

# Shaping Gender and Kinship Relationships in Recent Croatian Satirical Fiction

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Why should we research the treatment of gender and kinship relationships in satirical literature? What is the connection between these topics and satirical writing, and how might such a study be helpful for a discussion of narrative counterpublics? As a preliminary hypothesis: satire allows for critical distancing from societal and private grievances and thus provides an opportunity for forming alternative relationships. This paper discusses foundational positions concerning the characteristics of satire and connects these to the presentation of gender and kinship. Of central importance is the question of how satire involves readers and shapes their imagination and reactions. I will explore these questions by discussing the novels and screenplays of Ante Tomić, a popular satirical author from Split.

In theoretical discussions of its general attributes, satire as a mode<sup>1</sup> is typically understood to be a form of literature, mass media, or an aesthetic creation.<sup>2</sup> It is not confined to written expression (Quintero 9), and it (generally) attacks societal or individual grievances based on positive moral values. In combination with an attitude of aggression, the

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- 1 See Breunig 66 and Mahler 23ff., Hempfer, Brummack 355, Schwind 19ff., Zymner 21, 23. Satirical genres will not be discussed here, nor the many types of satire.
  - 2 See Condren 661, Arntzen 1989, 15, Breunig 69, Brummack 356, Schwind 19ff., Wöfl 304.

social function of morality, aesthetic techniques, humor,<sup>3</sup> and the influence of the reader's elicited mental and emotional reactions<sup>4</sup> are essential. Although the latter belongs to the most frequently addressed open questions of literature, satire undoubtedly aims to awaken the reader's desire for reform, or even seeks to resolve the issues it raises. Nevertheless, satire cannot automatically be identified with subversiveness (Condren 662). It depends on whether partial changes in the character's or the text's subject's—the abstract author's—worldview are intended, indicating either a progressive or conservative viewpoint. This is abundantly clear in the highly popular genre of comedy, which uses humor in different ways to critique grievances, shortcomings, or behaviors. Common stereotypes concerning marginalized groups sometimes serve as a source of laughter, and even the imagined exclusion of the other may become central to comedy.

Consequently, humor is conceptualized in vastly different ways.<sup>5</sup> Theorists such as Georg Lukács claim that satire has no subversive potential if it makes use of humor, criticizing tendencies towards “conciliation” and “liberal forbearance” regarding the criticized circumstances. Thus, Lukács argues that satire helps to minimize aggression towards problems within society and reconciles the reader with injustices in the world. Other theorists who share this position connect satire to the systematic societal sublimation of critical thought and see its fundamental function in the aesthetic control of aggression instead of social activity (cf. Weiß 11). However, humor and irony are of crucial importance to satirical texts and serve not only to reduce emotional tensions but also to reinforce subtle meanings. Ironic utterances, in which a given wording significantly differs or even contrasts with the intended meaning, bind the reader to the text's subject—because both are connected

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3 See Frye 109, Arntzen 1989, 15–16, Condren 661.

4 See Brummack 358, Breunig 72, Condren 662, Zymner 21.

5 The problem of humor, linked to the manifold functions of laughter, is a complex topic and will not be addressed in detail in this paper (see, for instance, Bergson, Bakhtin, Huizinga, Voss).

by the secret knowledge that what is said should be interpreted anti-facetiously and not be taken at face value. However, the effects of humor differ, based on its expression: accusing humor, mocking, and excluding of entire groups have the same effect, but only in cases where readers do not belong to or empathize with the lampooned. This kind of humor acts according to fixed categories and confirms existing opinions. Conversely, sympathetic humor (in Lukács' understanding, reduced to being bourgeois and soft) is able to transcend fixed borders, improve reader's positions, and change their attitudes.

Through fictional presentation and ambiguity, satire creates a specific relationship with the reader. Irony and a strategy of dissimulation (Wölfel 297), or dissimulated lying, belong to its basic methods. As Mahler states in his definition, satire is "a speech act that consciously transgresses rules of conversation, disingenuous, but at the same time is transparent to the listener in its insincerity, . . . a secondary use of given patterns of speech."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the reader recognizes the narrated world from a distance as being artistically alienated<sup>7</sup> but, at the same time, familiar. Narrator and intended reader are confidentially linked, since the implied author seeks to make the reader the narrator's or the protagonist's mental and emotional companion. This is only possible if the narrator does not discriminate or offend the reader, which would hinder their partial identification with the character or the narrator.<sup>8</sup>

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6 "eine Konversationsmaximen absichtlich verletzende, unaufrichtige, aber in ihrer Unaufrichtigkeit vom Hörer gleichwohl durchschaute Sprechhandlung. . . eine sekundäre Indienstnahme vorgegebener Sprachmuster." (Mahler 43; see also Wölfel 297, Zymner 22).

