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POSTCOLONIAL ECOCRITICISM IN HUNGER BY ELISE BLACKWELL

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Abstract
Hunger, a novella by a contemporary American novelist, Elise Blackwell, centres in the story of a Russian botanist, Nikolai Vavilov, during the Leningrad siege in 1941. Vavilov protects his collection of seeds at the Research Institute of Plant Industry in Leningrad against all odds, to be preserved for research for future use. In the recounting moments during the siege, the narrative provides parallelism between Leningrad and the ancient city of Babylon. In postcolonial writing, this can be perceived as a form of nostalgic projection of the past (Walder, 2011). Such a parallelism triggers a postcolonial narrative analysis on the pairing of the two as affinity, focusing on the significance of the comparison between the two cities (between the apocalyptic present and the glorious past). The contribution of this parallelism will be discussed to understand the novella as a narrative mode of ecocriticism, with regards to the idea of prioritizing seeds over human lives, which also acts as the steering issue stirring the plot. By mainly referring to Garrard (2004) and Huggan and Tiffin (2010) on ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, this essay in general aims to investigate how the novella contributes new perspectives on the intertwining between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism.

Keyword: Elise Blackwell, postcolonial ecocriticism, nostalgic projection, postcolonial studies, ecocriticism

Introduction
Earning its recognition as Los Angeles Times' "Best Book of 2003" and Sidney Morning Herald's "Best Read of the Year", Hunger (2003), a novella by a contemporary American novelist, Elise Blackwell, is described as "a private story about a man wrestling with his own morality" (eliseblackwell.com/hunger). But this essay will show more than that, as the morality faced by an anonymous narrator who refers to a Russian botanist, Nikolai Vavilov, is framed within narrative traces of what Walder (2011) terms as postcolonial nostalgia. Not much has been discussed in the academic realm about this novella, other than in a very general sense it has been said to "[explore] various types of appetite, juxtaposing images of plenty and pleasure with images of scarcity, always in a pared-down but

stylised prose, the effectiveness of which varies" (McCloskey, 2003). The juxtaposition of images of plenty and images of scarcity foregrounds the juxtaposition of something more substantial. One main argument that this essay proposes is that Hunger presents the juxtaposition of Leningrad during the Leningrad siege in 1941, with the ancient city of Babylon as a narrative technique of parallelism to show a form of nostalgic projection of the past. In postcolonial studies, such projection is indicative to "a historicizing of the present" (Walder, 2011, p.163). And as such, this essay will show how attempts of "historicizing of the present" through the presentation of Leningrad and the ancient city of Babylon as an affinity between the apocalyptic present and the glorious past is presented. In general, this essay aims to investigate how the novella contributes new perspectives on the intertwining between postcolonial studies and ecocriticism. Also, the discussion will explain the impact of our historically poor relationships with the natural world that changes our perspective on our current understandings of nature.

Systematically, this essay will first of all provide historical information on the Leningrad siege to give a general idea on how devastating the situation was during the siege and how it impacted the people living there. It will also show textual evidences in the novella that describe similar situation during the siege. Afterwards, on narrative level, this essay will enter into the discussion by showing how the presentation of the steering issue of prioritizing seeds over human lives with the comparison between Leningrad with the ancient city of Babylon work as an attempt to historicize the present. Lastly, this essay will provide a bird's eye view on how such presentation of story contributes to new perspectives on our current understandings of nature.

Method

The method applied in this essay is by paying attention to the parallelism between Leningrad and ancient Babylon which contributes to understanding the novella as a narrative mode of ecocriticism, particularly through narratives which tell an idea of prioritizing seeds over human lives, which also act as the steering issue stirring the plot. With this in mind, the analysis conducted in this essay falls within the field of postcolonial ecocriticism, as it discusses how the concept of postcolonial nostalgia and the attempt of historicizing the present are built through plot development whose main issue is on the preservation of seeds, conducted as an anticipation for future ecological disasters. As such, in the discussion, this essay will therefore refer mainly to Garrard (2004) and Huggan and Tiffin (2010) on ecocriticism and postcolonial ecocriticism, and Walder (2011) on postcolonial nostalgia. One argument proposed in this essay is that the novella presents narrative mode of ecocriticism associated with ecophobia (Estok, 2013).

