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ON THE CROATIAN BORDER – CHARACTER REPRESENTATION THROUGH LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE NOVEL *CIGANIN, ALI NAJLJEPŠI*

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Abstract

With his novel *Ciganin, ali najljepši* [Gypsy, But the Fairest of Them All], whose first edition was published in 2016, Kristian Novak added his voice to the debate about the contemporary situation in the society haunted by transitions, migration, corruption, intolerance, and identity questioning. Assuming that various identity categories, such as culture, heritage, language, religion and so on, are the building blocks of cultural identity, the question is to what extent cultural identity has the ability of self-determination and existence, and to what extent it is dominated by other identities. The topic of this research paper is centred around the literary presentation of Sandi, a fictional character, through the prism of linguistic and cultural identity. Even though he was, tentatively speaking, presented as a typical Roma man from a rural community in Međimurje, a representation of a new and different identity, shaped in deviation of the established ethnic boundaries, resides deep within him.

Keywords: character, culture, identity, Kristian Novak, language

Introduction

Contemporary Croatian novelist Kristian Novak is the author of several novels (*Obješeni* [The Hanged], 2005, *Črna mati zemla* [Dark Mother Earth], 2013, *Ciganin, ali najljepši*, 2016, *Slučaj vlastite pogibelji* [The Case of My Own Downfall], 2023) among which *Ciganin, ali najljepši*

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holds a prominent place in the literary landscape as a point of reference for Croatian prose in the early 21st century. With his choice of topics, unique characteristics of his style, his in-depth character psychology, and the complexity of his narration, this author has become “an important poetic turning point after 2010” (Pogačnik, 2023, 55), painting a “broad and layered” picture of the world around him that has both an external and an internal (focus on the subconsciousness and emotions) dimension, giving rise to notable elements of the author’s authentic poetics (Kos-Lajzman, 2017, 130). Novak’s narrative strategies equally masterfully and discerningly penetrate the deepest corners of the human psyche, offering the readers a glimpse of how it works and how it affects the characters’ actions, while also critically examining the social context and the circumstances his characters are exposed to.

The very title of the novel *Ciganin, ali najljepši* places the central focus on an identity category that is, alongside many others, mostly represented on the cultural, national and language level in the novel, focusing on the relationship between an individual and the *other* as a pivotal element in the process of (self) identification. The word “Gypsy” in the title refers to Sandokan Ignac Sandi, a member of the Roma community from Bukov Dol, who is the main protagonist of the novel. Even though the four distinct lines of narration in the novel indicate that other characters too hold central positions in the novel’s plot, which is not to be disputed, there are two reasons why Sandi was deliberately singled out as the main protagonist: 1) in spite of the complexity of the plot, which is dominated by a number of characters, metaphorically speaking, the “spiderweb” (a motive that often appears in the novel), or the plot lines, unravel around the character of Sandi; 2) of all his characters, Novak arguably paints the most precise and most complex picture of Sandi in his narrative processes, accentuating his thoughts and character traits through “the subjective thought flow in a posttraumatic delirium” (Detoni- Dujmić, 2024, 8).

The topic of this research paper is centred around the literary presentation of Sandi, a fictional character, whose identity is inseparable from the Roma community, an ethnic group residing in the Međimurje area. When Milena, one of the main protagonists and narrators, recalls the sad moment when she heard the song *Ciganin sam, al najljepši* [I’m a gypsy, but I’m the fairest of them all], whose title served as the inspiration for the title of the novel, she emphasises that she was “not stung by the word ‘Gypsy’

or the word ‘fairest’”, but “the word in between, the accursed ‘but’. It’s an intrusive word, an evil word. It doesn’t belong in sentences about people. If you find yourself on the wrong side of this word, it forever separates you from the good images, you see” (Novak, 2016, 69). This indicatively suggests that, in such a linguistic construction, identity makes the difference between the personal pronouns “I/we” and “they”, suggestively drawing the line between “I/we” and “other”, with “I” building its identity by differentiating itself from the “other” while depending on it at the same time, because the “other” becomes (and remains) the mechanism for its determination and validation. Language undeniably offers a number of opportunities to shape identity, since it plays the crucial role in how individuals and communities express, build, and maintain their identity. As the mainstay of culture, language is often the key to preserving cultural customs, traditions and values. Language is used to pass down stories, customs and beliefs that define the cultural identity of a community. As a result, languages often have the key role in building and preserving the national identity. Many countries have official languages symbolising national unity and identity. The connection between a language and a nation can be so strong that the loss of language is equated with the loss of a part of national identity. Therefore, “some see language (...) as the reflection of a nation’s identity; others see it as the reflection of the people’s spirit, which consequently helps shape its worldview and define its borders, but this definition is greatly susceptible to ideological variations; yet others see it all as fiction, maintaining that language is a collateral phenomenon in shaping an ethnic community, with which it has no organic connection” (Kuna, 2003, 279).

In keeping with theoretical assumptions about literary characters (Chatman, 1978, Rimmon-Kenan, 2005, Eagleton, 2013, Frow, 2016, Moi, Felski, Anderson, 2019), with a view to the category of identity (Hall, 1990, 1996, Derrida, 1999, Castels, 2002, Clake, 2008), the question is to what extent Sandi was portrayed, tentatively speaking, as a typical Roma man from a rural community in Međimurje, and to what extent his character exhibits features suggestive of the representation of a new and different identity. Culturological and political portrayal of an ethnic group does not lie within the scope of this paper, but let it still be noted that the Roma have been present in the world of Croatian literature for centuries. Older examples include authors like Mikša Pelegrinović (*Jeđupka*), Marin Držić

(*Tripčće de Utolčće*), and Josip Kozarac (*Tena*), whose depictions of Roma characters were rather stereotypical and discriminatory, presenting them as homeless, uneducated, fraudsters, persons with an uncertain future, and the like. Novak's portrayal of the Roma moves away from such conceptions, becoming a positive example of the representation of an ethnic group.

