

FICTION FOR ADULTS PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL AND INTRACULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract. *Intercultural and intracultural dialogue have become increasingly important in the 20th century society and the two forms of multicultural communication are repeatedly reflected not only in children's literature but also in mainstream fiction. Even though today it seems that more research related to the depiction of multicultural situation focuses on the visual media, the impact of literary texts on audiences is still so strong that the analysis of classical works of multicultural literature remains essential. Hence, the goal of this paper is to establish how literature aiming at mature adult readers can contribute to sensitization to multicultural communication. The issue will be tackled by focusing on Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) which is considered as one of the classics of multicultural fiction in English and was translated into several languages. This paper first analyses the multicultural issues presented in this literary work and then establishes to what a degree the presentation of the issues related to the 1930s in the United States of America can still foster multicultural awareness. The results of this study reveal that the elaboration of all fictional entities promotes intercultural awareness of mature readers and advocates intercultural and intracultural understanding.*

Key words: *Fiction for adults, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, intercultural, understanding, to promote, intracultural, dialogue, multicultural identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary analyses of media messages reveal that presentation of encounters between different cultural groups appears in various mass media, however, messages promoted by visual media seem to be paid much more attention to than the ones that can be uncovered in literature. On the other hand, the term 'multicultural' tends to be used when talking about dialogues between people belonging to various cultural groups, therefore it is appropriate to define at the very beginning the terms 'intercultural' and 'intracultural' used in the title of this paper. According to cultural theory, the term 'multi-

cultural dialogue' has been seen as the covering expression for two types of contacts; the ones taking place between various cultural groups, which are identified as 'intercultural' or 'cross-cultural', and the ones occurring within one cultural group and therefore called 'intracultural'. Even though the two aspects of the dialogue are equally important, intercultural dialogue tends to attract greater attention on international level. For example, the year 2008 was proclaimed The European Year of Intercultural Dialogue, and what is of particular interest in our context is that one of the aims of the proclamation was to inspire people to tolerance and mutual respect "which are prerequisites for intercultural dialogue" (http://ec.europa.eu/culture/portal/events/pdf/proposal_en.pdf). Obviously, promotion of intercultural dialogue concerns all generations and since literature has been acknowledged as one of the sources of inspiration for adults it is expected also to sensitise readers for intercultural and intracultural issues. Among these is the necessity of rising intercultural awareness. If literature has the potential to help us see the human dimensions of 'the encountered other' because it can help us "to respond fully to the singular otherness of the other person (and thus render that otherness apprehensible)," as Derek Attridge puts it in his work *The Singularity of Literature* (32), it means that it facilitates the process of accepting the other as an individual. At the same time literature should alert readers to all those who are in one way or another different from the readers themselves. Literature thus encourages inter- and intracultural awareness. The ultimate result of intercultural awareness is the creation of the atmosphere of mutual respect which is a prerequisite for real intercultural dialogue.

Nowadays this atmosphere leading to successful cross-cultural communication is to be created by the adults who are in the positions of power and decision. The adults of today are those whose influence and impact on the society will be exerted longer than those of previous generations, due to the existing demographic trends. Current generations are the first to be faced with the requirement of life-long learning policies and hence with the need to reassess their standpoints and to adapt. However, like all previous generations, they can also learn from literature. By reading literary works they can combine the pleasant and useful: discover the singularity of the connection between society and literary texts and consider the inspiration that fiction may bring to their vision of reality. Hence, it is no wonder that nowadays when most countries have known the impact of multiculturalism, "multicultural literature remains one of the sources through which issues related to intercultural communicative competence can be successfully addressed" (Mazi - Leskovar, 278).

One of the monumental classics of multicultural fiction globally is Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). At the start of the 21st century, the Association of American libraries proclaimed this book as the bestseller of the 20th century. The novel enjoyed popularity with both professional audiences and with the reading public from its publication, and in 1961 the author was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1962 the story was made into a major film. On the cover page of the First Perennial Classic edition, published in 2002, it is stated that the bestseller was translated into more than forty languages and sold more than a million copies worldwide. However, the success of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is only a repetition of the acknowledgement that multicultural literature received at the start of the 20th century when Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin or Negro Life in the Slave States of America* (1852) was proclaimed the 19th century American bestseller. If Harriet Beecher Stowe's book started raising the awareness of multicultural issues, Harper Lee's masterpiece showed that in the

subsequent 100 years American has become ready for forthcoming radical changes. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written in Alabama in the time when the Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King started questioning the basic multicultural texture of the USA. Even though the novel was quite timely at the date of its publication, its international success clearly proves that the text displays features that may be applicable universally to different human conditions cross-culturally.

