

Comparative Research of Slavic Intercultural Community in North Macedonia

In terms of its language, Macedonian culture belongs to the South Slavic community of cultures. However, regarding its intercultural interaction, it is deeply rooted within the Balkan, Mediterranean, and European contexts. With regard to research, the Macedonian culture and language are mostly viewed within the Slavic intercultural community and the Slavic studies focusing mainly on linguistic parameters. The only way for the Macedonian literature to be explored in academic research and thus gain international scientific attention is via the departments of Slavic studies at universities all over the world, where the Macedonian language is studied within the academic field of Slavistics, a philological discipline that has distanced itself from its traditional and conservative methodologies and reached the level of intercultural comparative studies.¹

The concept of “intercultural community” was inspired by the theory of interliterariness by the Slovak comparatist Dionýz Ďurišín, who was one of the most prominent theoreticians of comparative literature in the Slavic cultural world. His influence was strongly felt on the development of the Macedonian comparative school, especially through his close collaboration and personal friendship with one of our most brilliant scholars—Professor Milan Gjurčinov, who was a polyvalent scholar, the inaugurator of comparative literature in Macedonian academia, a distinguished Slavist, and an expert in Russian literature.

1. See the panel at the *XIV International Congress of Slavists*, held in Ohrid, North Macedonia, 10-16 September 2008, entitled *Literary Comparatistics in Slavic CentErs at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (Z. Kovač, *Comparative Study of Slavonic Literature Today*, L. Višnevska, *Komparatistika v Poľse - nabrosok situacii na 2007 god, s voprosami na 2008 god*, S. Stojmenska-Elzeser, *The Challenges of Comparative Studies of Slavonic Literatures*, M. Zelenka, *Czech and Slovak Comparative Literary Studies in the 20th Century*. The proceedings were published in *Прилози (Contributions)* 32, 2007/2, Skopje: Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Intercultural communities are communities of interrelated cultures that share certain geographical, linguistic, geo-political, or other characteristics marking a step forward from national literatures to the conceptualization of the world literature. Within the Slavic community, the different national literatures are engaged in a constant dialog by interchanging their creative ideas, mutual translation and reception of scholarly work and literature.

So far, the relations between Macedonian literature and other Slavic literatures have been the subject of many research projects on several different levels of scholarly work using various methodological approaches. For instance, in North Macedonia, the bibliography of the reception of almost every Slavic literature was completed by the end of the last century, thus showing the growing interest in certain Slavic authors and interliterary relations. One of the most dominant fields of research is the interrelations between Macedonian and Russian literature. This relationship was obviously forced in the past by ideology and political pressure. Despite this political constellation, the affiliation with Russian literature was highly productive for the writers of Social Realism (during the mid-20th century), developing into a distinctive stylistic formation. Many comparative studies have been devoted to the analysis of the significant influence of Russian Symbolism, Imagism and Futurism on Macedonian poets. Numerous studies analyse the impact of the personal creative poetics of some Russian authors, especially writers or playwrights, on the developing trends in Macedonian literature. In terms of literary theory, a great emphasis is put on the contacts with the Russian Formalist and semiotic theorists, who had a dominant influence on the terminology adopted in the Macedonian literary studies and the overall understanding, perception and reception of literary theory. The same approach has been adopted in analysing the greatest Slovak, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian, Polish, and Czech works of literature. Naturally, the predominant field of research in cultural relations is the interrelation of those Slavic cultures that used to be part of the former state of Yugoslavia from the end of WWII until 1991, when an independent Macedonian state was formed. Hence, this is a brief history of how regional comparative South-Slavic research was developed.

In terms of collecting data and commenting on mutual influences across Slavic cultures, Macedonian comparatists have broadened their interests in many different directions by adopting new interdisciplinary approaches. The more traditional comparative studies in the field of investigating the relations between two or more particular authors, poetics, or literary movements gave place to the more complex interdisciplinary and intercultural studies concerned with the questions of identity, gender and eco-problems, geo-criticism and ethical criticism, translation studies and other research areas related to the status of literary creation within the broader cultural framework and human life in general.

