

The Theme Of Exile In The Novels Studied By Students During High School

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Abstract

The exile has become a topic which managed to catch the attention of many people in the past few centuries because it explores the multiple ways in which a person can change his/ her life perceptions during the process of displacement from one place to another. Recently, the theme of exile has been discussed and studied over Romanian, English or Universal literature lessons, school subjects which are taught during high school, and it succeeded in receiving positive feedback from the students. This situation proves that the topic is still current. This article focuses on the effects which the exile inflicts upon the characters from *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, novels which are discussed during the Universal literature lessons and which were written by an European writer, Dubravka Ugresič. Their way of perceiving life changes in the moment they have lost contact with Yugoslavia because they feel that they do not belong anywhere. In both her novels, the author manages to create a special bond between the characters and their homeland which proves to be essential for the exiles. In this process of adapting to an unknown space, the characters think that they have lost their identity and the memories which bring nostalgia represent the last threads of connection with their homeland.

Keywords: education through literature of exile, imaginary homeland, identity, memories

JEL Classification: I20, I21

1. Introduction

In the past few years, the curriculum for the Romanian and the foreign languages studied during high school years has changed. Along many themes which have been discussed and studied during Romanian, English or Universal literature lessons, the theme of exile has been presented to high school students. During the Romanian literature lessons, the students have discovered information related to Romanian writers who had to leave their homeland and move to an unknown country, becoming exiles. An example of a Romanian writer that can be placed in this category is Vintilă Horia and his novel called *Dumnezeu s-a născut în exil*, which was originally written in French, but after some years was translated into Romanian too. During the English literature lesson, the students learn about writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro or Salman Rushdie, which were not born in Britain, but after leaving their homelands they decided to move to England. Their novels such *A pale view of hills*, written by Ishiguro, or *East, West*, written by Rushdie portray the experience of exile and the effects it inflicts upon the writers and the characters they have created. During the Universal literature lessons, the students learn about the novels related to the theme of exile, which were written by European writers, such as Dubravka Ugresič, who wrote the novels, *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. These two novels are going to be presented and discussed in this article.

2. The experience of exile and the yugo-nostalgia

The exile has become one of the major themes which has been explored during the last two centuries. This concept refers to the migration of a number of people from a territory to another, an action which was caused by specific reasons, because the exile „is a subspecies of the more general notion of human mobility across geographic and political space. It implies the idea of forced displacement (as opposed to voluntary expatriation) that occurs for political or religious reasons rather than economic ones” (Pavel, 1998). Dubravka Ugresič is the writer who managed to portray in her novels, *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the way in which the experience of exile influenced the development of the characters. The country from which the characters came from, Yugoslavia, was ruled by a communist leader. The communism, as a political system, had rules and norms which had to be followed by everyone. The characters from *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* did not

accept to obey the rules and that was the reason why they had to leave their homeland and move to another country.

From the moment in which they have lost contact with Yugoslavia, the characters feel that they have lost their identity, because they are aware that there are remote chances of returning home. Their memories related to the period in which they lived in Yugoslavia are associated with a specific type of nostalgia, which it is called the *yugo-nostalgia*. In their quest to find the identity they have lost, the characters are placed in a hybrid dimension, which can be perceived as „the third space” (Rutherford, 1990). The characters from *The Ministry of Pain* decide to rebuild a new version of Yugoslavia by using their memories related to this place. This kind of experience portrays the way the exiles are trapped in the space „in-between” (Idem), where are combined the influences from both spaces they have lived. Tanja Lucić, the main character from *The Ministry of Pain*, and her students are trying to build an „imaginary homeland” (Rushdie, 2008) which consists of all their memories related to Yugoslavia. In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the main characters come from Yugoslavia, and they carry within themselves a museum full of memories, stories, words, pictures and objects, which have a sentimental value. In *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* are described two types of exile. The first one is called *interior exile* and it reflects the mixture between the feelings, which reveals the inner conflicts of the characters. The second type is called *exterior exile* and depicts the way in which the characters struggle to find the right path to follow. The exile effects begin once they arrive in an unknown territory, a decision which will change their life perspectives. The characters manifest a constant need to look for the place they used to call *home*, but, unfortunately, most of the times, their attempts to find it end in failure.

