

# Migrating Words and Voices in Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* and *The Dog*

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**Abstract**—The 21st century has already witnessed the rapid globalization of catastrophes caused by layered political, social, religious, cultural, and environmental conflicts. The post 9/11 literature that reflects these characteristics retells the experiences of those who are, whether directly or indirectly, involved in the globalized catastrophes of enlarging and endangering their boundaries and consequences. With an Irish-Turkish origin, a Dutch and British educational background, and as an American green-card holder, Joseph O'Neill challenges this changing circumstances of the expanding crisis. In his controversial novel, *Netherland* (2008), O'Neill embodies the deeply-rooted compromises, the transplanted conflicts, and human internalized crisis in post 9/11 New York City. O'Neill presents to us the transition between *Netherland* to New York with a post-colonial perspective. This internalized conflicts are revised in *The Dog* (2014) in which a newly-constructing and expanding global city of gold, Dubai, represents the transitional location from New York City. Through these two novels, words and voices are migrating beyond cultural and political boundaries and discussing what a collective mind embodies in this globalized society.

**Keywords**—American literature, global literature, cultural studies, political science.

## I. INTRODUCTION

O'NEILL'S messages through his novels are more or less connected with his own multicultural background. His real and fictional travels and migrations portray the rapidly transforming society and its repeatedly occurring catastrophes on this globe. In an interview, O'Neill remarks on those global catastrophes and his writing theme:

I don't sit around waiting for these things to occur. It's not my fault if every time I sit down to write, something big happens! But I suppose I am more interested in global events than in what's happening, say, in Galway or Pittsburgh. It's my background. I don't have home turf, so I have no choice but to float around on these post-national currents. [1]

From a multicultural perspective, O'Neill challenges to convey his contemporary readers to the forthcoming catastrophes in both *Netherland* [2] and *The Dog*. [3] *Netherland* was awarded the 2009 PEN / Faulkner Award for Fiction, and *The Dog* was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2014. These two novels can be classified as O'Neill's masterpieces that reflect the possibility of literature in this globalized world.

From a multicultural perspective, *Netherland* experiments the rebirth of the protagonist, Hans van den Broek, a Dutch-born and English-educated analyst, in his relationship with Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian of Indian descent. [2] After his English wife returned to England after 9/11 in 2001, Broek is immersed into a more multiracial and multicultural community in Chelsea Hotel and his new community of cricket in New York. As its sequence, *The Dog* is set up in 2007, in post 9/11 and furthermore, the 2007-2008 global financial crisis starting from the US housing bubble. The narrator of *The Dog* is unnamed, yet he (X) is a Swiss-American lawyer who, after losing his job in New York, ventures into his new job offered by his old college friend. [3] As an attorney, he is assigned to supervise both the finance and the family matters of the wealthy Batros clan in Dubai. This new profession and new world outline the inevitable fate determined and controlled by economic and cultural globalization.

By examining O'Neill's *Netherland* and *The Dog*, it is possible to find a resolution in encountering the current controversial issues by listening to a collective voice and digging into a collective mind in search for 'home' in the transfiguring landscape of globalization.

## II. THE LANDSCAPE OF GLOBALIZATION

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, both New York and Dubai embody the rapidly transfiguring values in globalized economics, legislature, and politics as well as in human consciousness, self, and life. Both cities have a long history of strife, trading, and migration. In this era of globalization, the landscape does not mean the physical and architectural characteristics of the cities but also signifies the social, economic, cultural as well as legal particularities of the cities. By comparing the historical backgrounds of both New York and Dubai, it would help understanding O'Neill's novels.

### A. New York as the Island of Liberty and Chaos

New York is the most remarkable example of modern and contemporary urbanization after a series of transformations from the precolonial and colonial space to the national icon of legislature, and to the international icon of economics along with the social and cultural effects. In a global scale, New York represents the destiny of American dream that can be pursued by all the people who migrate across state and national borders. Because of its constant changes and rapid transformations, however, New York is a city of mobility and instability and it

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is finally recognized as the icon of broken code of humanity. The 9/11 terrorist attack in 2001, which crashed the landmark building of the World Trade Center and killed and physically and psychologically hurt a million of people, made New York to pursue a new challenge.