Findings and Discussion

The Leningrad Siege as Told in History and Hunger

Outside is a fountain where
visitors toss pennies and rubles
into icy water. Some leave roses
and carnations, which instantly freeze.

How long ago was it? She asks.
I can tell her how long ago but can't
explain bread as stone or children
turned to ice and bone (Longenecker, 2013, p.14).

The siege of Leningrad occurred from the summer of 1941 to the summer of 1944, which totals into 900 days and is thus known in world history as the 900-day siege (Forczyk, 2009; Glantz, 2001). Leningrad was sieged by the German and Finnish armies during World War II, and it was known as "one of the most horrific events in world history", taking the lives of "somewhere between 1.6 and 2 million Soviet citizens" (Bidlack, 2005, p.1). Known today as the city of St. Petersburg, before the siege, "Leningrad was the capital of Russian creative life" (Salisbury, 1985, p.8) as Ballet and performances and classical music concerts were held every Saturday. In his enticing narration on the siege, Salisbury describes how grim the situation was to the citizens of Leningrad towards the end of spring in 1941, as they felt a gripping terror of the approach of the German army. In spring of 1941, there were military evidences that indicated that Adolf Hitler was preparing to attack the Soviet Union. During this time, some had already fled to Finland to avoid the speculated siege. In practice, during the siege, the German troop movement had been carried out in three stages: 1.) About thirty divisions were sent to East Prussia and Poland in the fall of 1940; 2.) Heavy troop movements began on May 25, sending in about one hundred military formations each twenty-four hours; and 3.) The movement of troops from the interior was to be completed in the second half of July (Salisbury, 1989, pp.89-90). The people of Leningrad realized that war had started. A few minutes after the war was announced, queues, especially in the food stores, began to grow, and at the State Savings Banks lines formed as depositors wanted their money. Canned goods were massively purchased, along with other necessities such as butter, sugar, lard, flour, groats, sausage, matches, and salt. To this reaction, Salisbury noted: "In twenty years of Soviet power Leningraders had learned by bitter experience what to expect in time of crisis" (1989, p.146).

Once the Nazis firmly grasped the town, all of the rail connections between Leningrad and the remainder of Russia were severed and all the highways were cut (Salisbury, 1989, p.335). This leaves the Leningraders trapped in their own town. Since the roads were cut, the citizens of Leningrad had to make do of anything they can have their hands on to survive. For instance, they drew water from a hole in an ice-clad street, as pictured below:

Figure 1. Leningrad citizens drawing water from a hole in an ice-clad street (Salisbury, 1989, p.378)

and ate whatever they have to survive. They went to nearby countrysides to look for cabbage or potatoes or beets, but found very little. The only non-rationed products sometimes available were coffee and chicory. More people started to fall because of hunger. One evidence of this heart breaking condition was recorded by Yelena Skryabina, a diarist, in her diary: "What do you think, young man, that this is a first-aid station?" she said sourly. "Hunger is a terrible condition. Your old man has collapsed from hunger. And I might collapse any day myself—I'm getting more and more swollen" (Salisbury, p.473).

In July 1941, Leningrad introduced a ration-card system for the procurement of foodstuffs and manufactured goods (Bidlack, 2005). In October, bread ration is reduced for the third time, based on category, to either 400 or 200 grams per day for most people (Bidlack, 2005). As food became scarce, non-workers and children, as of October 1941, received only one-third of a loaf of poor-quality bread a day. Roughly, for a month they got one pound of meat, a pound and a half of cereals or macaroni, three-quarters of a pound of sunflower-seed oil or butter and three pounds of pastry or confectionery. In addition, they had to survive on a total of five and a quarter pounds of food a month, which is a little more than a pound a week. Fish or canned goods were substituted for meat. Salisbury notes that "[t]he deaths which occurred in late September and October, surprising and shocking to the Leningraders who knew of them, occurred among people subjected to this radically reduced diet and who had no personal food reserves to fall back on (1989, p.474). In November, bread ration was reduced to 300 and 150 grams per day, and it was further reduced to 250 and 125 grams per day (Bidlack, 2005). In reaction to this, a cut in military rations was immediately instituted. Yet this did not have much effect. Starting November 1941, the Leningraders had to survive on breads containing 25 per cent "edible" cellulose. In Hunger, it is described that in the days of food rarity, the people of Leningrad eat "a bread made of five parts stale rye flour and one part each of salt, cake, cellulose, soy flour, hack dust, and bran" (Blackwell, 2008, p.39).