The aim of this research paper is therefore to analyse *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the light of multicultural issues that address such a large reading public belonging to a gamut of cultural backgrounds and traditions. Moreover, the object of this contribution is to research how intercultural and intracultural awareness of adults are fostered in this novel. Hence, the fictional entities which are related to the concepts of identity and the perception of culture will be highlighted.

FICTION FOR ADULTS AND THE ISSUES OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Culture has many definitions and it has been acknowledged to be one of the most difficult concepts to define. Moreover, the definitions often seem to contradict themselves. For example, the view of seeing culture as a kind of means used by individuals use to structure and express their experience conceptually so that belief, knowledge, behaviour can be transmitted from one generation to the next, appears to contradict the vision that »culture is not the script which determines how its members have to act, but rather contains a wide variety of beliefs and values« (Bredella, 78). The more recent definitions of culture tend to stress in particular its role in communication (Tomalin and Stempleski, 2008) and this pinpoints the crux of the challenges in intercultural and intracultural communication. Literature presenting communication issues in such situations is often referred to as 'multicultural and it is primarily fiction about cultural identity and fluctuation of culture.

Cultural identity in this context refers to individual and ethnic identity and in the analysis of this novel this theme will be tackled by applying Stuart Hall's and Werner Sollors' theories. Cultural identity has emerged as a political concern highlighting the position of marginalized groups, as for example, African - Americans, if we restrict our perspective to the situation constructed in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Since the deconstructive critique has established itself, the view that no identity is entirely stable has been widely accepted. Terms such as "Americanness and blackness", to enumerate only a few of those concepts related to the identity issues presented in the selected novel, are thus viewed as being subject to continual change. Culture is consequently seen as a place where identities are not only formed but also contested. Accordingly, the concept of identity is, by its very nature, subjected to questioning. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall claims in his *Questions of cultural identity* (1996) that: "Identities are never unified and, in late modern times, they are increasingly fragmented and fractured positions" (Hall 1996:4). This is another confirmation that identities are wholly socially constructed and that there is always the possibility of multiple and shifting identities.

The concept of cultural identity has several facets; however, with respect to the identities which are highlighted in the novel of our interest, only the personal and ethnic identities will be put in the fore. Personal identity will be viewed also in the light of Werner Sollors' theory about the various types of links which determine the individual's

relationship to a particular culture. Sollors' interpretation of consent and descent appears to be most suitable for the analysis of the relationships presented in the novel. Sollors uses the term descent in compliance with the general usage defined in Brown's *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as "the fact of descending or being descended from an ancestor or predecessor" (643). Descent relations thus reveal the person's origin. Sollors' term consent relations, on the other hand, expresses the relations that are not determined by nature or birth but by environment and individual choices. These encompass both the ones based on voluntary agreement and those based on acquiescence. Within the context of the novel in question, consent relations appear to be of particular importance since they are testimony that we, humans, are capable of acting "as mature free agents and 'architects of our fate'" (Sollors, 1986: 6).

Research confirms that ethnic identities are constructed through a complex interplay between 'us and them'. "Only in relating to me is the other, and its otherness is registered" (Attridge, 30) in the way I react. The complex notion of 'us' and 'them' is thus based on the foregrounding of various aspects of existence and experience, e.g., the long-standing allegiance to a region, shared history and tradition. However, mobility, which is not an exclusive feature of modern times, has set the ground for the changes of cultures which lead to potential alterations of individual and ethnic identities. These changes, generated by inner and outer factors, have been identified with different terms. Stuart Hall has developed the concept of fluidity of cultures in his study *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Since then the concept has been recognised by cross-cultural research which confirms that culture is not rigid but subject to alterations. It does not only change in time, it is a heterogeneous whole since decisions and actions in a culture are often contested. Culture is not uniform, it contains a wide variety of beliefs and values often "interlocking, overlapping and contradictory" (Attridge, 21). Hall developed his theory on the basis of research into diasporic situations; however, the study of multicultural literature has proved that Hall's system is applicable also to the literary context. It will therefore be applied to the selected mainstream novel.

