

“SHUGGIE BAIN” OR BACK TO REALISM

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Abstract: “Shuggie Bain” by the Scottish-American writer Douglas Stuart, a semi-autobiographical novel which was awarded the Booker Prize for Fiction in 2020, strikes the reader by the realistic approach to the appalling life conditions in the outskirts of Glasgow in the 1980s and early 1990s. The plot of the novel, the setting, the characters orbiting around Agnes Bain and Shuggie, the protagonists, the language used by the author, but also the omniscient point of view speak in favor of a new, contemporary realism. On this note, Stuart is the creator of a tale of love, addiction and otherness which resonates powerfully with the contemporary reader. The aim of the article is to demonstrate that the literature of the 2020s witnesses a return to a simple, clear, empathetic way of writing.

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In an interview for “Irish Times”, when asked about the writing of “Shuggie Bain”, Douglas Stuart confessed: “It was a difficult process; it felt very necessary when I started to write it, it flew through me. And I felt like I had something by the tail, and didn’t want to put it back on the leash I just wanted to let it out.” The act of creating art from life became unbeknownst an effort to overwhelm the drama: “When you grow up as a child of trauma, you have no control over that. Especially when it’s a parent suffering from addiction, it’s really a black hole, and you’re just whipped around it, trying to cope. So, if you can take that trauma and turn it into art, and take control over it as fiction, it’s and incredibly powerful place to be.” These are Stuart’s words uttered during the very same interview, and this is exactly what he succeeded in doing in his debut novel “Shuggie Bain”.

Although not entirely autobiographic, Stuart’s novel was without any doubt inspired by his own childhood and teenage experiences. Stuart started writing it in 2008 with no intention of publication. It took him ten years to finish this wide scope chronicle which was rejected repeatedly by publishers. Then, in 2020 it received the Booker Prize for Fiction.

This article aims at demonstrating that beyond being a reflection of the author’s hurtful childhood and teenage, “Shuggie Bain” is a faithful depiction of the difficulties and dire poverty of the Scottish working class between 1981 and 1992: “I do think for the longest time regional voices and working-class narratives have been overlooked, and people don’t quite know how to amplify that towards an audience.” These again are Stuart’s own words when asked about the topic of his novel.

The 1980s and early 1990s were plagued by high unemployment, violence, poverty, drugs and prostitution as a consequence of Mrs. Thatcher’s politics which had put husbands and sons out of work. The closing of the ship building yards and of the mines in Glasgow brought about significant changes in the lives and behavior of

Glaswegians living in the outskirts. Men became idle and violent; women were forced to beg for social benefits in order to sustain their families. From this angle "Shuggie Bain" is a deeply socio-political novel focusing on the impact of Thatcherism on Glaswegian society, which became a place of "men rotting into the settee for want of decent work." (Stuart 2020, 39)

Narrowing down, the more specific target of this article is to point out the re-emergence or rather the emergence of a new kind of meaningful and sympathetic realism which can be traced back in contemporary authors' works, like for instance Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes", Elif Shafak's "Honour" or Bernardine Evaristo's "Girl, Woman, Other", to mention only a few. While the subjects of the above-mentioned novels are different, they nevertheless encapsulate socio-economic and psychological issues contemporary societies are confronted with: dire poverty and aloneness in Frank McCourt's Dublin of the 1970's and 80s, the tragedy of immigrants' loneliness and inadaptability in the adopted country in Shafak's novel or the isolation and unequal treatment of LGBTQ adherents in Evaristo's "Girl, Woman, Other" or "Mr. Loverman".

Rather than resorting to modern techniques like stream of consciousness, foreshadowing, allusions, metaphors, symbols or to postmodern means of deconstructing the categories of the novel, more and more contemporary novelists favor straightforward, simple but vivid ways of telling a story, describing the setting and creating flesh and blood, living characters. Thus, Stuart's heartrending narrative is a tale of poverty, addiction and sexuality told in a linear, logical, easy to trace back way; his characters – mainly Agnes/ and Shuggie Bain – are definitely alive and depicted with deep human compassion. Even though the poor neighborhood of Glasgow he paints is sordid and grim, reminding the reader of Dickens' grey, wet, bleak settings or Frank McCourt's Limerick drowned in mud and sadness, Stuart's descriptions are heartfelt, a declaration of the author's love for his hometown: "I'm always looking for my way back home", he admitted when asked about his future plans.

The novel, a frame story like many famous classics – the best known of which is perhaps "Wuthering Heights" – opens in 1992 with the sixteen year old Hugh aka 'Shuggie' Bain struggling to survive on his own in Mrs. Bakhsh's dark bedsit, dreaming of going to hairdressing college while he has to work long hours in a grimy grocery shop, and ends the same year with the teenage boy comforting Leanne whose mother is an alcoholic, thus reminding him of his own distressing experiences.

