

INSIDE OUT: AN INSIGHT INTO THE IMMIGRANTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR NEW HOMELAND

UDC 314.742(=163.42):82]:323.15

Branka Kalogjera

University of Rijeka

Abstract. *The paper deals with the attitude taken by the immigrant writers, in this case Croatian ones, toward their new homeland and their ethnic identity through the elusive, least objective and most truthful medium of literature.*

Key Words: *American, Croatian, Literature, Ethnic Identity*

There are few places like the Internet for learning how people think. Not long ago, a Swedish friend from a mailing list I subscribe to complained about a local immigrant - Turkish - couple's decision to name their daughter Bajramsa; the story even made it to the news, as this perfectly ordinary Turkish name in Swedish brings to mind thoughts of rubbish and human waste. In our mailing list the man was immediately attacked as racist, xenophobic, for directing the very same complaint against his neighbours. He is xenophobic for denying the immigrants their culture; they are xenophobic for refusing to conform to their new society in any way, even at the expense of their daughter, probably doomed to ridicule until she decides to change her name herself. Even though we argued that children will mock other children regardless of their names and that it is the dominant society's responsibility to teach its young to understand foreign names in the context of their cultures of origin, I found myself intrigued by prejudices held by members of ethnic communities in regard to their new, or not so new homeland.

"When in Rome," as the proverb says, and especially if you plan to stay there, "do as the Romans do." While this exclusive view no longer holds ground in our confused but wonderful world of the 21st century, who has not at some time wondered about incidents caused by conflicting customs and thought "well, if you refuse to adapt, why did you move there in the first place?" It seems as if there is no middle ground when people move from one community to another – either they are eager to blend into the crowd and leave their old identity behind, or they embark upon joining or creating nearly insular outposts of their native land. As my interest lies in literature, I decided to explore the immigrants' perception of their new homeland through this least objective and most truthful medium.

Ways in which immigrant - in this research Croatian-born - writers treat their ethnic identity are three: there are ethnic writers whose interest lies in the problems arising from the aforementioned culture clashes; exile writers who all but ignore the fact that they live and work in a new country and whose thematic focus stays with the largely political issues of their native land; finally, I propose to call them globalists, cosmopolitan intellectuals free of the "baggage" of their formal minority status. These groups often overlap, and the fact that they offer views of three different diasporas - the old, the political and the professional - gives one a priceless view into a mind torn between two homelands.

It is also important to note that literature is not only a mirror of current events and sensibilities, but also has the power to influence and direct that which it reflects. For the longest time the only news Croats at home and abroad had of their twin communities were the almanacs and magazines published by Croatian societies of the United States and elsewhere, most notably what would become the Croatian Heritage Foundation. It did not take long for its publications to review and include the literary works of its countrymen. S. R. Danevski's *Tales* of 1911 portrayed the life of Croats in both their old and their new homeland, with both worlds, unsurprisingly, rich in elements characteristic of the old country. 1920's *Collected Stories from American-Croatian Life* by Stjepko Brozovic and the peculiar autobiography of Louis Sanjek *In Silence* are typical of the production of the time by their raw, realistic approach to the process of integration into the mainstream society, a process that often failed, and not always because the immigrants were willing but shunned. (Kalogjera, *Hrvatski etnički korijeni* 10)

In fact, the very constitutions of those Croatian societies postulated the need to stick together and preserve the customs and language of the old country, which implies reluctance to join the oft-damned "melting pot". Ivan Mladineo notes it explicitly in his *American Almanac* by stating that the Croatian-American experience should be documented in the, I quote, "nightfall of our immigrant existence" because "the immigrants have become too Americanised and too much is lost." (Kalogjera 10) Ante Tresić-Pavičić, author of the *Life of Croats in Northern America* insists in his educational mission to American Croats that there is only one homeland and only one language, and he is not referring to the US and the English language. (Kalogjera 11) This mindset left a trail in the work of Jack London, who in *The Valley of the Moon* writes:

Do you know what they call Pajaro Valley? New Dalmatia. We're being squeezed out. We Yankees thought that we were smart, but the Dalmatians came along and showed they were smarter. (...) Now they own the whole valley, and the last American will be gone. (402)

Joining the American way of life made the talented writer Gabro Carabin feel like no less than a traitor as he managed to leave behind his countrymen in the blue-collared world of exploited factory workers, and enter the white-collared one. By disassociating himself from his community of origin, he notes in his 1912 *Honorable Escape* a growing sense of loneliness and fear coupled with the feeling of being alien to either world, unlike London's prosperous Dalmatians who stick together and begin to supplant the earlier inhabitants together with their language, customs, and nomenclature. (Kalogjera 14)

