of incomprehensible and unmanageable globalizing forces the only thing the state can do is to concentrate on the matters of personal security of its citizens.

The narrative of terror, which presents Mehta as a global danger and at the same time a threat to personal safety, is necessary to legitimize all actions against him and it ultimately asserts the authority of the state. The pervading ambiguity of the statements made by the American government officials maintains high levels of anxiety and insecurity. After the spread of Leela02 worm the press demands straightforward information from the American government about the danger: "The *New York Times* wanted to know whether the administration could confirm or deny that the country was under attack" (145), but the convoluted speech of the president's spokesman offers no clear explanations. In the end "[t]he woman from the *Times* was not sure if this meant yes or no, but she filed a story that made the situation sound very tense, indeed" (145). Here Kunzru skilfully emphasizes the role of the media in disseminating and escalating the atmosphere of terror, which in lieu of the facts offer speculations and manipulate with emotions of the public. The mechanisms of "transforming" one into a terrorist are described with an air of parody and yet they reveal the drama of a subject wrongfully accused and forced beyond the border of the law. The narrator comments with a full understanding of the situation:

> They were calling him [Arjun] a terrorist, which meant that he would probably just join the ranks of the disappeared, the kneeling figures in the orange suits against whom anything was justified, to whom anything could legitimately be done. It was the revenge of the uncontrollable world. He had tried to act but instead had made himself a nonperson. (148)

Certainly, the inability to predict the results of one's actions, "the revenge of the uncontrollable world" is the key element in the whole novel. Uncertainty dominates

in the characters' life as their plans are shattered, and new, sometimes unthinkable scenarios are created. However, just as much the narrative emphasizes the rule of unpredictability, its critical outlook on the question of terrorism, which exposes the plight of a person unjustly accused of terrorist intentions, cannot be overlooked.

The fear of an immigrant, a potential enemy of the state, is disclosed also by other characters of the novel. Guy Swift and his partners, representatives of several European nations, discuss the nature of borders and the position of an immigrant in the globalizing world. They come to a conclusion that dissolving, porous borders are undesirable, because with various people free to move without any strict controls, the result is even greater uncertainty. Swift and his business partners dream of altering this situation, they come up with a plan to rebrand Europe as the world's VIP lounge, and so to impose stricter controls of immigrants: "A continent that wants people, but only the best" (239). This policy is directed against people who do not count as "elite", most obviously against any arrivals from the so called Third World countries. Immigrants are "Others" perceived stereotypically as an economic danger for the nation: "The problem with these people is they lie, they destroy their papers. You have no way of knowing who they are. They say they're from the war zone but actually what they want is to take a job from a citizen" (235). Swift and his partners express a common fear of Western society: fear of an immigrant, a stranger, who is viewed as a subject attempting to undermine the position of a citizen and destabilizing his/her comfortable life.

The second part of the novel entitled "Noise" shows the triumph of the dominant features of liquid modernity: uncertainty and unpredictability both in its form and content. This part deals with the consequences of the Leela virus, the "noise", which disabled the transmission of information, impaired communication between people and caused global chaos. "Noise" satirizes fascination with uncertainty, playing with meanings and interpretations, especially in the view of known facts: the multiple, unreliable narrator presents a proliferation of various conspiracy theories concerning the Leela virus and Mehta's later disappearance which are created regardless of Mehta's earlier explanations of his motives. Another bizarre result which points to the inability to predict the future outcome of a situation is the status the protagonist achieves after his disappearance: he is both a terrorist and celebrity, he combines the figures of "an outlaw and the underground genius" (267) and becomes a symbol of protest:

> The hope that the genius hacker might be a revolutionary was so strong in certain quarters that it has survived the revelation that the Leela papers were the creation of a group of a Bologna-based radicals, who had appropriated Mehta's name as a gesture and invited anyone else who wished to use it to do the same. In recent times, "Arjun Mehta" has authored statements on the food industry and the World Trade Organization. His Virugenix employee identification photo … has been screenprinted onto T-shirts with humorous anticapitalist slogans. (267)

It is ironic that the protagonist's intention is never to be a rebel or a revolutionary and yet this is what he becomes in the eyes of many people. The unexpected turn of events represents the incomprehensible and uncontrollable forces operating in the globalized world. Despite Mehta's intention to act locally, on a small scale, the outcome of his action has a global reach. The unanticipated result shows the triumph of "liquidity", the condition of our times which makes it almost impossible to realize any project according to the initial plan. At the same time the ultimate feeling of uncertainty remains with the reader after the narrator offers several possible endings of the story of Arjun Mehta and Leela Zahir pointing to none of them as more possible than the others, yet suggesting the necessity to make a choice: "According to conspiracy theorists, there is only one possible explanation, only one pattern that makes sense" (276).

In conclusion, it can be stated that *Transmission* takes an ironic stance on the globalizing processes and liquid times. It highlights economic and cultural inequalities or even polarization in the globalizing world and views globalization as a phenomenon fraught with pitfalls and dangers rather than promises. The novel makes it clear that a sense of uncertainty and unpredictability is a common condition in the times of liquid modernity generating fears of different nature, and that stability and security may be still desired but illusory commodities.

Another interesting issue raised by the novel is the role of the new media. In the globalized, wired world, possibilities for acts of resistance are wider thanks to new technology. Kunzru points to the internet as a possible tool for social protest: just like the Leela virus is transmitted to various locales around the globe, all kinds of ideas, also those of resistant character can be transmitted worldwide. They can exert their influence globally, transform the consciousness of various people and as a result be a tool for social change. There is, however, a snag in this vision: it is impossible to predict fully the outcome of all undertaken actions. For Arjun Mehta everything goes wrong in the world where local has become global, while global is local.

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