The objective of this paper is to identify the extent to which language and cultural identities are a part of the conceptual and thematic world of the novel, and the extent to which they reflect the author's intent to use fiction as a metaphor to draw attention to the problems that, even though they are presented within a small community on the Croatian border, in fact reflect the image of the contemporary Croatian society. Assuming that various identity categories, such as culture, heritage, language, religion and so on, are the building blocks of cultural identity, the question is to what extent cultural identity has the ability of self-determination and existence, and to what extent it is dominated by other identities. Novak uses the character of Sandi (and others) to question language and cultural identity. This paper therefore aims to analyse how they are shaped and negated, while reflecting on the occurrence of minority languages and local idioms, and their function on the narrative level.

On characters and identity

A number of studies analysing the status of characters in a text/story, among other elements of prose texts, have been written within the field of narratology. For example, in his study about the status of main and supporting characters, Woloch argues that "for a long time now, characterization has been the *bête noire* of narratology, provoking either cursory dismissal, lingering uncertainty, or vociferous argument" (Woloch, 2003, 14). The importance (relevance) of characters in a story, and the question whether their role is purely functional, or they can be interpreted and analysed as separate text instances, was the principal point of disagreement. The formalist and structuralist understanding of characters' status³

3 Due to the limited scope of this paper, we will not discuss all existing views about the status of characters in modern theory in detail here, but it is important to note the contributions of Vladimir Propp and A. J. Greimas to the discussion of this "problem". Propp considered characters to be

interprets them as “products of the plot”, whose status is “functional”, and insists that narratology should avoid their psychological aspect (Chatman, 1978, 111). Accordingly, the characters in a story should only be construed as the elements whose actions cause the course of the plot to unfold as per the author’s ideas, and any attempt to identify the traits of these characters and try to analyse them as “persons” is irrelevant. In S. Chatman’s view, “the question of ‘priority’ or ‘dominance’ is not meaningful. Stories only exist where both events and existents occur. There cannot be events without existents” (Chatman, 1978, 113). This view is aligned with the modernist narrative, in which the focus is not necessarily on the plot, and more attention is paid to the characters. At one point, even Roland Barthes himself revised his views about the status of characters, and stopped arguing in favour of the characters being subordinate to the plot/twist. Rather, he started viewing them as components of the narrative that have their own “semic code”. In his book *S/Z*, Barthes offers the following definition: “The character is a product of combinations: the combination is relatively stable (denoted by the recurrence of the semes) and more or less complex (involving more or less congruent, more or less contradictory figures); this complexity determines the character’s ‘personality’” (Barthes, 1990, 67). In other words, by endowing characters with the feature of “personality”, the opportunity opens up to subject them to a more complex analysis, one that will not be reduced solely to their function in the text.

Discussion of someone’s personality suggests that this is an actual/living person, with different ethical, psychological, social, physical and other characteristics we can observe. The question is, can we do the same with fictional characters? Are characters nothing but language constructs (words) appearing on the pages of a work of fiction, whose “fate” is merely a concept that the author is offering to his readers, or can they be viewed outside of the boundaries of the text they appear in, giving them a wider space for action, so to speak, in which reality and fiction are intertwined as a result of ontological characteristics? Naturally, a fictional character

subordinate to the story/text, but he categorized them into seven roles based on their performance: “the villain, the donor, the helper, the sought-for-person and her father, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero”, allowing for the possibility of one character playing multiple roles, and the same role being played by more than one character. Greimas maintained that characters are unquestionably subordinate to text. He referred to them as “actants and acteurs”, which include “characters, inanimate objects and abstract concepts”. For more information see: Rimmon-Kenan, S., *Narrative Fiction*, p. 36.

is clearly not a real person, which will be obvious to any reader, but this does not exclude the possibility of character analysis on a mimetic level. S. Chatman finds such a thesis justified in his comments about the analysis of Shakespeare's character Hamlet, arguing that Hamlet's actions, although he is not a real person, are not confined to the text alone. On the contrary, we should not be "any less inclined to search through and beyond the words of Shakespeare for insights into the construct 'Hamlet'" (Chatman, 1978, 117-118). T. Eagleton makes a similar point, underlining that it is justified to speak about the literary nature of a piece of writing if its characters are treated "as though they were actual people. In one sense, to be sure, this is almost impossible to avoid" (Eagleton, 2013, 45). He thus suggests that characters, albeit fictional, can be constructed in such a way so as to suggestively encourage the reader to equate those characters with actual persons. As we have mentioned in the introduction, Novak's Sandi is a fictional character, a member of the Roma community in rural Međimurje. However, his efforts to move away from the tradition that has been forced on him and from the existing stereotypes as he builds his life (and even his identity) raises the issue of the representation of the Roma as an ethnic group in the literary and in the real world. Rimmon-Kenan reflects on the discrepancy between "mimetic theories" equating characters with actual persons, and "semiotic theories" seeing characters only as parts of textuality, and proposes a reconciliation of the two opposing views, stating that, "although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modelled on the reader's conception of people and in this they are person-like" (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, 35). From the modern point of view, fictional characters have expanded their "existence" into the real world through the awareness of the readers, who often use them as models against which they compare actual persons, consider their own actions, seek inspiration in them, or emulate them.⁴ John Frow published a comprehensive study on this subject titled *Character and Person*, in which he sought to explain the "tension" between thinking about characters as "pieces of writings and imaging" and "person-like entities". Aware that such an interpretation of characters

