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Galina GEORGIEVA[1]

Happiness as an Impossible Horizon: On Andrei Platonov and Michel Houellebecq[2]

Abstract

This article offers an analysis of the short story *Dzhan* by Andrei Platonov written in the early 20th century, and the novel *The Possibility of an Island* by Michel Houellebecq penned in the early 21st century. Genre-wise, both works navigate between utopia and dystopia. The text explores the potential for happiness in conditions of a primordial, pre-modern society (in *Dzhan*) and in the context of hypermodernity (*The Possibility of an Island*). The article questions: What happens to the perfect utopian machine and the pursuit of happiness today? Or, how does the absence of desire and imagination, the lack of a lasting yearning for future horizons, as an essential existential aspect of humanity, undermine even the inhuman itself?
Keywords: Andrei Platonov; Michel Houellebecq; *Dzhan* (*Soul*); *The Possibility of an Island*; utopia; dystopia; happiness; eternal life

Резюме

Статията предлага анализ на два литературни текста, които по своя жанр се разполагат между утопията и антиутопията – повестта *Джан* на Андрей Платонов, писана в началото XX век, и романът *Възможност за остров* на Мишел Уелбек, писан в началото на XXI век. Текстът разглежда възможността за щастие в условия на робство, или „естествено поданичество“ (от страна на примитивните народи в *Джан*), и в условията на една свръхмодерност на съществата, преодолели принудите на човешкото (в лицето на клонингите във *Възможност за остров*). Какво става със съвършената утопична машина и копнежа по „очевидното“ щастие днес в контекста на осъществената нечовешкост, доведена до невъзможност да обитава нечовешкия си свят и самоволно напуснала неговите граници? Как отсъствието на желание и въображение, на траен копнеж по бъдещи хоризонти, като съществен екзистенциал на човешкото, подкопава дори самото нечовешко?
Ключови думи: Андрей Платонов; Мишел Уелбек; *Джан*; *Възможност за остров*; утопия; антиутопия; вечен живот; душа

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[1] **Galina GEORGIEVA,** Assistant Professor, PhD**,** Institute of Literature, BAS. Part-time lecturer at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski and South-West University Neofit Rilski. She is the author of the book *Avant-garde and Social Realism. The Problem of Lyric Poetry in Russia in the 1917-1934 Period*. Her interests are related to the avant-garde, socialism, utopias and dystopias, the history and theory of cinema. She has participated in a number of projects in these areas.
ORCID ID : https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9460-3215

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If engaging with utopias and dystopias today is not only necessary but also a form of a peculiar resistance against the "presentism" of the current era, which, according to Alexander Kyosev, imposes the self-evident dominance of the "now" over the past and the future“[3], then returning to them in the context of the question about the boundaries between the human and the inhuman seems even more justified. Justified insofar as their foundation is Desire, transgressing the present. The present, both of humans as a species, as a biological condition, and as living conditions – material, political, and social. Desire as an "undefined, scandalous impossibility", publicly expressed in the "form of a scandal, a rupture with the accepted reality and the possible."[4] Desire (for another world elsewhere) is not only a metaphysical quantity of the genre but also the core of plot construction – it leads the hero (or the entire community) to the new, precisely in an extreme rupture with the present, amid the inconceivability, the "scandalousness" of the (im)possible new world. Desire leads beyond the potential of actual possibilities to the mirage of the beautifully unreal.

Written more than 80 years apart from each other, the short story *Dzhan* by Andrei Platonov[5] and the novel *The Possibility of an Island*[6] by Michel Houellebecq are situated between the genre characteristics of utopia[7] (*Dzhan*) and dystopia (*The Possibility of an Island*). The initial expectation of differences, arising from both the genre and literary traditions in which the two texts fit, as well as their radically different historical (and technological) contexts, is dispelled by the imposing similarities in the issues embedded in both literary plots. This sense of similarity arises both in the manifested "Desired Impossible" in both narratives (reinforcing the narrative foundation of both stories) and in the analysis of the basic, psychological, let's call them, characteristics of the characters, the starting assumptions of their own existence. To achieve this, we need to briefly go through the plot and contextual dimensions of the two texts.

Written in 1934 after Platonov's visit to Central Asia, *Dzhan*, according to the author himself, is a direct result of his impressions from that part of the Soviet Union at the time. On today's political map, these are the territories of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, specifically the region

[3] Кьосев, Александър Скандалът на утопията - *Пирон,* бр.7, 2014. (Мой превод). [Kiossev,Alexander. Scandalat na Utopiyata - *Piron*, br. 7, 2014]. (My translation). https://piron.culturecenter-su.org/%D1%81%D1%8A%D0%B4%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B1%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D1%83%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B5%D0%B7%D1%81/ (3.03.2024).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Written in 1934, first published in 1966, with full original edition: Платонов, Андрей. *Проза.* Москва, Пушкинская библиотека, 1999. [Platonov, Andrei. Proza. Moskva, Pushkinskaya biblioteka, 1999].