People were mobilized to collect "edible" pine and fir bark. What was worst, each region of the city was ordered to produce two to two-and-a-half tons of "edible" sawdust per day (Salisbury, p.500). In Hunger, this condition is described vividly and elaborately as follows:

> All manner of animals—dogs and cats, sparrows and crows, rats and mice—and then their excrement were eaten. Soups were made from tulip bulbs stolen from the soil of the Botanical gardens, pine needles, nettles, rotten cabbage, lichen-covered stones, cattle-horn buttons torn from once-fine coats. Children were fed hair oil, petroleum jelly, glue (Blackwell, 2008, p.40).

The Leningraders were forced to cling on to life with whatever they can get their hands on. Yet starvation continues to occur despite an increase in the bread ration (350 gr, 200 gr, and 400 gr for the rear army) in December 1941. In January 1942, there was only a two-day supply of flour in reserve, causing the inhabitants to receive nothing but a bread ration. The first convalescent hospital (statsionar) for the treatment of starvation was opened in January 1942. It got worse; in the

same month, the last working hydroelectric power station closed, causing the city to be left without running water, heat, or electricity. In late January of 1942, 96,694 deaths were reported to the register office (ZAGS). The second increase in the food ration was instituted in February 1952, with only 500 gr of bread for factory workers, engineers, and technicians, 400 gr for office workers, and 300 gr for children and dependents.

In winter of 1943, a new crime emerged: people started murdering people for food; "They stole, connived, and killed" (Blackwell, 2008, p.40). There was cannibalism in Leningrad. Reports of the trade in human flesh can be seen in the published official histories. In the words of Vavilov in Hunger, this condition is described as follows: "They peddled their flesh. They peddled the flesh of the children needing to be fed" (Blackwell, 2008, p.40). Crimes-for-food became part of Leningrad's history. It was not until the beginning of spring of 1944 that a military operation was undertaken. The objective was to end the blockade of Leningrad. With operation code Iskra (the name of the first Social Democratic newspaper, the one which Lenin edited before the break between the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks), Leningrad was finally liberated. Yet, the history of the siege remains.

Figure 2. Piskarevsky Cemetary (Salisbury, 1989, p.395)

After the devastation, Piskarevsky Cemetery was built as common graves of over one million victims of the Leningrad siege, also as a monument to remind the people of the world about the horrific and devastating tragedy, as poetically conveyed in the epigraph provided at the beginning of this section.

Using the Leningrad siege as its background, Hunger pictures the devastation hunger causes to the life of Nikolai Vavilov and the lives of other characters within his circle. Although Vavilov's name is not explicitly mentioned in the narratives, Blackwell implies at the beginning of her novella, before the story takes its start, that the main character in the story is the biologist Nikolai Vavilov. As a biologist, Vavilov is torn between two choices: preserving the seeds he and his colleagues have been collecting for research and future use or using the seeds to be planted, harvested, and consumed to survive starvation caused by the siege. The next two sections will first of all deal with parts in the novella where Vavilov's and his team's concern over the seeds is displayed. The section afterwards will discuss the parallelism between ancient Babylon and Leningrad and elaborate several ideas on how such parallelism can be used to see Leningrad by putting it into ancient Babylon context.

Seeds of Life, City of Death

The many thousands of specimens stored at the Research Institute of Plant Industry where Vavilov and his fellow researchers work include several hundred tubers; "Small and large. Smooth and warty. White, brown, yellow, purple, and blue" (Blackwell, 2008, p.8). The sacrifice and struggle they have to face are to a certain extent, heroic, as they "held [their] packs and [their] ground—all to save a few specimens of rare apple. [They] survived the ridicule and bullets of bandits who overtook [them] when [they] were collecting sorghum in Eritrea, and [they] outsmiled hostiles up and down the Orinoco (Blackwell, 2008, p.15). In the island of Ometepe, Vavilov and his team collect what they could of the coffee, sesame, and strange fruits that grew in its fertile volcanic soil, in the humidity of southern Louisiana they collect a variety of rice with nutty flavorflavour that can "give warmth and pleasure" (Blackwell, 2008, pp.54 & 71). At the institute, new ways are invented in agricultural engineering. Seed dormancy and germination can be manipulated in many ways "to shorten or lengthen the vegetative periods of cereals" (Blackwell, 2008, p.79). To Vavilov and his team, it is imperative that they protect the seeds, and the decision is made "all at once but by something like attrition" (Blackwell, 2008, p.9). They decide not to eat from the collections and that they will protect them at all cost (Blackwell, 2008, p.11). The idea of sacrificing themselves in order to protect the seeds is an act of prioritizing what could save future agricultural advancement over human lives. Despite the fact they have agreed upon, there is a time when Vavilov sneaks into the collection and retrieves "Just a few kennels of a few kinds, taking nothing too rare, taking the last of no variety, rearranging the remainder to hide [his] weakness" (Blackwell, 2008, p.59). And later, he finds himself ashamed of what he has done.

