

Inese Vičaka

TERRITORIAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY AND AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S "CHILD OF GOD"



The notion of belonging has often been examined from the perspective of location and the politics of relations to space and culture. The paper explores, how Cormac McCarthy's novel "Child of God" (1973) maps out and interrogates the notion of belonging – the protagonist Lester Ballard's belonging to his nation, community and the limits imposed or the labels attached to Lester Ballard and the rest of the Appalachian community. The paper also dwells on the issue of borders expressed in C. McCarthy's text: the border of territorial and national identity, the border of Lester Ballard as the victim's personal identity and the border of his physical place – the Appalachian region within an existential realm of conflicting political system and cultural context in the 20th century. It is possible to draw parallels with Latgale region in Latvia, which had struggled for maintenance of its territorial and national identity for years, especially in the 20th century, when Latvia intelligentsia was unwilling to accept the identity and culture of Latgale region. For many years, it had been a periphery of periphery, marked by isolation and dominated by internal and external forces and struggles against the ongoing oppression of its distinct, regionally and historically rooted identity and language. The paper as well examines "Child of God" text from an ecocritical angle, unveiling the metaphorical and symbolic level, on which relationship with the nonhuman and human world is conveyed.

Keywords: ecocriticism, culture, nature, human, industrialization.

TERITORIĀLĀ UN NACIONĀLĀ IDENTITĀTE UN EKOKRITIKAS PERSPEKTĪVA KORMAKA MAKĀRTIJA ROMĀNĀ „DIEVA BĒRNS”

Piederības jautājums bieži tiek skatīts lokācijas un kultūras kontekstā, šajā gadījumā uzmanība ir pievērsta romānā atainotajai Apalaču kalnu reģiona videi, kultūrai un sabiedrībai. Rakstā ir pētīts, kā Kormaka Makārtija romāns „Dieva bērns” izvērsis teritoriālās un nacionālās identitātes problēmjautājumu un galvenā varoņa Lestera Balārda piederību sabiedrībai. Galvenais šā raksta mērķis ir aplūkot teritoriālās un nacionālās identitātes jautājumu un ekokritikas perspektīvu K. Makārtija romānā „Dieva bērns” (1973). Rakstā ir iztirzāta arī L. Balārda kā pastāvošās politiskās un sociālās iekārtas upura personības identitātes robeža un

viņa fiziskās lokācijas robeža – industrializācijas skartā Apalaču kalnu reģiona vidiene. Ne mazāk svarīga loma pētījumā ir piešķirta ekokritikas perspektīvai romānā, aplūkojot tā simbolisko un metaforisko slāni, kurā ir ievītas L. Balārda attiecības ar pasauli un apkārtējo vidi.

Daudzi ekokritiķi ir pētījuši faktuālus un fikcionālus naratīvus par cilvēku dzīvi Apalaču kalnu reģionā, kurā kopš 20. gs. sākuma industriālisms bija ienesis apkārtējai videi postošas vēsmas un netaisnīgā zemes nodokļu sistēma daudziem zemes īpašniekiem lika atteikties no sava īpašuma par labu valdībai. Bieži vien naratīvos par Apalaču kalnu reģionu ir sniegts ieskats vēsturiskajā laikā pirms 20. gs., kad reģiona teritorija bija industriālisma un nesaudzīgās politikas un ekonomikas neskarta. Agrākā Apalaču kalnu reģiona dzīves apraksts ir kļuvis gandrīz kā mīts par skaistiem, neskartiem mežiem, dzidriem, foreļu pilniem strautiem, mazām, ienesīgām kalnu fermām un to īpašniekiem, kuriem vēl nebija atņemtas tiesības saimniekot savā zemē pirms nesaudzīgās nodokļu sistēmas ieviešanas. Terēze Burisa (Teresa Burris) un Patrīcija Gānta (Patricia Gantt) ir vienas no ekokritiķēm, kuras ir pievērsušas uzmanību Apalaču kalnu reģiona aprakstam romānos, norādot, ka ekokritikas kontekstā ir svarīgi izpētīt atainoto simbolisko un metaforisko slāni, caur kuru kļūst redzamas apkārtējās vides un cilvēku attiecības.