7 Alienation can be the result of different techniques, but the attack of the general—not the detailed—phenomenon is one of its common characteristics (Arntzen 572; Wölfel 85). Thus, even if details are more central, they are never the primary target, as satire always requires the reader's abstraction from the concrete to the more general attribute below the surface of phenomena.

8 Such texts fit into the genre of pamphlet or pasquill, understood as being motivated by private resentment (Arntzen 181) and with the aim of destroying a rival (Zymner 22).

Thus, attacks against human or societal deficiencies have to be tempered by positive attitudes that offer a chance for identification and reform to the reader. Depictions of stereotypes can be problematic, as they are often used for negative generalizations.

When considering the depiction of gender and kinship relations in recent Croatian literature, we come across the genres of detective fiction and romance in popular literature, commemorative/autobiographical, and “biographical” literature. These texts deal with personal and/or historical taboos of Yugoslavia or Croatia (i.e., the treatment of political “enemies” in labor camps or the German minority), social and cultural references, topics of everyday life, or insights into intimacy. Whereas many novels focusing on political “taboos” show very problematic kinship relations between children and their parents,<sup>9</sup> as a consequence of prevailing silence about historical circumstances, Ante Tomić’s novels present recent everyday topics in a popular and satirical manner.<sup>10</sup>

In Tomić’s novels and films based on such themes, we are often confronted with—unsurprisingly—traditional gender and kinship relations of heterosexual couples. His male characters are well-to-do officers, lawyers, businessmen, politicians, farmers, teachers, or even priests. His female protagonists appear in the roles of housewives, nurses, hairdressers, servants, workers, or students who have low incomes or are dependent on their husbands.<sup>11</sup> The way gender and kinship relations are portrayed is mostly stereotypical and exaggerated but still familiar to the reader’s experience: typical examples include not only the search for love and an ideal partner but also extramarital affairs of well-situated husbands. However, what makes Tomić’s work

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9 See Hansen-Kokoruš, 2013.

10 His popularity finds its expression in the number of editions and films based on his novels. The films are among the most popular Croatian film productions in the past 15 years and have received many awards at international film festivals.

11 There are also well-to-do women, but they are often presented in a negative and stereotypical light: for example, a young pop-star without musical ability, relying on financial and cultural support from her rich boyfriend’s family.

significant is a creeping, step-by-step shift from the dominant perspective of men to the marginalized outlook of women, which ultimately becomes central in many texts. Indeed, even in strong patriarchal kinship structures (manifested in the 'clan'), matrimonial tendencies emerge (for example in *Čudo u Poskokovoj Dragi*, 2009, The Miracle in Viper's Glen).

Lidija, the protagonist in *Ljubav, struja, voda & telefon* (2005, Love, Electricity, Water & Telephone), rushes headlong into a marriage dominated by her husband and his family, especially his "mama." The young woman breaks out of her life as a housewife,<sup>12</sup> in favor of a life without material security, working as a hairdresser while self-determinedly flouting convention and embracing new ways of life. What makes this character convincing and refreshing is Lidija's anti-authoritarian behavior and colloquial speech, which gives her authenticity,<sup>13</sup> her fearlessness and the categorical rejection of subordination to patriarchal men, and her attempt to control her own life. Her history shows different kinds of women's oppression (from her own family traditions, her husband, his family, and her married lover). Thus, the story generally discusses its manifold manifestations: emotional blackmail (by her friend Branka and her importunate boyfriend), the fear of articulating sexual desires (embodied by the conservative women in Lidija's beauty salon), and the fear of transgressing conventional boundaries (Lidija demands payment for sex). The implied author makes use of an incredibly canny technique. The character of Lidija presents herself to the readers as a radical but authentic and true woman whose desires are understandable: she wants love with all her heart and searches for a partner without any kind of subjugation or loss of self.<sup>14</sup> Her life experience

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12 Her husband's traditional understanding of women's duties is shown in one particular detail: his symbolic gift for their wedding anniversary is an apron with the motto "My wife is the best cook."

13 She uses the idiom of Split, which is quite vulgar and provocative.

14 Thus, the author plays with stereotypical expectations and shows the socially conditioned nature of gender images. The comic effects are caused by the switch in gender roles, as Lidija's behavior is more typical of men.

leads more and more to her refusing to lie. Speech is her weapon—as is common in male self-portrayals—and she evokes sympathy due to her lack of pretension; however, when talking to her small son, she communicates in an entirely different manner, showing her to be a more conventional loving mother.