⁴ Rita Felski also discusses the beliefs and habits that encourage readers to identify themselves with a character, the impact of the text on the fact that readers seek like minds among the characters, the reasons why readers even think about fictional characters, and other points in her paper *Identifying with Characters*, in: *Character – Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, 2019, pp. 77–126.

is difficult to explain logically, he points out, “yet we do so in our every encounter with fictional character”, and, as a result, “the problem is to find a language in which to convey this ontological hybridity” (Frow, 2014, 25). On the one hand, the latter syntagm indicates that literary character theory offers no universal solution for approaching its analysis (*hybridity*), and on the other, it suggests that characters are indeed identifiable with actual persons (*ontological*), however, we should not neglect the fact that characters indeed *are* and *remain* purely fictional. Frow himself acknowledges that the connection is difficult to explain logically, but he nevertheless insists on the following: “try to complicate and mutually to implicate both of its poles, the textual and the person-like” (Frow, 2014, 25). Still, discussions about this concept of characters can be useful when considering characters as a complex narratological instance that is more than a mere language sign, while bearing in mind that the readers recognise characters in the text as fictional instances that they can talk about as if they were actual persons, but this will not have the cognitive effect of trying to perceive them as “alive”. T. Moi makes a rather clear point in this regard.

“We can’t libel them. They can’t sue us. We can neither murder nor marry them. (So there is no point in warning us against doing any of this.) We can imagine that we talk to them. But they can’t talk back. Yet they can place claims on us, claims we may feel compelled to respond to. We can love them, hate them, acknowledge them, imitate them, be inspired by them, carry them in our hearts and minds, think about them when we want to understand our own lives. We can also invent further adventures for them, and we can imagine what they would be like if they lived in our place and time. To understand all this is to understand what fiction is” (Moi, 2019, 27).

The quote above is the opening paragraph of the essay *Rethinking Character*, in which Moi discusses the taboo against treating characters as if they were real, and equally criticises the *formalist* and the *modernist* ideas about the meaning of characters in texts. Avoiding to offer a new form of character analysis theory, Moi underlines that there is no single correct way to “read” and analyse characters, stating that she does not believe “in laying down requirements for what good character analysis must look like in advance of any specific practice” (Moi, 2019, 66). What is more, she suggests the development of “nonformalist analyses of form”, which

will avoid modernist conceptions of what forms are supposed to be like, taking into consideration that the literary text is inseparable from the language that is used to convey special meanings, topics and contents, and which do not view the text just as form, “but also expressions, actions, and interventions“(Moi, 2019, 67). In other words, Moi advocates a heterogeneous approach to the literary text (and its characters), and rejects the insistence on singular methodological and theoretical assumptions as the key to its analysis. Of course, existing theories create a good path toward an analytic approach, but text offers much more, and it is up to researchers to find the most suitable way of considering its possible meanings.

An analysis of a character in a novel raises a number of questions about the character’s origins, traits, relationships with other characters, the motives for the character’s actions in the text, deliberations, dilemmas, and decisions that make this character a relevant subject of the story. This introduces into the debate the category of identity as a mandatory element in the discussion of what makes a character (subject) exactly who he is, that is, who the author portrayed him as. Eagleton refers to them as “literary figures” who “have no pre-history” and “do not have futures” (Eagleton, 2013, 46-47), suggesting that the entire process of construction and/or deconstruction of identity only proceeds to the extent and at the intensity that the author intended to present. Characters are considered one of “the key elements of a story, and the fundamental way of representing the complexity of subjects and their identities in a work of literature” (Paternai Andrić, 2019, 211). In this limited literary space, a character goes through various forms of identity strategies and changes affecting the construction and deconstruction of his identity, thus becoming directly associated with the social context as an inescapable aspect of his own existence, which puts him in a relationship with the *other*.

Every character thus seemingly becomes a part of a certain culture, and his potential awareness of his membership in a certain group will affect how his cultural and language identity is shaped. According to Hall, any cultural identity has its past, and for this reason, “like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall, 1990, 225). Subject to social norms and certain historical, political, geographical, religious and other characteristics, an individual develops his identity, which he can accept, reject, or change within a culture. The feeling and the impression of an individual’s cultural and language identity will largely depend on

the society that the individual belongs to, which opens up the possibility of freedom of identification, because “if culture is the projection of the identity of a group, it is subject to change, and can be ‘shaped’ according to the subject’s wishes” (Varga, 2018, 32). In Sandi’s case, for instance, he is obviously aware of his Roma identity on the cultural and language level, but he also constantly faces internal conflicts seeking to reshape this identity. Such an identity is unstable and incomplete, fragmented, divided, built on the basis of an “antagonist relationship”, whose stabilisation is based on “an exclusion process” (Pternai Andrić, 2019). The subject is exposed to two simultaneous processes: on the one hand, he shapes his cultural identity in relation to another cultural identity, strengthens and represents it as unique and different; and on the other, he faces the formation of an individual identity within his own culture. Hall points out that the development of identity is possible “only *because* of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render ‘outside’, abjected” (Hall, 1996, 5). He underlines that identity is formed with respect to the difference between oneself and *others*, through the things that it lacks, that make its *constitutive outside*.⁵ It follows that identity becomes a part of an uncompleted process, in which it on the one hand strives to maintain its integrity through differentiation from *others*, and on the other is constantly impacted by *others* that provide it with opportunities to shape itself.

