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THE MYTHICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONS IN MODERN LATIN-AMERICAN PROSE FICTION

Mityczny wymiar stosunków między człowiekiem a środowiskiem naturalnym we współczesnej prozie latinoamerykańskiej

Abstract:
Various modes of interactions between humans and the natural world are among the most important topics in modern Latin-American literature. The narrative discourse of the region debates the Old-World myths and ideals projected onto the Latin-American reality. It also incorporates indigenous mythical concepts which contribute towards the creation of a new and original literary vision of the natural world. Growing interest in ecocriticism and its importance in postcolonial studies highlight the validity of new approaches to non-Western cultures and literatures, and facilitate reinterpretation of cultural practice within an environmentally conscious theoretical framework. Far from being exhaustive, the present study suggests some new and ecologically sensitive interpretative patterns which centre on the relationship between myth, nature and narrative.

Keywords: ecocriticism, transculturation, regionalism, apocalypse, Mesoamerican mythology.

Streszczenie
Współzależność między człowiekiem i otaczającą go przyrodą należy do jednych z najważniejszych motywów we współczesnej literaturze latinoamerykańskiej. Dyskurs narra cyjny regionu kwestionuje mity i idee pochodzące ze Starego Świata, przez pryzmat których przechodzona jest rzeczywistość Ameryki Łacińskiej. Poprzez adaptację pojęć zakorzenionych z mitologii rdzennych mieszkańców Ameryki literatura tworzy nowy i oryginalny obraz natury oraz miejsca, które zajmuje w niej człowiek. Rosnące zainteresowanie ekokryptyką i jej znaczeniem w ujęciu teorii post-kolonialnej otwiera możliwość reinterpretacji pozaeuropejskich praktyk kulturowych, w tym literatury, pod kątem interakcji między człowiekiem a środowiskiem. Niniejszy artykuł sugeruje nowe wzorce interpretacyjne, które skupiają się na zależności między nitem, naturą i literaturą.

Słowa kluczowe: ekokryptyka, transkulturacja, regionalizm, apokalipsa, mitologia Mezoameryk.

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Descriptions of the natural world and complex interactions between humans and their environment are among the dominant motifs in Latin-American literature. These motifs have been subject to constant evolution and have reflected the necessity to enter into debate with the Old World religious and literary myths, as well as to establish a new discourse of identity, in line with the Latin-American emancipatory movements, both in arts and in politics. Although mythocritical analysis of selected 20th century literary works will be the main objective of the present study, some ecocritical rhetoric and terminology will also be applied throughout this article. Ecocriticism is a relatively new initiative which has equipped scholars with a new model of inquiry into literature and environment, and the application of ecocritical concepts in this instance may be justified by a close connection between culturally-driven conceptualisation of nature and particular cosmogonies or systems of beliefs. Thus, the seemingly arbitrary selection of prose fiction in the article will illustrate how the perception and representation of nature may be informed by various mythical concepts in which the natural world takes centre stage. Three important hallmarks of Latin-American narrative will be taken into consideration: contention of Western ideals through which the perception of the reality is mediated, inclusion of indigenous myths in the narrative, and reinterpretation of same in the modern socio-political context of the region. Rather than aspiring to be strictly ecocritical, the present analysis aims to contribute towards better understanding of the relationship between myths and nature-related imagery in modern Latin-American fiction.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the conflict between modernised cosmopolitan culture, with cities as its stronghold on the one side, and the traditional culture of the rural hinterlands on the other, led to the adoption of a particular survival strategy, especially by the cultural practice known as regionalism: “pick up what modernity has new to offer, revise the contents of regional culture in that new light, and use both sources to cobble together a hybrid that can keep on transmitting the received heritage” (Rama, 2012: 16). This strategy is known as narrative transculturation, a term masterfully elaborated in the context of literary theory by Ángel Rama. The concept of transculturation stands in opposition to the assumption that “a clash between cultures experienced in the process of colonization leads, necessarily, to the assimilation of one by the other” (Larsen, 2001: 137-138). Rama saw transculturation as a revitalizing process, initiated in urban and cosmopolitan circles but inspiring “the traditional cultural structure, which is thus capable of inventive responses, drawing from its own component elements” (Rama, 2012: 18). Transculturation, driven to a large extent by the influence of European and North American modernism and avant-garde aesthetics, encompasses a va-
riety of innovations. These include linguistic solutions, such as creation of an original narrative voice based on the regional language, new interpretative perspectives on existential philosophy, and the inclusion of indigenous mythical concepts in the narrative discourse.