This challenges Hansen's classic notion of the three-generational process of the immigrants' willful assimilation into the dominant society and the subsequent loss of their children's ethnic identity which is then again researched, re-evaluated and to a degree re-established by their grandchildren. If this schematic was partially true of the early waves of immigration to the Americas, Australia or New Zealand, it is far less so in this age of

globalisation and pronounced multiculturalism. Speaking of multiculturalism, the genial Michael Novak's *Unmeltable Ethnics* identifies many problems stemming from this forced and hasty idea of cross-cultural tolerance. His "nine perversions of 'multiculturalism'" such as anti-Americanism, victimology or ego-boosting justly note that when cultural prejudices and intolerance are analysed, it is often done asymmetrically with deliberate ignorance or denial of the "victims'" contribution to the problem. (xvii)

Not all immigrants wish to join their new society fully; in fact many enter it, as the following examples will show, with a sense of cynical superiority. While this may be a defence mechanism, it can still mould the opinion of those who hear or read it. The early ethnic writers complained about the harshness of life, but the problems they encountered were essentially the same as the ones they had hoped to leave behind, as Croatia of the time had suffered both economic and political troubles. A new problem was language, the most powerful cultural denominator and the main reason for the insularity of the early ethnic communities.

The choice of language is an indicator of the character of one's integration. There is the insistence on using the language of the old country, or a nostalgic and mostly cosmetic use of random words or phrases - some third or fourth generation writers actively seek to learn the language of their grandparents - or a complete renunciation thereof, sometimes due to habit and practicality, sometimes for less prosaic reasons. Names have an added political weight, as Bajram's parents are certainly aware, and in stark contrast to the displays of xenophobia mentioned at the beginning, there is a complete acceptance of one's new society and its dominant language, culminating in the act of cultural surrender by changing one's name. Poles, Novak writes, were made to feel apologetic about their difficult names. While Croatian writers working in the English-speaking world often agree merely to alter the spelling of their name, some take it further: Vladimir Gvozdanović changed his name - to be effective both in the States and Croatia - to Vladimir Peter Goss, adopting also the Anglo-American tradition of pronouncing middle names. Your name is who you are and giving it up is a primeval, magical act of surrendering a part of your nature, in this case ethnicity. It is interesting to note however that Croatian characters in the said writers' stories, immigrants like themselves for equally varying reasons, regularly have unmistakably Croatian or generally Slavic-sounding names.

How do the ethnic, exiled and globalist immigrant writers of today handle the issues of behavioural and linguistic integration or the refusal thereof? It is fortunate that each of the three most prominent Croatian-born writers has a different profile and a different milieu.

Vladimir P. Goss lives and works in the academia, and not even his excursions into journalism rid his style of a refined sense of observation borne out of his background as a connoisseur of art and literature. In his short story collection *From Both Sides of the Ocean* he approaches both of his homelands with simultaneous distance and good humour. Considering himself a citizen of both Croatia and the United States he is well acquainted with their respective quirks, and delights in satire - mostly mild but sometimes unnervingly sharp; one of his targets however remains the culture clash, comedy or tragedy arising from the two societies' unbridgeable gaps. Goss makes one suspect that they are simply not able to understand each other, nor will they be. His explorations of cultural differences and the improbability of communication range from romantic encounters to the idiosyncratic dynamic of the white-collared world, but seldom straying outside his intellectual milieu. Immigrants like him are considered exotic and intriguing, while they

in turn consider Americans juvenile and amusing - it makes one think of a zoo in which everyone is at the same time a spectator and exhibit, but nevertheless divided by strong, if transparent, walls.

Janko Deur's *American Stories* are despite their title also involved with both Croatia and the United States, but Deur's world is nowhere as light and capable of self-irony as Goss's. He writes about the many immigrants of Brooklyn and their descendants who are unable and often unwilling to join the Anglo-Saxon mainstream. He ridicules the notion of the American Dream in a story of a Dalmatian who goes to the States to get rich so that he could build his dream house in Dalmatia; his hero has no intent of becoming American - the country is but a vast ATM. The house ultimately proves a disaster, and tragedy is a constant in Deur's prose. "New York winters," he writes,

have a special effect on the newcomers. Direct, one could say. The winter draws them out, but only as far as their meeting places. Places where they can talk in their mother tongues, taste food from their common kitchen (...) Often they come there just to listen to others' stories: how they came to New York, how long they'd been in New York. There are such group oases all over the city. After all, New York rests on American soil but it is also an island floating in international waters. (212)

An island of islands, one could say. Deur sympathises with those of his fellow immigrants, and there are many, whose bodies live and work in the States but whose souls - Deur's favourite word - belong to Croatia, the only name to merit the title of "homeland". One should also note the absence of the word "American" in regards to the characters of outwardly *American Stories*.