Culture as such forms an integral aspect of identity formation, in which the pursuit of stabilisation and sustainability is intertwined with the pursuit of change and resistance. The subject stabilises its identity and maintains it through continual identification processes, which it is exposed to only when it acknowledges the *other* as the prerequisite for its formation and existence. Jacques Derrida believes that identity, just like word meanings, is inconstant and has multiple meanings, its connection with the *other* allowing it to take on different meanings in different contexts. To put it simply, identity is the product of a differentiation system. In his view, “a relationship with oneself, an identification with one self, cannot exist without culture” (Derrida, 1999, 48), which indicates that it is not possible to view identity outside of its context. On the contrary, its existence is

5 In Hall’s interpretation, the concept of the *constitutive outside*, borrowed from Jacques Derrida, refers to “continuous possibility of undermining the temporary stabilisation of one of the identity categories, as a result of which no identity can occur as ‘pure presentness’ or ‘objectivity’; on the contrary, it is always contingent and unstable” (Pternai Andrić, 2019: 101).

only ensured in relation to the *other*. In this process, the *other* generates a sense of uncertainty due to its potential impact on the integrity of one's own identity, but this does not necessarily have to be negative, because various shaping strategies are available to the subject.

Jacques Derrida's concept of "différance", which allows an identity to identify itself with or distinguish itself from *others*, raises the question of the role of language in this process. Ferdinand de Saussure's arguments that language is a system of differences, based on establishing the identity of a language element according to the features differentiating it from other language elements (Ferdinand de Saussure, 2011), became a model for the discussion about the formation of identity among theoreticians. It is the fundamental medium in which the subject generates his identity through acts of speech, thus obtaining the "performative discursive character" that many theoreticians and philosophers have studied (J. L. Austin, J. Derrida, M. Foucault, J. Butler). Language generates a meaning that is conveyed through communication, and is the instrument by which the subject shapes its understanding of itself and others. "Language also allows a certain perception of the world, while restricting this perception at the same time" (Paternai Andrić, 2019, 95). In other words, if language shapes the world in which the subject exists, identity too can be viewed as its effect. In Hall's opinion, changes and transformations represent the essence of forming an identity that becomes fragmented and disunited, in which language plays a vital role. He maintains:

"Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation" (Hall, 1996, 4).

In this sense, language, as a cultural determinant, becomes a material and functional component in the sense of understanding reality, and its impact on the formation of identity becomes inseparable from the context it functions in. Language shapes and reflects identity on multiple levels: language is used to pass on cultural values, traditions and customs, thus generating a sense of belonging; language implies membership in a certain language community, which is how social interactions happen; language reflects

personal identity through self-presentation, and, as history has taught us, is often used as a political ideological tool: “Language plays a special role in politics: its potential opens up opportunities for manipulation of the language for ideological purposes. Language indeed has the power to hide and mask the truth, and to mislead the listeners and readers. Language can be used to restrict the understanding of reality, that is, to wrap people up in a false reality” (Rebernik, 2022, 20).

Who is Sandi?

We will begin by analysing Sandi’s name here as the starting point for our discussion about the representation of this character’s identity in Novak’s novel. Even though he is referred by his nickname Sandi through most of the novel, his full (official) name is Sandokan Ignac, of Bukov Dol (Đinjc). This name only appears in a police report about a crime he was the victim of. When introducing himself, he uses the name Ignac Sandi. Regardless of the various versions of his name and their use in the novel, the name is the first level of identification of a character.

As Frow puts it, it becomes “a kind of hook on which properties are hung and it is one basis for an imputation of identity” (Frow, 2014, 187). It is a language construct, “a textual attribute” (Garvey, 1978), which positions the character in a social context, and differentiates it from other characters. The name is associated with a body, becoming its label, and functioning as the node of what Barthes describes as the shaping of semantic content through the existence of the character in time and space, with all its biographical features. Naming a character creates an object that has a destiny (Barthes, 1990). In this case, it becomes an instance that appropriates all other segments of identity, such as culturological, ethical, political, and other characteristics. It functions as an instance that the subject populates with an indeterminate number of traits (Chatman, 1978).

The name Sandokan brings to mind its namesake, the fictional character in Emilio Salgari’s adventure novels, in which Sandokan is a pirate and a noble hero who fights injustice and the colonial rule. He is dedicated to his cause, and loyal to his friends. In the culturological sense, he often

symbolises resistance against oppression, and the fight for freedom.⁶ This name is suggestive of the social context that the characters appear in, and is indicative for the plot of the novel *Ciganin, ali najljepši*. While Salgari's Sandokan fights European colonists in Asia, Novak's Sandi is a member of the Roma community that is, figuratively speaking, colonising Croatia's territory. Conflict between the Roma and the "white" Croats are common on the local level, with individuals exhibiting a marked intolerance. Against such a backdrop, Sandi is looking for a way to create the conditions for a harmonious coexistence with the Croats while facing his difficult personal situation that forces him to turn to crime:

"You know how easy it is to become a thief? All you have to do is clench your teeth a little bit for the first two or three times so that your heart doesn't jump to your throat. Before that, you need a sick mother who has no health insurance, and a pair of dark eyes telling you that she won't get any better. A medicine you have to pay for, and hunger that is a day away at best. (...) And you need someone to tell you that stealing is not a terrible thing, because you are taking from someone who has taken something from you. Or one of his people has taken something from one of your people. Someone to tell you that no one will ever find out, and that you'd be a fool not to do it. This someone will also show you how" (Novak, 2016, 222).