The tension between modernity and tradition becomes visible especially in the regional novel and its specific manifestation, *novela de la selva*. In the example selected for this paper, *La vorágine* (1924) by José Eustasio Rivera, the narrative transculturation favours literary creation of a new image of the tropical rainforest, diametrically opposed to the European myth of the Paradise Lost. Another aspect of the narrative transculturation, the inclusion of the indigenous mythical concepts in literature, will be examined on the example of *Hombres de maíz* (1949) by Miguel Ángel Asturias: a novel in which the relationship between humans and the natural world plays a crucial role in the development of the plot. Lastly, Homero Aridjis’ unique vision of an environmental apocalypse and its relation to the Mexica myth of the five suns or epochs of the earth in *La leyenda de los soles* (1993) will be analysed. The selected examples of modern prose fiction are far from exhausting the possible approaches to the mythocritical analysis of the interaction between humans and nature in Latin America. However, they will hopefully highlight a number of noteworthy aspects of the relationship between myth, perception of the natural environment, and narrative.

**The myth of the Paradise Lost**

Since the times of the Conquest, the flora and the fauna of the New World have been described numerous times. The first descriptions of the natural world aimed at bringing closer to the European reader the exotic environment of the newly discovered land. The Old-World imagery, shaped by Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian myths, as well as European legends and fantastical literature, dominated the narrative interpretation of the American reality. Thus, America was largely “invented” by the Europeans who tended to look at the continent though the lens of their dreams and expectations (Nawrocka, 2010: 11-12). The search for the Arcadian ideal of harmonious and innocent co-existence with nature, coupled with the yearning for the recovery of the unspoiled biblical Paradise and the communion with the sacred, is clearly present in the pastoral, the idyllic and the bucolic imagery that shaped much of the literary perception of the New World until the end of the 19th century. The idealised image of the exuberant American nature acquired an even stronger symbolic meaning with the progressing urbanisation and industrial advances. The natural environment began to be seen as the
antithesis of the civilised, the domesticated, the tamed and, ultimately, the contaminated.

However, new ideological and aesthetic perspectives on the human-environmental relations emerge from the first few decades of the 20th century onwards. Many Latin American novelists include direct or indirect critique of modernising processes which wreak havoc upon the landscape and transform native communities (Barbas-Rhoden, 2011: 40). The clash between tradition and modernity is particularly visible within the literary convention of regionalismo and the regional novel. Largely due to the influence of the international modernist philosophy (especially existentialism) and aesthetics, the representation of nature and the human interaction with its elements undergoes a nearly complete re-evaluation. Nature is no longer a safe haven, facilitating communion with the divine; it becomes an antagonist of the human will, a powerful enemy, a destructive force that shatters all sentimental ideals (see: Fuentes, Carlos, cited in: Nawrocka, 2010: 55). The ideal of the Paradise Lost cannot and does not emerge unscathed from the confrontation between myth and reality.

A flagship example of the so-called novela de la selva, José Eustasio Rivera’s *La vorágine*, provides one of the best samples of the wilderness trope (see: Garrard, 2012: 66-92) in a specifically Latin-American narrative context. The novel’s plot and the construction of the protagonist/narrator illustrate the changes in the rhetoric relating to the human-environmental interactions and the shift from the sentimental to the modernist discourse. As the journey of the novel’s protagonist, Arturo Cova, progresses, there is also a noticeable change in his perception of the natural environment. The concept of a gendered landscape used in the ecocritical analysis (Garrard, 2012: 56) clearly resonates in the protagonist’s relationship with female characters in the novel. Initially, Cova harbours sentimental illusions regarding his relationship with his pregnant lover Alicia, and imagines an idyllic and meaningful life with the domesticated, tamed *llanos* as its setting:

Hasta tuve deseos de confiarme para siempre en esas llanuras fascinadoras, viviendo con Alicia en una casa risueña, que levantaría con mis propias manos a la orilla de un caño de aguas opacas, o en cualquiera de aquellas colinas minúsculas y verdes donde hay un pozo glauco al lado de una palmera. [...] libre ya de las vanas aspiraciones, del engaño de los triunfos efímeros, limitaría mis anhelos a cuidar a la zona que abarcan mis ojos, al goce de las faenas campesinas, a mi consonancia con la soledad (Rivera, 2012: 80).

