

**AN INVISIBLE TERROR OUTSIDE: THE ANXIETY OF
UNCERTAINTY, PANIC AND ISOLATION IN RUMAAN
ALAM'S LEAVE THE WORLD BEHIND**

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Abstract: Today humanity is going through a period of great upheavals and rapid changes in every sphere of life, including the environment, that inevitably lead to general destabilisation and disruptions. In the latest novel by Rumaan Alam, apocalyptic *Leave the World Behind* (2020), a crisis appears to reshape our closest bonds and forge new ones. This story of an invisible terror deals with cataclysmic but mysterious events that shut down the communication networks we over-rely on, and sees an almost overwhelming sense of uncertainty, panic and increasing anxiety. Isolated in the remote holiday house with the Vermont stone kitchen tops and night-lit swimming pool, a couple of New Yorkers and their teenage children are looking forward to taking a rest from the routines of city life when catastrophe strikes. In addition to the major theme of the threat of human extinction, *Leave the World Behind* explores the relationship between class and race and the complexities of parenthood and solitude during an unspecified disaster. Those issues are included in the context of the global problem of anthropogenic impacts on the environment. At the same time, Alam demonstrates how habituation to the ongoing crises in the modern world, including social-ecological transformations, affects the understanding of a severe situation people are facing and ways to prevent it: they have increasing tolerance for the absurd. The suspenseful, provocative and prescient book, *Leave the World Behind*, captures the generalised panic of 2020, the year of a global outbreak of coronavirus. As a kind of end-of-the-world fiction, the novel is full of moments of exquisite recognition and reappraising of our attitudes the article discusses.

Keywords: Anthropocene fiction, blackout, claustrophobia, communication, environmental crisis, safety.

Introduction

Global environmental problems are inextricably linked to human activity and its impact on the environment. Climate change is one of the most severe crises of our time, and it is emerging faster than anyone could guess. The issue of scale is discussed by researchers (Oppermann; Tong) as one of the primary barriers to the conceptualisation of such unquestionably urgent problems as climate change. Wherever you stand on the ongoing debate about whether and to what degree human impacts on the environment, it is undeniable that we interact with time scales beyond our imagination. So, how is one to comprehend the fact that the ecology of the entire planet is changing rapidly from the perspective of a single human person? (Ram para. 5). This question is of interest not only to environmentalists but also to writers who see fiction as a means of warning of a forthcoming tragedy. As the climate crisis becomes more evident, such a kind of climate fiction may help reshape our understanding of nature.

Since the environmental crisis causes anxiety and fierce controversy, the problems of the interaction of nature and society in past decades have been actively transferred to literary works that reflect ideas about the principles of interaction between man and nature, reproducing pictures of the environment that are changing under the influence of anthropogenic factors. Even if the mentioned questions are expressed implicitly, the main idea always remains as follows: Man is a child of nature, therefore the existence of humanity is impossible beyond nature (Guignard and Murphy; Keegan and McKusick). The demand for such fiction contributes to the emergence of new authors. One such writer who has only recently attracted attention to his work is an American writer Rumaan Alam (b. 1977), the author of several novels – *Rich and Pretty* (2016), *That Kind of Mother* (2018) and *Leave the World Behind* (2020). In the article, we focus on the latest novel from Alam, involved in the context of ecocriticism “as a study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist’s praxis” (Buell 430). The environment is present in such a kind of fiction not only as a tool for creating a background but as a specific idea of human involvement in the history of nature.

Leave the World Behind, which was a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction and was assessed to have been included on twenty year-end lists featuring the best novels of 2020, in form and content, resembles a disturbing dream, which echoes with memories, anxiety and confusion in the mind of the reader. The novel with an open end represents the most realistic scenario of the end of the world, as we

believe. The suspenseful, provocative and prescient *Leave the World Behind* differs from most Hollywood disaster films, which are characterised by the rapid development of events. The stunning atmosphere book makes you think about the threats that people face both now and in the future.