The motives behind his actions reflect the human survival instinct, and have no basis in nobility or integrity. If Sandi possesses a certain courage that allowed him to commit his crimes (robbery, trafficking), it stems from his need to ensure that his sick mother gets the help she needs, and to show Milena that a Gypsy is capable of taking care of his family. In Novak's novel, the symbol of resistance and the fight for freedom becomes a symbol of the fight to survive. This results in a contrasting perception of the meaning of his name, creating the prerequisites for something that may be indicative of "changes of approach, ways of thinking and acting, and opinions about the bearer of the name" (Paternai Andrić, 2019, 126). This is reflected in the resignation Sandi feels about the arrest of his friends and partners in crime, Mirza and Tompa. Both served years in

⁶ See more: *The meaning and history of the name Sandokan*, <https://venere.it/en/the-meaning-and-history-of-the-name-sandokan/> (28 July 2024)

prison, but they protected Sandi's identity, and never confessed that he was a member of their gang:

“The two of them left sometime in spring 2012, leaving me in debt to everyone. Things were looking very bad for me. All of Đinjc was against me, and I didn't have a friend in sight. As I walked around the village, I tried to make myself as small as I could, and to not hear what they were saying” (Novak, 2016, 271).

In such a situation, Salgari's Sandokan would have shown prudence and loyalty to his close friends, with whom he shared common interests and goals. Their guilt would be his guilt as well, because he believed that integrity and fairness to others are values worth fighting for, even at the cost of sacrificing his own existence. There is a paradox at work in Sandi's case, the noble name having been given to a frightened young man who is not at all determined, loyal, or prepared to accept responsibility at the moment when his friends most expect it. Letting them bear the punishment for what he too had done was a big burden that Sandi faced daily on a personal level (internal conflicts) as well as on a social level (facing unacceptance within the Roma community). Sandi suffered disintegration of identity, thus starting the quest for its stabilisation. Even though a name in itself does not define a person's identity, having a name is essential for a subject wishing to position itself within a social community. The possible meanings attributed to Sandi's name are a contrast to the referential point (Salgari's Sandokan), but this did not undermine the productivity in identity shaping through naming as one of the possible mechanisms making his representation in the novel possible.

A much more complex presentation of the formation of Sandi's identity takes place through the prism of his cultural identity as a member of the Roma (Gypsy) community. The question of their name and determination is outlined at the beginning of the novel:

“The first Gypsies moved here in the mid-1970s. Roma. Gypsies. When I say 'Roma', I see a written word. When I say 'Gypsy', I see a person. I mean, at the time, Gypsies had not even known that they were actually Roma (...). Now everyone keeps repeating what a terribly offensive term it is, as if all anger will go away when we all agree nicely that these people should be referred to as the Roma” (Novak, 2016, 16-17).

At another point in the novel, Sandi continues: “In the end, everyone in Đinjc was angry. Arguing if we should be using the term Roma or Gypsy, and which one was right. There is twenty million Roma, they said, an entire people. As Gypsies, we are alone, every village left to fend for itself. But if we are Roma, there is more of us than Croats” (Novak, 2016, 262). Such a conception results in a difference between the majority population (“white” Croats) and the minority living in their immediate vicinity (Roma/Gypsies). The language intervention in the name of the ethnic group was designed to maintain the ostensible domination over the minority. Being a Gypsy implies being in the position of a marginalised, alienated, foreign, unaccepted, nonconforming subject, and has the features of a pejorative name in the public discourse. Being a Roma expands the meaning of this identity to a level beyond the minority group, and is a potential threat to maintaining the other group’s domination in their own space. Aware of this fear, Sandi says: “You know, people from poor Croatian families hated us Gypsies the most. They were afraid that I would skip ahead of the Gypsies by the main road one day and move right into their back yard, and then skip ahead of them too. It’s obvious when you fight them” (Novak, 2016, 220).

In her discussion of political correctness, Nives Opačić makes a special note of the example of the Roma/Gypsies:

“They moved to the Croatian territories in the second half of the 14th century (Dubrovnik, Zagreb), where they settled in small groups, working as traders and craftsmen (butchers, blacksmiths, furriers, tinkers). The word ‘Ciganin’ (Gypsy) originates from Old Slavic ‘athinganinъ’, which transformed to ‘acinganinъ / acinganъ-ka’, and then to ‘Ciganin/Ciganka’. This people is known under this name in most of Europe: Tzigane (French), Zigeuner (German), Zingari (Italian), Țigani (Romanian), Cigan (Albanian), Cikáni (Czech), Cygane (Russian), Cigáni (Hungarian), Cyganie (Polish), Gitano (Spanish), Cigano (Portuguese), etc. The word ‘Gypsy’, which means ‘a cunning man’ in addition to ‘Roma’, is used only in English (...). The historical name of this people therefore originates from a common root, and this name is ‘Cigan(i)’. (...) The concentration of the Roma in Croatia is the highest in the Međimurje County, but coexistence with the Roma is not without its problems even in this otherwise peaceful county (Croatian

parents have recently rebelled against Roma children attending classes with their children), even though the Gypsies are not newcomers in Međimurje (the first mention of Gypsies in this region dates back to the late 17th century). They started arriving in Međimurje in large numbers in the second half of the 19th century, when the slavery of the Roma was ended in Romania, and a mass migration started toward Hungary. (...) The use of the name ‘Roma’ (which means ‘man, husband, member of a lower caste who sings and plays an instrument for living’; ‘Gypsy’) became more frequent at the time of the disintegration of Yugoslavia in an effort to soften the negative views about the Roma community (because the word ‘Cigani’ was yelled as an insult, for instance, at stadiums). Today, the name Roma is considered to be politically correct, and even the historians who discuss ‘the Gypsy issue’ write about the Roma all the time when the term is not encased in quotation marks, even though nobody outside of their community referred to them by this name at the time they are writing about” (Opačić, 2010, 244–248).

