

IDENTITY AND QUALITY OF LIFE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN JOURNALISTIC AND LITERARY WORKS OF MARIJA JURIĆ ZAGORKA

Beatriz Brkić*

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
beatrizbrkic5@gmail.com

As the main topic of PhD research is focused on identity types in early literary works of first Croatian female journalist and writer Marija Jurić Zagorka, relation to conference topic Quality of Life for young people in the first part is based on Zagorka's comments in the article of Women's Journal regarding the choice of profession and its challenges, which is one of the main determinants of identity of young people. In the second part, Zagorka's views about gender norms and equality in Croatian society in the 20th century are presented, which are compared to contemporary Croatian autobiographical literature. The third part is based on Zagorka's depiction of narcissistic personality disorder in her literary work, which resonates with the findings of modern psychology and is related to the mental health of young people. The main point of the paper is to emphasize the similarities of issues of young people in Croatia during Zagorka's time and the modern age. Young people in Croatia still have to endure immense pressure when it comes to areas of life considered crucial for quality of life – career, mental health, and socializing in a system that functions on the terms of performative gender norms. Thus, the challenges faced by young people today are remarkably similar to those encountered by the youth of the 1930s, as described by Zagorka in her journalistic writings and novels.

1. Introduction: topic of the PhD study

Marija Jurić Zagorka is remembered in Croatian history as the first female journalist in Central Europe, the first editor of a women's magazine in Croatia, and the most widely read representative of the genre of popular historical romance novels. She is the author of the longest novel in the history of Croatian literature (Gordana) and the pioneer of the Croatian feminist movement, as the organizer of the first women's demonstrations and the first feminist organization in Croatia. In her journalistic and literary texts, she promoted patriotic and feminist ideas, with the aim of spreading the popularity of literature written in the vernacular to improve the status of the Croatian language during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as well as to enhance the position of women in both the private and public spheres in the context of gender equality and political rights. As a journalist, she reported on political events in Croatia and Hungary. Krešimir Nemec (Nemec, 1993) described Zagorka as the most popular representative of the genre of trivial historical fiction, to which literary critics do not attribute high aesthetic value; however, he characterized

her novels as socially engaged, educational, and patriotic, grounded firmly in historical documents that form the basis of a historical background further developed through the author's imagination and fiction. Oklopčić and Jakšić (2009) are right when they emphasize that the literary canon was intended for men, while popular historical romances were mostly associated with women as authors and readers - reflecting the patriarchal culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A notable feature of Zagorka's poetics is the authorial intention set between the lines of novels set in both recent and distant national history, through which she promotes patriotic ideas as well as ideas concerning women's labor, political rights, and their role in presenting national ideals. The heroines and heroes of Zagorka's novels were carriers of patriotic and feminist ideas, and since their characterization is rooted in the author's own moral principles and values which unmistakably are inscribed into the text, it can be concluded that Zagorka's works are based on a threefold construction of identity: the affirmation of the authorial voice in the form of autonomous female authorship inscribed into the text through self-referential strategies, alongside the construction of national and gender identities of fictional characters, which in turn influenced the identity formation of Zagorka's readers.

The PhD research is based on the assumption that the common feature of Zagorka's early literary works is the representation of identity: psychological, social, gender, political, national and cultural, in the novels Vladko Šaretić, The Tomboy from Trešnjevka, The Adventures of the Newly Born Petrica Kerempuh, Slaves, The Red Ocean, the short story collection Silhouettes of Zagreb, and the play Evica Gupčeva. The corpus of novels was selected according to the criteria of minimal or non-existent prior interpretations, in order to contribute to the study of Zagorka's literary work, including the early phase of her career that did not achieve the popularity of works such as The Witch of Grič or The Fiery Inquisitors. The aim is to demonstrate that Zagorka's psychological characterization is at a remarkably high level and that she described the characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder decades before it was formally defined in professional psychological literature as it is known today. She developed psychological characterization at an exceptionally advanced level, which distances her from the labels "trivial" and "low," commonly used to describe popular literature in a negative context (Nemec, 1993), as her work offers complex character portrayal and psychological depth typically associated with canonical high-style literature. The goal of the research is also to highlight the complexity of the procedures in Zagorka's construction of literary characters, which, according to the theory of Milivoj Solar presented in The Theory of Literature (Solar, 1977), is realized as a construction of a specific type of individual based on real-life characters, while also representing the traits of the social group to which they belong: bourgeoisie, peasantry, aristocratic bureaucracy, etc.