Though the discussion of history of New York usually starts with the era of colonization in the sixteenth century, New York was first discovered by Native Americans, especially the Iroquoian and the Algonquian, by 1100 AD. This soil was confronted with the crisis when Henry Hudson who was sent by the Dutch East India Company landed on its harbor in 1609 and had a fight with the Native Americans in canoes [4].

From that symbolical name of New Amsterdam, the name was changed to New York being named after the Duke of York. From a small port town along the Hudson as a Dutch colony, New York began to play a role for the European immigrants to land on, especially symbolized later by the Ellis Island, which was opened in 1892. New York became the primarily destiny for the people who migrated from Europe, Africa, Middle and South America, etc., since its early settlers and slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

After a series of transformations, New York has developed into a global city of ambition, hope, dream, as well as of greed, vanity, and nightmare. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Wall Street with its stock market and also all the information regarding economics became the center of America and of the world finance. In 1792, the New York Stock Exchange was founded and in 1889, *The Wall Street Journal* was first published. New York became the center of the world finance as well as the national finance. The plan and development of urbanization named New York Reginal Plan, especially the evolutionary plan and building of the New York skyscraper at the beginning to the twentieth century, embodies "a means of expressing corporate power" in a newly-realized aesthetic sense. [5]

In addition to that business side of New York, it was also recognized as the city of entertainment, art, and academics. Because of the establishments of theaters and schools, Times Square became an icon of the world famous sanctuary of show business. The establishment of schools, universities, and museums also transformed New York to a center of academics, culture, and art. In contrast to this remarkable development, New York suffered the city's chaotic environments and conditions consisting of the high crime rate, high unemployment rate, and poverty and around the 1970's, the gap between classes in New York became wider than before. [6]

Throughout its history, New York has been blessed with liberty so that it has become the icon of new world finance, new urban development and metropolitanism as well as new cultural and artistic activities. This globalized space represents all kinds of migrations due the countless opportunities for people from all over the world. New York as the land of liberty in the twenty-first century possess a never-ending story filled with possibilities, dreams, ambitions, and failures.

### *B. Dubai as the Golden Oasis in the Desert*

Dubai is another New York in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Dubai is the best-known and most populous city in the United Arab Emirates which was formed in 1971. As the settlers and immigrants looked for the open land and opportunities in New York, the contemporary people in the global era currently look for the new vocations and new spaces in newly-developing areas in Dubai. Being much less evaluated than New York and developed in an absolutely different way, Dubai suddenly appeared as the golden oasis in the desert. Thanks to the highly manipulated and managed technology and business skills by inviting the oversea investors and companies, Dubai's transfiguration represents the contemporary globalized space.

Though Dubai began to be widely recognized as a global city at the end of the twentieth century, it has a long history of trading between the East and the West, dating back to 7000 BC. This trend has been consistent throughout the transformations of Dubai. During the pre-Islamic Ancient Ages, there appeared the Magan Civilization around the cities affluent with both Eastern and Western worlds and with a role of international trading port around 2500 BC. [7, p.25]

After a series of the declines of pre-Islamic societies and the strives and invasions by different political, racial, religious powers such as the Ottoman Empire, Islam spread in the seventh century along with a rapid expansion of the Islamic community. Still divided into several tribes, the Gulf area began to be invaded and controlled by Portugal, the Netherlands, and England. After those powers declined or withdrew from the Gulf, the wars among different tribes repeatedly occurred until 1833 when the Maktum family of the Baniyas tribe moved from Abu Dhabi to Dubai and established the ground of the UAE. [7, p.37]

The Nineteenth century brought the waves of imperialism and colonialism to the Gulf. The Gulf was rediscovered as a pivotal role for shipping rout between England and India. The relationship between England and the Gulf in the middle of a cease-fire conditions influenced the local business such as oil and pearl businesses. The British military's withdrawal from the Gulf in 1968 motivated the cease-fire nations and surrounding nations to be independent. In 1971, the six small tribal nations became independent and next year, one more nation joined, so that the current UAE was born.