The perception of the Roma as wanderers (nomads), criminals, kidnapers, beggars, uneducated and lazy, which has persisted for centuries, has made Sandi a member of an unwanted minority. On the collective level, Sandi, like the rest of the Roma community, faces stereotypes and prejudice about the Roma. He is viewed as a thief, criminal and rapist, and perceived as illiterate, uneducated, bad-mannered. This is the result of the general perception of an ethnic minority that promotes its own lifestyle and manifests a different (and even undesirable) identity while coexisting with the Croats: “People started comparing Gypsies to rats. They multiply quickly, eat everything, spread diseases, and don’t ask if they’re allowed to come in. They attack without delay. There’s no negotiating with them” (Novak, 2016: 98); “Somehow, it all came down to them being rude, lazy and ungrateful, to them stealing, paying no taxes, and not being subject to the same rules; to the government and the police protecting them while they harass Croats” (Novak, 2016, 54).

On the other hand, intolerance towards Croats was also promoted among the Gypsies:

“Don’t talk to anyone. You don’t understand how they think. Croats are swindlers, who have deceived us a hundred times. The white

people are dangerous. They're looking to screw you over, and they'll never help you if there's nothing in it for them. Everyone knows this. The kinder a white man's words, the more evil his thoughts. Every child in Đinjc learns this. They instil fear into them until it gets into their bones. Do you know that they won't let their children be vaccinated, because they think they're being poisoned? And the white people think we're afraid of needles. (...) Everyone knows that white people killed Gypsies in concertation camps, took their children away, sent the police to raid their villages, beat people up with batons, and take them away. You wouldn't help someone who'd beat up your brother or son, or kill your mother. Working for a Croat? Treason of the worst kind. You know, then, how they feel about me" (Novak, 2016, 170).

Positioning of the Roma in the narrative discourse calls to mind Stuart Hall's thoughts about identity, stating that any identity is characterised by instability, inconstance, incompleteness; that any identity is "increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across defferent, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996, 4). Such positioning of identity within the discourse consequently leads to the relationship with the *other*, which, in Hall's view, constitutes the knowledge that identity is constructed through its relationship with the other, identifying what it is not, or what it lacks (*constitutive outside*). Lacan presented a similar argument, arguing that *others* encourage the subject to question its own existence, thus expanding the space for the interpretation of identity from the psychoanalytical to the culturological.

Such and similar statements about the Roma are indicative of the hegemony of the other identity, and the collision of two cultural identities, permeated with the ambition to preserve their own, and accept the others'. Each of them manifests its power through different discourses, and maintains it on the basis of the historical and political context. Drawing on such and similar materials, intermixed and in immediate contact with one another, cultural identities drift closer or farther away from one another (Hall, 1996). Creating the impression of intolerance and discord, the effect of the distribution of power that the Croats hold over the Roma evidently transcends the deeply rooted convictions about "white people" as bad people. Even though the Croatian legal system guarantees the fundamental

human rights of minorities, the community in Medimurje still promotes a perception of them as those who have “occupied” their space and “illegally settled” in it, as those who contribute nothing to the development of the society.⁷ By virtue of the law of majority, the Croats regulate the social relations and rules, expecting the Roma to accept them and abide by them.

This threatens the viability of their cultural (and language) identity. Defined as “fluid and contingent in relation to historical and cultural circumstances” (Clarke, 2008, 527), it is socially conditioned, and dependent on the context in which its construction occurs. As such, it assumes historical, geographical, political, religious, moral and other traits, basing its construction on the position of belonging to those who are the same or similar, and resisting others and differentiating itself from them (Hall, 1996). The social context implies the questioning of power relations, and, as Foucault would put it, this power is not necessarily repressive, but is also productive in terms of shaping the subject. Its action allows the emergence of what Castells describes as “resistance identity” (Castells, 2002), which allows the subject to reverse its own marginalisation and stigmatisation into an act of rebellion against social practices.

Novak’s Sandi is a character saddled with a tragic destiny and faced with his own moral dilemmas, whose identity vibrates between the traits assigned to him by birth and membership in a marginalised group, and his ambition to make his life normal and ordinary so that he can fit in among “white people” more easily. Two conceptions of Sandi’s identity are represented: his teenage deviance, based on the theft and crime he committed and his lack of morals, and his youthful resolve to create legally and socially accepted prerequisites that will allow him a harmonious (co) existence. The constant search for identity that recurs throughout the novel and results in Sandi’s downfall, which can equally be blamed on the individual and the society, arises from this position. If identity is conditional on social norms regulating its emergence and survival, this position was rather difficult for Sandi as a Gypsy. On the one hand, he was supposed to model his identity on the culturological patterns of the Roma community to remain within the established order of his community (start a family, observe Roma customs, choose an appropriate job etc), and on the other

⁷ Intolerance towards the Roma is apparent in several examples in the novel, such as the virtual group “We must not let the Gypsies of Medimurje drag us down to the bottom”, or the skinheads in Čakovec attacking the Roma who come there to beg (Novak, 2016: 158).

he exhibits an obvious individual resistance to the existing prejudice and stereotypes about the Roma/Gypsies. At the same time, he lives as *other* in relation to “white people” (a difference based on ethnic and culturological characteristics) and becomes *other* in relation to the ethnic group he was born into (he has a business cooperation with Croats, and a love affair with Milena, a Croatian woman). The double position of Sandi’s identity confirms the theses that identity is built on the difference from and the relationship with *other*, with exclusion as the only way to stabilise it. Torn between two diametrically opposite starting points in the identification process, Sandi assumes the characteristics of a modern subject who does not deny his ethnicity, culture, and identity as member of a minority, but strives for assimilation and acceptance of the social norms upheld by the majority population. This is also proven by the fact that he finds mechanisms to ensure that he is well received by the Croats, and to elevate his identity to an acceptable level. He is thus often spoken about positively: “But he is a good boy, not like those other Gypsies” (Novak, 2016, 31); “He’s a Gypsy, but he was normal” (Novak, 2016, 156).