[6] First edition in French: Houellebecq, Michel. *La Possibilité d'une île*. Éditions Fayard, 2005.

[7] Although most of Platonov's works lie on the border between utopia and dystopia, as is the case with *Chevengur*, *The Foundation Pit*, and others, *Dzhan* seems to be sustained more in a purely utopian vein, in my opinion. In it, we find purer genre characteristics, stemming both from the narrative thread of the text and the actions of the main character.

where the three states border each other. Geographically, these are the lands between the delta of the Amu Darya River (the largest river in Central Asia at that time), the Ustyurt Plateau, the Sarykamish Lakes, and the Sarykamish Depression, whose highest point is 38 meters below sea level. The depression is the northern border of the vast Karakum Desert, whose sands are also the stage for actions in the short story. In short, this is the area between the Caspian Sea and the now-disappearing Aral Sea. I emphasize the space because during Platonov's time (and even today), it is accompanied by a series of strange, bordering on ominous, oral traditions and legends on the one hand, and provocative scientific discoveries on the other, some of which are woven into the fabric of the story itself. The entire Sarykamish Depression, and even the Ustyurt Plateau in the past, had been the bottom of a large lake; in the Karakum Desert, archaeologists find the remains of a highly developed ancient civilization, and nearby passed an important trade route known as the Silk Road. Further back in history, according to oceanologists, the entire space between the Black, Caspian, and Aral Seas represented a common water surface.

Platonov visited this territory in the 1930s when it was covered with sand, cracked clay, dotted with salty marshes, sparse reed forests, and bare rocks. There he saw a sparsely populated community living in inhumane conditions. Around the same time, Soviet authorities decided, in line with the era's "cause" of "humanizing nature," to build enormous cotton plantations in one of the driest places on the planet, primarily supplied with water from the Amu Darya River through large and complex irrigation facilities.

Around the same time, the main character in the story, Nazar Chagataev, is sent by the Moscow Central Committee to lay the foundations for future happiness among the poorly studied people inhabiting the territory between the depression, the plateau, and the river – not just any happiness but the happiness of a shared communal life. When Chagataev enters the Sarykamish Depression, the first person he encounters on his way is the old man Sufiyan. Sufiyan, recognizing the young Nazar – originally from these lands but driven away by his mother to seek a living elsewhere – asks the returnee from the big center:

> Have you met your father anywhere?" - "No," says Nazar and replies, "Do you know Lenin?" - "I don't know him," Sufiyan replies. Once, I heard that name from a wanderer, he said it was a good name. But I don't think so. If it's good, let him appear in Sarykamish. This is the hell of the whole world, and I live in it worse than anyone.[8]

[8] Платонов, Андрей. *Проза*. Москва: Пушкинская библиотека, 1999, 134. (Мой превод). [Platonov, Andrei. *Proza*. Moskva, Pushkinskaya biblioteka, 1999, 134]. (My translation).

This dialogue, between the young and educated Nazar, who has returned as a stranger to his native village, and the old, wise, and seemingly unaffected by the descending depression Sufiyan, seems crucial. In the land's Hell, where almost nothing alive grows, riverbeds have long dried up, and the soil literally contracts into the salt of time, where the bones of the living, when they manage to move, produce sounds fiercer than the desert wind, and the remains of the forgotten dead serve as food for the toothless dog – the only domestic animal in the village, where people sleep for most of the time to avoid hunger and the timeless void, there Chagataev is commissioned to build a new happy life and to place the "dzhan" of the people on the map of the happy nations.

In fact, the very designation "dzhan," as we understand from the beginning of the story, means a soul seeking happiness (in Turkmen). Further, down in the text, we understand that "dzhan" also means "soul" and "dear life". "This people had nothing else, only their own soul and their life", says Nazar in response to a question from the secretary of the district committee in Tashkent about why the people are called that. At the end of the story, it becomes clear that "dzhan" is a common concept for all the people encountered in this region, a concept given to them by other nations enjoying far more prosperity, marking their poverty because the only thing poor people have is their soul – that's what the rich people thought. However, as the story unfolds, we understand that even the soul, the "dzhan", is not something the people can rely on because their soul is hidden within them, long lost and can no longer find its way back. "We hear how inside us our soul rushes and wants to come out to help us", sing the people of the "dzhan".

