

Aging and Croatian Literature

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Abstract

*In recent years, aging is slowly becoming a topic of increasing interest for a number of contemporary Croatian writers. This article focuses on how literary texts address the subject of aging. Through a close study of two Croatian contemporary writers' novels, Dubravka Ugresic's *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* (2008) and Zoran Feric's *Kalendar Maya* (2012), this article will argue that these writers' engagement with aging and gender allows them to create a different picture of what late life style can be. This work tends to conclude, neglecting socially constructed stereotypes of what aging is, how aging is capable of generating in fiction a new relationship among time, memories, stereotypes, and form.*

Keywords: aging, body, literature, stereotypes, self-perception

1. Aging and Croatian Literature

The main idea of the title of this article, 'Aging in Croatian Literature', makes references to the attitudes towards the ageing process seen through two approaches: socially-imposed stereotypes and the self-perception of the characters in the novels of Dubravka Ugresic, *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* (2008)², and Zoran Feric *Kalendar Maya* (2013)³. The first attitude, related to the socially-imposed notion, tells us what we are or are not supposed to do at certain ages.

Today, we tend to call these socially-imposed notions stereotypes. We see stereotypes as specific views and opinions being held by a large group of people. As such, stereotyping may be divided into three components: the cognitive, the affective and the conative. The cognitive components include the simple, inadequately grounded perceptions, beliefs, and expectations that are held by the number of people. The affective components of a stereotype include both a general friendliness toward the object of the attitude and various specific feelings. The conative components of stereotyping include ones beliefs about 'what should be done'. All of these attributes, cognitive, affective, and conative, combine to create a rigid, judgemental, and prevalent attitude toward members of the opposite sex or even toward members of your own sex. In other words, societies perpetuate certain stereotypes to maintain themselves and to direct individual activities and potential. In the Western countries, cultural notions as well as socially-imposed stereotypes concerning the traditional idea what women should be, look like and behave comes in two periods. The first one refers to the idea that if a woman is not married, has not settled down and had children by the age of 30, she is said to be too old to perform any of these roles. The traditional idea states that a woman should get married between mid- and late 20s, have a child as far as 35.

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² The novel *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* has been translated in English, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, translated by Ellen Elias-Bursac, Celia Hawkesworth and Mark Thompson, in 2009.

³The novel has not been translated in English, yet. The translation of the title of the novel would be *The Mayan Calendar*.

From this specific viewpoint, women receive the concept of 'suitable' age in an extremely stereotyped external pressure. The second one refers to women age 60 and more. Even if they have or have not fulfilled the first socially constructed expectations, women age 60 and more are officially considered to be old, useless, 'inadequate', not to mention the physical signs of ageing over the face and the body. But what happens very often, if not always, is that these stereotypes do not coincide with women's inner feelings; the duality of the inner and the outer perceptions of age do not always follow the rules dictated by the social contract. This idea of the self-notions is closely connected to the notion of 'symbolic interactionism' that Hepworth defined as 'one of the branches of sociology that places a high value on the role of the imagination in the development of the concept of the self [...] our sense of individual selfhood develops from infancy through the human capacity to become aware of the way others see us' (Hepworth, 2000). Also, Hepworth continues in the same tone saying that 'the ageing of the body does not destroy the self though it certainly produces changes in the relationship between body and self' (Hepworth, 2000).

Scientific and technological advances in the field of reproduction and medicine (for example aesthetic surgery) have allowed women, in the recent years, to feel more relaxed towards what is expected from them at the certain age. Following this line of thought, we must be aware that no stereotypes can be understood without knowing the social scene in which they are formed.

According to the latest figures on the demographic challenges in the EU, from the 1st April 2011 (Eurostat-Commission, 2011), life expectancy at birth, in the European Union (EU), has increased considerably. The EU has seen a substantial increase in fertility rates from 1,47 children per women in 2003 to about 1,60 children per women in 2009. Croatia, according to the same report, is under the European standard rates with the fertility data that state a slight increase from 1,32 children per women in 2003 to about 1,49 children per women in 2009. Over the last 50 years, life expectancy at birth in the EU has increased by around 10 years for both men and women, to reach around 82,4 years for women and around 76,4 years for men in 2008. In Croatia, men expect to reach the age of 73 and women the age of around 79,7. Thus, we should conclude that the population is getting older, while the numbers of people older than 60 years of age are the fastest growing population group not just in Croatia but also in the whole EU (2 millions every two years). This means that personal ageing is changing in the sense that the process is gradually slowing down and that, in relative terms, youth has been extended.

The increase in life expectancy, urbanisation, globalisation, and industrialisation has brought to Croatia the same problems that the old people face in other affluent countries: solitude and abandonment. The elements of a conflict between what the characters want to do with their own lives and what other people demand and expect of them, will be shown in the following analysis of the two novels.