Like New York, Dubai is multicultural and multiethnic community. Because of this multi-ethnic community, English is a common language and freedom of non-Islamic religions is secured. [7, pp. 17-18] Unlike New York, however, Dubai originally had a small number of population and a need of laborers for expanding oil export business. More than 90% of Dubai's population are currently expatriates, from working-class to highly professional ones, with the largest number of Indians as workers and British as professionals, and their wages of all kinds of jobs and "the possibility of professional advancement" are than those at home. [8] In order to protect Dubai citizens, Dubai has a strict strategy to exclude the non-citizens from all the civil benefits. Due to this migrate workers from all over the world, moreover, there appeared a wide

disparity between the rich and the poor among immigrants. Dubai is a challenging yet problematic multiethnic community.

Dubai's rapid and continuing transactions are founded by its brains and their unique schemes: two strong leaders, both Sheikh Rashid bin Saeed Al Maktoum and Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Sheikh, an industrial infrastructure such as establishment of the international port, international hub airport, the airline company Emirates, metro, etc., and economic freezone, shopping malls, tourism, internet networks, education, etc. [9] Like New York's skyscrapers, Dubai's ones reflect Dubai's challenging, expanding, and also transfiguring economies with a competitive spirit and ambition.

Dubai as the oasis in the desert is no more a phantom but a composed and extended city that inhabits newly-arrived expatriates, encloses newly-introduced possibilities in the free zone of investment and business, and transports all the cargos and passengers to different places on the globe.

### III. IN PURSUIT OF NEW LIVES AND HOMES

#### A. "Home Bitter Home" in "Netherland"

In *Netherland*, the code of home is portrayed as a broken family or couple is united or a family or couple is broken after 9/11. Even in being reunited, the humans, whether they are victims or survivors, have to be motivated to act by individual wills and to pursue their own lives and homes in the middle of transfiguring landscape of New York. By focusing on Chuck's life "as an American visionary," one reviewer points out that *Netherland* "has opened where 'The Great Gatsby' ends, with its forlorn dreamer dead in the water." [10] The American soil was already the Ground Zero when it was deprived from the Native Americans.

The family and domestic stability is questioned, deserved, and reevaluated in contrast to the violation of 9/11. In *Netherland*, the young couple is separated due to facing the incredible violation of 9/11: the protagonist Broek remains in New York, while his English wife Rachel returns to England with their son. Their separation results from their changed values of their New York life not only from a financial perspective but also in a safety perspective. The absence of family life and its stability throughout this novel underlines the social and economic chaos. The absence of home is, however, compensated with the presence of another belonging place, that is, a hotel as a temporal accommodation after the loss of home due to 9/11. As symbolized by its freely decorated rooms and their unique dwellers, Chelsea Hotel in New York signifies the paradise of free expression and ideas beyond the cultural, racial, sexual, social differences. Broek's adventurous life with unique residents of Chelsea Hotel embodies the threshold of the new life and values. This avant-garde hotel is a New York's paradise which accommodates the outsiders regardless of differences of their racial, sexual, and cultural identity. More ironically, the protagonist's newly-discovered territory is a community of a cricket team of expatriates. Though it originates from Britain and spreads throughout the British Commonwealth, cricket is overwhelmed by baseball and basketball in contemporary America. It is ironical to connect cricket as a British colonial

cultural icon with the subculture of expatriates in a postcolonial society. In his interview, O'Neill remarks that a cricket field is "an environment of justice" or "a respite" because it consists of a "different hierarchy" and "a different personal status." [11] The most active member of the cricket team is Chuck, a Trinidadian of Indian descent. This background implies that Indians were slaves for the colonial labor market in Trinidad and Tobago which became a Spanish colony in 1532 and eventually became a British colony in 1797. Because of this colonial heritage, The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is currently a multiracial nation with Africans, Europeans, and Asians, especially Indians and Chinese. In *Netherland*, Chuck as an ambitious enterpriser himself points out that New York is overwhelmed by the new wave of rapidly increasing Indian immigrants, including those from the West Indies and South Asian nations such as Pakistan and Bangladesh, and this postcolonial migration embodies their ambition to intrude into the professional and business area. By examining this colonial and postcolonial background of Chuck, Heerak Christian Kim analyzes the political implication in *Netherland* and he is described "as a symbol of the failure of American dream." [12, p.28] In addition to the implication of colonial strives, slavery, and plantation, white-color immigrants, such as his wife, Rachel, in postcolonial era represent the pilgrims of American capitalism. [12, pp. 28-29] American multiculturalism finitely challenged in respects of establishing new perspectives and of recalling the historical backbone of America in *Netherland*.