The domesticated landscape of the *llanos* stands in opposition to the corrupt urban environment and offers a tranquil, albeit illusory, promise of domestic, fertile bliss. This is not, however, a complete or an adequate image of the American nature. Cova, bored with his lover’s docility, establishes a relationship with
Griselda, a married woman whom he tries to subjugate (using physical force once other resources fail) and, ultimately, with Zoraida Ayram. The latter is an ageing, manipulative prostitute, who symbolises the destructive force of the rainforest, “un abismo antropófago, la selva misma, abierta ante el alma como una boca que se engulle los hombres a quienes el hambre y el desaliento le van colocando entre las mandíbulas” (Rivera, 2012: 203). Towards the end of the novel, the image of the jungle turns unequivocally brutal: violence, fear, exploitation and corruption, especially in the context of the rubber industry, coupled with venomous animals and exotic illnesses, replace all the illusions of freedom up to the point of making the protagonist delirious. Human beings, especially those who try to harness and exploit the forces of nature, are helpless in the face of the infernal “green prison” (ibid.: 103) and invariably succumb to its destructive power and its irreversible influence on the human psyche:

[...] la selva trastorna al hombre, desarrollándose los instintos más inhumanos: la crueldad invade las almas como intrincado espino y la codicia quema como fiebre (Rivera, 2012: 146).

Un sino de fracaso y maldición persigue a cuantos explotan la mina verde. La selva los aniquila, la selva los retiene, la selva los llama para tragárselos. Los que escapan, aunque se refuigien en las ciudades, llevan ya el maleficio en cuerpo y en alma (Rivera, 2012: 245).

La vorágine exemplifies some of the aspects of narrative transculturation described by Rama, especially in the dual linguistic system which alternates “the learned literary language of modernism [...] with the dialectical register of [...] rural characters” (Rama, 2012: 24), although the syntax and phonetics of the popular speech still stand in contrast to the lettered voice of the narrator. European modernist influences are discernible in the hyperbolised descriptions of the protagonist’s states of mind, from the initial decadent ennui to the profound existential crisis bordering on madness and resulting in violent behaviour. Often enough, the descriptions of the natural world correspond symbolically with the protagonist’s mental state. One important aspect of the narrative transculturation, however, is conspicuously missing from Rivera’s novel: the incorporation of the indigenous mythology and world view.

Indigenous myths and human-environmental relations

While the Old-World myths are contested and challenged in the modern Latin-American fiction in the first decades of the 20th century, new interest in “the distinctive cultural characteristics of the hinterlands of the Americas” (Rama, 2012: 4) emerges. The indigenous myths and world view, largely ignored or belittled by literature up to that point, slowly find their way into the narrative. The
influence of the European modernism (or *la vanguardia europea* in the Spanish speaking world) can be considered as one of the factors leading to their inclusion in the Latin-American literary discourse (Morales, 1996: 405). Modernism questions the empirical method as the only way of describing the reality, and places important value on the irrational, the intuitive and the subconscious. It also rediscovers myth, understood not as a “withdrawal into some realm of the timeless but a recognition of the intrinsic and foundational import of (...) values for the given community or «world»” (Bell, in: Levenson, 2010: 15).

International modernist influences are clearly visible in the works of Miguel Ángel Asturias. His famous novel *Hombres de maíz*, published in 1949, considered by many scholars to be an example of cultural *indigenismo* or *neoindigenismo* (Leal Fernández, 1996: 383), is beyond the widely accepted time frame of modernism, so it is best described as a continuation of the trend. One of its most important and innovative facets is not only the incorporation of the indigenous myth, but also placing this myth in the very centre of the narrative.

Before the cultural *indigenismo* made an attempt at penetrating the indigenous world view and understanding native mythology, the American indigenous peoples were largely ignored by literature or existed in it as an undifferentiated mass of little more than animals: either particularly benign (“the noble savages”) or particularly brutal (“the primitive barbarians”). *Indigenismo*, defined as a state-sponsored political and cultural ideology which aimed at the assimilation of indigenous peoples into the national culture as part of the homogenising nation-state project, turned its attention to the economic situation of the indigenous population. Marginalisation and exploitation, accompanied by poverty and alcoholism, were one of the most prominent subjects of indigenous-themed realist fiction from the 1920s to the 1950s. Still, *indigenista* writers mostly belittled indigenous beliefs and considered them to be backward and superstitious. However, cultural *indigenismo* begins to validate the indigenous world view together with its interpretation of the place of human beings in the universe.