The construction of Zagorka's both main and secondary characters in each work is placed within a relevant socio-historical framework, connecting individual and collective issues. In doing so, a realistic portrayal of the characters' positions within the private and public spheres is achieved, which is not typical for popular literature and its presumed but not necessarily "low" style. The analysis begins with a description of the socio-historical context of the novels' publication, followed by a comparative analysis of Zagorka's journalistic (Zagorka, 1935a,b,c) and autobiographical texts, such as "What Is My Fault" (Croatian: Što je moja krivnja) (Zagorka, 1997), in order to determine the author's inscription of her own values and ideals into her texts, that is, the self-referential strategy she employs across all her literary works. The starting point of PhD research lies in theories of national and gender identity of Nira Yuval Davis, with emphasis on feminist theory of Simone de Beauvoir and Mary Wollstonecraft, authorial identity and the concept of female authorship of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, along with theories of political-ethical impact in

literary work by Wayne Booth and James Phelan, and at last, theories of character construction by Mieke Bal, Zdenko Lešić and Milivoj Solar. The main goal of the research is to affirm Zagorka's role in the history of Croatian literature so that she may obtain her deserved place within the educational system, specifically in Croatian language and history curricula and on the mandatory reading lists. Efforts to popularize Zagorka have already been underway for years within the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb, which organizes the annual event The Days of Marija Jurić Zagorka, including a literary and academic conference.

When it comes to relating the topic of PhD research to the quality of life for young people, it is possible to detect a few points Zagorka described in her novels and articles in the *Women's Journal*, which foreshadowed the future of young people in Croatia. In her articles in *Women's Journal*, Zagorka discussed the pressure young people face when choosing a profession and building a career that should ensure their existence, the difficulty of finding employment within one's field, particularly in the teaching profession, which remains a significant issue in Croatia today, as well as the society's perception of the identity of young women and men. In her novels Vlatko Šaretić, *The Tomboy from Trešnjevka*, and *The Adventures of Newborn Petrica Kerempuh*, Zagorka addressed the problem of modern-day narcissism, the unfavorable position of women in the male-dominated business world, and possibly anticipated the invention of the smartphone. The contents of these works will be briefly outlined and subsequently connected to the contemporary life of young people in Croatia.

2. Which profession should young people choose?

In the article, Zagorka describes the dilemma faced by young people who hear criticism straight from people who are working in the professions they consider. She emphasizes that every profession has its drawbacks, even a doctor may become a "certified beggar", and concludes that what matters the most is choosing what one genuinely enjoys and loves. However, Zagorka's reflection may be described as overly idealistic, as in the struggle for survival, idealism, although it may guide a young person's choice of profession, ultimately takes a place behind managing basic existence conditions. The sentence from Zagorka's article that relates to the current situation in Croatia is particularly striking: "It does not matter, my son, choose anything else, just do not pursue a teaching career. Securing a position is almost impossible..." (Zagorka, 1936). Employment in the Croatian education sector represents a particularly problematic issue when it comes to securing permanent positions, which consequently affects talented students' decisions to pursue PhD studies, which may be seen either as a way of postponing entry into an unstable labor market or as an investment in education that may not have long-term benefits, although it aligns with Zagorka's idealistic view of the purpose of choosing a vocation.

3. The imbalance of gendered power in Croatian society

Zagorka further explains in the article that the age at which young people experience the greatest pressure is eighteen years old. This is also the age of Štefica Žigrović, the heroine of her novel *The Tomboy from Trešnjevka*. In the novel, Zagorka explores the imbalance of gendered power relations within the labor market. The narrative is set in 1940s Zagreb. Štefica aspires to achieve financial independence in order to avoid dependence on either her father or a husband. Štefica pursued an education and secured employment in a company where the position of secretary represents the highest level of career advancement available to women. Zagorka modeled Štefica's character on the "modern girl" she had described in her article

The Modern Girl in Women's Journal - a figure marked by courage and determination in her pursuit of a profession and personal independence. In her article, Zagorka comments on how the prototype of a girl or woman changes according to current social circumstances. She argues that women have greater freedom in choosing a vocation and in their understanding of marriage, noting that "the generation of prejudice considers today's youth to be bad and corrupt." It is precisely tradition, however, that continues to uphold social norms supporting the performativity of gender roles. The position of women and gender relations of power are constant themes in Zagorka's literary and journalistic work, as well as in contemporary social debates, so a relevant question should be: how much do gender stereotypes today affect the quality of life of young women and men in Croatia?

