

Miluša Bakrač

THE MISUSE OF THE IMAGE OF THE OTHER IN NJEGOŠ'S WORK *GORSKI VIJENAC*

Introduction

This paper will examine the discourse of power through the example of Petar II Petrović Njegoš's work *The Mountain Wreath* (*Gorski vijenac*, 1847) focusing on its misuse in statements by politicians and influential figures, as well as its use in the education system and potential for misuse. The analysis will draw on a range of literary and linguistic theories. Among other things, the analysis will be based on the literary-theoretical views of Mihail Bahtin and his concept of the chronotope (1989), Gérard Genette's (1985) narratological theory, Boris Andreyevich Uspensky's perspective on the problem of point of view (Uspensky, 1979), and the principles of imagology as a branch of comparative literature (Foucault, 2005), with special emphasis on Teun Van Dijk's concept of micro and macro analysis (Van Dijk, 1980) and his view on the influence of ideology on discourse. Particular attention will be given to the example of racist ideology and the way it manifests in literary discourse when misused. (Van Dijk, 2012).

Attention will be drawn to segments of the work that offer space for misuse and how this might appear from the perspective of the ideology creator through the discourse of literature, as well as how through the same segments it becomes a language of peace, unity, and opening cultural boundaries from the perspective of a well-intentioned critic.

The paper will focus on the use of literary discourse in the educational system and its potential misuse- specifically, how literary works can become a means of imposing power. As *The Mountain Wreath* has been misused in media and political discourse – often serving as a basis for confrontation with the Other- the paper will also address the misuse of this work in the statements of

politicians and influential figures, whose negative influence can permeate the educational system. Through media discourse, *The Mountain Wreath* is often cited as valid evidence for the discrimination of Muslims within the intercultural concept or as justification for the dominant superiority of Christians. In educational institutions, particularly in schools, literary texts serve as tools in the hands of teachers, who are entrusted with a crucial role in the educational process. Depending on their intention, a literary work can become a means of conveying messages, attitudes, and ideologies – whether positive or negative.

Njegoš's Eternal Flame of Eternal Darkness

When it comes to Montenegro, the topic of the misuse of Njegoš's works in political discourse is almost inexhaustible. The media, as a convenient channel for quickly and efficiently conveying messages, is filled with articles from various national and religious groups or individuals that either attack or defend Njegoš and his work. Political discourse often brings up the topic of Njegoš, inevitably directing the conversation towards religious or national orientations. Debates surrounding Njegoš generally revolve around two main points: whether he was anti-Islamist and whether he was a Serb or a Montenegrin. Numerous issues related to the misuse of his work have been raised in this context. Through the discourse of politicians aimed at strengthening their power, these two lines alternate attacking each other and presenting themselves to the public as fundamental issues on which the survival of the state depends. Here is one example:¹

During a discussion in the Montenegrin Parliament regarding the decision to declare Njegoš's Day for Montenegrin holiday of culture, two parliamentarians from different political parties, ideologically opposed to each other, exchanged the following arguments:

"Turning Njegoš, a Serb, into Njegoš, a Montenegrin, for the daily political needs of the Montenegrin Government makes no sense, and my hand will never rise for such a law," said Slaven Radunović, a member of the New Serbian Democracy.

.....
1 We will not include entire text, only specific parts.

“Is this the country of Montenegro? Is this the Montenegrin parliament? Was Njegoš the master of Montenegro or some other country? Are we deciding here on the holidays of this or some other country? Whose holiday will it be if not Montenegrin? asked Milorad Vuletić from the ruling DPS.” (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2013)

Debates about whether Njegoš was a Serb or a Montenegrin are not uncommon, and there are also reactions from Bosniaks who believe that Njegoš's work is anti-Islamic.