2. Initial Stage

More than ever, the cult of youth in today's consumerist time has become an imperative. To stay young and beautiful for as long as possible means victory over time and mortality. Body, particularly the female body, defined by social and cultural context, is 'acceptable' right up to the moment when it becomes old and sick. As such, the old body becomes a taboo seen as something shameful, and therefore destined to be pushed to margins. In addition, there is also a disease that is most commonly associated with old age. Susan Sontag, when talking about a disease in her book *Illness as Metaphor* (1978), addresses disease as a dark side of, a burdensome citizenship (Sontag, 2013). She also remarked that the disease is neither figure nor a metaphor, but a mystery that still provokes acute fear, guilt and even violation of taboos (Sontag 1983).

Facing old age, Simone de Beauvoir writes about the existential issues of old people. In her writings, she tries to stop the 'conspiracy of silence' about old age as something that is abhorrent and evil (de Beauvoir & O'Brian, 1996). De Beauvoir points out that she has never in her life met a single woman who looked at her old age with pleasure (de Beauvoir & O'Brian, 1996).

Over the past couple of decades, more and more scholars in different fields have been focusing on female protagonists over the age of 60 as well as on older women and their place in a society. For example, we read about it in critical reviews (Brennan, 2005), feminist research (Rosenthal, 1990), as well as in novels - including Doris Lessing, May Sarton and Barbara Pym (Browne, 1998; Wheeler, 1997). The picture of the relationship between aging, socially constructed stereotypes, and the idea of a 'late style', to borrow from Edward Said (Said, 2007), finds its place in the Croatian literature, too. The ratio of Croatian literary texts that address the theme or subject of aging as opposed to those that address the theme or subject of youth is considerably smaller in number. However, in recent Croatian contemporary literary production we do find authors like Zoran Feric, Dubravka Ugresic, Dasa Drndic, Mani Gotovac, Andrea Zlatar, who, in their novels, in different ways, focus on the subject of aging.

3. *Old Age and what about it*

Regarded as one of the greatest today's Croatian novelist, Zoran Feric, published in 2012 his novel *The Mayan Kalendar*. The theme of this book is the way in which stereotype about the old and the solitude of old age can be deconstructed.

'Old age came on the 23rd May 2010, around 11 o'clock', says, at the beginning of the novel the main character, 60-years-old retired obstetrician, Tihomir Romar. Tihomir with his former colleagues, now people of sixty-something, decides to repeat their graduation trip by boat along the coast. The motif of navigation ironizes here a metaphor of escape where, by looking back at their life, white-haired seniors sail into an unknown and very uncertain future.

Old women are Dubravka Ugresic's heroines and old womanhood the theme of her book *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (Warner, 2009).

In Ugresic's novel, we also encounter the motif of escape. Her three characters, Beba, Kuka, and Pupa (whose names signify doll), who she ironically calls 'girls', go to a five-days-long trip to Czech wellness centre where they believe to find a way to stay young and beautiful, as long as possible. By using the old myth of 'Baba Yaga' for the Russian folklore⁴, Ugresic ironizes aging, deconstructing it from the social and cultural stereotypes. Obsession with healthy and beautiful body is opposed to the old one of three 'old girls' who, at least for a moment, try to ignore the social preferences. 'Her body was like a plant you keep in your house and you move here and there every day, a plant you water regularly, and from which you wipe the dust off', writes Ugresic when describing the body of Pupa (Ugrešić, 2008).

⁴ Baba Yaga, repulsive hag, gatekeeper to a parallel world, half-woman, eater of children, is a frequent character in many folkloric traditions. Ugresic borrowed the phrase 'Baba Yaga Laid an Egg' from a reworking of folklore by the modernist Aleksei Mikhailovich Remizov. The egg of the title comes from a riddling fairy tale about a quest for love. As Kukla summarises it, 'Ivan falls in love with a girl, but to make her fall in love with him, he has to find out where her love is hidden. And he sets off over seven mountains and seven valleys, and reaches the ocean. There he finds an oak tree, in the oak there is a box, in the box a rabbit, in the rabbit a duck and in the duck an egg. It is in that egg that the girl's love is hidden. The girl has to eat the egg. And when she eats it, the flame of love for Ivan flares in her heart.'

Ugrešić's Ivan is Mevlo, a young masseur at the Wellness Centre; he is a Bosnian orphan with a heart of gold, who has suffered from a permanent erection ever since a bomb exploded beside him in Sarajevo. He will find the egg, and there will be a beautiful future for him, too.