The plot of Asturias’ *Hombres de maíz* centres on the fulfilment of a curse pronounced by the fireflies wizards who condemn everybody involved in the murder of Gaspar Ilóm and his followers to either death or sterility, so that they are unable to leave any descendants. Ilóm is a leader of an indigenous revolt against *maiceros*, or those who farm corn commercially. This contradicts the indigenous beliefs in the sacredness of maize from which mankind was created, and damages the land with which the Maya have a metaphysical connection. The myth and the supernatural powers of those who protect the ancestral tradition have the capacity to set in train a chain of events, to open or close narrative possibilities in a narra-
tive world which in itself is not fantastical. These events are kernels, not satellites, which means that they cannot be deleted from the story “without disturbing the logic of the plot” (Chatman, 1980: 54), they are essential.

Placing the myth at the heart of the story has important implications: it suggests that without embracing the mythical discourse it is impossible to understand not only the story related in the novel, but also the extra-textual reality and the complexities of the Guatemalan nation. It points to the sacredness of the relationship that the Maya have with their land and its elements, a relation that cannot be reduced to a mere superstition or an ethnographic curiosity.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the link between the events in the novel remains quite obscure until towards the end of the book, when two of the characters, the healer Venado de las Siete Rozas and the postman Nicho Aquino, descend into a system of subterranean caves to witness ceremonies carried out by a fireflies wizard. On the way, they transform into their nahuals, a deer and a coyote, their animal counterparts with which they share their spirit essence.

Los que bajan a las cuevas subterráneas, más allá de los cerros que se juntan, más allá de la niebla venenosa, van al encuentro de su nahual, so yo-animal-protector que se les presenta en vivo, tal y como ellos lo llevan en el fondo tenebroso y húmedo de su pellejo. Animal y persona coexistentes en ellos por voluntad de sus progenitores desde el nacimiento, parentesco más entrañable que el de los padres y hermanos […] (Asturias, 2000: 327).

This particular metamorphosis allows them to access the supernatural plane of the reality and to understand a deeper meaning underlying the narrative. Only by embracing their extra-rational selves are they able to achieve full insight into the link between the myth and the events.

Nahualism is an animistic belief understood either as the ability to transform into an animal or a natural force, proper to sorcerers, healers or shamans, or as the existence of protective spirits in the animal world. Nahualism is common to most if not all Mesoamerican cultures (see: Miller, Taube, 2014: 122-123; Olko, 2010: 240) and constitutes a particular form of contact with the supernatural. It highlights the close relationship that the indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica had (and continue to have) with the natural world with which they share a spiritual or divine element. Nahualism pinpoints the difference between the indigenous world view and the Judaeo-Christian doctrine, in which the divine element (soul) is present only in humans. Mesoamerican animism is also contradictory to the Cartesian dualist “hyperseparation” of humans and nature (see: Garrard, 2012: 28). It is interesting to observe that, according to Rigoberta Menchú, the belief in nahuals or protective spiritual counterparts that every member of the Quiché community has in the natural world, continues to inform the indigenous attitudes towards nature:
The nahual is our double, something very important to us. [...] The child is taught that if he kills an animal, that animal's human will be very angry with him because he is killing his nahual. Every animal has its human counterpart and if you kill him, you hurt the animal too (Menchú, 2009: 20).

The differences between indigenous beliefs and Western philosophy or stance towards nature have been emphasised by literature numerous times. Canek, the eponymous protagonist of Ermilo Abreu Gómez's part prose poem, part novel, ascribes social injustice and the land exploitation by the greedy non-indigenous land owners to the differences in their approaches towards nature:

Todo depende del lugar que el hombre ocupa en la tierra. Las discordias y los aciertos de los hombres se explican si recordamos cuál es la posición que tienen cerca de la tierra. [...] Los indios - de madura infancia - viven al lado de la tierra. Duermen en paz sobre el pecho de la tierra: ellos conocen las voces de la tierra; y la tierra siente el valor de sus lágrimas. Son olor de tierra: olor que enriquece los caminos. Los blancos, en la madurez de sus años, han olvidado lo que es la tierra. Pasan sobre ella aplastando el dolor de su entraña y la gracia de sus rosas. Son el viento que se quiebra y salta sobre el rostro de las piedras (Abreu Gómez, 2006: 36-37).

