

SOME CONTEMPORARY LITERARY POLEMICS AND CONTROVERSIES OVER LITERATURE

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The paper discusses some contemporary literary controversies in international and Serbian literature and offers an overview of the poetic and ideological arguments of the confronted positions: controversy over cultural appropriation and views on gender issues in the novels of Jeanine Cummins and J. K. Rowling; attempts to ban Woody Allen's memoirs over his alleged sexual abuse; (anti)racist agenda in children's books; warnings of potentially disturbing content in university programs; removal of books in libraries as a consequence of war. Examples related to the Serbian cultural scene are Handke's Nobel Prize for 2019 and NIN Award for the best novel in 2020 awarded to Saša Ilić.

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[...] we shall find both poets and prose-writers guilty of the most serious misstatements about human life [...]. We shall have to prohibit such poems and tales and tell them to compose others in the contrary sense. (Plato, *Republic*, 392b)

The fact that some literary polemics and controversies current in the international and Serbian cultural public a few years ago still exist today implies that their importance cannot be reduced to temporary incidents, especially since they arose and lasted in the background of broader cultural tendencies and attitudes that are part of the phenomenon labeled as "culture wars".¹ In them, literature is treated as a means of forming and presenting not only the canon, but also public opinion in the broadest sense, and it is approached and analyzed accordingly, leading to a radical transformation in literary criticism as a specific activity of evaluation of literature. Previously reserved for philosophical treatises, expert studies, or specialist issues, (in) which only selected and competent critics of the era could publish; today, due to the expansion of the Internet and social networks, evaluation of literature has been decentralized and democratized to the extreme.

Along with that process, there has been a proportional increase in approaches to literature that can be assessed as ideological. Writing about books has never been devoid of ideological admixtures – in addition to judging the literary value of a work, criticism always implied a certain idea about the function of literature,

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¹ The causes of cultural conflicts are seen as deeply rooted in the problem of (re)distribution of power in the existing social order, implying that hostilities in culture will not end anytime soon. (San Juan, Jr. 1997: 17)

that is, about the desired relationship to various aspects of reality, as well as beliefs that are perceived or sanctioned as appropriate. However, in the past few decades, the global ideological pressure on literature has intensified to unprecedented proportions, advancing along several axes with a common denominator contained in the aspiration to prescribe, on the one hand, what a writer is allowed to write about and what he is not allowed to write about, and on the other hand, how and what he must or can declare about contemporary phenomena in culture, politics, and world relations.

In addition, critical judgment – especially the negative one – is often aimed at causing practical consequences, such as boycotting the work or the author, removing books from libraries or bookstores or preventing the publication of the questionable works. In this way, literary criticism is imbued with the widespread phenomenon of the cancel culture, invalidation and elimination of unwanted phenomena, personalities, or even groups of people. Furthermore, many aspects of the contemporary ideological approach to books and literature are not only related to cultural wars but also to actual ones, to the interpretation of their causes, development, and outcomes. In this regard, several illustrative examples of cultural issues related to literature in the last few years, initiated primarily in the countries of the First World, will lead to the central topics of this work – controversies and polemics related to the Serbian cultural scene.

Two novels by female authors drew criticism in 2020 for offending political correctness. Widely advertised in the media, the novel *American Dirt* (2020) by American writer Jeanine Cummins, “a white-identified author” narrating the story of a Mexican woman who escapes Mexico and attempts to immigrate to the United States for the safety of her family, has come under scrutiny of (primarily American) cultural and literary critics for several reasons. It was perceived as an example of cultural appropriation, inauthentic and stereotypical writing and “a travesty to recent feminist causes – to a #MeToo trend that encourages women to tell their stories and to a humanitarian crisis that terrorizes Latin American women” (Panuco-Mercado 2020: 218). Questions were raised over Cummins’ right(s) to author this book: did she have “the cultural license to tell this story” and did she “hold the biological qualifications to share the story of a Mexican woman’s suffering?” (Seefried 2020). Even though it was revealed that Cummins was of Latin American descent, there was a debate as to whether there was a cultural appropriation between the sub-sectors of the “Latinx” community; was this another case of a white author capitalizing on the suffering of another culture?” (Ibid)². On the other hand, *Troubled Blood* (2020), *Harry Potter* author J. K. Rowling’s novel, written

² In the wake of the controversy, publisher Flatiron canceled Cummins’s book tour, due to threats to both Cummins and to booksellers.

under the pseudonym Robert Galbraith, followed a detective on the hunt for a cis male³ serial killer who dresses as a woman to hunt and murder cis women. This book renewed previous controversy on J. K. Rowling's views on transgender men and women after her comments about trans people, with some reviews describing *Troubled Blood* as a "book whose moral seems to be never trust a man in a dress." (Kerridge 2020). Several bookshops around the world announced they would drop J. K. Rowling's books. Social networks reacted as well – hashtag #RIPJKRowling and incitements to burn the novel trended on Twitter, while on TikTok former *Harry Potter* fans were registering their anger at Rowling's views on trans people by burning her books (Flood 2020). Despite this, *Troubled Blood* acquired No 1 spot in the UK's book charts, selling 65 thousand copies in five days, being "by far" the biggest single-week sale for any Galbraith title.