THE CASE OF *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*

The storyline and cultural awareness

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* has become an outstanding example of multicultural literary works. Due to the variety and complexity of the multicultural relationships that it illustrates, it falls into the category of multicultural books that represent "distinct cultural groups through accurate portrayal and rich detail" (Yokota 1994, 212 – 219). At the same time it stands among literary texts which are about members of groups considered to be outside the socio-political mainstream. Consequently the text offers a repository of motifs building the themes of cultural identity and of fluctuation of culture. It is told in retrospect by the adult Jean Louise Finch, whose nickname during the period of the story, the 1930s, when she was aged between six and nine, is Scout. Hence, the complexity of the multicultural aspects of the novel gradually reveals itself through the narrator's perception of society and of the perspective she affords us of her father's standpoints.

The fictitious location presented in the narrative, which is set in Alabama, is called Maycomb. The narrator's father, Atticus, is a lawyer who has entrusted the care of Scout and her brother Jem to a black housekeeper Calpurnia. In the town, which is culturally

split between the white and the black, Atticus is appointed to represent a black, Tom Robinson, who is falsely accused of raping and beating a white woman. Scout and Jem have to face a barrage of racial insults and therefore get increasingly involved in the goings on. The pre-trial atmosphere gradually uncovers the prejudices on which most of the contacts between the two races are based. The legal process itself proves that the legal and social system prevent fair trial. Tom is convicted even though Atticus proves that he could not possibly have committed the crime. Despite the fact that Atticus has foreseen this conclusion, he uses the opportunity to pinpoint indirectly to the real offender, the accuser's father. Humiliated, the white man vows revenge. However, when he tries to kill Scout and Jem, he succeeds only in severely injuring Jem. Before being able to realise his plans, he himself is killed by the neighbour of the Finchs', a reclusive man who has followed the multicultural clashes without actively intervening before the crucial moment. The children are rescued and they are given the opportunity to understand that there is a larger group of people who supports Atticus acting and secretly share his perception of the world. Thus by the close of the narrative, the children have begun discovering also more positive aspect of Maycomb; also the adults, the grown up inhabitants have learnt the lesson that Atticus gave everybody in the town. It is not only the children who know that segregation is legal in the country and who have to show respect for the equality-based education which is a rule at home. Also several adults have to live the dichotomy between what is permitted by the law and what they consider to be moral and humane. A few adults, for instance Dolphus and Calpurnia, openly show that the black and the white cultures complement each other. For Scout and Jem race has nothing to do with the real evaluation of the personality of an individual and the principle of empathy is not restricted to the racial issues but is a guideline to observe when considering others. Atticus repeatedly teaches them that "you never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—[...] until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (33). Because he himself gives an example of this conviction by his everyday behaviour, the children try to practice this principle. However, the ethical standards that Atticus has set, are high and their realisation has to be monitored by Calpurnia, another adult who is able to show empathy also towards the ones who behave contrary to the standards in which she believes.

The theme of race and intercultural and intracultural awareness

Scout has experienced multicultural environment from her tender childhood and she used to believe that she has learnt the different ways a person needs to respect till the Robinson's trial has been announced. The expectation of the great event brings a new polarisation between the white and the black section of the population and it thus uncovers a part of the hidden structure of the place.

The pre-trial period and the trial itself thus become an important eye-opener for Scott, her brother Jem and for Dill, a friend from Meridian. It is not only Dill, the outside, who needs the explanation of the interracial situation in order to see what is really going on in the trial. Scout, as an insider, also needs a thorough explanation about the societal structure. Firstly, the children learn that the white community is not homogenous: class is a big separator within it. The economic factor is a strong divider and there is almost no dialogue between the two social groups. The intracultural communication is almost non-existent. The rich inhabitants look with disdain at the poorer and show strong suspicion

of the newcomers who have changed the social landscape of the place. Adult readers notice that also the black community is divided in groups and that there are considerable differences with regard to issues related to the dialogue with the whites. Secondly, the children learn that the town is not divided only in the white and black communities. A white man who has followed the trial, Dolphus Raymond, reveals to them the existence of Mulattos. The offspring of parents who belong to the white and black races are treated as nobodies. Even though Raymond feels disdain for "the hell white people give colored folks, without even stopping to think that they're people, too" (229) and accordingly prefers to live in the black community, he blames also the black community for its attitude towards the biracial children. "Colored folks won't have 'em because they're half white; white folks won't have 'em because they're colored, so they're just in-betweens, don't belong anywhere" (183). Mixed-race children do not belong anywhere. The society which has elaborated strict rules for the whites and the blacks has excluded biracial children from social life. They are invisible in the social structure because they embody the real possibility of bridging the gap between the two races which are kept apart due to the societal norms. An outsider thus helped children uncover the real cultural landscape of their place.