In real life, the idea of storing seeds for future use has been practiced by the Nordic Gene Bank (now NordGen), who had established a back-up seed storage facility in an abandoned coal mine outside Longyearbyen. Following the finalization of International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) in 2001, the Treaty calls for establishing a multilateral system for plant genetic resources that includes global rules for access to and benefit sharing of those resources (https://www.seedvault.no/about/history/). This enables the world to have a global security storage facility in Svalbard, Norway, which was opened in February 2008, to house duplicates of seed conserved in gene banks all over the world. The freezing climactic nature of Svalbard global seed vault helps the preservation of the seeds, as can be seen below:

Figure 3. The Entrance of the Svalbard Vault in Norway (https://www.seedvault.no/)

The Seed Vault is carved into solid rock with storage area located more than 100 meters inside the mountain, and under layers of rock that range between 40 and 60 meters thick. Inside, the seeds are cooled to minus 18˚C.

The Svalbard vault is a real evidence that human kind is preparing the worst that may come upon us in the future. As the world has been historically prone to wars and conflicts, it is imperative that the ecology of the world should be cared for as early as possible. In Hunger, the collecting and storing of seeds indicates not only efforts to advance agricultural engineering, but also a precaution on apocalyptical world in the future. In relation to this, in Blackwell's defence, Hunger is "to comment on what does and does not change about human life with changing leaders and gods—and on the tragedies of mighty civilizations" (Blackwell, 2008, p.134). Published in the time of Iraq war—an armed conflict by a United States-led coalition to overthrow Saddam Hussein government—Hunger also provides a critical view on the world at war and its impact on civilization. It highlights a tragedy not only experienced by the people of Leningrad, but also the people of the world. In this sense, the tragedy in the city of Leningrad is not sui generis, as nowadays war, conflict, and famine—big and small in scale—has become international headline news. With regard to tragedy and terror, Estok (2013) postulates that:

> Terror and tragedy obviously have much in common: both attract and repel, ... both exploit our aversion toward unpredictability (an aversion that is at the core of ecophobia), both stimulate our distaste for violence against our own agency, and both present unequivocal notions of right and wrong. They both also assert assumptions about positions, about what and where we are in relation to other things and concepts (2013, p.2).

In this context, in Hunger, men's aversion toward unpredictability due to the German siege is depicted for instance through Alena's unwillingness to stay alive; she gives up eating, letting her physical condition to continue to drop. Vavilov expresses his distaste for violence by grimly describing how the few survivors of Leningrad turn into murderers for food. Through his narration, Vavilov also shows his notions of right or wrong by contemplating about his affair with Iskra. As a biologist, Vavilov is questioning his authority and his place at the institute and in Alena's life, which can be perceived as a manifestation of his assumptions about his positions and where he is in relation to other things around him.

Tragedy can potentially trigger a certain phobia. In the case of Hunger, there is a certain phobia of losing the seeds by consuming them even though it risks the lives of Vavilov and his circle. The act of collecting the seeds and preserving them is in itself a manifestation of phobia; a phobia on the possibility that the seeds will extinct and have to be genetically engineered in the future. As this is highly relevant to nature and the ecology of the world, such a phobia can be called ecophobia. Ecophobia, as mentioned in the citation, is defined as "an irrational fear (sometimes, of course, leading to a contempt or hatred) of the agency (real or imagined) of nature" (Estok, 2013a, p.74 in Estok, 2013b, p.2). Blackwell recounts that the one thing that triggered her to write Hunger is due to her accidental encounter with Vavilov's story in a publication of the Seeds Savers Exchange. Seeds Savers Exchange happens to be a non-profit organisation that

"conserves and promotes America's culturally diverse but endangered garden and food crop heritage for future generations by collecting, growing, and sharing heirloom seeds and plants" (https://www.seedsavers.org/mission). As such, this organization shares similar cause with the Svalbard global seeds vault. Hand in hand, people are collecting and storing endangered crops for future generations. This may come as a form of anticipation, instead of phobia. Either way, the idea of being precautious underlines this very concept.