The leap of eleven years brings the reader to Sighthill, where the five-year-old Hugh lives with his grandparents, parents, Shug and Agnes Bain, and siblings, his elder half-sister Catherine and half-brother Leek. The growing tension and resentment in the relationship between Shuggie's father, a philandering taxi driver who works at night and has numerous dubious love affairs, and the unstable Agnes brings about her growing dependence on alcohol: "Agnes sank to the edge of the bed. Shuggie could feel her can of lager spill on to the mattress and start to soak through his socks. Burying her face in his hair, she sobbed her dry, frustrated tears; her breath was clammy against his neck...As

she gripped him, he could see her face was lopsided, the paint on her eyes was blurred and running away.” (Stuart 2020, 54)

After Big Shug, Shuggie’s father abandons his wife and son at Pithead, a miners’ housing scheme at the edge of the town, Agnes skirmishes with her addiction, starts even going to AA meetings, but only succeeds to be sober for brief spans. The family gradually collapses when the elder children go their own ways, leaving Shuggie to take care of his alcoholic mother who sinks deeper and deeper into her addiction. In addition, Shuggie has to fight with bullying and his own burgeoning homosexuality.

In an effort to start anew, Agnes and Shuggie move to the city in a small flat: “No more drinking for me. I’m not saying it’ll be easy, but that’s the best thing about the city. No one will know us from Adam...We can be brand new.” (Stuart 2020, 369) Nevertheless, this does not happen, and Shuggie’s burden becomes more unbearable and ultimately useless, as Agnes at the lowest stage in her dependence on alcohol chokes on her own vomit and dies in her early fifties.

The storyline unfolds smoothly, in equal chapters and subchapters, in a chronological order, outlining Agnes’ downfall and Shuggie’s growing up, both physically and spiritually. Confronted with his mother’s addiction, his father’s abandonment, his siblings’ desertion, utter shortage of food and parental love, and constantly exposed to harassment at school - which he could attend only sporadically - he is pushed into maturity at the early age of sixteen. Douglas Stuart acknowledged that in the aforementioned interview: “I didn’t know my father, I was orphaned at 16, I had to put myself through high school...I’m proud of how I’ve risen in the world.” On the one hand, the novel is a Bildungsroman showcasing Shuggie’s path from childhood and innocence to adolescence and early maturity, and on the other, it contains significant elements of a memoir, reminiscent of Frank McCourt’s childhood and early teenage in a poverty-stricken Northern Ireland. All through the book facts are clearly and realistically told, there is nothing mysterious, illusive or ambiguous about the story. There is no room for doubt or misinterpretation, the reader faces and digests the crude reality.

This very reality is described in a harsh, realistic way which points to the appalling life conditions of the working-class men and women in the outskirts of Glasgow. Thus, the description of the city instantly reminds us of Dickens’ dreary portrayal of Victorian London: “He [Big Shug] liked the drive from Sighthill, it was like a descent into the heart of the Victorian darkness...It was down near the river that the skinny, nervous-faced women sold themselves to men in polished estate cars, and sometimes it was here that the polis would later find chopped up bits of them in black bin bags.” (Stuart 2020, 38) Likewise, the rainy Glaswegian weather is strongly reminiscent of the opening pages of “Bleak House” in which rain, dampness, fog and darkness are minutely described: “Rain was the natural state of Glasgow. It kept the grass green and the people pale and bronchial...It [the weather] was a problem because it was mostly inescapable and the constant dampness was pervasive...(Stuart 2020, 39)

Shuggie’s half-brother, Leek takes refuge from his mother’s alcoholic binges hiding in a pallet fort vividly depicted: “Leek had covered the floor and the walls in old

bits of discarded carpet and flattened cardboard boxes. Through the narrow hole in the top he had dragged old bits of furniture and broken kitchen chairs.” (Stuart 2020, 64)

But maybe the most gruesome description is that of the miserable, muddy coal-mining area, Pithead, where Agnes and her children are left to fend with scarcity of money and food, a cold, filthy dwelling, the neighboring women’s hatred and alcoholism: “The black slag hills stretched for miles like the waves of a petrified sea. The coke dust left a thin grey coating across Leek’s face...He looked out over the scene, past the pipe-cleaner trees and the carpet of dead marsh. The Glasgow to Edinburgh train seemed like a toy in the distance as it charged through the wasteland that separated the miners from the world.” (Stuart 202, 146)

Descriptive passages, although brief, are an important part in the depiction of Agnes and Shuggie’s grim, grey, utterly unwelcoming world. Notwithstanding, the setting does not define the characters but quite the opposite: protagonists are able to change their environment. Thus, Agnes keeps a clean cozy home in a sea of dirt and promiscuity, and she stubbornly continues to wear her grand purple coat and high heels while the other women have given up cleanliness and pride a long time ago.