The novel begins as a family story slowly turning into intense terror. Wanting to spend some time away from the noisy city, the family couple Clay and Amanda with their two children, fifteen-year-old son Archie and younger daughter Rose, rent a house on Long Island and go on a long-awaited vacation. Determined to have a pleasant rest, they do not notice the signs and feel the changes in the environment. Only at night, when the strangers, who are the house owners, knock on the door, the family learns that there has been a blackout in New York, communication networks are out of work and they have been left alone with an invisible terror outside. So, *Leave the World Behind* creates “a pervasive atmosphere of dread that escalates as the uncertainty of the situation the characters are facing deepens their fears” (Caracciolo, “*Climate Change*” 122). The author does not reveal all the secrets, so his readers have no idea about the causes of the disaster depicted in the novel. Therefore, the readers become co-authors since everyone can invent a plot according to their ideas about the end of the world, their own fears and existing threats, among which ecological ones are certainly the most disturbing. From this perspective, *Leave the World Behind* may be termed a kind of ‘anthropocene fiction’ (Trexler) that concerns anthropogenic climate change and other environmental disruptions, *which are exacerbating climate change, and is written during and about this time.*

Climate anxiety may be involved in such fiction through the “fantasy of survival” (Vermeulen 153) to explore the ways of salvation. According to the World Meteorological Organization, the number of weather-related natural disasters has increased fivefold over the past fifty years. Natural disasters began to occur more often due to climate change and more extreme weather conditions, which definitely affects mental health. The sense of anxiety that permeates Alam’s book extends to all the characters who find themselves in conditions of complete uncertainty. Given the circumstances and duration of this uncertainty, the nature of anxiety changes, which affects the mental health of the characters. Focusing on certain signs of nature, the characters of the novel understand that something is wrong with nature, climatic changes are being signalled. All this actualises internal experiences and, possibly, pre-existing mental health problems, such as pre-existing anxiety

disorders, which may be strongly affected by climate change stressors (Taylor 2).

Alam wrote a revelatory novel about how people cope with the unexpected circumstances of the frightening unknown. In addition to the major theme of the threat of human extinction, which is preceded by a contemptuous attitude to nature, the author explores the problems of racial, gender and class inequality, the relationship between generations and the complexities of solitude. The title *Leave the World Behind* has a double interpretation: literal – to survive, the characters have to leave everything behind and try to stay as long as possible in the place that becomes an island of safety in a collapsing world; metaphorical – to understand the author’s intentions, to feel the atmosphere of the text, to imagine the approach of the disaster, to penetrate the thoughts and fears of the characters, it is necessary to delve into the text, reading the novel thoughtfully and without haste.

Alam wrote his novel before the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, yet it brilliantly captures the feeling of global panic and seems to blend fears about the climate, class inequality, racism and over-reliance on technology. And although during the pandemic, some of those pressing issues slipped into the back of one’s mind, climate uncertainty has intensified. This term is actively discussed in the context of the coronavirus crisis: “[...] the uncertainty of the outbreak and the uncertainty of our climate future have more in common than one may assume at first” (Caracciolo, *Contemporary Fiction* 4). Climate change appears to be a leading concern in Alma’s book since “[...] ecological crisis makes us aware of how interdependent everything is” (Morton 30).

Although *Leave the World Behind* does not directly indicate the catastrophe and its causes, contextually it becomes clear that the terrible events that hit the East Coast are the result of a person’s careless attitude towards nature, society and their loved ones in the end. And when ‘the moment of truth’ comes, questions arise that seem difficult to find answers to. Is there a suitable moment for something terrible to happen? Is there a suitable place for that? Are there people you would like to meet the apocalypse with? The first two questions may require a lot of thought, but everyone knows the perfect company for themselves. It remains only to learn about the world...

A Disaster Novel Without the Disaster: An Uncertain Threat to the Environment

As a preamble to his novel, Alam chose the words from the song *Angela* by Bill Callahan: *Love goes on like birdsong, As soon as possible after a bomb*. The personification of *love* makes it clear that this feeling is the starting point for the rebirth of life, and whether it will be familiar to us, whether people will be similar to the present ones, and whether the planet will be populated by people are the questions that remain unanswered in the novel, but prompt reflection about a probable future.