Thus Scout not only learns how important it is to be a member of a community. In addition, she understands that individual identity within a family is not necessarily uniform, since race as a cultural factor is not obvious. The children of bi-racial parents may appear to belong to either the white or the black race but their appearance does not always tell the whole truth about their person's racial features. On the other hand the protagonist is also informed about the societal viewing of race, since a single drop of black blood seems to suffice to declare a person as black. Hence, the children have to accept the fact that the notion of race is constructed in place and time. Accordingly, Scout and Jem become curious about their own descent. When informed that perhaps in the distant past their family might have had some black ancestors, they are reassured and feel even stronger empathy with the blacks. Their consent relations with the black community appear even more justified to them and they feel as if they have reconstructed the image of their personal identity. Nevertheless, Calpurnia, who is also aware of the importance of the ties with one's own race and tradition, does her best to educate Atticus' children in the culture of the white group.

The characters and intercultural awareness

Most fictional characters in the novel are adults, however, there is a group of three children that has a specific role in this work which addresses mature readers. Despite their young age, the children can be considered promoters of intercultural awareness due to their critical and enquiring nature. Dill, the outsider, the one who is not really from the place even though he feels sympathy with his Finch friends, makes Jem and Scout reflect about the intercultural aspects of Mycomb. When he asks them about the causes and reasons of events and ways of acting, they have to acknowledge that their familiarity with the issues is only superficial. Jem, who in the course of the story reaches the age of 13, tries to understand the real nature of multicultural gaps and clashes and to put it into simple language in order to be understood by the two younger children. The boy attains the status of a young adult and in his wish to be like his model father he tries to put in practice the communication precepts he learnt from his father. Scout is the main protagonist,

yet her narrating voice is the voice of an adult who reconsiders the events lived as a child. Her narration is thus filtered by her adult experience and cannot avoid some impacts of her maturity. Her standpoint is therefore extremely interesting for adult readers.

The novel brings a whole panoply of grown-ups representing various cultural communities and different standpoints with respect to the cross-cultural dialogue and varied degrees of multicultural awareness. Taking the intercultural competence into account, the most influential adult characters are: Atticus, Calpurnia and Dolphus Raymond. The two adult characters at the extreme poles of the line of cross-cultural encounters are Calpurnia and Dolphus. They both foster multicultural awareness, each in a particular and specific way. Calpurnia as a black woman spends most of her time in the house of a white family where she has the function of a substitute mother. She is self-confident and is respected by the family she works for. She likes the children whom she refers to as "my" when she talks to the other members of the establishment. Her identity is obvious, she is versatile in the white and the black cultures and she is culturally aware: she knows how to adapt to her environment in order to enable the best communication possible. By practising openly the two cultural codes and by living with the family she can become a model for the white girl. Raymond, on the contrary, has to play a drunkard in order to protect his family and himself from the vengeance of the governing white community. Knowing the values of the whites, he has to accept his self-imposed outsider's position in order to be able to live in the black community. His respect for Atticus makes him reveal his real nature to Scout and Jem. By being honest with them, he gives them the most important lesson on fluctuation of culture, on construction and reconstruction of identity, on the importance of consent relations. He is the one who explains to the young fictional characters that community is vital for the survival of an individual. His sway of coping with the social exclusion of his mulatto children shows that he knows that the level of multicultural awareness depends on various factors and that it cannot be prescribed by authorities. Besides, his testimony proves that intercultural dialogue is possible also when the societal conventions are created by groups which are not in favour of cross-cultural exchange. If Calpurnia appears to accept the status quo of the society she lives in, Raymond questions it and with his 'subversive' lifestyle prepares its collapse.

Atticus in his role of a father and a lawyer seems to harmonise both attitudes. He is not only aware of the intercultural situation of his place, region and country but also discusses it when asked, even if the question is put by his children. He speaks to his children in an adult-like manner and he teaches them the art of survival in their specific intercultural context. He believes in the success of the art of compromise and peacemaking. In his calm way he tries to make it clear that the prerequisite for successful dialogue is the awareness of the interlocutor. For him this means above all to be aware of the possibility to adopt the standpoint of the other. The way he instructs Scout how to communicate with her teacher who is a newcomer in Maycomb shows that he considers cultural background important. His fostering of intracultural and intercultural dialogue is effective because he is not prejudiced and because he respects people on the basis of their personality and not their race or social status. It is significant that he does not so much fight for Tom because he is an African American, but because he is convinced that the black man is wrongly accused. His great speeches at the court are revealing for the white and the black community and his ability to admit to his children that he has been fighting a battle that he knows in advance to be lost is an important message for adult readers of the novel.