The growing number of works in imagology worldwide inspired similar approaches to the complexity of the "Slavic world". Through examples from

Macedonian literature, the attitude towards Slavdom was analysed as a controversial category that connects two opposite tensions: a feeling of closeness, similarity, and familiarity, but also an ironic and critical position, “otherness”, and even hate/hatred for the other Slavic peoples and the Slavism in general. The category of “Slavic” or “Slavdom” is quite problematic. Is it just a philological concept of mutual language origins, or a myth of Slavic unity and togetherness that can’t be easily proved by history? Maybe it’s just an illusion or another utopian concept from the world history of ideas. “Slavdom, taken in its entirety, is still a sphinx, an enigma!²”—wrote the Russian philosopher Constantin Leontiev in the nineteenth century. The attitude towards Slavism of the people and cultures speaking a language of Slavic origin is complicated and controversial. It has many faces and can be examined from various aspects.

The intercultural relations across Slavic peoples vibrate between two extreme forms, described by the French comparatist Daniel-Henri Pageaux³ as the so-called “phobias” and “philiias”. At the same time, they are strongly influenced by one unifying stream, which under the mask of the prefix “pan” (here it means pan-Slavism, an ideological project conceptualized few centuries ago), appears as a cruel arbiter in positioning and giving appropriate or inappropriate place and attention to cultures, nations/peoples, or ethnicities belonging to the Slavic circle. Many articles on the imagery of the Slavs as a community and the accompanying prejudices, stereotypes, “philiias” and “phobias” *versus* the other Slavic ethnicities reflected in contemporary Macedonian prose and drama yielded amusing finds about cultural stereotypes, such as “balkanism”, “slavism” and “barbarism” that were incorporated in a number of literary works and exposed the main ways of perception and reception of other Slavic identities reflected in literature. Here are a few examples of some of those subjects of analysis: “The image of the Russian immigrant in the Macedonian novel”; “The Russian woman: the conflict between sensuality and ethics”; “Russians and reading”, etc. Additional topics of comparative analysis include the controversial attitude expressed in Macedonian literature to the idea of the “Slavic soul”, the myth of the unity of the Slavs and the stereotypes of eternal brotherhood.⁴

The contacts across Slavic cultures are not immune to negativity. The (form of) “philia”, as a real intercultural dialogic relation in the pursuit of mutual respect, tolerance, understanding and getting to know each other better, is still a desirable form of relation to which more or less, all the Slavic cultures aspire. Throughout history, Slavism has been a favourite subject of rethinking, especially in Russian mysticism and philosophy of the nineteenth century, wrapped up under the veil of specific Slavic messianism as an opposition to the

2. Konstantin Leontiev, *Vizantizam i slovenstvo*, Beograd: Logos: Ortodoks, 1999, p. 9
3. Daniel-Henri Pageaux, *La littérature générale et comparée*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1994.
4. Соња Стојменска-Елзесер, „Културниот стереотип за руската душа“ [The Cultural Stereotype about the Russian Soul] in *(He)секојдневни љубопитства [(Un)Usual Curiousities]*. Скопје: Институт за македонска литература, 2018.

rational European culture. Small Slavic nations, who developed their national Renaissance in the nineteenth century, attached fondly to the idea of Slavism as a community for practical reasons. In the 19th century, Slavophilia was a mechanism of defence against non-Slavic cultural influences. For the South-Slavic nations, it was a way of practical resistance against the long-lasting Ottoman Empire. Withing the general cultural and historical framework of Eurocentrism, the concept of Slavism is often regarded or even identified with the idea of barbarism. The twentieth century notifies devaluation and downfall of Slavism, mainly from the point of view of the West Europeans. But what is more provocative is the sharing of the same attitude towards Slavism by the Slavic peoples themselves. What Maria Todorova⁵ wrote about the Balkans can also be said about the Slavs. They are a tampon zone between Europe and Asia—they are the primary Others and foreigners, the first barbarians to the Europeans which is a paradox because, by geographical measures, they too belong to Europe.