The personification of natural phenomena allows us to feel a part of nature since “the anthropomorphization of nature can affect people’s response to nature” (Liu et al. 40). Instead, nature remains in waiting, observing the processes taking place: “WELL, THE SUN WAS SHINING. [...] The sun where the sun always was. The sun persistent and indifferent” (Alam 1)¹. Emphasising its steadfastness, the author uses the repetition of *the sun*. Alam accentuates the ability of the plant world to communicate and emotionally perceive events: “The trees were watching, and not impartially. The trees knew what was up. The trees talked amongst themselves. They were sensitive to the seismic reverberations of bombs far distant” (119). In the same way, beasts and birds realise the warnings of impending danger. The observations of wildlife may provide some clues about a threat; such clues as bird migration: “There are no wild flamingos in New York” (182). However, living in cities has led to people losing the ability to see warnings and respond adequately to them: “Indeed, had he looked – closer than it was possible for him to look – he’d have understood the stillness as a response to that wind. He’d have noticed that the insects had gone quiet; he’d have noticed that the birds were not calling” (74). The author emphasises the importance of such a skill by using inversion. Surrounded by noise, the house dwellers no longer enjoy the silence, night sounds are disconcerting with their loudness, reminding of themselves in the dark: “She opened the door, and the night was shocking with noise” (22). Sometimes the desire to merge with nature unexpectedly reminds us of itself and forces us to admit that human, regardless of their achievements, is only a creature of nature: “It was pleasant to sit outside, near naked, the sun and air on your skin reminding you that you’re just another animal” (15). The greatness of nature frightens them, each time making them feel their insignificance: “You felt small, like one of many things, and the least important too”

¹ When referring to Rumaan Alam’s *Leave the World Behind* (2020), only a page number appears hereafter.

(119). However, this does not stop people from reckless acts which bring disaster closer.

The nature cataclysm in the novel is unspecified, but it becomes clear that such a development may lead to the collapse of civilisation. Instead, the representatives of the animal and plant world may only have benefits in such a case: “Maybe they’d be better off without us. Sometimes, sometimes, suicide is a relief. That was the right noun for what was happening” (120). Alam points out that the approaching end of the world is caused by humans. However, the harmful influence that nature has suffered has turned against people. Some actions look like suicide, which the writer directly notes, using the word *suicide*, which is perceived as atonement for what has been committed. The author does not take the side of man, which is emphasised by the repetition of the adverb of frequency *sometimes* and the noun *a relief*. Rhetorical questions make you think about potential consequences:

Did it matter if a storm had metastasized into something for which no noun yet existed? Did it matter if the electrical grid broke apart like something built of Lego? [...] Did it matter if some nation claimed responsibility for the outage, did it matter that it was condemned as an act of war, did it matter if this was pretext for a retaliation long hoped for, did it matter that proving who had done what via wires and networks was actually impossible? [...] Did it matter that machines meant for supporting life ceased doing that hard work after the failure of backup generators in Miami, in Atlanta, in Charlotte, in Annapolis? Did it matter if the morbidly obese grandson of the Eternal President actually did send a bomb, or did it matter simply that he could, if he wanted to? (120)

The repetition of *did it matter* at the beginning of each interrogative sentence is perceived not as a request for information but as a tool that prompts recognition of the evident. A series of alternate events leads to the inevitable, the starting point is the reckless acts to impact climate change. Of particular concern is the pollution of the world’s oceans which causes the extinction of sea creatures, as well as the appearance of unprecedented disasters: “[...] those storms of the century were going to be storms of the decade. That there might have to be a new category introduced to accurately describe the kinds of storms, now that humankind had so altered the ocean” (80). The increase in their number is reflected in names that are first used with the mark *of the century*, later *of the decade*, and the destructive process does not stop. Subconsciously, people feel responsible for what they

have done and therefore try to avoid the danger that lies in the waters, looking for salvation and protection among plants: "It was different than having a home at the sea. The ocean loomed. The trees were protective" (88).