Since its first initiation in the 1990s, ecocriticism has been known as a form of literary criticism more informed scientifically by ecology, environmental biology, and geology (Balaev, 2012; Buell, 2011; Fromm, 2012; Glotfelty, 1996; Heise, 2013; Marshall, 2005; Oppermann, 2011; Waage, 2013). As a mode of analysis, ecocriticism can help to comprehend the rise of ecophobia, as "ecocriticism also reflects a striking feature of the modern crisis of the natural, its challenge to the way human knowledge is organized" (Clark, 2011, p.8). Closely related to environmentally oriented developments in philosophy and political theory, like feminism and Marxism, ecocriticism acts as a political mode of analysis. It means that there is always a sense of urgency in it and that it involves a larger, global issue, thus "[e]cocritics generally tie their cultural analyses explicitly to a 'green' moral and political agenda" (Garrard, 2004, p.3). In relevance to this, Clark (2011) states that:

For an environmental critic, every account of a natural, semi-natural or urban landscape must represent an implicit re-engagement with what 'nature' means or could mean, with the complex power and inheritance of this term and with its various implicit projections what of human identity is in relation to the non-human, with ideas of the wild, of nature as refuge or nature as resource, nature as the space of the outcast, of sin and perversity, nature as a space of metamorphosis or redemption. Ecocriticism usually reads literary and environmental texts with these competing cultural conceptions of nature to the fore (Clark, 2011, p.6).

In this context, in Hunger, Leningrad is presented as the site where negotiations between human identity and nature as refuge and resource take place. It can also be perceived as the space of sin and perversity, particularly through Vavilov's reflection on his past engagements with other women.

Since what Vavilov and his team do in Hunger (protecting the seeds and refraining from consuming them) represents a global concern, it can then be perceived that this is the steering issue of the novella. The plot develops its way from present-day New York to past-time Leningrad and back to present-day New York as it is stirred by this issue. Within its course, the plot presents series of juxtapositions between Leningrad and the ancient city of Babylon.

Historicizing the Present: Putting Leningrad into Ancient Babylon Context

Plot wise, the story starts in present time Vavilov's New York apartment, years after the siege. The plot then moves to Vavilov's reminiscence of his bitter experience during the Leningrad siege. "Faced with his own mortality" (Anderson, 2003), Vavilov reminiscences his nostalgic memories on his deceased wife, Alena. Alena, as revealed towards the end of the novella, dies of starvation during the siege. Vavilov's memory on his experience during the siege starts on the 40 days into the 900 days siege, when the collection of seeds stored at the institute are moved to an experimental station in Estonia and are cared for by Leppik, the great director's colleague. Before the seeds are moved, Lysenko, the

great director, has already called the institute Babylon, because it has to be put to an end, saying that "Babylon must crumble", and referring it to "Dust" (Blackwell, 2008, p.23).

This naming progresses in the plot into series of association with the ancient city of Babylon. Vavilov, being on the opposite side of Lysenko, thinks of the naming as a compliment. To Vavilov, the ancient Baylonians are impressive in terms of their breakthroughs in agricultural science. He shares that "[l]ike the members of our expeditions, the Babylonians travelled widely to collect medicinal herbs and unusual fruits" and that they "planted world's first botanical garden" (Blackwell, 2008, p.25). Vavilov is also impressed with the fact that in ancient Babylonia, barley had more value over silver, and that it was the centre of the Babylonians' diet, which "united wealth and weight, [and] joined prosperity and health" (Blackwell, 2008, p.27). In the narratives after this, the mentioning of Babylon or ancient Babylon surfaces over time, placed in juxtaposition with: 1.) Vavilov's memory on his affair with Iskra, 2.) the lion statue over the Catherine Canal, 3.) the stone slabs which are put as foundation cellars of the hanging gardens, 4.) Leningrad's celebration, 5.) Leningrad in general, and 6.) the death of Albertine's parents.