Today, after the fall of the larger states—the concept of Slavic unities, the rethinking, understanding, and the perception of the Slavic community takes on new dimensions. Slavs are the largest European ethnolinguistic group. They have specific national and cultural identities. However, there seems to be a trend of hiding and holding back their Slavism. The growing interest in Slavism seems to have begun and stopped at the level of ethnology and folklore. The concept of Slavism in Macedonian literature and culture has been received with a grain of salt and ambivalence: on the one hand, it is an image of the Other, of something unfamiliar, strange and foreign, and on the other hand, it is an image of the Self, of one's own origin and identity. And this ambiguity makes it a complex phenomenon. It connects the outside with the inside; it moves towards the Other and the Self. It looks inwards, to the "room of one's own" and yet it looks up to someone else's dwelling space. Macedonian culture within the framework of the imagined Slavic community (both political and cultural) has a peripheral and marginal position. It creates a self-image of a small, weak and stigmatized country.

By understanding comparative literature as a "discipline of decolonization," the Italian comparatist Armando Gnisci suggested the elimination of the opposition between small and great literatures, powerful and weak cultures. In his view, the interliterary process is a *colloquium* among all the various cultures and literatures in the world. This is also the case with the cultures integrated in the Slavic intercultural community. In one of his texts, he writes: "If it is true that all of us live in one 'postcolonial' world, in that world the ex-colonists have to learn to live as equals and together with the ex-colonized".⁶ This can also be said concerning the Slavic community, within

5. Marija Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

6. Армандо Њиши, „Компаративната книжевност како дисциплина на деколонизацијата“ in *Книжевен контекст/ Literary Context* 3, Skopje: Institute of Macedonian Literature,

which there are also former colonising and formerly colonized cultures. Their task is to learn how to live together with the necessary mutual respect, and improve their communication in order to familiarize themselves with their respective differences or similarities.

In this context, we can relate to the concept of “subaltern” identities, born in the theoretical discourse of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, implying the ex-communication from the socio-economic resources and social exclusion by the powerful entities of certain cultures. The subalternity is related to the colonized peoples, states and ethnicities (in one way or another: economic, political, cultural, etc.). Within the Slavic context, one of the main features of the so-called “subaltern” identities can be identified in the case of the Macedonian culture, which has been continually colonized in the past, whereas today is in a constant rivalry with its neighbouring cultures

Over the past few decades, the Slavic intercultural community has changed tremendously, and the position of the Macedonian culture has been quite unstable, sometimes enhanced, sometimes slightly neglected or even ignored. Intercultural relations vary in intensity in different historical periods and socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, the reception of other Slavic literatures in Macedonian culture has had its high and low points, and there have been periods of a total break in communication.

The current state of Macedonian culture within the Slavic intercultural community framework is rather disputable for many reasons. There are several controversies with regard to her unfavourable position in the contemporary globalized world, which are not only matters of cultural exchange, mutual acquaintance and understanding but raise subtle questions of language and national identity, recognition and sustainability.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the world has been witnessing war conflicts among Slavic peoples. So, the myth of the brotherhood of the Slavic peoples has been seriously brought into question. The nineteenth-century project of Pan-Slavism with all its negative connotations is being revitalized again under the veil of politics and clever manipulations. The division gap between Slavic cultures is getting deeper and deeper, and instead of intercultural communication for mutual advancement the Slavic world is divided into dominant and marginalized cultures. Over the last few decades, Macedonian culture has been undoubtedly in the latter group.

The cultural marginalization is vivid in the academic centres worldwide, especially at the departments of Slavic studies, where Macedonian language and literature are often seen as marginal subjects within the curriculum. Universities with a long tradition of offering undergraduate and postgraduate

1999.p. 16.

studies in Slavic languages and literatures are usually moderated by two types of contextualization, which are de facto the two types of comparative research of the Macedonian culture: one within the wider Slavic community framework and the other one within the South Slavic community framework. Nevertheless, both concepts of unification have proved to be controversial and shaped by political events and beliefs at certain moments in history. Furthermore, engagement in academic and research practice is heavily dependent on financial sources, especially the practise of literary translation, which is crucial for intercultural communication and which, according to many comparatists, is the primary focus of research in comparative literature.