The inability to assess the scale of the disaster and identify the threat causes the characters a sense of panic. The mystery that divided the lives of the characters into prior to and after is a noise: "There was nothing (real life!), and then there was a noise [...]. You could fairly say that their lives could be divided into two: the period before they'd heard that noise and the period after" (127). This noise led to invisible changes and therefore did not cause panic at first: "Something had happened, something was happening, it was ongoing, the noise was confirmation even as the noise was mystery" (127). The noise was so powerful and unheard of that eyewitnesses were at a loss for words to describe it: "Amanda was trying to reconstruct it, but a noise was like pain: your body couldn't remember its specifics" (133). It was unlike anything known before and therefore resembled something supernatural, which the author notes with the noun *mystery*. The unknown gives rise to speculation that the use of weapons could have caused the sound: "It had never occurred to Amanda that a weapon could be sonic, had never occurred to her that a noise might be something to fear" (128). Panic gripped them from the probability that this sound may be repeated: "That was the nature of the noise; it was horror, in some distilled way, in a single, very brief moment" (140).

The disaster was not a sudden one, a series of events led to it: "They were the end of a chain of events invisible until that epiphany had been reached. [...] That's what people did, that's how people learned. Yes. So. The thing was a noise" (127). The actions of people became the countdown to the beginning of the end. The author uses sentence fragmentation to draw the readers' attention to events that do not have a reverse effect and serve to create a suspenseful plot. It is evident that probable human extinction is the responsibility of previous and present generations. Indifference to the signs of nature caused such a threat but the desire to set things right and bear responsibility for future generations makes us human: "It was George Washington and the men of his generation, their mania for plastic and petroleum and money. It was a hell of a thing to not be able to keep your kid safe. Was this how everyone felt? Was this, finally, what it was to be a human?" (188).

Class Inequality in Modern Society: The Power of Stereotypes

Although there is a tendency to deny the division of people into classes, it is worth noting that classism has not disappeared in the modern world:

[...] people hold and use class categories in a consistent manner, and [...] these class categories are primarily related to differences in income and occupation, although education and class background (i.e. the class positions of previous generations) are also relevant. (Stubager et al. 135)

The division contributes to the desire of representatives of different classes to stratify, which is reflected in the choice of social circle, and forms of employment, allowing them to stay in their comfort zone and be surrounded by those who understand their way of life: "The towns were either blue collar and full of Central Americans or prosperous and populated by the white demimonde of plumbers and interior designers and real estate brokers" (4). Such behaviour affects the lives of children whose families have different incomes and opportunities. Parents try to create an appropriate social circle for their offspring to add to the problem: "Rose was too young to understand, but Hazel's father was a director at Lazard; the two family's vacations would not much resemble one another" (5). Tolerant attitudes towards children and adolescents are one of the most important issues for our future. However, some people are ruled by stereotypes about children of the rich: "who would become Republicans, the rich ones who would become drug addicts, the rich ones who would exceed their parents' expectations of them" (81) and the poor "who would prosper and the poor ones who would skulk from Princeton back to East New York" (81). The remarks are made by Ruth, the rich owner of the country house. It looks like she comes from a poor family due to her negative stereotypes referring to children from wealthy families, and positive ones to the descendants of the poor ones. The vocabulary indicates the emotionality of the character. Stereotypical thinking based on emotional behaviour creates a dangerous combination, as both stereotypes and emotions can independently foster prejudice which in turn can lead to discrimination.

A residence plays an important role in determining status as wealthy people tend to create their own communities. The mention of the location of G. H. (George Herman Washington) and his wife Ruth's estate makes an impression on Clay: "Clay was cowed. The Upper East Side was uncool, but still holy. Or maybe so uncool that it was in fact cool" (56). Wealthy people have power which helps them feel

important: "It was less that Amanda was fearsome than that power was" (3). A high position makes it possible for employees to feel like God: "She [Amanda] wanted her colleagues to need her as God wants people to keep praying" (3). Inadequate assessment of power may lead to a desire to dominate. Power and domination have different origins, understandings and impacts, as we have found in Pansardi: "Domination [...] has been mainly defined as a subtype of power, referring to those cases in which power is exercised in a way which is detrimental for the interests of those subject to it" (94). The almost unlimited power of the upper class creates a desire to be a part of 'all-powerful' and leads to pretence and exaggeration of one's capabilities: "You could fake your way to a lot" (97).