3. The imaginary homeland and the memories

Tanja Lucić teaches courses about the Yugoslav language and literature at the University from The Netherlands. At every course she tries to establish a connection between her and the students, because she wants to discover if they have undergone a similar situation. As time goes by, Tanja manages to communicate with the students and finds out which were the reasons that led to their exile. Every course is focused upon collecting all the memories related to Yugoslavia in a symbolic bag, which has the meaning of an „imaginary homeland” (Idem, *ibidem*). The

symbolic raffia bag has red, white and blue stripes and this aspect can be interpreted as a subtle reference to their loss, because these are the same colours which formed the Yugoslav flag. Also, Tanja and her students discuss about different types of food that they associate with Yugoslavia and this journey through the culinary field heals their wounds and traces the way to new expectations.

The characters from both novels are focused upon protecting their past, because they are united by the same pain, the longing for Yugoslavia, a country which, nowadays, does not exist anymore. In *The Ministry of Pain*, Tanja and the other characters organize meetings during which they remember all the moments which helped them create a special bond with Yugoslavia. Some of the students recite poems, others talk about news related to this country, and at the end of the meeting they all sing together Yugoslav songs. These types of meetings have a cathartic effect for the characters because they help them forget about the pain and the burden of being an exiled.

In *The museum of Unconditional Surrender*, characters keep their family photographs in a leather bag which has a special meaning for them because it helps them maintain safe their memories. Throughout the novel, the leather bag is always remembered with nostalgia. Sometimes, the exiles want to wander the streets just to find the thing which is missing and cannot be find in the leather bag. Whenever they want to go to a place where they feel at ease with themselves, the characters visit the Berlin flea-markets. In this place they meet and discuss with other people from Yugoslavia who are exiles too, and that is the reason why the flea-markets are perceived as spaces „in which they can perform and redefine their cultural, social, ethnic and linguistic identity – by drawing the map of absence” (Sándor, 2012). Due to the fact that the characters immigrated to another country, leaving Yugoslavia behind, they try to recreate at least a part of their homeland every time they go to the flea-markets or they visit a museum. There is a difference between these two places because the flea market is „a nomadic, transitory heterotopia, which gathers not only cultural differences, but also the fragments and quotations of historical time: family albums, peaceful, reconciled military uniforms, watches, broken flower vases” (Idem, *ibidem*), while the museum is described as „the heterotopia of accumulated time” (*ibidem*). In the museum, time is frozen, which means that the memories are untouched and that is the reason why it is perceived by the characters as a safe place.

4. The hybrid identity

The contact with another country has an impact on the characters because they think that they have lost their identity, since they no longer live in Yugoslavia. This concept called hybrid identity reflects the fact that both spaces, their homeland and the adoptive country, inflict an influence upon the evolution and the development of the characters. Dubravka Ugresiç depicts in her novels, *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the permanent oscillation between two territories. Throughout the novel, the exiles are always wondering who they really are, but, unfortunately, they cannot find the proper answers to their questions. The characters are neither in their homeland, nor in the new territory in which they live as exiles. Only in their imagination, they are free to return to Yugoslavia and recover their lost identity.

5. Conclusion

After reading these novels, *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the students will be able to say that Dubravka Ugresiç illustrates the idea that there is a thin line between the two options which can change a person's path in life. The first option gives the characters the opportunity of living a normal life if everybody obeys the rules imposed by the communist system. The second one reflects the fact that the exile and the hybrid identity of the characters are the consequences of not obeying the rules. The memories from the period in which they lived in their homeland and the nostalgia help the characters recreate the bond with Yugoslavia, which will never perish.

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