Not only novels have come under criticism – Woody Allen's autobiographical prose *Apropos of Nothing*, set to be released on April 7, 2020, was withdrawn by its US publisher Hachette Book Group's Grand Central imprint following a walkout in protest by its employees. The famous movie director became controversial after sexual abuse allegation in 1992, brought to the forefront again with the onslaught of the #MeToo movement, even after Allen had been cleared twice by the courts of charges. Despite the protest and the pressure, his French publisher Stock released the book in June 2020 under the title *Soit dit en passant*. In the meantime, Allen's book did appear in America by a new publisher and was subsequently translated into other languages. Despite the controversy, the reactions of the readers as well as serious professional reviews were decidedly positive.

Children's literature has not escaped controversies either, especially at a high political level. During a US Senate hearing in the spring of 2022 Senator Ted Cruz claimed that the children's picture book *Anti-racist Baby* by award-winning author and Boston University professor Ibram X. Kendi, tutored kids "that babies are racist" (Kenney 2022). Even though according to an online synopsis, the 24-page publication had the intention of introducing young readers "to the concept and power of antiracism" and discussing kid-friendly steps families can take toward "building a more equitable world" (Ibid), it sparked further controversy because of some views (one of them being "babies are taught to be racist or antiracist – there's no neutrality," a variation of the phrase "you are either with us, or against us", aimed at generating polarization and rejecting non-partisanship). Nevertheless, as a consequence of Cruz's criticism, *Anti-racist Baby* leapt to the top of Amazon's best-selling Children's Books in the US. chart as well as the Number Two best-selling book overall.

An analogous kind of approach was also applied to university programs and libraries. Students of history and literature at the Scottish Highlands and Islands University were warned by the management of some potentially dangerous books

³ "Cis male" and "cis woman" – terms signifying that gender of personalities is the same as what was presumed at birth.

with content warnings that would allow students to make “informed decisions” on whether they would read them or not. These books included Hemingway’s classic *The Old Man and the Sea*, containing “explicit fishing scenes”, Homer’s *Iliad*, written in the 8th century BC, and *Beowulf*, an English poem written around 1025, with the warnings that the works contained “scenes of violent close combat.” *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley was marked because it contained “violent murder and cruelty”, and students studying Shakespeare’s works *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* were warned that the plays contain scenes of “stabbing, poisoning and suicide” (Hastings 2022).

Apart from death and destruction, recent real wars in Europe have resulted in a revision of book holdings in libraries. Enmity towards states and nations led to the interpretation of literature as antagonistic and undesirable, and consequently significant elimination of books belonging to “hostile” writers or languages. The most recent example can be found in the removal of books of Dostoevsky or Pushkin from Ukrainian libraries as “ideologically harmful literature” and “propaganda” books. By the end of 2022, books published at the time when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union will be withdrawn, as Russian literature of so-called anti-Ukrainian content. The second round of withdrawal aims to cover all books published in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some genres, however, including children’s books, love novels and detective stories, will remain, “so that experts could study the roots of evil and totalitarianism” (Walsh 2022). It seems that after the Yugoslav wars, during the 1990s, a similar phenomenon occurred in Croatian libraries, in a kind of “silent cleaning”. Officially, it was a so-called book write-off, a common procedure in the world for obsolete books. However, according to recent research, this was seemingly done according to an ideological or ethnic key, that is, by getting rid of books in Cyrillic, “ekavica,” books by Serbian authors and publishers, “suspicious” Croats, and left-wing literature. Almost 2.8 million books, or 13.8 percent of the total material, were removed, including about three thousand books documenting the destruction of monuments to the anti-fascist struggle in a new Croatian state (Derk 2012).

Yugoslav war-related example of book funds purification leads to two controversies important for Serbian cultural sphere, one global, the Peter Handke Nobel Prize for Literature 2019, and the other, local, nevertheless particularly important for Serbian literary and publishing scene, the NIN 2020 Award for Best Novel of the Year. The announcement of the Nobel Prize for Literature for 2019, awarded to the Austrian writer Peter Handke, caused outcry in a wide range of the public. Handke was originally criticized at the turn of the century for having an understanding for the Serbian side in the Yugoslav wars, only to be condemned again after his decision to speak at the funeral of Serbian politician Slobodan Milošević

in 2006.⁴ The writer was accused that some of his published works indirectly promoted and encouraged genocide apologetics, his most prominent critics – ranging from representatives of states, organizations and prominent writers and intellectuals – challenging the notion that Handke’s literary work can be evaluated apart from its political implications. PEN America issued a statement decrying the academy’s support for Handke, saying the body is “dumbfounded by the selection of a writer who has used his public voice to undercut historical truth and offer public succor to perpetrators of genocide” (Irish Times 2019).