Stratification leads to the fact that people in modern society are doomed to solitude and isolation: "The brain abets the eye; eventually your expectations of a thing supersede the thing itself" (3). Deliberately fencing themselves off from acquaintance with their surroundings contributes to the fact that 'boundaries of decency' appear that are difficult to overcome: "Opening a door to an unexpected visitor was without precedent. Urban life contained only the guy who came to deliver an Amazon box, and he had to buzz first" (35). Perhaps this was because "[...] most people cared only for themselves" (88) and did not want to be concerned with the problems of others. Nevertheless, it is through communication people can find help, safety and console: "Touching another human being was a curative" (133). Solitude has a dual nature: it can lead to abandonment syndrome or discomfort due to the presence of other people in one's life: "Solitude made the noise unbearable for Clay, but so did its opposite" (139). Isolation affects a person's psychological health: "There were studies about solitary confinement making you mad. He missed the presence of other humans [...]" (166). People are biologically coded to feel better when they are together. Social contact reduces anxiety or fear of threat and gives a sense of greater security. Solitude and loneliness are interconnected. Murthy notes that nature has made us suffer from loneliness. In pre-historic times, loneliness could be equated with death, because of the inability to survive alone in the wild. Now we live in flats instead of caves or forests but the brain has not stopped sending signals about feeling safe in the circle of your class.

Race and Gender Preconceptions: Intolerance in the Air

Society cultivates tolerance that is "mainly understood as a positive belief in terms of an absence of prejudice, racism or ethnocentrism" (Rapp and Freitag 1033). Even though any prejudice in today's world is

not tolerated in contrast to attempts to overcome stereotypes, there are still people who are inclined to condemn 'otherness'. Such people feel chosen and superior but try to hide their bigotry even from themselves: "Jocelyn, of Korean parentage, had been born in South Carolina, and Amanda continued to feel that the woman's mealy-mouthed accent was incongruous. This was so racist she could never admit it to anyone" (3). Alam repeatedly refers to Amanda speaking about racism. When G. H. and his wife Ruth visit the rented house, she cannot accept them as owners: "This didn't seem to her like the sort of house where black people lived" (38). The author uses the repetition to emphasise the character's emotions towards the owners of the house, linking her prejudice to the latter's race: "But those people didn't look like the sort to own such a beautiful house. They might, though, clean it" (51). In her mind, "[...] they looked more like evangelists than criminals, hopeful pamphleteers come to witness Jehovah" (38). Clay does not show his aggression towards the owners of the house but he is also subject to stereotypes and tries to justify himself: "And he knew that maybe, on some level, he was especially not good with black faces. [...] Like, it wasn't racist, was it, to admit that one billion Chinese probably looked more like one another to him than they did to one another" (53). Their facial expressions change when they saw African-American people on their doorstep. Their confusion was not lost on Ruth: "Ruth didn't need to say anything about the look on their faces when they'd opened the door to them. Guess who's coming to dinner?" (84). The interrogative sentence is the writer's reference to the American romantic comedy-drama film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), which depicts the conflict in a white American family when the daughter of the main characters announces that she wants to marry an Afro-American boy.

The issue of gender equality is the focus of psychologists, sociologists, philosophers and writers. Despite sharp criticism and public reaction, the problem remains unresolved. It is worth noting that sometimes women themselves tolerate this attitude trying to play along with public opinion: "Two different kinds of vanity at odds – a desire to look capable rather than girlish" (20). Trying to prove her independence and to emphasise her ability to make important decisions on her own, Amanda refuses her husband's help with her laptop, reacting quite aggressively to his offer: "'I don't need your help, Clay.' She did not like the implication of her inability" (45). Gender equality is an issue that requires attention from all genders. For example, an inadequate response from women can cause men's reactive abuse: "'You're going to call me hysterical – the word people, *men*, use for women.' Cassandra

had, of course, been right about Troy" (83). Ruth emphasises that it is men who have such stereotypical thinking about women. However, the allusion to the legendary Greek mythological prophet Cassandra, who foretold of the Achaean army that would destroy Troy, suggests the opposite.