On a personal level, Sandi is on the one hand represented as insecure, reckless, misunderstood and frightened, and on the other as a persistent, self-sacrificing, and caring young man. These traits are obvious from his actions and relationships with others (especially his relationship with Milena and his monologue addressed at Japica, in which he presents his family history and the culturological traits of the Roma community, and looks back on everything that led to his present situation). The traits could be said to represent what Chatman calls “the paradigm of traits”, which he understands “metaphorically, as a vertical assemblage intersecting the syntagmatic chain of events that comprise the plot” (Chatman, 1978, 127). They are a constituent part of his identity and the product of the social practices he has been exposed to, and their manifestation affects a number of events in the novel. Even though Sandi participates in a number of criminal activities and breaks the society’s laws, Novak does not paint him as a villain. On the contrary, he clearly positions him as a victim of unfortunate circumstances, bad decisions and unfulfilled ideals. First of all, this refers to Sandi’s origins and his social position within the Roma community. Sandi is rather well aware that the position of a Gypsy in Croatia is not the only aspect by which his cultural identity is reduced to the domain of *other*. He clearly presents the class division in their own

community (Đinjc/by the road – Nazmes – Globoko), reflected in people's material possessions and the parts of Đinjc they live in. The wealthiest inhabitants of the village live right next to the road, and as you move away from the main road, the living conditions and the material situation of the Gypsies living there get worse and more tragical:

“You know, Đinjc is three villages rather than one. The row right next to the road is visible to everyone. That's where the best among us live, those whose homes have facades. Further behind it live the people who would like to move closer to the road. This part is called Nazmes. And the deepest part is... well, the deepest. And that's what we call it, *Globoko*. That's where I come from. For a long time, I thought that the wealthiest people live along the main roads everywhere, and the farther you go from the main road, the people are poorer and poorer, they drink more, and they fight more, because this is how it is in Đinjc. If you want to make something of your life, I thought, you have to live by the main road” (Novak, 2016, 171).

Sandi's position in the society is determined by his membership in the poorest group of Đinjc residents. Globoko is the neighbourhood “populated by those who have nothing”, those who are “in debt to everyone”, who live in houses made of mud, and sleep on the floor, and it leaves the impression of a sad place (Novak, 2016, 184-185). Such an environment had a rather adverse effect on Sandi's identity, because he realised at a very early age that he is living in a place that offers few opportunities in life apart from pure survival: “I never belonged there, you know. Half of the reason is because they didn't want me there, and the other half is because I didn't want to be there” (Novak, 2016, 185). “I was just a child, Japica, but I already knew that I didn't belong in Đinjc” (Novak, 2016, 205). Poverty, a fatherless childhood, a mentally disabled mother, unknown lineage, and unacceptance by the other Gypsies are some of the key determinants that drove Sandi to question his personal goals in life and possible mechanisms to achieve the things that could give them an at least seemingly normal life, far away from Đinjc. Aware of the reality that they were not liked in Đinjc, and that they did not belong anywhere, and could only have ended up in Globoko, Sandi fell victim to his own existential crisis and the set of life circumstances that forced him to turn to crime.

His stepfather Dani was the point of reference in Sandi's life as a mark of temporary stabilisation of his identity. Even though Sandi never met his real father, Dani made up for the lack of his identity "on record" as a father figure. Their relationship was built on the patriarchal model that is proven typical of the Roma community, but in Sandi's case it was the only possibility, because his mother Albina was incapable of caring for him. Novak completely neglects the motherhood discourse and focuses on the fatherhood discourse, materialised by mixing the traditional (breadwinner) and new (caring father) forms of fatherhood (Wall, Aboim, Marinho, 2007). Thus he presents fatherhood in the modern discourse as a culturological identity blurring the lines between the mother's and the father's duties. Albina's mental illness and her socially disadvantaged position made Dani the central parental figure in Sandi's life. Dani taught Sandi the basic ethical and social values, acted as his protector and nurturer, developed his sense of self-confidence, and embodied the figure of a father who is equally committed to maintaining the patriarchal family values, and caring for the children. He became Sandi's role model due to multiple reasons, as the representation of a father who is motivated to provide his family with a better life in the Roma community ("Rather than brag, Dani moved Albina and I from Globoko to Nazmes. You have no idea what a miracle it is when someone moves closer to the road" (Novak, 2016, 198)), who teaches him positive moral values, and acknowledges his success ("Dani was the reason why I was not allowed to fight. And I did all right in school. I boasted to him about being good at one thing or another, and he was over the moon" (Novak, 2016, 203)), who told him that their social marginalisation does not imply inability to seek and realise the same opportunities as others:

"They live a better life, Dani – I made my last point, ready for him to smack me on the head. – You're right about that – he said, softly after all – but you can do it too. You'll have a harder time of it than one of their own, but you can do it. You have to be a good boy, you hear me, listen to your elders, go to school and read fast, for starters. And forget about these fools from the village, don't follow them. If I hear you stole something, I'll throw you right into the Mura, you hear me? I'll kill you. If you need something, I'm here to provide it. I better not hear it. Thieves build their fortune on another's misfortune, and it's a rotten foundation. It won't do to be

a scrap collector either. You start from the bottom, and never dig your way out. And those on the top, they build on everyone else. That's not right either. You go and find yourself a clean place, make it your own, and build there. And remember, things can always be different, it's just hard" (Novak, 2016, 205).