K. Makārtija romāns „Dieva bērns” ekokritikas kontekstā izceļ L. Balārda un apkārtējās vides simbolisko saikni. Ne tikai L. Balārds ir kļuvis par tālaika sociālās un politiskās iekārtas upuri, bet arī apkārtējā vide signalizē par tai nodarīto kaitējumu. Tā kā rakstnieks K. Makārtijs pats bērnību ir pavadījis Apalaču kalnu vidienē, šīs vides sociālie un politiskie problēmjautājumi ir izgaismoti ar faktuālu precizitāti, tāpēc tieši viņa darbs „Dieva bērns” ir izvēlēts robežu tematikas apskatam, kas, skatot Latgales reģiona kontekstā, kaut nedaudz attāli, tomēr sasaucas arī ar Latgales reģiona identitātes aspektu. Apalaču kalnu reģions 20. gs. sākumā, tāpat kā Latgales reģions šajā laikā, tika cīnījies par savas identitātes un kultūras saglabāšanu un pret zemes konsolidāciju reģiona robežās. K. Makārtijs, lai gan neapzināti, ir izcēlis arī ekokritikas zinātnei svarīgus problēmjautājumus, kas norāda uz to, ka cilvēkiem ir jādomā par dabas un apkārtējās vides skaistuma saglabāšanu, jo nekāda veida finansiāls vai materiāls ieguvums nespēj aizvietot dabas estētiskā skaistuma vērtību.

Atslēgas vārdi: ekokritika, kultūra, daba, cilvēks, industrializācija.

Introduction

The objective of the article is to research the issue of territorial and national identity and ecocritical perspective in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God*. C. McCarthy's literary work *Child of God* is set in Appalachian region around the mid 20th century and serves as an elegy for the demise of the wilderness and farming due to the industrial development, that led to a homogenization of both the region's landscape and culture. The novel describes the degradation of the landscape in the Appalachian region, farms and many people's lives due to the encroaching

consumerism, technological, industrial and institutional development. During the thirties, the government acquired thousands of local farms for non-payment of taxes on the land in the region. The time was marked by severe hardships, homelessness and inconsiderate overproduction and degradation of local farms and the surrounding woods. The Appalachian region faced threat of losing its identity with the advance of adverse political and economic situation. External and internal forces had always tried to push the boundaries of the Appalachian region and to incorporate it in the mainstream American culture, politics, economics and identity. This aspect can be well compared to Latgale region, which had fought for its own voice and identity for years and had been depressed by adverse internal and external forces ready to divide or re-divide the borders of the territory without its right for considerable autonomy. The novel as well serves as a good ground for the study of ecocriticism, where the relationship of the human, environment and world is vital. C. McCarthy has spent his childhood in Appalachia region, therefore his account of the environment, life within borders of Appalachia is largely factual, which in its turn makes analysis of the novel interesting. C. McCarthy encourages not only the implied readers to think of the fundamental aspects of their lives, but the inhabitants of the whole world to think of the threatening appetites, which have turned them into avid and inconsiderable consumers, which in its turn is constantly providing an adverse effect on the surrounding environment and nature. The method used in the research is an ecocritical re-reading of representations of nature and environment in literature. The paper aims at understanding the nature-culture problem, discusses the complicated boundaries between nature (culture) and the place within the boundaries of Appalachian region, which, although distantly, but still bears resemblance with the issue of Latgale region in the context of its long lasting struggle to maintain its identity and autonomous culture.

1. Ecocriticism in literary studies

Literary ecocriticism has grown into a broad and mature field and has become more diversified with years since its advance in the 90s (Buell 2005; Gersdorf, Mayer 2006; Glotfelty, Fromm 1996; Witschi 2011). Greg Garrard in his most recent book *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014) has pronounced ecocriticism to have come of-age as the movement, taking measure of massive proliferation of anthologies on the subject.

Ecocritics since the dawn of ecocriticism have provided an ecocritical study of relationship of different environments, nature and its dwellers portrayed in fictional and nonfictional narratives, in its count – the environment, nature within the borders of Appalachian region. Most of the narratives of Appalachia region lead the readers to the awareness, that *one of the richest and loveliest regions of America was savagely exploited and that the exploitation still continues* (Waage 2005: 157). Many ecocritics have especially studied non-fictional and fictional narratives of the life in Appalachia region that are interwoven with the choices and fates of individuals

in the existing realm of social and political order. Ecocritics interpret the effect of these choices on the surrounding environment and its degradation, providing the glimpse into the earlier Appalachia, which appears almost like a mythic tale with *lush green mountains, deep forests, ice-cold trout streams, small hill farms and little towns filled with unpretentious working class people* (Waage 2005:158). Teresa Burris and Patricia Gantt are among those ecocritics, who have turned their attention to the description of Appalachia region in novels, suggesting that ecocritical discussions of Appalachian novels necessarily need to include the following questions: *What themes emerge to help guide the reader? In what symbolic ways the environment is described? How does the writer help the reader to make sense of the relationships humans have with the physical world? How does the book add to our understanding of the natural world?* (Burris, Gantt 2013: 180). While each question may inspire an array of different related questions, an ecocritical discussion of the novels has to remain faithful to the goal of ecocriticism.