The emergence of the soul metaphorically coincides with the journey through the desert that the people undertake, led by Nazar Chagataev, to their native lands – the Sarykamish Depression. Driven in the recent past by cruel khans, who inhabited the lands around the oases, the people settled in the delta of the Amu Darya River to hide in its reeds. Because the khans would come every year and take a large part of the people into slavery to work for them without pay, and the weak would be killed. Nazar leads his people through the Karakum Desert and brings them to their native depression. The long journey through the Karakum Desert strongly resembles the forty-year liberation of the Jewish people from slave labour in Egypt to the Promised Land, and the mission of Moscow engineer Nazar Chagataev resembles the mission of the prophet Moses. In fact, the blending of specific post-revolutionary plots with pan-historical archetypal narratives is a key moment in Platonov's treatment of the present in his plots.

The difference in this case, and the paradox of the journey to a promised paradise, is that the people of dzhan are not heading to a place where milk and honey will flow, but to a barren and cursed land, below sea level, and in a sense, below the minimum level for biological survival. Nevertheless, Nazar takes his people, finds rocky caves for them to dwell in, provides them with food – on the way,

he finds a large flock of sheep and, at the risk of his life, bravely kills several giant birds to feed his people. Nazar begins to build houses from clay bricks, together with the only living being from his people, 12-year-old Aydam. Despite this, a few days after settling in the Sarykamish Depression, Nazar discovers that his people lack the most basic and fundamental condition for life – the desire to continue living. One morning, Nazar decides to count the people; many die along the way, but he knows each one of them. This morning, he discovers that one of the three children who travelled through the desert is missing. No one can say when or how the child was taken by the desert wind – not even their own parents. In the evening, Nazar gathers the people and says to them:

> It's been five days since we've been here. During the day, you wander around your caves, and in the evening, you fall asleep with the hope never to wake up. I ask you – do you want to continue living?!" Nazar's resolute face meets the empty gazes of the people. No one utters a word.[9]

The second major blow for Nazar comes when, a few months later, on the eve of winter, he arranges with the authorities in Tashkent for supplies of food, medicine, and clothing to last through the winter. Nazar's shock occurs one morning after they have feasted abundantly on the new food, slept nearly three days, exhausted from excessive eating – the people of dzhan leave the settlement built by Nazar, each going in different directions, alone, wherever their eyes see. Nazar, left alone with little Aydam, can only bury his mother, who died during the great sleep.

A brief description of the events in *Dzhan* can stop here and make room for a purely mechanical, at first glance, transition to Michel Houellebecq's novel, *The Possibility of an Island*. Instead of a preface, the book begins with someone standing in a phone booth after the end of the world, speaking whatever they want to whomever they want, without knowing if the whole of humanity is listening on the other side or, on the contrary, if there is no survivor. From there to the epilogue, we follow two separate narratives of one and the same person, but at different stages of development. The first narrative is that of Daniel 1, who inhabits our world, here and now, while the second narrative is that of Daniel 24 and Daniel 25 – his cloned copies, inhabiting the world two thousand years in the future and belonging to the so-called "neo-humans." The "neo-humans" exist due to the development of technology and, in particular, because of the possibility, based on the information encoded in the DNA of a given creature, for that creature to reproduce reproductively indefinitely. However, their infinite existence is in an isolated environment, limited by barriers beyond which wild beings live. Almost nothing is known about them or their environment.

[9] Ibid, p. 189.

Compositionally, the narrative of Daniel 1 is what they read as a written will, as a "biography" of his descendants – a reading through which they acquire memory and past. There are two more prominent characteristics: Daniel 1, by profession, is a stand-up comedian, a satirist with his own very popular show, satirically oriented towards the world. The show has made him rich, but in his life, he is primarily guided by chance and apathy. His strongest experiences are his two short but extreme loves with Isabel and Esther – "one did not like sex, the other did not like love," as the hero comments. His descendants live in complete tranquillity, in pure contemplation, in thought without purpose, interrupted only by brief interactive encounters with other neo-humans in some server, mainly with women. Life is not happy when Daniel 1 makes people laugh, exposing the sores of his society, nor when all the prerequisites for a calm and endless life are present. Daniel himself, as much as he falls into the cult whose main goal is precisely eternal life, becomes not just a witness to the epochal event – the "resurrection of the prophet" and the proclamation of eternal life as possible – but also one of the Founders of this eternal life. However, this does not prevent either the original, Daniel 1, or his incarnated descendants from abandoning life as a given, be it finite or infinite. In the first case, mortal Daniel commits suicide; in the second, Daniel 25 voluntarily leaves the isolated zone of immortality.