She proceeds with saying that ‘the skin on her legs was so tenuous with swollen crackled capillaries and veins. The nails on her feet were so ossified and distorted that resembled the claws’ (Ugresic 2008: 173). In contrast to this description, we read about in the moment when three girls get to choose the type of massage. The description of different types of massages is shown on the photo of a beautiful, naked female body covered with a cloud of soap foam that the girls see when trying to discern and choose the type of massage.

There is a certain stereotype concerning the range of activities that the old are supposed to do. This range of activities is quite limited and reduced, but not according to their actual mental or physical (dis) abilities, but according to what we (the group of people up to 60-years-old) think appropriate for them. When asked in an interview, Feric spoke about the same problem saying that he is quite sceptical towards the activities old people could, want to or should do (Ferić, 2012). He said that maybe it is time all of us to stop looking at them through the prism of mothers and grandmothers. Examples of such repression are evident in the everyday life: it is ‘not normal’ to see an old person in the cinema, rock concerts, bars or clubs.

When the group of school colleagues sail to the Island of Pag, they come across a young bartender whose look speaks more than words. From his look, we read about his judgemental attitude towards their decision of coming to an island known primarily for its wild summer parties.

Pupa, the oldest of the three women from Ugresic’s story, also speaks about this problem in an ironic way. She says that even the oldest, primitive cultures as she calls them, knew better how to treat old people. The rules were simple, she says. When a person became old thus no longer able to make profit, they would leave him/her to die or they would help them to die easier. Today’s people, who Pupa calls hypocrites, appalling over primitivism of former customs, leave their parents without any shred of remorse. They leave them in nursing homes or in various types of clinics or hospitals for old people. The question Ugresic leaves to every reader to decide is which of the two cultures is cruller: today’s or the previous, primitive one.

On the other hand, the scene of Feric’s earlier novel *Children of Patras* (2005) can be read as a symbolic one because it brings us a middle-aged professor, the main character, who having an affair with the 17-years-old student, decides to take a trip together (Ferić, 2008). On the trip, they pretend to be two people who have already lived most of their lifetime. This plot served Feric as a prelude to the trip described in his novel *the Mayan Calendar* (Ferić, 2011). In both of his novels, the game becomes reality; the reality is hiding inside another truth, in the awareness of both of the main characters that picture age as something that comes suddenly regardless of the physical condition and age of a person.

Discrepancy in relation to body-mind can begin at the very early age, as it is the case with the youngest of three Ugresic’ old girls. In her case, her body took over the control and got older long before her 40s. And in Feric’s novel, we observe the similar pattern when he describes Alma, one of the female characters. The way she moves implies that she is still a very beautiful and desirable woman, and not the person on the edge of old age. She cannot reject from the head the picture of herself as an appealing woman. Once arriving at the Island of Pag, looking at a group of youths enjoying themselves on the beach, a group of old high school graduates discuss how they have noticed that they have become old. One of the characters, Tony, adds that he still feels like a 40-years-old man up to the moment when he sees himself in the mirror or in some window shop.

4. Oninvisibility

‘At first you don’t see them,’ reads the introduction to *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (Ugrešić, 2008). ‘... At first they’re invisible. And then all at once you begin to spot them. They shuffle around the world like armies of elderly angels. One of them peers into your face. She glares at you, her eyes wide, her gaze pale blue, and voices her request with a proud and condescending tone.’

She is asking for your help, she needs to cross the street but she cannot do it alone... You feel a pang of sympathy for the old lady, you are moved, and you do a good deed, swept by the thrill of gallantry. It is precisely at this moment that you should dig in your heels, resist the siren call, and make an effort to lower the temperature of your heart. Remember, their tears do not mean the same thing as yours do. Because if you relent, give in, exchange a few more words, you will be in their thrall. You will slide into a world that you had no intention of entering, because your time has not yet come, your hour, for God's sake, has not come' (Ugrešić, 2008). But 'there are those little, sweet, old ladies who are still 'in force', says Ugresic, dressed in low-cut summer dresses with flirty feather decoration around the neck, with the melted make-up leaking from their faces' (Ugrešić, 2008). A lot can be read from these lines.

To begin with, we should step back a little from the fact that most passers-by do not pay attention to old people who pass them by on the street, and look at the picture from a broader perspective. Namely, the problem of aging is almost always faced with the aforementioned problem of marginalization of the elderly. The cult of eternal youth and beauty which today's people see as imperative, forces us to look at any of the body changes with disgust, scorn even impoliteness. Wrinkles and body weaknesses are a taboo; something we consider to be unsophisticated, something we do not want to be faced with, we ignore it, we act towards it as if it does not exist, we tend to judge it and eventually marginalize it.