When Vavilov reminisces about his affair with Iskra, he talks about sexual fealty, which he learns is prized by the Babylonians. He says: "Contrary to the imaginative indulgences of Herodotus, the Babylonians prized sexual fealty. Infidelities were punished harshly, but there was room for forgiveness. Though an adulterous wife caught in the act was actually bound to her lover and drowned in the Euphrates, her husband could grant her pardon" (Blackwell, 2008, p.70). By saying this, Vavilov is thinking about his own situation, wondering if he could get away with it the same way an infidel wife is forgiven by the husband in ancient Babylonian time. Another juxtaposition surfaces after Vavilov sees the lion statue over the Catherine Canal. Vavilov states:

> In 1776, South of Baghdad, peasants found the unfurnished figure of a lion amid the ruins of what was once Babylon's Northern palace. This lion stands hard, trampling the hapless man who lies beneath his paws. Unlike the seated lions that gaze so elegantly at the Catherine Canal, the Babylonian statue was made by someone whose gods were intimately, if cruelly, involved with human fate and the lots of individual men (Blackwell, 2008, p.73).

It can be seen that to Vavilov, unlike the lion statue presiding "without interest" over the Catherine Canal, the Babylonian statue bears more meaning. The lions at the Catherine Canal, in a sense, are lacking purpose. They are standing there giving no impact to the passers-by, including him.

Another instance where ancient Babylon is juxtaposed is when Vavilov remembers about Alena's most vulnerable point in time of her descending health. Vavilov talks about the stone slabs that are piled as the foundation of the hanging gardens in ancient Babylon. The stone slabs are laid by slaves who are homesick, not knowing whether or not they will be able to see their wives again. At this point, the narrative highlights Vavilov's mental decline, as paralleled with Alena's physical decline due to starvation. In a different part of the novella, ancient Babylonian tradition is mentioned by Vavilov after a narrative describing him

seeing a woman smoking a cigarette. “The availability of tobacco signaled better times to come” (Blackwell, 2008, p.102) Vavilov thinks. This can be perceived as Vavilov’s optimistic view on Leningrad’s fate in the near future. After this, he talks about the Babylonians New Year’s celebration in spring time known as Akitu; “It was believed that the gods ended each festival by letting human fortunes for the coming year” (Blackwell, 2008, p.103). This event is juxtaposed with Leningrad’s very own anniversary of the October revolution. His new take on the banners from the Gorky Park celebration that says: HE WHO DOES NOT LAUGH, DOES NOT EAT into HE WHO DOES NOT EAT, DOES NOT LAUGH indicates that during the siege, eating causes joy. In other words, eating is the epicentre of everything else, as eating becomes the rarest activity that people do in those difficult times.

The next parallelism is seen when Vavilov juxtaposes the siege of Leningrad with the siege of Babylon. He states: “[The Assyrians’] long and bloody struggles with the Egyptians led to a siege of [Babylon] that lasted almost precisely as long as the siege of Leningrad would, so many years later” (Blackwell, 2008, p.105). At this point of the narration, it is becoming clear why Babylon is significant in the story. Babylon has similar historical experience with Leningrad, thus making the two reciprocal. The last juxtaposition in the narrative is triggered by the death of Albertine’s parents in which Vavilov narrates: “When they spoke of it, and they spoke of it seldom, the Babylonians described the place of the dead as a place where dust is nourishment, clay is food. Convinced that their sins would be punished in this world, this life—whether by men or by gods—they had little use for hell” (Blackwell, 2008, p.108). Alena tries to console Albertine by saying that she will see her parents again, to which Albertine answers: “If anywhere, not here” (Blackwell, 2008, p.108). Here (Leningrad) is opposed to elsewhere, to the place of the dead, which in Vavilov’s defence referring to the ancient Babylonians’ tradition, is where sins are abolished. In other words, in this context, Leningrad is a place where sins are not abolished. In a sense, Albertine implies that she sees Leningrad as hell on earth.