In such a relatively positive family environment, Sandi relies on the figure of his protective and patient stepfather in his formative years. Dani's actions manifest as what is known as father's involvement in modern discourse, with positive outcomes in children's development including the father's role in shaping the child's personality, encouragement of the child's language and cognitive development, support to the child's social, developmental, and psychological aspect, and empowerment of the child in learning skills and earning academic achievements (Nanxun, 2022). The above and a number of other situations in the novel suggest that he was a devoted father to Sandi. It is therefore unsurprising that Dani's sudden disappearance, the uncertainty of his fate, and Sandi's return to Globoko with Albina had a powerful impact on Sandi's confidence. He faced a seeming return to the beginning of his own life story, having once again lost his father, and found himself in the hands of a mother who was incapable of caring for him, and abandoned to his personal decisions that could either destroy him, or save him from ruin. In the circumstances he grew up in, it seems that the care and upbringing Sandi received from Dani affected him after all:

"And she looks in wonder as you bravely go out into the street, because you know that no one has any reason to mess with you or rib you, because you pay for your own, and you walk where people walk, and you drive where people drive, and you say hello or good day to everyone, because you know that at least a hundred people no longer see you as Sandokan Sandi Ignac, a Gypsy. Not just any Gypsy, but a Gypsy from Đinjc. And not even from Đinjc, but the worst kind of Gypsy from Globoko" (Novak, 2016, 335).

Even though Sandi, as a character, falls victim to his own ideals, and the means he chose to achieve his goal often go against Dani's positive advice, Sandi remains a subject characterised by a fragmented and split identity. His formation was motivated by several ambitions that threatened the survival of his personal and cultural identity: life outside of Globoko and

outside of Đinjc, among Croats who will accept him, with a Croatian woman he loves, and opportunities among “white people” that will give him a normal life.

Conclusion

Discussion of characters in modern literature transcends the formalist approach viewing characters as one of the narrative instances, whose sole function is to serve the development of the story. Characters have much more complex traits (personalities/character, identity, culture, origin, and so on), which deserve special attention in narratological analyses. This approach was used in this paper to depict the representation of the character of Sandi in Novak’s novel *Ciganin, ali najljepši*. Using the so-called “non-formalist method”, the authors attempted to illustrate that the text and its characters are not just mere signifiers whose meaning needs to be defined, but form a separate world full of complexity (Moi, 2019). As one of the novel’s four main protagonists, Sandi is characterised by a layered structure and presentation through various aspects of identity, among which his language and cultural identity hold an important place. Our analysis shows that Sandi’s identity as a Roma/Gypsy man in Croatia is based on the difference from and on relationship with the *other*, in which his position is twofold: he lives as *other* in relation to “white people”, and he becomes *other* in the ethnic group he was born into. The stabilisation of his identity was only made possible by excluding the *other* and assuming the position of “resistance identity”, by which he will turn his marginalisation into an act of personal development. Sandi assumes the characteristics of a modern subject who does not deny his ethnicity, culture, and identity as a member of a (language) minority, but strives for assimilation and acceptance of the social norms upheld by the majority population. This includes adaptation on language level, as he only uses the Roma language when communicating with Albina and some Roma, but does not neglect the use of the Kaikavian dialect and the Croatian language in general as an essential requirement for being accepted in the local community. In this way, Novak does not remain within the confines of the stereotypical representation of Roma (in spite of the abundance of culturological material), but delves into the essence of the problem of their minority position “on the Croatian border”, manifested through intolerance, unacceptance, and

crime. The symbolic value of the literary portrayal of the “fairest Gypsy” Sandi lies in his refusal to let his life be ruled by the fact that being Roma always means being marginalised and rejected, and his ambition to seek his chance at happiness outside of the boundaries defined by his ethnicity.

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NA GRANICI HRVATSKE – REPREZENTACIJA LIKA KROZ JEZIČNI I KULTURNI IDENTITET U ROMANU *CIGANIN, ALI NAJLJEPŠI*

Sažetak

Kristian Novak prvo je izdanje romana *Ciganin, ali najljepši* objavio 2016. godine čijim je tekstom doprinio raspravi o aktualnom stanju u društvu obilježenom tranzicijama, migracijama, korupcijom, isključivosti i problematiziranjem identiteta. Ako se krene od pretpostavke da je kulturni identitet sazdan od različitih identitet-skih kategorija poput kulture, nasljeđa, jezika, religije i sl., pitanje je koliko mu je omogućeno samoodređenje i postojanje, a koliko je izložen tzv. hegemoniji drugih identiteta. Tematska okosnica ovoga rada analiza je literarnog prikaza Sandija, fiktivnoga lika, kroz prizmu jezičnog i kulturnog identiteta čime se pokazalo da, iako prikazan kao, uvjetno rečeno, tipični Rom međimurske ruralne sredine, u sebi krije reprezentaciju novog i drukčijeg identiteta oblikovanog u otklonu od postavljenih granica etičke pripadnosti.

Ključne riječi: identitet, jezik, Kristian Novak, kultura, lik