Possible generalizations from the briefly presented plot cores highlight the main problem of the lack of desire for the biological sustenance of life, whose reverse side, in a metaphysical sense, would be the lack of meaning. In Platonov's world, people are placed in an extremely primitive, pre-historical, pre-human situation, and in the second world – in a hyper-technologized, perhaps post-historical, and super-human situation. It turns out that neither the pre-civilizational conditions of life among the dead nature, nor the domesticated nature of man, algorithmically repeating itself with each new incarnation, instinctively give rise to the Desire for the preservation of the species. The striving for the "scandalous" overcoming of the possible and the real does not take root in either the enchanted depression of Sarakamsh or in the scientifically sustained endless reproduction of cells in the isolated land of the neohumans. Moreover, in the first case, the aforementioned unwillingness, meaninglessness is within the framework of a biologically finite corporality, of a measurable life, behind which death awaits, and in the other – it is foundational in conditions of living that have annulled death and placed life as irrevocable.

In Platonov's characters, placed in conditions of permanent mortal threat – both from the natural environment itself and as a result of human factors, the social and economic dominance of the khans – this lack seems justified or at least explainable. However, from another perspective, that of the young and educated missionary Chagataev, coming from the Happy Moscow, this unwillingness of the people, despite personal testimony and the proximity of the promised, is disturbing. In fact, for Platonov's characters, distancing themselves from universal happiness is not new, even though it has

already been given to them, even though they are already its carriers. This happens with the two wandering commissars Dvanov and Koponkin in *Chevengur*, it happens in *The Foundation Pit*, in *The City of Cities*, and others.[10] However, this distancing contrasts against the background of a set of other figures, bequeathed to us by the entire remaining revolutionary Russian avant-garde – figures that strive to conquer the world and indulge in intoxicating biocosmic living in already seemingly fulfilled utopias of the left avant-garde.

Actually, the key to the aforementioned distancing is perhaps precisely in what happens as a permanent present and future, right here and now, in the permanent course of history that has annulled the end and declared the urgency of the happy revolution. Because the advent of infinity easily leads to the annulment of the desire for life, despite its biological inevitability, as happens with Houellebecq's character. When the mortal Daniel dies by his own will, Daniel 1, who already knows that his DNA will give rise to many Daniels, says:

> An infinite autumn awaits me, and then a cosmic winter... and yet there is something, something terrible, approaching in space as if it wants to get closer. Every sadness, every sorrow, or a precisely defined lack is preceded by something else that can be called the pure fear of infinity. ... What had I done to deserve such a fate? And what had people done at all?[11]

The desire for utopian happiness in Sarakamsh is castrated, the desire to experience eternity and fullness is also. At the same time, the lack of a desire to live in Dzhan is accompanied by the oppression of death due to weakness, hunger, or foreign domination. The lack of a desire to live with the character from *The Possibility of an Island* is his specific characteristic, it is relevant precisely in an environment where death is no longer an event in life.

But along with the prospects of biological existence that both authors outline, there is something else that we can extract from the final parts of their literary texts – something whose omission would leave their theses unfinished. After surviving the winter in Sarakamsh with little Aydam, Nazar sets out to find his people in the wider world. In the first city he visits, Nazar meets old Sufyan but decides to continue his journey. When he returns to Aydam in the settlement, Nazar sees that some of the people of Dzhan have returned. In the evening by the fire, Nazar asks them: "Why did you leave us?" They reply: "We thought that there was nothing in the world for a long time. We thought we were alone...

[10] Original titles: *Чевенгур*, *Котлован*, *Град на градовете*. [Chevengur, Kotlovan, Grad na gradovete.]. Вж: Платонов, Андрей. *Чевенгур. Изкопът*. Том 2, прев. Симеон Владимиров. София, Изток-Запад, 2021. [Platonov, Andrei. *Chevengur. Izkopat*. Tom 2, prev. Simeon Vladimirov. Sofia, Iztok-Zapad, 2021.].
[11] Уелбек, Мишел, *Възможност за остров*, прев. Галина Меламед. София: Факел Експрес, 2006, с. 376. [Houellebecq, Michel. *Vazmozhnost za ostrov*, prev. Galina Melamed. Sofia, Fakel Ekspres, 2006, c.376.].

why then should we live too?" One says, and another adds: "We wanted to check... it became interesting where there are other people."

In this peculiar emancipatory gesture of the people of Dzhan, who left the depressive nature of Sarakamsh and curiously wanted to check if there are others, perhaps the beginning of the realization of Nazar's project is. Or maybe it's not because after a few days, Nazar himself leaves his people and returns to Moscow. At the end of his novel, Houellebecq takes his hero out of the isolated space of infinity, where he resides "free from the burden of communication and relationships with others." Daniel 25 walks through the empty wilderness, beyond which is perhaps the Island, and he, as the rumour commands, is the last stop for humans or savages who still live in societies and maintain relationships. Although the ending of his book, in fact, the last words of the non-human Daniel 25, tell us: "Happiness is not a possible horizon... The future is emptiness. I was, I am no more. Life is real."[12]

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[12] Ibid., p. 425.