In an attempt to distance themselves from the negative consequences of their prejudices, people tend to ignore trouble or loss: "The building lacked a thirteenth floor because that was terrible luck. Simply pretending it wasn't there was better" (84). People are not perfect but instead of improving themselves spiritually, physically and emotionally, they try to find excuses for themselves: "[...] it wasn't fair, not to have a vice. The modern world was so joyless" (98). The statement about the modern world sounds somewhat cynical because each generation may use the same phrase. So, instead of trying to change the unsuitable existing order, it is easier to let things go with the flow.

The Anxieties of Social Life in Isolation: Over-Reliance on Technology

Modern life is associated with the use of communication and social media, which leads to addiction to gadgets. Television is not a priority today as it can be quicker and easier to get the information you need as well as for entertainment, which is provided by smartphones: "'Television is idiotic.' Clay turned it off. He'd rather play with his phone" (31). In previous years there were debates about the safety of gadgets for children and teenagers, today we can see the addiction of representatives of all generations: "People are becoming more dependent on technology than ever before. Today's children and adults are heavily plugged into electronics, which raises concerns for their physical and cognitive development" (Liza et al. 1). The author introduces his characters by depicting a standard situation – a minimum of communication among family members, separation from each other's problems, children's immersion in the world of games and entertainment with permission of their parents: "Archie looked at his own phone, Rose at hers, both with games and parentally preapproved social media" (2). The author depicts children's addiction to gadgets with an apt comparison: "The phones worked on them like those bulbous flutes did on cobras" (3).

Human has lost the ability to survive without gadgets, and travelling without the GPS becomes a real challenge: "It was more than a mile before it turned off toward its home homestead, and by that point Ariadne's thread, or whatever bound them to the satellites overhead,

had snapped” (6). The author uses *Ariadne’s thread* to indicate the difficulties faced by the characters, as this phrase is used to denote a thought or a way that helps to get out of a difficult situation, solve a difficult question, or get out of a confusing situation. Although, at first glance, there is nothing complicated in returning the same way, and “[...] the ability to take written directions to one destination and simply invert them to move in reverse was an obsolete art” (93).

It is the absence of a mobile connection that becomes the first harbinger of the impending disaster. Clay tries to explain the lack of connection through the remoteness of the house but the owner of the property notes: “But I’m not sure if that’s what’s happening at the moment” (40). Amanda was able to read only one message from the New York Times on her smartphone: “Major blackout reported on the East Coast of the United States” (40). There is no clear answer to what happened except the radio message: “This is the emergency broadcast system” (45). It is from this moment that the threat becomes tangible. Later, Amanda manages to see several more messages on her phone screen but the last one remains a mystery to the characters and the readers: “[...] a final ‘Breaking’ followed by nonsensical letters” (72).

Adults experience information hunger if they are unable to receive messages even for a short time: “He [Clay] felt phantom tingles when the phone was not at his side. [...] that was how he did most of his newspaper reading, and staying informed was as worthy a resolution” (64). If this information relates to work processes which are extremely important for a modern person and is denoted by the term workaholism that has variably been perceived in the academic literature as “an attitude, a trait, an obsession and/or compulsion, and as an addiction” (Andreassen 3). People experience almost sexual pleasure in work and a sense of self-importance, such as the protagonist of the novel: “She sat, the engine idling, to see if she had cell-phone service, and the endorphin rush of the arriving emails [...] was almost as sexual as that flutter over the bag boy” (13). This process is addictive due to its simplicity, as the ease with which messages are sent today provokes a simple action of communicating information: “[...] the emails arrived, piling the one atop the other. Forty-one! She felt so necessary, so missed, so *loved*” (21). A number of received messages makes the author feel important which is indicated by the use of italics for the adjective *loved*. On the other hand, this leads to a person losing their own space and the opportunity to relax, receiving messages outside of working hours, which leads to overwork and early burnout.