In 2023, a duo of anonymous authors published *The Manual for Survival* (Croatian: *Priručnik za preživljavanje*) (Darkula, 2024), a collection of 27 autobiographical stories whose purpose is to witness an oppressive mechanism of contemporary Croatian society aimed at regulating gender ideology. The performativity of gender roles is a consequence of patriarchal social structures, which, in relation to boys and men, manifests itself as toxic masculinity - a model of manhood that must be earned and which, in turn, negatively affects their mental health. It often includes proving one's strength through physical violence, suppressing emotions considered signs of weakness, avoiding and condemning feminine traits that threaten masculinity, and demonstrating interest in sports and sexual experience to prevent any allusion to homosexual tendencies. When it comes to girls and women, quality of life is undoubtedly affected by the practice of selective abortion in Balkan countries aimed at preserving the family surname, the social and political stigmatization of abortion, the sexism embedded in the linguistic tradition of the Croatian language, and the hypocritical beauty standards that glorify male ageing while warning women of the dangers of losing beauty and youthfulness. These issues contribute to both individual and collective crises. Society still defines what it means to be a man or a woman, punishing those who become exceptions to the rule (Darkula, 2024). Stories presented in the Manual, which may be described as activist autobiographical art due to their content, correspond to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as outlined in her work *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body, which includes bodily movements, clothing styles, and patterns of behavior that can be perceived as feminine or masculine. This means that "the reality of gender is created through repeated social performances," and therefore gender is an artificially constructed and invented concept (Butler, 2000). In an article in the *Women's Journal* titled "The Different Abilities of Men and Women", Zagorka (1935c), in line with the theoretical perspective later articulated by Judith Butler, appears to suggest that there is no fixed boundary between what is or can be considered masculine or feminine. Moreover, the characteristics attributed to men and women may just as readily be assigned to the opposite sex, indicating that exceptions to such "rules" are not only possible but to be expected (Zagorka, 1935c).

Furthermore, in another article titled "Interesting Professions", Zagorka (1935a) explored "male" and "female" occupations, which she interprets as products of performative gender norms. Thus, she classified aviation and pyrotechnics as belonging to the male domain, while for women she recommended professions related to the arts, interior design, tourism, nutrition, and child psychology. The emphasis on certain occupations that were desirable and in demand in the 1930s points to areas of life considered crucial for quality of life: housing, recreation, healthy eating, and mental health. (Zagorka, 1936) The situation has not changed significantly today, except that young people are under intense stress due to the difficulties of buying their own property. The mental health of young people is heavily influenced by not achieving independence by moving away from a parental house, due to inflation, unemployment, and rising prices of real estate.

4. Mental health of young people

Speaking of mental health, today social networks play an influential or even crucial role in shaping young people's identities, making them more sensitive to the promotion of unrealistic beauty and economic standards by which happiness is measured. The era of smartphones made the rise of social networks possible, so it is important to highlight that Zagorka possibly anticipated the emergence of the smartphone in her novel *The Adventures of the Newly Born Petrica Kerempuh* (Zagorka, 2015). The smartphone Zagorka described looked like a telephone receiver, but it was actually a „viewing device” that Americans made for Petrica Kerempuh in order to be able to see everything his enemies were doing far and wide, with a receiver on the other side, which could help him hear everything people were saying. For instance, if Petrica finds himself in another country, he can hear what others are saying and see them through the telephone (Zagorka, 2015).