2. Territorial and national identity and ecocriticism in Cormac McCarthy's novel *Child of God*

C. McCarthy's novel *Child of God* (1973) is set in Appalachian region at the time, when the industrial and political system lured off their small farms thousands of yeomen and the government acquired large numbers of these farms sold at sheriff's auctions for non-payment of taxes. The novel chronicles the auctioning of Lester Ballard's family house and farm much to his dismay due to the unpaid taxes on the land. The reader becomes a direct witness of Ballard's eviction from his property and his conscious gradual flight from civilization and disengagement from the borders of the social environment and at last his arrest and placement in a mental institution.

The novel *Child of God* not so much serves as a portrayal of L. Ballard's ruthless violence – murder and necrophilia, but more as an elegy for the demise of the Southern wilderness and farming due to the industrial development, that subsequently led to a homogenization of both the region's landscape and culture. As Gabe Rikard has pointed out, *although self-promoting commercialism of later half of the twentieth century has not yet encroached upon life in "Child of God", the industrialization has made its mark on the world of L. Ballard* (Rikard 2013: 132). The novel describes the degradation of the Southern landscape, farms and people's lives mainly through the intrusion of government institutions. The text reveals 20th century industrial, technological and institutional development in America, that lead to the exploitation of human and nonhuman nature. The Great Depression of the 1930s began in 1920s in Appalachia, when *the industrial system had lured thousands off the farms of the region and thousands of others to the mountain collapsed under the weight of overproduction and increasing competition* (Straw 2006: 15) and *the loss of farms due to the inability to pay taxes was a commonplace of rural America during the Depressions* (Cant 2007: 95). The years of Great Depression in Appalachia were marked by severe hardships – hunger, homelessness and starvation. *During the*

1930s, the government's acquisition of large numbers of small farms sold at sheriff's auctions for non-payment of taxes to support... feelings of suspicion, hostility and despair (Rikard 2013: 132). The land speculation and government intervention provide the canvas, on which C. McCarthy paints *Child of God*.

The auction, that C. McCarthy describes in the beginning of the novel, was a common phenomenon in Appalachia during the 1930s. Farms, such as Lester's, were easy prey for the coal and timber interests, who searched property titles, bought mineral rights for a fraction of their value and increased tax burdens on yeoman farmers, however, were not the only tools, used to seize land and make traditional farming a thing of the past. *Child of God* is set at a time, when the effect of industry on the region is readily apparent: the land has been despoiled beyond repair and the people have been severed from their traditional small-farm culture. The Frog Mountain turnaround, mentioned in McCarthy's text, is one of the examples of industrial intrusion in the Appalachian wilderness, where the civilization has already put its negative mark, print on it with pollution and littering. The turnaround at the Frog Mountain and the woods in the novel is a dead end on symbolic and metaphorical level with *clay and thin gravel and flattened beer cans and papers* (McCarthy 1993: 17) all around the place, that was once filled with aesthetic beauty.

The carnivalized auction of L. Ballard's farmhouse, that takes place in *a mute pastoral morning*, stages the primal social, political and cultural crisis, that structured the society of that time in the Appalachian region, where the gathered musicians *looked like porcelain figures*, devoid of self-expression and control over liberty. The carnival-like auction has become *a holiday-gone wrong* (Ciuba 2007: 183), where property, materialism, capitalism are celebrated, but the agrarian virtue of land and nature is left undermined. Ballard, as a part of Sevier County community and the victim of the social and economic structure, becomes himself devoid of introspection and self-consciousness, which fuels violence, murder, necrophilia and intensifies chaos in the world and nature. The local community, blinded by the promised possible well-being in support for the governmental decisive role, when attending the Congregation at Six-mile Church, shuns L. Ballard and does not want to see him as a member belonging to the community of Sevier County. The community itself has been turned into puppet-like beings, as the state has already exercised power over their bodies and souls, and none of them is eager to see L. Ballard as an individual, who seeks revenge and freedom from the heavy burden of the corrupted state power: *The Congregation at Six-mile Church would turn all together like a cast of puppets at the opening of the door behind them [...] when Ballard came in with his hat in his hand and shut the door and sat alone on the rear bench they turned back more slowly. A rifle of whispers went among them* (McCarthy 1993: 23).