Blackout, Terror and Indifference: The Apocalyptic Scenarios of Death

Humans' ability to react emotionally to positive or negative changes in their lives differs them from animals. It would seem that the absence of electricity cannot be such a problem, but for a modern resident, it is a sign of comfort and protection: "He had not realized how much light connoted safety, and how much dark its opposite" (65). The mood in society is becoming close to pessimistic, and this is not the author's fiction. One of the largest blackouts in Ukraine on November 23, 2022, is a good example. Most thermal and hydroelectric power plants were damaged as a result of a massive Russian missile attack on energy facilities, caused an emergency shutdown of all nuclear reactors in the country, and stopped generating electricity, affecting people's ability to do their routines and provoking emotional anxiety. The unknown creates fears, and assumptions about what happened do not allow people to feel safe: "A blackout could be something. It could be a symptom of something bigger [...] It could be fallout. It could be terrorism. It could be a bomb" (58). Several sentences with the modal verb of deduction indicate confusion and add rhythm to the message creating a nervous atmosphere.

Large-scale events that affect history are often perceived as incredible as if they could not happen under any circumstances. Sometimes the events resemble the script of a feature film, which at first glance seems fantastic: "It was something from a movie, or the kind of story they didn't want their life stories to be" (109). Watching the dynamic development of events makes for keeping viewers glued, but in real life, people try to avoid disturbing stories which leads to hyper-emotional perception. For many years, the greatest fear of Americans was the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. Therefore, it is often the fear of a repeat of this terrible event that provokes negative emotions: "I was so worried. Of course, we were all remembering 9/11, but it was so much better than that day" (61). The threat from totalitarian countries and their dictatorial regimes led by tyrant leaders is felt physically. North Korea, Iran, and Russia are mentioned in the novel among these countries – "What if it's the North Koreans? That fat one who fed his own uncle to the dogs" (62); "He had his money on Iran, maybe Putin. Not literally so; that was against the law. But he was no fool" (63). The current situation in Ukraine and the threats of nuclear weapons use to make us think about the question that Alam raises in the novel: "How would you spend the last thirty-two minutes: looking for a basement or texting your friends or reading a story to your children or in bed with your spouse?" (62).

Panic can be transmitted to other people, especially if they are emotionally unstable, frightened, or experiencing personal tragedy or loss. When Clay meets the Spanish woman, her nervousness is immediately transmitted to him: "But she was panicked, and she was panicking him. He was lost and wanted his family" (116). The only thing that can help in such a situation is to be distanced from the cause of anxiety: "She was afraid. He should be afraid. He was afraid. [...] He needed to be away from her more even than he needed to be with his family" (117). The parallel constructions and repetition of *to be afraid* create an atmosphere of anxiety and fear. Particularly emotional adolescents suffer from panic: "Compared with children and adults, adolescents also experience more intense emotions in both positive and negative domains" (McLaughlin et al. 404). Increased emotionality prevents them from responding adequately to changes but it helps them to see, feel and understand something unnoticed by adults. Thirteen-year-old Rose was the first to notice something unusual in the behaviour of wild animals, although she could not assess the danger: "[...] every time Rose adjusted her eyes to try to understand what she was seeing, she was seeing something new" (77). Unable, due to her age, to make convincing judgements, the girl reacts to changes that are not evident but are felt emotionally: "[...] Rose felt the change in the day, even if no one else did" (87). Adults also retain animal instincts that help them sense danger but they need to learn not to be alienated from such signs: "Amanda had a feeling like being watched, but there was no one out there watching her, was there? An involuntary shiver at the very idea, then a retreat into the adult illusion of safety" (22).

The topic that evokes the greatest emotional response is death, so Alam uses euphemisms that reduce the awareness of the tragic event and the level of nervousness in society: "Everyone had perished. You heard that rendered as souls, sometimes, which made it sound more grand or old-fashioned or sanctified" (26). The desire to acquire new knowledge indicates human development but the concealment of knowledge about the date of death is instead seen as a blessing since the constant fixation on the last day of life would cause constant panic: "You never know when a time is the last time, because if you did you could never go on with life" (74).

Conclusion

An invisible terror comes out of nowhere and reminds us of our powerlessness in the face of real cataclysms. Alam's *Leave the World Behind* is a story about how our 'normal' is destroyed forever by uncontrollable circumstances, sometimes returning people to their

primitive instincts. The book feels right in sync with 2020 which has taught humanity that disaster can be sudden, unexpected and overwhelming. *Leave the World Behind* summarises all the fears left to humanity by the long period of the pandemic and reinforces them with a special sense of loss and confusion, making clear that only in caring for the world, nature and each other, people have a chance for the future.