In Asturias' *Hombres de maíz*, the extensive corn farming for commercial purposes (mostly, but not exclusively, by white people) is seen as contradictory to the indigenous beliefs and hence “barbaric” and bound to bring about severe punishment:

 [...] el castigo será cada vez peor. Mucha luz en las tribus, mucho hijo, pero la muerte, porque los que se han entregado a sembrar méiz para hacer negocio, dejan la tierra vacía de huesos, porque son los huesos de los antepasados los que dan el alimento méiz, y entonces, la tierra reclama huesos, y los más blanditos, los de los niños, se amontonan sobre ella y bajo sus costras negras, para alimentarla (Asturias, 2000: 231).

The elderly Maya priest in Dante Liano's *El misterio de San Andrés* considers dominating and domesticating elements of the natural world as a transgression and explains this stance to Benito, the protagonist of the novel and his disciple:


This attitude is quite different from the Judaeo-Christian doctrine, in which humans are seen as the masters of creation and are entitled to dominate nature as they please.

The polarized view on the indigenous and non-indigenous approaches to the natural world presented in literature fits the common stereotype of the Ecological Indian (Garrard, 2012: 133). While the European (or white/mestizo) attitude is essentially anthropocentric, predatory and destructive, the indigenous animistic system of beliefs and traditional methods of cultivation are seen as eco-friendly.
and of minimal environmental impact. Garrard argues that this view is idealised and derived from the European and not from any of the indigenous cultures (Garrard, 2012: 133, 135). The stereotype may well be a simplification: after all, mounting evidence points to the over-exploitation of natural resources leading to an imbalance in the ecosystem as one of the factors contributing to the collapse of the Classic Maya civilization in the past (Coe, 2011: 171; López Austin, López Luján, 2001: 177; Olko, 2010: 86). Literary characters of Indians willing to cooperate with exploitive white businessmen for their own personal benefit are also relatively common. It is, however, evident that the general polarization between the indigenous and non-indigenous approach to nature is a fact represented in literature, including literary production by indigenous authors.

The above literary examples of the indigenous myths and mythical thinking incorporation into the narrative are confined exclusively to rural or small-town settings as part of the popular culture. In the following example an application of a Mexica myth to a quintessentially urban setting in a dystopian narrative will be analysed.

The Apocalypse

One of the most important premises of ecocriticism is that ecological processes are not only a subject of study for natural science, but also for environmental humanities and literature:

Ecocriticism begins from the conviction that the arts of imagination and the study thereof – by virtue of their grasp of the power of word, story, and image to reinforce, enliven and direct environmental concern – can contribute significantly to the understanding of environmental problems: the multiple forms of ecodegradation that afflict planet Earth today (Buell et al., 2011).

Nature both shapes cultures that are subject to environmental impact, and is shaped, as a concept, by cultural discourse, including literature (Garrard, 2012: 10). This interdependence between nature and discourse has an undeniably ideological and political dimension, and ecocritics “generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a ‘green’ moral and political agenda” (ibid.: 3). Ecocritical reading of literature is particularly (though not exclusively) concerned with environmentally conscious works of art, which focus on the representation of nature together with the threats it faces, such as pollution, overpopulation and modernisation, which have been “predicated on the exploitation of natural resources and on the marginalisation or elimination of other modes of living on the planet” (Barbas-Rhoden, 2011: 15). Environmental concerns are present in modern Latin-
American literature and one of the most original fusions of mythical and ecological discourse will be examined subsequently.

Homero Aridjis defines himself as “an environmentalist poet” (“un poeta ambientalista”, in: Bautista, 2015) and, along with eroticism, nature is one of the most important topics present in his literary work. The novel selected for analysis, Leyenda de los soles, is a dystopian narrative with two prominent aspects: the mythical and the referential. The title of the novel already suggests that the mythical element will play an important role in the discourse: it alludes to the myth of the five suns or epochs of the earth. According to the Mexica religious tradition, there have been five consecutive stages in the existence of the world, each ending with a catastrophe or a natural disaster brought about by elemental forces and each leading to the creation of an improved version of humans, plants and foodstuffs (León-Portilla, 1961: 15). The present epoch is called Nahui-Ollin, 4-Movement, and is to end through a powerful earthquake (Olko, 2010: 234).