Throughout history and especially nowadays, the controversial syndrome of “neighbouring Slavic ethnicities” has been slowly taking shape. The overlapping subjects of the cultural heritage and history of several neighbouring Slavic countries and ethnicities (especially those formerly existing within the same states or federations that later collapsed) have provoked many misunderstandings, negative sentiments and even bitter conflicts. This kind of animosity between the Macedonian and Bulgarian cultures developed and took root throughout the society of the 19th and 20th centuries, which has recently culminated with the Bulgarian obstruction to the accession of North Macedonia to the European Union. Drawing strong support from its scientific institutions, Bulgaria invoked its veto power on negotiations with would-be members to block North Macedonia’s candidacy based on cultural grounds by questioning the Macedonian language and the history of North Macedonia (including its literary history too). The intercultural communication between Bulgaria and North Macedonia has never been satisfactory, especially in academia but mostly at Slavistics congresses and conferences, and in the departments of Slavic studies, where both sides tend to ignore each other. Most of the significant comparative studies of both cultures have been provided by foreigners. In the long history of Macedonian comparative studies, only a small number of cooperation projects have been carried out between the Macedonian and Bulgarian national academies of sciences and arts (but not without causing some problems)⁷. Both sides have taken uncompromising attitudes to the controversial subject of medieval studies, where Macedonian and Bulgarian scholars keep completely divergent perspectives. The most prominent figures of the national canon of Macedonian literature have also been appropriated by Bulgarian literary history, including the folklorist and ethnographic materials collected during the National Revival period.

Comparative literature has solved similar problems in many other neighbouring Slavic and non-Slavic countries by introducing the concept of double

7. M. Gjuričinov, A. Iordanov, (Гурчинов, М.; Јорданов, А.) [Ed.] (2015) Модернизам во бугарската и македонската литература: сличности и разлики (Modernism in Bulgarian and Macedonian Literature: Similarities and Differences) Skopje/ Sofija: MANU, BAN, p. 320.

belonging (bi-lingual) or multiple belonging of authors whose literary achievements have a leading role in the development of two or more different cultural systems. But the problem arising from the Bulgarian academic stance is that they reject the existence of Macedonian literary history accusing North Macedonia that the Macedonian language is not a separate language but a dialect of the Bulgarian language. This falsification of history might lead to dangerous consequences and cause an absurd cultural genocide (a “disappearance” of the Macedonian national culture) in the 21st century under the flag of good neighbourly intentions. It is indicative that this political and cultural pressure activates acts as a policy of revisionism at a moment when a new form of political community is being built—the integration in the EU on a cultural level under the slogan “unity in diversity”. The concept of the cultural community once again creates (as it has done many times in the past) the opportunity to question the identity of weaker entities by cultures maintaining their dominant hegemonic and superior position.

In such a constellation, the comparative research of Slavic cultures in North Macedonia increases in value and significance by offering the Macedonian culture a chance to maintain and affirm its own identity. The communities in literary research vibrate between two tendencies—universality (similarity) and diversity. In the process of harmonization of these tendencies, some controversies may occur due to the aforementioned (divergent) approaches. For this reason, the concepts of intercultural communities in comparative literature are always *pluralia tantum*: Slavic literature(s), European literature(s), South-Slavic or Yugoslav literature(s), Balkan literature(s), Mediterranean literature(s), etc. These communities are dynamic and changeable, exploring a variety of different aspects of rethinking literature and culture both inter- and cross-nationally. In one of the most important books that deal with the ethical aspects of literary research, Tobin Siebers claims that “the heart of ethics is the desire for community”.⁸ The concept of World literature could also be perceived as a variation of this desire. However, in working towards the goal of this desire, it is vital not to lose the potential of diversity and pay tribute to all the different variations of cultural identities.

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8. Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988, p. 202.

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