Josip Novakovich takes on a complex role of a chronicler of both the ethnic and the exile experience. When Goss writes about his oeuvre - the writers also rely on each other for promotion - he introduces the author as an "American, born in Croatia by chance" (215). Here is a writer of ethnic origin who, although he continues to find inspiration in his immigrant countrymen - exotic and intriguing as they are - all but renounces the Croatian half of his identity. He does state that he feels American when in Croatia and Croatian when in America, but adds that "a hyphen connects those two cultures which will never merge in me, but will leave me forever suffering with multicultural schizophrenia, or bicultural psychosis" (Kalogjera, *Pisci* 36). Despite his topical focus on Croatia and passionate political views he holds in regards to it - as does Deur - he seems to be on the other extreme of the spectrum of xenophobic to xenophilic perceptions of the new homeland. Novakovich's homeland is America and his previous milieu is little more than a source of plots for his finely crafted stories. They especially shine with occasional gems illustrating unexpected results of the ethnic communities' cultural insularity. *The Enemy*, the closing story of his 1998 collection *Salvation and Other Disasters*, tells of a curious comradeship between flatmates by necessity, a joke-inviting line-up of a Serb, an Albanian Muslim, a Pole and a Croat. "My roommates and I," the narrator concludes,

"did what our Eastern European totalitarian systems failed to do: develop a workable communist system" (188).

It is a situation worth of Gabriel Garcia Marquez: immigrants from countries of traditional enmity come together in their inability to merge with the dominant Anglo-Saxon society. While this is admittedly not a situation representative of "real life", it does evoke Novak's dismissal of the belief that ethnic consciousness is illiberal, divisive, and breeding hostility. He however does not support either extreme: neither that of forced unifying as a mistaken idea of unity, nor that of the ethnic communities' unquestionable

demand for uniqueness. The word "question" is the key, as the only way to establish a working greater community is to constantly question and if necessary redefine concepts of identity and belonging, even if it leads to such previously unthinkable systems such as Novakovich's "communism" in the heart of Queens. According to D. A. Hollinger's *Postethnic America*, the American society is fragmenting into competing ethnic enclaves of which each is concerned with its own well-being (65). When we think of the concepts of xenophobia and xenophilia and how they mould a country's (multi)cultural identity, it is imperative to consider their occurrence in all the communities involved. I speak as a Croat and I am not overly happy with any tale of exclusivism, be it propagated by the mainstream or by the immigrants; there are few things more dangerous than subscribing any two groups to the fixed roles of victim and oppressor. The situation is more complex than that - as it should be - and the least we can do to better it is to approach it objectively and through as many views available, fiction or non-fiction, because they too, as most things in today's world, blur and merge.

WORKS CITED

1. Berglund, Joakim. "Flicka får heta Bajrams." *Sydsvenskan*. 12 Apr. 2004. 9 May 2004. <<http://w1.sydsvenskan.se/Article.jsp?article=10080776>>
2. Deur, Janko. *Priče iz Amerike*. Tomislavgrad: Knjižnica naših ognjišta, 1994.
3. Goss, Vladimir P. *S obje strane oceana*. Zagreb: Naklada Jurčić, 2001.
4. Hollinger, D. A. *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism*. New York: Basic Books, 1996.
5. Kalogjera, Branka. *Hrvatski korijeni etničkog pisca Edwarda Ifkovića*. Rijeka: Hrvatsko filološko društvo, 1997.
6. *Pisci između dviju domovina*. Rijeka: Hrvatsko filološko društvo, 2003.
7. London, Jack. *The Valley of the Moon*. IndyPublish.com, 2002.
8. Novak, Michael. *Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics & Culture in American Life*. Somerset, NJ.: Transaction Publishers, 1996.
9. Novakovich, Josip. *Salvation and Other Disasters*. Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1998.

IZVRNUTI RUKAVI: KAKO IMIGRANTI DOŽIVLJAVAJU NOVU DOMOVINU

Branka Kalogjera

Rad se bavi stavom koji pisci-imigranti, u ovom slučaju hrvatski, zauzimaju prema svojoj novoj domovini i sopstvenom etničkom identitetu, kroz neuhvatljiv, najmanje objektivan, a opet najistinitiji medijum – književnost.

Ključne reči: američki, hrvatski, književnost, etnički identitet