The territory within the borders of Appalachian region with its local community has lost its identity, on the threshold of approaching consumerism and industrialisation, that marks a negative impact on the social arena and the environment with small farms overtaken by the government, and large amounts of trees logged for production

and material income, irreversibly ruining the beauty of the region.

C. McCarthy, referring to L. Ballard as *a child of God much like yourself perhaps* (McCarthy 1993: 3), encourages the readers to see within the borders of Lester's identity *fundamental aspect[s] of ourselves – of our fear of time, our programmed infatuation with death, our loneliness, our threatening appetites, our narcissistic isolation from the world and the reality of other people* (Buell 2005: 55). L. Ballard, in fact, becomes a part of the Southern mythology, the ancient spirit of the Southern Appalachian region and an elegy of once lost pastoral. As Georg Guillemain posits: *Lester is claiming a role for himself in one of the central dramas in the pastoral republican mythology – he is ready to defend his country, land, liberty and the foundation of stable order. Lester's trauma of pastoral dispossession feels real and worthy of empathy* (Guillemain 2004: 44). The drama of the lost pastoral, as well lost territorial and national identity, due to the encroaching industrialization, that surges homogenization, is heightened on metaphorical and metaphysical level through L. Ballard's loss of personal identity and sanity, when more necrophilia and murder take place, which again demands empathy from the part of the implied reader. Rikard Gabe (2013) is one of the literary critics, who acknowledge, that C. McCarthy in his novel *Child of God* raises to the horizon the vital historical, political and social contexts of the Appalachian region and the degradation of its environment, that stems from manipulation of power and biased legal, commercial manoeuvrings in the 20th century. This makes us think, as well of Latgale region, which had also experienced manipulation of power, oppression and persistent threat of losing its own language, identity, culture and customs, due to non-acceptance by intelligentsia of Latvia in western part of the state in early 20th century and as well due to intrusion of external forces in mid 20th century.

Gradual crumbling of Lester's subjectivity within the borders of his personal identity on the metaphorical level is similar to the crumbling, degraded territory within the borders of Appalachia region. When L. Ballard's physical and mental degradation intensifies, he is referred to as *goddamnest thing and it* (McCarthy 1993: 89) – an entity, that has lost its tenacity. One cannot condemn Lester for being a victim of the time, politics and the community's neglect, as the time and place itself has become the victim of the change. Behind the political and economic background, C. McCarthy asks the implied readers to see, how L. Ballard's tale allegorically represents an unacknowledged damaging force within culture, even if they would not like to confront it. C. McCarthy's novel *Child of God* from an ecocritical perspective also raises the issue of land exploitation and its degradation in Appalachian region, following the fate of the victim of the time – L. Ballard, who seeks his place and space in the borders of life territory – bioregion, that has lost its earlier aesthetic beauty. C. McCarthy in the novel, from an ecocritical standpoint, depicts L. Ballard, the former owner of his family farmhouse, as the victim of the unjust rule of the dominant culture and politics, who has lost his property due to the heavy burden of the taxes on the land. However, this is not the only loss, that the novel describes, it

also draws the readers' attention to the surrounding environment in Appalachia, that has lost its beauty and needs new ways to heal. The auction, that takes place in the beginning of the novel, is the first key indicator, that at the time in Appalachia the economic potential of the land and the good timber is of prime importance, instead of consideration of the long-term ecological consequences of the harvesting. The auctioneer begins his sale almost like a priest, bowing and pointing, as if leading a flock of *lost sheep* to the right path, stressing the guarantee of growing wealth for the gathered Appalachians: *While you're a laying down in your bed at night this timber is up here growin. They is real future in this property. There is no sounder investment than property. Land* (McCarthy 1993: 3).

L. Ballard's farm is sold out without his permission and ability to stand against the unfair ruling of the government's decision. The land in the text is not seen as a living entity, but as a commodity, that promises the return 10–20 %.

L. Ballard's life after he lost his property slowly begins to crumble, until he reaches the utmost point of insanity. Environment and nature along with L. Ballard is portrayed as degraded due to the domination of unjust rule and political order. C. McCarthy under the veil of symbols admits, that Appalachia region and the victim of the time, L. Ballard, need new paths to heal and to recover from the unjust oppression: *Coming up the mountain through the blue twilight among great boulders and the ruins of giant trees prone in the forest he wondered at such upheaval. Disorder in the woods, trees down, new paths needed. Given charge Ballard would have made things more orderly in the woods and in men's souls* (McCarthy 1993: 78).