Zagorka could certainly not have foreseen that this “visual telephone” would become one of the main, if not the primary, sources of identity formation among young people, promoting unrealistic standards of physical appearance and success; however, in her novel *Vladko Šaretić*, she successfully anticipated the rise of narcissistic personality disorder. Vladko Šaretić is a representative of the wealthy bourgeoisie who seeks to ascend to a high social and professional position during the rule of Ban Khuen-Héderváry and the political conflicts between pro-Hungarian factions and their opposition. In order to secure a wealthy dowry and a favorable position, the young Šaretić intensifies his narcissistic traits by manipulating others.

Ana Schauperl, in her article “Intergenerational Changes in Narcissism,” explains that older generations today tend to perceive younger ones as more selfish, more narcissistic, and more self-focused, which can be attributed to the worsening global economic situation (Schauperl, 2021). Zagorka's characters, Vladko Šaretić and Štefica Žigrović, lived in conditions defined by economic, political, and social instability in Croatia during the early and mid-twentieth century. However, while Šaretić exhibits traits of pathological narcissism, such characteristics are not observable in Štefica. Instead, she demonstrates a form of healthy self-confidence and a focus on her own financial and professional advancement, without a tendency to endanger the mental well-being or existential security of others, as Šaretić does in the novel.

In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch advances the idea that each historical period generates its own distinctive form of pathological behaviour, and that contemporary society is particularly prone to easily attributing narcissistic traits to others. In everyday life, narcissism manifests as a dependence on the admiration and approval of others combined with a fear of dependency, a sense of inner emptiness, persistent repressed anger, and unfulfilled aspirations. Secondary characteristics include an intense fear of ageing, death, and decline in any form, a fascination with celebrity culture, and an aversion to competition. In the contemporary context, narcissism has become synonymous with selfishness and serves as a metaphor for a state of mind in which the world functions as a mirror of the self. Lasch is persuasive in arguing that modern society perceives the future as threatening and uncertain due to political and economic instability. As a result, individuals increasingly turn towards intensive self-work, a domain in which they can exert control, in contrast to the external conditions over which they have little influence. He contends that society has replaced the instinct for self-preservation with the ultimate goal of self-improvement in an age of disorder (Lasch, 2018). That being said, it is not only young people who demonstrate higher levels of narcissistic traits.

Although pathological narcissism, like other personality disorders, undoubtedly impairs everyday functioning and quality of life across all age groups, Schauperl clarified the contexts in which the expression of narcissistic traits may be considered desirable when it comes to young people. Since students are just at the beginning of finding their place in the adult world, certain traits of narcissism are today not only beneficial but rather necessary for a successful adaptation (Schauperl, 2021). Schauperl does not seek to justify narcissistic behavior in its pathological form; she rather emphasizes the constructive direction of narcissistic traits, which are present to some degree in all individuals and which could be useful for young people still negotiating their role within a society and world shaped by political forces.

5. Conclusions

Today, politics plays a role just as significant in the labor market as it did in Zagorka's novels situated in the 1900s and 1940s, and women are still marching for equal rights, including equal pay for positions held by men. It is often said that Zagorka was ahead of her time in her views on women's rights and freedoms. However, judging by the article "Which Profession Should I Choose," she probably did not realize that, by vividly describing the present of the early twentieth century, she had in fact foretold the reality of the coming hundred years for younger generations entering the labor market. In 1936, as in 2025, young people were preoccupied with ensuring their future and questioning the purpose of education for their chosen profession. Today, young people who choose careers in the fields of medicine and natural sciences face fewer challenges than those who study humanities or social sciences. The inability to find employment within one's field greatly affects quality of life, as does the choice of vocation that matches an individual's psychological profile, competencies, and talents, factors that directly influence one's joy in life, as Zagorka concluded. (Zagorka, 1936) In conclusion, the challenges faced by young people today are remarkably similar to those encountered by the youth of the 20th century, as described by Zagorka in her journalistic writings and novels. The first major factor is the choice of vocation, which entails a series of other aspects that determine quality of life: employment success, housing, financial security, and mental health, ultimately becoming an important determinant of a young person's identity. The second factor is social gender norms, which are performative and acquired through learning; in addition to affecting quality of life, they shape identity and influence career choice by guiding young people in adapting their everyday practices - behavior and management of physical appearance, while defining the boundaries of their political and social freedom.

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