The small fiendish world is inhabited by flesh and blood characters the reader can easily relate to: unemployed idle men who cheat on their wives, lazy untidy housewives who take to drinking, dirty skinny children who are neglected by their parents. From among them Shuggie and his mother reign supreme.

“Shuggie Bain” is as much about a lonely boy named Hugh or Shuggie as about Agnes and her attempts to be a wife and a mother amid most difficult times in 1980s and 90s Glasgow.

Agnes Bain is both Shuggie’s guiding light and a woman who falls apart, who walks a wayward path, and thus fails her three children and her husband. She dreams of a clean welcoming house with its own front door, but spends the social aid money, which should feed the whole family, on extra strong lager hidden in plastic bags and poured in tea mugs. Agnes Bain increasingly finds solace in drink, while trying to keep up appearances by wearing glamorous clothes, elaborate make-up, pearly-white false teeth, and by carefully doing her hair. She takes pride in looking like a Glaswegian Elizabeth Taylor, only to reach the lowest point of human existence when getting drunk. Fighting her demons proves to be a failure, and so is her attempt to get rid of the addiction by attending AA meetings: “She [Agnes] stoated around the empty house, tipping out all the hiding places that might hold a forgotten drink...On her knees, she pulled all the empty grocery bags out from underneath the kitchen sink till she knelt waist-deep in a cumulus of blue and white plastic.” (Stuart 2020, 128) Although her behavior is often monstrous, she is not a monster, but rather drawn with extraordinary sympathy and compassion. She is a troubled, lovable, vulnerable but resilient woman with ambitions for her children and a supportive mother to Shuggie.

Shuggie, in his turn, learns to read the signs and to predict the state of his mother’s drunkenness, and takes care of her. Despite everything he loves and protects Agnes, and when Catherine and Leek decide to start a new life elsewhere, he is the only one who

stands by her, worries about her health. He is in thrall to a charismatic but addicted mother. In addition, he struggles to come to terms with his own sexuality, his need to become 'normal', and be accepted by his peers. From early on he hides a secret everyone but Shuggie himself knows about: "He felt something was wrong. Something inside him felt put together incorrectly. It was like they could see it, but he was the only one who could not say what it was. It was just different, and so it was just wrong." (Stuart 2020, 161)

Stuart's characters act in real life situations and speak the Glaswegian working class speech which make them come alive and brings them closer to the reader. Conversations are colorful, often humorous and full of slang or taboo words: "Gies peace" she shushed. "It's just a wee bit of my winning." (Stuart 2020, 44); or "Who the fuck do ye think ye are, Ann Marie? I'm tryin' to make a livin', and ye call me across the city like I wis a dog that pissed on yer carpet." (Stuart 2020, 45) or "Listen tae that voice!...Ere, posh boy. Whaur did ye get that fuckin' accent? Are ye a wee ballet dancer, or whit?" (Stuart 2020, 378). In contradistinction to their working-class neighbors or school mates, Agnes and Shuggie take pride in speaking a correct and refined language which brings about resentment and hateful gossip.

Consequently, the linear plot, the faithfully painted settings, the living characters into whose shoes the readers can step, the author's omniscient voice, the vulgar language we also use sometimes are all contributing to a faithful picture of the world we live in, one we know so well. If we were to compare Stuart's novel to a painting, that would be one by Breughel, full of detail, striving people, and movement. The novelist has, therefore, fulfilled the mission of a realist writer in the tradition of the nineteenth century with a difference. The narrative voice is not an indifferent, entirely objective or ironical one but a call for compassion and understanding. Douglas Stuart does not condemn or despise Agnes for her addiction, for her repeated and disastrous yielding to alcohol, but treats her with affection, even when she debases herself. Why? Because he would always be "inspired by gentle souls surviving in hard places", and because this is how we should behave and feel especially in hard times like these we are living these days.

By writing these few pages and by trying to make my point I have, sadly, sinned against Douglas Stuart and against literature, as I have 'forced' "Shuggie Bain" into a 'box', one which I named 'contemporary realist' literature. But literature, like life itself, is a complex living organism and can't be limited to theoretical patterns. The proof is Douglas Stuart's novel itself and his own statement: "I don't want to be defined as a Scottish writer or a working-class writer or a queer writer, because I'm all those things. And then I'm also American as well. We're always looking to categorize things, when the truth is that life can be many things at once." Maybe the only right statement about "Shuggie Bain" is that it is a remarkable, pulsating slice of life.

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