CONCLUSION

The novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written in a very specific multicultural context, the period when the black section of the American nation rose in a peaceful way in an attempt to change the inhuman circumstances which had drastically marked not only the identity of Afro-Americans but also the identity of the rest of American citizens. In order to address her audience, Harper Lee spoke about a fictitious place, within a narrative located in a real state of the American South. She highlighted the unique intercultural and intracultural contexts typical of the chosen region in the first half of the 20th century. These facts could have trapped the text between the steps that America had to make in order to enable its citizens to engage in the intercultural and intracultural dialogues. However, the artistry of the author created a narrative that surpasses the geographical and temporal borders of the publication of the novel. With its multi-layered text, the book can address both mature and educated readers and thus displays several lessons on intercultural and intracultural communication.

The book can be read as a story of growing up in adults help a white girl gradually unveil the intercultural situation between the whites and the blacks and the intracultural situation within each of these groups. However, even as a coming-of-age novel, the book is primarily a story about cross-cultural encounters between the members of two races which, despite the fact that all are citizens of the same state and inhabitants of the same place, seem not to have much in common. In this case the novel becomes above all a narrative of fluctuation of culture concerning primarily racial and linguistic issues and the construction and deconstruction of identity. This reading will highlight the role of those adults who enter into contact with members of the other group – above all the situations of Calpurnia and Dolphus. The first is put into the limelight as a black woman proud of her tradition and willing to make this experience available to the Finch children. Her familiarity with the two cultural codes makes her an accepted go-between the two races: she stands out because she shows respect for the background of all individuals. Her behaviour confirms that she believes that each community has the right to develop its culture and that each individual within a group has the right to remain unique. Dolphus, a white man who is a loser in the eyes of his source community, is highlighted as the one who confirms that the fluctuation of cultures is a fact, regardless of the attitudes displayed by individual members of the communities. His revealing explanation of the racial landscape and intracultural situations identifies him as a severe critic of the society who can make readers rethink their consent relations within their specific cultural landscape.

Hence, *To Kill a Mockingbird* can be read also as a story of the challenges that every human being has to encounter in order to meet the 'other'. Then the text may thus turn into a narrative that speaks about intercultural and intracultural awareness in its wider sense and consequently about all possible human encounters. Such a reading can elicit and support the identification of a perennial theme of human communication. The reader can discover the brilliancy of the interrelation between the theme of intercultural communication between two races – the novel's mimetic aspect; and the way the theme is expressed through the story and the characters, through the setting and the atmosphere – through the novel's creative-imaginative aspect. The interplay of these major features of this literary work constitute the literary value of the novel (Lamarque and Olsen, 449) which can relate to any cross-cultural situation where "the 'other' is in question and where the 'I' has to adjust to the 'other' in order to acknowledge it" (Attridge, 30).

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KNJIŽEVNOST ZA ODRASLE I PROMOVISANJE INTERKULTURALNOG I INTRAKULTURALNOG RAZUMEVANJA

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Interkulturalni i intrakulturalni dijalog u društvu dvadesetog veka postaje sve važniji, pa se ova dva oblika multikulturalne komunikacije stalno reflektuju ne samu u literaturi za decu već i u opštoj književnosti. Premda se čini da većina istraživanja posvećenog multikulturalnosti ima u vidu vizuelne medije, uticaj književnih tekstova na čitalačku publiku je još uvek tako snažan da je i dalje analiza klasičnih dela multikulturalne književnosti od suštinskog značaja. Prema tome, cilj našeg istraživanja je da ustanovimo kako literatura usmerena ka zreloom čitaocu može dovesti do pojačanog osećaja za multikulturalnu komunikaciju. Ovom problemu posvećujemo se koriteći roman "Ubiti pticu rugalicu" autorice Harper Lee (1960) za koji se govori da je jedan od klasika multikulturalne fikcije na engleskom jeziku, prevedenom na mnoge jezike. Prvo analizujemo multikulturalne teme koje se mogu naći u ovom romanu, a potom razmatramo stepen u kome se problemi S.A.D., tridesetih godina prošlog veka mogu naći kao pokretači multikulturalne svesti. Rezultati naše studije otkrivaju da kod zrelih čitalaca razrada književnih likova podstiče interkulturalnu svest, te podstiče interkulturalno i intrakulturalno razumevanje.

Ključne reči: *književnost za odrasle, "Ubiti pticu rugalicu", interkulturalno, razumevanje, podsticanje, intrakulturalno, dijalog, multikulturalni identitet*