However, Handke was not without voices of support, defending his literary and stylistic ability and artistic imagination. Some members of the jury pointed to the very nature of the award, refusing to consider the writer’s alleged political views. It was emphasized that the Nobel Prize for Literature is awarded on a literary and aesthetic basis, that the Academy does not balance literary quality against political considerations and that „the task of literature is other than to confirm and reproduce what society’s central view believes is morally right” (BBC 2019).

Handke’s Nobel prize was widely discussed in Serbia as well, one of the fiercest opponents being Saša Ilić, writer and future laureate of the NIN Award for the best novel of the year 2020. In 2019, he argued that Handke, as „Milošević’s specter” should not have won the Nobel Prize for his literary work, because an author who at one point in his life sided with the persecutor, for whatever reason, must never be rewarded, even if that medal were only for poetry for children (Ilić 2019).

Ilić was also extremely critical of the prestigious Serbian NIN Award as an institution. After giving up the competition for the best novel in 2010, dissatisfied with the award policy, Ilić boycotted it for 10 years. Explaining his decision, he stated that he wanted to draw attention to the process of merging the concepts of literature, nation, and Orthodox religion in Serbian public space. In his view, NIN Award was the symbolic part of the nationalist ideology and militarized culture that still dominated the public sphere of Serbia. Anything short of boycotting an institution such as the NIN Award would not only be its legitimization, but also the preservation of the taboo that lies in the “NIN-esque heart of darkness” (Ilić 2010).

However, Ilić modified his attitude after a radical change in the NIN Award jury and criteria; he returned to the competition and won the prize in 2020. Called out for being unprincipled or opportunistic, Ilić responded with war metaphors – when fighting the system, an individual should lead a guerrilla war, constantly changing tactics. Out of the limelight, Ilić wanted to regain attention for his writing

⁴ As a direct result, Comédie Française removed Handke’s play from the repertoire, and stood accused of “cultural censorship” – Handke’s editor Ulla Unseld- Berkéwicz objected that the decision “goes against everything that constitutes a free society.” Nobel prize-winning author Elfriede Jelinek and Claus Peymann, director of Germany’s Berliner Ensemble theatre company stressed that the principle of individual freedom was exposed to the “cultural censorship and subordination” exercised on national theatre (Arendt 2006).

and his small publisher by applying for the NIN Award and gaining faith that his novel could influence future award criteria by bringing the story of war crimes and wars of the 1990s into the mainstream (Bakotin 2022). The tactic proved to be successful – Ilić’s novel “The Dog and the Double Bass”, not even existing in bookstores until the victory, received huge media coverage.

This, however, sparked another round of controversy – 18 Serbian prose writers published a boycott appeal (“Boycott the NIN Award”). Although the letter states that “there are no awards that are perfectly fair”, as well as “a jury that is impeccably competent”, it characterized the current jury as a group of “professionally, morally, and most often both professionally and morally incompetent people, for whom it is not clear by what criteria they were elected” (Politika 2020). The signatories demanded their future novels not to be submitted nor considered for the NIN Award, refusing to participate in the downfall of “once relatively free-minded, but today almost small-minded award” (Ibid). Some of the comments on Ilić’s award and his ideological views have led to litigation. Literary critic Igor Perišić, after accusing Ilić in a newspaper article of ideologically reversing Ratko Mladić⁵ and “discursively preparing for new wars in these regions”, was brought to court by Ilić on charges of defamation and fined for “inciting feeling of emotional pain and professional insult” (Пресуда 2022).

In the end, nonetheless, the award, media attention and controversies did not appear to have the expected effect on the sales of Ilić’s book. According to the National Library of Serbia, it was printed in a total circulation of about 1,000 copies, which is significantly below the average number of sold copies of previously awarded novels (Kurir 2021).

As shown, literature is still considered a particularly important form of expression of ideas and is usually exposed to ideological assessments of an entire range of issues contained in the culture and real wars. The very nature of modern media allows conflicting voices to appear instantly, leading to numerous and dynamic public controversies and polemics. At the same time, still based on the assumptions of the traditional approaches to literature, these disputes evoke questions from the field of classical aesthetics and poetics, such as the (nature and limits of) creative imagination and literary imitation/modeling of reality (mimesis), even if the participants in the polemics are not aware of it. The results of ideological pressures range from various individual or collective calls for boycott or condemnation to the physical removal or destruction of (large numbers of) books.⁶ Attempts to cancel,

⁵ Bosnian Serb general sentenced by the Hague Tribunal to life imprisonment for genocide and crimes against humanity.

⁶ Or even writers, as the recent attack on Salman Rushdie sadly confirms.

however, do not always lead to the desired results, sometimes causing the opposite effect.

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