Leave the World Behind is not a typical disaster novel, but rather an end-of-the-world novel. An open-ended novel represents the most realistic end-of-the-world scenario. At the same time, it differs from the canonical climate fiction and apocalypse-novel narratives of survivalism. What happens in just a few days to strange families focuses on the minutiae of just one place, just a few characters, and a sense of isolation. Alam depicts the characters in such intimate detail that we can see them as people we know (or ourselves). An unspecified disaster is only a background against which the writer reveals the flaws of the modern world – from class and race inequality (remnants of the past) to a dismissive attitude towards the environment. These create a sense of uncertainty and anxiety about not understanding one's future, even in the near future. From Alam's perspective, a modern disaster consists in the precarity of American life, which leaves us unsure, always, if all can get worse.

In *Leave the World Behind*, this kind of disaster is a force of narrative tension: the readers are eager to learn how people move from the stage of upheaval to the stage of 'stability'. A kind of habituation to the ongoing crises affects the understanding of a severe situation and ways to prevent it. They have an increasing tolerance for the absurd. Alam's achievement is that he was able to see that the traditional construction of the genre, based on the idea of awareness of consequences, no longer makes sense. Today, disaster novels (or disaster novels without the disaster) call for something different, for an acknowledgement that we will not find a new 'normal' even if we hide behind strong walls in the forest. In fact, the disaster happened a long time ago, before Amanda went grocery shopping and the Washingtons left Manhattan, and before Clay submitted his latest piece to the Times Book Review. With the internet outage, the characters are unable to watch the disasters rack up. However, their reactions – fill the hot tub, keep the vodkas on ice flowing – are in no way in line with the scale of what is happening around them. What would it take for them (us) to really panic?

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НЕЗРИМИЙ ЖАХ ЗЗОВНІ: ВІДЧУТТЯ НЕВИЗНАЧЕНОСТІ, ПАНІКИ ТА ІЗОЛЯЦІЇ У РОМАНІ РУМААНА АЛАМА «ЗАЛИШ СВІТ ПОЗАДУ»

Сьогодні людство переживає період великих потрясінь і стрімких змін у всіх сферах життя, зокрема навколишньому середовищі, які неминуче призводять до загальної дестабілізації. В останньому творі Румаана Алама, апокаліптичному романі «Залиш світ позаду» (2020), оприявнюється криза, що моделює наші найтісніші зв'язки і формує нові. Ця історія невидимого жаху оповідає про таємничі катаклізми, у наслідок яких вимикаються надважливі для сучасної людини комунікаційні мережі, та увиразнює майже непереборне відчуття невизначеності, паніки і зростаючої тривоги. Ізольована у замиському маєтку з кухонними стільницями з дорогого каменю і басейном з підсвіткою сімейна пара з Нью-Йорка і їхні діти-підлітки з нетерпінням очікують на початок відпочинку від рутинного життя у місті, коли наближається катастрофа. Окрім головної теми загрози зникнення людства, «Залиш світ позаду» досліджує класові і расові упередження, а також складнощі батьківства і самотності під час катастрофи, яка відбувається навколо, але не називається автором. Зазначені болючі питання включені у контекст глобальної проблеми антропогенного впливу на довкілля. Водночас Алам демонструє, як звання до криз сучасного світу, зокрема соціально-екологічних трансформацій, впливає на розуміння серйозності ситуації, з якою стикаються люди, і шляхів її запобігання: у них зростає толерантність до абсурдних рішень. Напружений і провокаційний роман-передбачення «Залиш світ позаду» фіксує загальну паніку 2020 року, року глобального спалаху коронавірусу. Як своєрідна література про кінець світу, роман сповнений моментів особистих зізнань і переоцінки власних позицій, що і студіюються у репрезентованій статті.

Ключові слова: антропоцен-література, блекаут, клаустрофобія, комунікування, екологічна криза, безпека.