While one can read C. McCarthy's story of Lester's sexual deviance and insanity, it is essential to see the narrative on Lester's quest as a continuous strive to be at one with nature and defeat over already unattainable harmony of human and nature. *Lester is structurally and semantically situated to channel an ecopastoral discourse* (Guillemin 2004: 50). L. Ballard is as much victim of the politics of culture as nature itself, the emphasis in the novel is symbolically placed on the age of the landscape, that once was untouched and free from the constraints of ownership, which appears a mere mythic tale now with vanished once beautiful seas and woods: *Old woods and deep. At one time in the world there were woods that no one owned and these were like them. He passed a windfelled tulip poplar on the mountainside that held aloft in the grip of its roots two stones the size of fieldwagons, great tablets on which was writ only a tale of vanished seas with ancient shells in cameo and fishes etched in lime* (McCarthy 1993: 74).

Not only the social and cultural order has been violated in the Appalachian region, but natural order as well, where *the green world reclaims what humans have set apart* (Ciuba, 2007: 181). C. McCarthy's novel *Child of God* emphatically outlines *flattened beer cans amid roadside grass* (McCarthy 1993: 17), strewn bushes, left trucks to corrode in a quarry, weeds that overgrow Lester's outhouse, honeysuckles, that have overtaken the rusting trucks, which serve as a reproach of done harm to the surroundings and nature in Appalachian region. L. Ballard himself appears as

the victim of the time and the place – lonely, lost, harnessed and prisoned in the amphitheatre of the rock walls: *Ballard descended by giant stone stairs to the dry floor of the quarry. The great rock walls with their cannellured faces and featherdrill holes composed about him an enormous amphitheatre. The ruins of an old truck lay rusting in the honeysuckle* (McCarthy 1993: 20).

Ballard cannot attain peace and harmony in the surrounding environment, where once degraded nature mimics with irreparable sorrow the disrupted social and cultural order. The depiction of the surrounding area with the absence of large timber stands and abandoned quarries serve as a hint of the destructive consumption, that had once taken place. C. McCarthy through L. Ballard leads the readers throughout the Appalachian region and makes aware of the state of the surrounding environment. L. Ballard cannot find peace at any place he stays, be it an outhouse with a few soft shards of planking grown with a virid moss, Waldrop's abandoned house or dumpkeeper Reubel's junkyard.

L. Ballard cannot even find reconciliation with nature in his dreams of the past. L. Ballard in his dreams rides with his father through woods, watching deer in meadow, where the sun falls on the wet grass, but still the dreams promises no consolation as *each leaf that brushed his face deepened his sadness and dread. Each leaf he passed h'd never pass again* (McCarthy, 1993: 93). The sadness stemmed from the awareness, that no one can give back the time, when the mark of industrialisation had not left its print on the beauty of nature. The apprehension of once lost beauty of the earlier state of nature gives only bitter taste of extinction.

The end of the novel symbolically promises L. Ballard rebirth and reconciliation with nature. The cavern, that was his last hiding place from those, who sought to arrest him, was with *the walls with softlooking convolutions, slavered over as they were with wet and bloodred mud, had an organic look to them* (McCarthy 1993: 77). L. Ballard symbolically returns to the place, that once was his mother's womb with the promise of soon rebirth or return to innocence. Nature itself has given a promise of return in case he succumbs and admits, that there is no possible further existence without reconciliation with the damaged nature. The walls of the cave extrudes him out like a newborn to come to meet his fate: *it was with hours past dark and a black night when he finally emerged from the earth* (McCarthy 1993: 104). L. Ballard is aware of the necessity to succumb to the social order, to present him at the local county hospital, stating, that there is no other way of escape to freedom.

Conclusions

C. McCarthy's novel *Child of God* despite its prevailing theme of violence and necrophilia, on the metaphorical and symbolic level unveils the unjust social and political order in the Appalachia region in early 20th century with the depiction of L. Ballard as a fragile, weak individual, victimized not only physically, but as well mentally. The Appalachia region has had its own history with the unjust rule and industrialization, that has irreversibly inflicted huge damage to its environment and

culture. One can draw parallels with Latgale region, which had been as well the victim of the time in the 20th century with the experience of rejection by Latvian intelligentsia in the early 20s and due to intrusion of external forces in mid 20th century. But in the context of ecocriticism it can be well seen, that once lost pastoral and the aesthetic beauty of the landscape can never be regained, it is a dead end like Frog Mountain turnaround seen in *Child of God* with littered woods, flattened beer cans and papers. C. McCarthy's novel serves as a good reminder, that the beauty of nature and every region's culture and identity have to be preserved and that any material gain or profit cannot counterbalance aesthetic value of nature and treasure of culture and identity.

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