Tomić avoids the creation of a completely stereotypical character by also depicting her desires and doubts as to whether she is on the right path. However, one technique is of special importance for the persuasiveness of this figure: she narrates from a first-person perspective. As we know, this influences the reception of a character—readers regard the information as trustworthy and accurate, even the narrator's gender. Surprisingly, Tomić uses a cross-gendered, first-person narrative: the male author chooses a female narrator, a technique which Ingrid Noll also used effectively in her crime novel *Stich für Stich* (1997, *Stitch by Stitch*), a story in which the protagonist narrates “her” story of tragic alienation from her partner, in the first-person, until the reader ultimately realizes that the artistic handiwork is linked not—as expected—to a woman but a man. Humor is the other decisive method that plays a key role in the positive reception of this and other characters: Lidija articulates what others are afraid to even imagine in a liberating way. Transgressing taboos of permitted communication is what makes the readers laugh. Thus, reading the novel may lead women, in particular, to identify with this sharp-tongued, quick-witted character that offers a sense of emancipated partnership. In other novels about patriarchal kinship structures, Tomić presents women as the strong gender who solve the problems, underlining their mental power, empathy, and intelligence.

The 2016 film *Ustav Republike Hrvatske* (The Constitution) and its screenplay (2017) also show how satire challenges mainstream opinions regarding gender and other relations; they combine stereotypes of straight and same-sex relationships with ideological statements of politics and religion,<sup>15</sup> while demonstrating their absurdity. Two popular

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15 The conservative social and ideological commitment of the Catholic church is one of Tomić's most passionate issues and the topic of two more of his novels.

positions stand in contrast: Vjeko Kralj (the surname means “king”), a strong conservative, nationalistic bourgeois teacher with strong prejudices against other nationalities and classes, is living a double-life as a closeted gay man who—in contrast to his own prejudiced worldview—is also portrayed as a character full of sympathy, mourning his partner who committed suicide and searching for compassion.<sup>16</sup> He is connected to Croatian history through his fascist father, a caricature of the Ustaša movement, whose ability to act is—figuratively and literally—amputated and who despises same-sex relationships. On the opposing side, there is the working class in the basement, the policeman Ante and his dominant wife Maja Samardžić, a nurse. The teacher, representing the upper class, shows no respect for them, due to their Serbian origins and lower level of education. Maja, however, transcends her antipathy for her snobbish neighbor, through a clever deal: she cares for Kralj’s father. Kralj, in turn, tutors Ante in the Croatian constitution for an exam required for his promotion. As a result, their original disrespect for one another gradually decreases. They gain a mutual understanding and even grow sympathetic to one another’s attitudes. The idealized conclusion of the film is hyperbolic but nevertheless offers an optimistic core, presenting two rigid and opposing worldviews and lifestyles, initially unwilling to change their positions. Both sides come into contact—not by choice but by necessity or even fate—and learn to accept the other’s alterity. Maja’s and Ante’s

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*Što je muškarac bez brkova?* (2005, What Is a Man Without a Moustache?) focuses on the abolishment of clerical celibacy, embedded within a romantic love story initiated by a woman. In *Veličanstveni Poskokovi* (2014, The Great Vipers), the Catholic church is depicted as one of the greatest political and financial powers of Croatia, involved for centuries in the corrupt misrule of the country.

- 16 The film mixes these categories more than the scenario, creating comic effect: the actor who plays the Croatian teacher is a well-known Serbian actor (Nebojša Glogovac, who died only a few months after the film’s completion). The fact that an anti-Serbian, Croatian nationalist is also gay and played by a Serbian actor challenges the idea of clearly defined and stereotypical identity categories. The film poster visualizes mixed representations of gender by showing the Croatian/Serbian man in make-up and in female clothes.

stereotypically portrayed relationship grows deeper, as they attempt to adopt a child. The optimistic view does not simply lead to the coexistence of two parallel worlds. Rather, their connections liberate them almost automatically from their ethnic, religious, sexual, and other prejudices.

In conclusion, satire can challenge traditional gender and kinship relations by emphasizing empathy through its critical characters. Stereotypes serve as a hyperbole for deficiencies and are supplemented by other attitudes<sup>17</sup> to underline that they are changeable. In this way, the narrative avoids rejection by readers by circumventing any impression of personal attack. Irony undermines negative attitudes and evokes a kind of “corrective laughter” (Condren 661), which gives the reader the feeling of being included in the worldview of the text’s subject. Thus, the reader is invited to identify with a critical position and to self-reflect, which is more acceptable when it is accompanied by humor than by strong attacks. The strength of satire is not the presentation of alternative ways of life but rather the activation of critical thinking. However, the transformation of actual political and private relations is left to the readers.

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17 The individual, reality-based, more positive attitudes are accompanied by empathy for the respective characters’ motives. This enables readers’ identification with those characters, even when they offer new worldviews and images.

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## Filmography

*The Constitution: A Love Story About Hate*, directed by Rajko Grlić., performed by Nebojša Glogovac, Ksenija Marinković and Dejan Aćimović, In Film, Interfilm, Revolution, and Sever & Sever, 2016.