The name Babylon, which according to Lysenko is interchangeable with “dust”, signifies an idea that the institute should exist no more. Yet, towards the end of the novella, the “dust”, brought forth by Vavilov in his words of consolation to Albertine, signifies an element that nourishes, that gives life, which is a complete opposite of what the meaning is conveyed at the beginning. This can be seen as a narrative technique that shows that the story reaches its full circle; what is brought up at the beginning is mentioned again at the end to show how the two complete one grand idea of the story. Since its first mentioning by Lysenko, the ancient Babylon becomes a trope that provides contrasts with Leningrad. The contrasts are present in order to help the narrative work its way in understanding one from the other; Vavilov’s narration tries to make sense of what Leningrad is during the siege compared with the ancient city of Babylon during its glorious time. And this is simultaneously done while Vavilov is reminiscing his past with Alena, which also has to do with his attempt on trying to understand his mortal being that must one day come to an end.

In order to understand the situation in Leningrad, the narrative shows its contrasts to the ancient city of Babylon. Immediately we can see this as narrative pattern that helps the readers interpret what Leningrad is through Vavilov’s

perception. The juxtaposition of the two underlines a contrast between the apocalyptic present and the glorious past. In postcolonial writing, this can be perceived as a form of nostalgic projection of the past, as proposed by Walder (2011). Walder postulates that "[n]ostalgia begins in desire, and may well end in truth. It can, and often does, serve as a key to the multiple pasts that make us who and what we are, for better or worse" (2011, p.3). In this context, in a smaller scale, Vavilov's nostalgic memory of Alena brings him a form of "truth" in the end; a truth that enables him to understand his situation in the world after the siege. Also, in this context, in a bigger scale, the nostalgic memory of Alena in Leningrad gives surface to a narrative construct "that [reaches] back, and forward" (Walder, 2011, p.3) which is symptomatic to postcolonial nostalgia. Walder further states that:

> Like all forms of nostalgia, postcolonial nostalgias have both positive and negative aspects: usually the latter is fore grounded, as the source of an insecure idealism or sentimentality, casting a beneficent glow over past suffering and anxiety; but there is also a positive side, which admits the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way, allowing a potential for self-reflexivity or irony appropriate for former colonial or diasporic subjects trying to understand the networks of power relations within which they are caught in the modern world, and beyond which it often seems impossible to move (Walder, 2011, p.16).

In this context, the juxtaposition between Leningrad and the ancient Babylon in Hunger can be perceived as a form of admitting the past into the present to allow self-reflexivity or irony. Vavilov in this case is the diasporic subject who is trying to understand such networks of power relations within which he is trapped, causing him to become immobile or in a state of paralysis one might say.

Vavilov's self-reflexivity is an attempt of historicizing his present that leads to a more substantial matter: an attempt of historicizing the present Leningrad. By paralleling what Vavilov sees, remembers, and experiences, the narrative is putting Leningrad into ancient Babylon context. Leningrad can be more critically understood by looking at it from the context of the history and tradition of ancient Babylon. It may well be called a longing; a longing for making Leningrad more meaningful. In this sense, the glorious ancient Babylon acts as a trope to the apocalyptic Leningrad. At this point, the intertwining between postcolonialism and ecocriticism forms a mode of analysis termed as postcolonial criticism, which was also once called green postcolonialism. Green postcolonialism, as defined by Huggan and Tiffin (2007, p.10), "brings out a truism that clearly applies to, but is not always clearly stated in, the different strands of both postcolonialism and ecocriticism: no social justice without environmental justice; and without social justice for all ecological beings no justice at all". Postcolonial criticism, on the other hand, "is that form of criticism which appreciates the enduring non-instrumentality of environmental writing, as well as gauging its continuing usefulness in mobilizing individual and collective support" (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010, p.33). Elise Blackwell's Hunger, in this sense, contributes to new perspectives on our current understandings of nature in a way that it showcases

the tragedy impinged by series of devastation and starvation ironically paired with the plentifulness of seeds of life.

Conclusion

From the discussion, it can be concluded that Leningrad and ancient Babylon juxtaposition can be understood as a form of admitting the past into the present to allow self-reflexivity or irony. Vavilov's self-reflexivity, in this sense, is an attempt of historicizing his present, leading to an attempt of historicising the present Leningrad. Parallelism on what Vavilov sees, remembers, and experiences in his self-reflexivity puts Leningrad into ancient Babylon context. All in all, it can be said that the amalgamation of historicizing the present through the longing for a utopic Leningrad with crisis of nature as its background suggests a scene of interplay between the element of the natural within history and the historical aspects of various concepts of nature.

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