In the first part of Ugresic's novel, one of the three girls insists upon entering the cafe with a walker although she is being aware that it might disturb others. She still believes to be in charge of all aspects of her life, even though her physical conditions tell her the opposite.

Feric's characters often behave in the similar way. Joseph, a pensioner, still gets to be controlled by his mother he did not manage to separate from either physically or symbolically. The two characters show their eager to be noticed, to prove to still be capable of living in the same way and tempo they did their whole life; they still want to be noticed; they still want to be part of a collective.

In need of attention, all of Ugresic's girls dress in a similar way, the same way they used to dress 40-years-ago; they all pronounce the same sentences about how their life used to be lovely. Thus, all of them show a kind of a double struggle for identity, the one faced towards those younger ones, and the one faced towards those older ones.

In one of his interview, Feric acknowledges how Ugresic' novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* actually helped him to become aware of some aspects of age, especially the invisibility aspect. This problem of invisibility, which occurs at the beginning of *Baba Yaga*, he faced with at the end of his novel. When you are old, he says, you become visible only if you stand out of the crowd because of something unusual and different, for example if you dressed inappropriately; something negative about you standing out that can catch the attention of the people around you. The moment when Feric's group of travellers finally arrives at the port they sail away from, nobody from the crowd that was passing them by, notices or responds to their greetings; the people surrounding them act as if they are invisible.

5. Conclusion

Baba Yaga-the-stereotype, unclaimed, is 'a loser... The chief reason for Baba Yaga's heresy is her great age. Her dissidence only takes place within the system of life-values that we ourselves have made; in other words, we are forced her into heresy. Baba Yaga does not live her life; she undergoes it. She is an old maid or a virgin, who serves as a screen for the projection of (castrating) male and (self-punishing) female fantasies. We have stripped away the mere possibility of accomplishment on any level and left her with nothing but a few tricks to scare little children with... Baba Yaga is a surrogate-woman; she is here to get old instead of us, to be old instead of us, to be punished instead of us. Hers is the drama of old age, hers the story of excommunication, forced expulsion, invisibility, brutal marginalization.

On this point, our own fear acts like acid, which dissolves actual human dramas into grotesque clownishness' (Warner, 2009). Ugresic and Feric use literature as a medium to remind readers that aging and physical decay are a normal part of human life, not a deviation or illness. Ugresic, being aware of old age as something inevitable, something that exists outside in the 'physic space', approaches aging through laughter, irony, parody, and exaggeration. Feric, on the other hand, approaches old age as something that is a part of the human life, which, in spite of the obvious physical changes, does not change the way a person feels inside. Time in which we live does not look friendly at anyone who does not fit into socially and/or culturally imposed patterns. Old people are seen as a constant reminder of the end of life, of passing of time, of death.

In contrast to this thought, stereotypes on aging are often based on a lack of knowledge about aging. While, on the one hand, we recognize physical decline with age, on the other hand we often regard old age as a 'golden years' prescribing them, at the same time, life wisdom. Or in Edward Said's words 'A late style would reflect a life of learning, the wisdom that comes from experience, the sadness that comes from wisdom and a mastery of craft that has nothing left to prove' (Rothstein, 2006). On the other hand, aging of the body and illness manifestations are stigmatized and are subjected to real culture torture in which youth, health and sex are axioms of existence, and wellness centres, rejuvenating treatments moments that we live for. Since stereotypes as considered to be cultural facts, they are transmitted to new generations as part of their cultural heritage. However, stereotypes can change, over time, they can adapt to new conditions and new age, they can even reduce or increase its intensity. It is necessary to understand and try to change the socio-cultural instruments that determine the subjective and objective rights. Social rights, especially the sexual one, cannot be achieved by a series of law changes, changes in language, nor in the concepts of truth and values defined by the social order. Although the cultural and social changes, in terms of the stereotypes, usually consist only in replacing one model to another, the process of socialization, art, literature, science, religion and mass media are of great importance in such changes.

By exploring the attitudes of the characters in Dubravka Ugresic's and Zoran Feric's novels, we may conclude that the main point of the two authors was that they were not really interested in lateness that brings wisdom, harmony and serenity, or even lateness as a reflection of hard-earned knowledge; they were interested in lateness as opposition, lateness that displays control in achieving self-definition and a certain type of independency. Late style, Said suggests 'expresses a sense of being out of place and time: it is a rejection of what is being offered' (Said, 2007).

And at last, what is left for women when they do get the marks associated with old age, when their body becomes ugly and, maybe, ill? We conclude that one of the many possible interpretations of the novel *Mayan Calendar* and *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, could be the one that claims that the worst thing we could do is to bury our head in sand and look for some other Baba Yaga to get old for us and thus lives that type of life for us.

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