Yet the setting of Aridjis' novel is explicitly identified through architectural and geographical references as Mexico City and the action does not take place in primordial times proper to the mythical discourse or in an undefined prophetic future, but in the year 2027. The purpose of the literary discourse, therefore, is not to re-tell a myth, but to transform it and to re-work its symbolic dimension in a new and clearly defined context.

The futuristic vision of Mexico presented by Aridjis is dystopian in its entirety. The city is afflicted by an ecological disaster, suffers almost a total collapse of moral values and is governed by one of the most repulsive characters invented by literature: The President of the Republic José Huitzilopochtli Urbina and the Chief of Police General Carlos Tezcatlipoca. Overpopulation, chronic water shortages, earthquakes and omnipresent pollution are only some of the many problems plaguing the city; crime, exploitation and alienation compliment the pessimistic picture. In the oppressive heat and amidst dust showers, the inhabitants of Mexico City lead their “relative inexistence” (Aridjis, 1993: 123). Unnatural living conditions and constant fear make them appear phantoms rather than human beings (ibid.: 105). Corruption of moral values besets the city: sexual exploitation is rife (the President of the Republic himself has a penchant for adolescent girls), nefarious representatives of security forces are not held accountable for their actions and ordinary people are constantly manipulated by the media. A catastrophe of mythical dimensions looms in the air.

The cataclysm takes place immediately after General Tezcatlipoca's coup d’état: seismic activity buries the city in rubble and monstrous, grotesque tzitzimime accompanied by a procession of pre-Hispanic Mexican deities take over the
city. It is the end of the fifth “sun” or epoch of the Earth. The imagery in the novel is apocalyptic in the sense that it encompasses a vision of the End of the World and it bears certain parallelisms with the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The apocalypse is preceded by “cosmic violence and disorder”, as well as “human violence and immorality” and “natural disasters […] as damaging as the more obviously supernatural misfortunes” (Chauvin, 1992: 86). However, placing the apocalyptic vision in the context of the Mexica religious tradition and world view means that the End of the World is not final or unique, “as the [biblical] cosmogony was unique” (Eliade, in: Chauvin, op. cit.: 87). Mexica cosmogony differs considerably from Judaeo-Christian beliefs in that the former is placed in a cyclical mythical time frame and the destruction of the world means the creation of a new era of the Earth. In Aridjis’ novel, the apocryphal book of revelation, La leyenda de los Soles, explains the recurrent nature of time as follows:


The relationship between myth and reality in Aridjis’ novel is more complex than it may seem. Although space and time undergo processes of mythologisation in the sense that the events and the characters in the novel are linked with the mythical discourse and pre-Hispanic narratives, the reverse process is also noticeable: some of the supernatural aspects of the reality presented in the novel are explained logically through natural phenomena or human actions. Thus, for example, General Tezcatlipoca’s apparent omnipresence is explained by tricks employed by his associates (Vidaurre Arenas, 2004: 173). Moral decrepitude of the city can also, up to a point, be explained as a deterministic result of the abnormal living conditions and their effect on the human psyche. The ambiguous relationship between myth and reality allows for an interpretation of the novel in the context of social and political critique, often expressed through parody and hyperbolisation (Vidaurre Arenas, 2004).

The end of the novel brings a ray of hope to those who survive the apocalypse as a new era begins:

En la punta, sobre un tunal vieron la figura azul de una mujer que tenía los brazos extendidos hacia el Sol, como si quisiera tomar de él el calor y el esplendor de la mañana. En su mano se posaba un pájaro dorado de plumas luminosas.
Era el primer día del Sexto Sol (Aridjis, 1993: 198).

Since the Blue Goddess, a patron of the new epoch, is a figure painted and imagined by the novel’s protagonist Juan de Góngora, a landscape artist, perhaps
the onus of imagining a new, better and more eco-friendly world rests on environmentally conscious humans as well: “Juan de Góngora pintaba. De su pincel, saltían colores cálidos, siluetas. La figura azul se precisaba, cobraba forma y movimiento. La inmensidad, animada, incluía su figura” (Aridjis, 1993: 181).