Domestic space as a microcosm of human relationship is a challenging theme especially after 9/11. As 9/11 destroyed the sense of everyday life for Americans, it reminded them of the importance of everyday domestic life. As it is generally recognized that the myth of American traditional family is already broken, American has been confronted with the decline of marriage, the low birthrates, high divorce rates, and the formation of new couples such as gay and lesbian counterparts. American family myth is being retrieved as the consequence of an economic disparity.

The reconciliation scene between Broek and Rachel in London is, however, overlapped with another New York scene with Broek and his mother; and these scenes are integrated into one value, that is, the commitment to the family and its once-questioned value. This reunion or retrieval of family relationship represents contemporary America's wish to possess the family value in an ironical scheme of "Home Bitter Home."

#### B. Exile from Home in "The Dog"

In a similar way, *The Dog* challenges the migrating words and spirits across the ocean, this time, to the Middle East. Though in a different narrative voice, *The Dog* can be evaluated as the sequence of the post-9/11 literature because it is located in such a representative of a globalized sphere as Dubai. Exile from a homeland is intriguing in this novel. In contrast to a more definite implication of New York after 9/11 in *Netherland*, *The Dog*, though it is located mostly in Dubai, "actually remains parked inside its sullen narrator's head – which, we soon realize, is a suffocating place to be." [13] Another reviewer insists that

*The Dog* is not “just about Dubai,” but it is “simultaneously about New York, about us.” [14] American psychology in post 9/11 migrates to the foreign land that cannot be home.

The broken code of human relationship in the home land motivates the protagonist to migrate to Dubai. Different from the protagonist’s multicultural and multiracial background in *Netherland*, X has a Euro-centric background with his French-speaking mother from Switzerland. His separation from this mother culture and life is the ground of his exiled life without his own home. In addition, his terrible breakup with his life-long partner, Jenn, strengthens his loss of belonging and loneliness. His broken relationship with his colleague at their corporate law office in New York turns to be a direct reason for X to leave New York and to venture into Dubai. This new adventure is, however, initiated by his college-day friend, Eddie Batros, who offers X a special position as his family’s legal financial advisor and also as the family’s “dog” for the wealthy Lebanese family. Though he is an outsider, X is quite close to the family matters, both public and private ones. The once-broken code is revived into another code that is connected and usually bound with money.

In addition to an instable relationship with human beings, the financial and professional instability in New York is also the key factor for X to seek for a job in the land of new possibilities. As an elite American, X represents thousands of extricates in Dubai in search for the rapidly-gained profits and success especially in the globalized business sphere. This elite or expert position in *The Dog* is, however, switched into the highly-salaried house secretary or butler whose jobs range from mentoring the family’s teenage boy, Alain, to booking a superstar for a private party. This can be one of the factors of “high comedy.” [15] In order to satisfy the millionaire’s public and private lives, ironically enough, X plays a role as a Euro-American trustee and manager with an appropriate academic and professional background. X’s newly-established life supported by Dubai’s money is symbolized by his luxurious condominium called Privilege Bay, his leisure of scuba diving, etc. In an interview, O’Neill himself analyses that the narrator X “feels, in his work life, subject to a terrible indeterminacy” because work is “really a question of being frightened.” [16]

Lonely, unprotected, and unstable professionalism in an age of globalization expresses the satirical implication of globalization and its consequences.

The newly-established community of foreign residents of Dubai is entirely opposed to the governmentally-controlled and racially-oriented community of natives of Dubai. This extreme disparity or even almost complete barrier between natives and expatriates formulate the psychological instability and even the lack of emotional reactions and compassions. Though X’s sense of belonging is too subtle to be realized, it can be observed in scuba diving. X’s neighbor and scuba-diving friend, Ted Wilson, disappears mysteriously in the middle of the novel. The underwater represents the unknown and alien side of Dubai. The sense of belonging to a community of aliens is nothing but another exile from home.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

O’Neill’s *Netherland* and *The Dog* embody the role to presenting the transfiguring socio-cultural scene in the age of globalization. Both New York and Dubai portray the backbone of the changing and challenging landscapes of contemporary cities. Development, transformation, and also deconstruction of those landscapes formulate both illusions and disillusion of the idealized space. With a colonial and postcolonial perspective, O’Neill plunges into the profound side of our contemporary society and also ourselves.

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