**Conclusions**

The growing global importance of the ecocritical approach to literature underlines the validity of interpretation and re-evaluation of cultural production through environmentally conscious ideology and rhetoric. Ecocriticism is especially important within the postcolonial discourse, as it highlights politically and culturally sensitive issues, such as “the relationship between imperialism and ecological distress” (Buell et al., 2011: 427) portrayed in literature. Latin-American prose fiction is rich in representations of the natural world and imagery relating to human-environmental interactions, as they play an important role in the process of creating a new political and cultural identity. The mythical dimension of these representations may be considered as particularly revealing. It sheds a new light on the Eurocentric and anthropocentric attitudes towards nature, validated by the Christian dogmata and Western philosophy. Complex indigenous systems of beliefs offer an alternative perspective to the Western one and they should neither be omitted, nor oversimplified by scholars in literary theory.

A diachronic analysis of the history of Latin-American literature shows alternate cycles of opposing tendencies: local versus cosmopolitan, traditional versus modernised, national versus universal (see: Nawrocka, 2010: 41). The tension between local traditions and cosmopolitan trends derived from European modernism is especially visible in Latin-American regionalism which adopts certain tactics in order to survive. This phenomenon is known as narrative transculturation and has resulted in the creation of one of the most outstanding novels in Latin-American literary history.

José Eustasio Rivera’s *La vorágine* is an excellent example of the transformation of the tropical rainforest image as a consequence of the Latin-American debate with European ideals projected onto the New World reality. Myths borrowed from the European antiquity and Romantic ideals crumble when confronted with the new image of the jungle which is no longer an idyllic place of harmonious human coexistence with nature; neither does it facilitate the communion with the divine and the recovery of the Paradise Lost. The American jungle is a place where the limits of human psychological resilience are tested, and where the darkest secrets of our subconscious mind are revealed. Cedomir Goic sees the
transculturated regional novel, “novela de espacio”, as a type of narrative discourse in which

el paisaje es el determinante principio de convergencia que auna las características de situaciones, personajes y escenario natural, se representa la lucha del hombre con el medio avasallador que anula su libertad y determina su existencia por medio de variados poderes ominosos (Goic, 1992: 228).

The influence of European modernism, or vanguardismo, undoubtedly played an important role in the inclusion of the indigenous mythologies in Latin-American literature. In this context, cultural indigenismo can be regarded as an attempt at validating the indigenous world view and its contribution to the cultural identity of Latin-American heterogeneous nations. Asturias’ fiction is quite unique in that it places the indigenous myth at the centre of the plot and endows it with narrative capabilities unprecedented in the indigenista narrative. Asturias’ narrative seamlessly combines realist discourse with supernatural or magical elements and is thought to be one of the precursors of magical realism, a literary phenomenon which is a global trend but which will be associated with Latin-American fiction for decades to come (Łukaszyk, Pluta, 2010: 363). The mythical concepts that play a crucial role in Hombres de maíz, the creation of mankind from corn, as well as nahualism, are related to the Maya interaction with the natural world and highlight the intimate and metaphysical relationship that the Maya have with elements of nature.

The newest Latin-American prose fiction is not indifferent to environmental issues either, and Homero Aridjis’ dystopian and apocalyptic vision of the End of the World is a testimony to this statement. The futuristic image of a degraded, degenerated and vice-ridden urban environment of Mexico City is combined in the novel with the Mexica religious tradition, especially the belief in five suns or epochs of the creation of the Earth, and with Mesoamerican mythical concepts, such as the cyclical nature of time. The mythical imagery in the novel, however, is much more than an aesthetic solution: it reinforces social and political critique through a hyperbolised portrayal of political corruption, progressing degradation of the natural environment and the decay of moral values.

The present study is, in certain ways, limited: firstly, because the selected examples of fiction were written exclusively by male, non-indigenous authors. Future works on the subject should perhaps focus on the examples of indigenous narrative as well as prose literary production by women in order to expand the perspective on environmental issues and the ways in which the global economic system, imperial domination and degradation of nature have affected indigenous peoples and the position of women in society. Secondly, a special focus has been
placed on the Mesoamerican mythology which does not represent the totality of indigenous religious tradition in Latin America. Neither does the paper touch upon all ecologically relevant questions debated by prose fiction. The aim of this paper, however, is to highlight the variety and the complexity of the mythical discourses present in Latin-American narrative and, additionally, to signal some of the most recent environmentally sensitive approaches to literature. By combining the mythocritical approach to literature and selected ecocritical rhetoric, the present study hopefully contributes towards deeper understanding of the relationship between myth, the natural environment and cultural activity.

**Bibliography:**