Šemso Agović² has addressed Njegoš's work on several occasions, stating that there is speech of hate in the text and its misuse to the detriment of the Bosniak people. In one article, he writes:

Here begins another school year; students across the former SFRY fill classrooms, eager for knowledge and education. These young people, upon whom ‘the world depends,’ could never imagine that school authorities will subject them not only to education but also to lessons of psychological and spiritual torture, where small but real crimes will occur. These are the lessons of their native language, covering the topics of *The Hourglass* by Danilo Kiš and, of course, *The Mountain Wreath* by P. II P. Njegoš.

The classroom will become a crime scene, and frenzied teachers, legal and legitimate criminals. The victims, as we mentioned, will be students of the ‘false’ faith. (Agović, 2018)

In another article on the misuse of Njegoš's work in the educational process he draws attention to religious discrimination against Muslims:

The *Mountain Wreath* cannot be edited. There would be nothing left of it. The theme of *The Mountain Wreath* is the ‘investigation of the poturica’³ (a colloquial, mostly derogatory term for a convert to Islam during the

.....
2 Šemso Agović, the long-time editor-in-chief of the magazine *Glas Sandžaka* is the author of over sixty articles on the topic of misuse of Njegoš. For this occasion, we will highlight characteristic quotes, selected randomly.

3 Incorrect interpretation of the theme. Contemporary literary critics fail to find arguments to support idea that this phrase could be considered one of the themes.

Turkish conquests of Europe), as Njegoš calls the physical extermination of a people, peaceful and good neighbors, whose only fault was being of a different faith and culture. Such inhuman acts, such evil and malicious intent, are not found anywhere in world literature, especially in school textbooks, yet they are extolled to the heavens. (Agović 2017)

After sharing selected quotes from *The Mountain Wreath* in the article, the author concludes:

The misuse of *The Mountain Wreath* is ubiquitous in the regions where Serbs and Montenegrins currently rule. The most horrible misuses are those that occur in schools. I will mention the example of a high school student, S. Bihorac, who now lives in Luxembourg: ‘Attending school in Berane was a real hell. I felt so much hatred directed at me that one might think the mosque, which once stood in the center of Berane and whose foundations were later used for residential buildings, was actually a church destroyed Muslims and that’s why, perhaps, they hate us so much. But it was the opposite. “I didn’t hate anyone after all that I went through. It was hard to say who was more intense in hatred, teachers or schoolmates. *The Mountain Wreath* is a story of its own. Holy scripture for the assailants. High school teacher Sreten Vešović would ask: ‘Do you know what the central verse in *The Mountain Wreath* is?’ And then he would answer himself, fixing his gaze on me: ‘Let’s rid the plague from the torus!’ And then he would explain who the plague is that needs to be expelled. All of this made me give up everything a few years later and go as far away from those primitive people as possible.” (Agović, 2017).

This is undoubtedly an example of racist ideology expressed through a literary work.

The author of the article chooses certain controversial quotes from works whose themes relate to the end of the 17th century as evidence of hate speech directed continuously at Muslims. The author himself used the language of conflict by referring to the Christian people as murderers, which contributes to the spread of conflict-driven rhetoric and the demonization of the Other. By interpreting the quotes from *The Mountain Wreath*, the author himself misuses the work by removing it from its literary context and placing it within the framework of contemporary society. This misinterpretation

perpetuates a racist ideology that is transferred from the micro-level⁴ to social macrostructures.

The misuse of an author has rarely reached the extent it has with Njegoš and his work, particularly *The Mountain Wreath*, which was even discussed at the Hague Tribunal during the trial of Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadžić. On this occasion, Srđan Janković stated: "The Hague Tribunal for War Crimes considered Njegoš's seminal work, *The Mountain Wreath*, as an ideological basis for crimes against Bosniaks, and the prosecution claimed that Njegoš glorified the killing of Muslims". (Janković, 2014)

Following this, Z. Šuvaković, in the article *For The Hague, Njegoš Is Innocent, Although Suspect*, noted: "It seems that The Hague has finally issued an acquittal for Njegoš's *Mountain Wreath*. The Chief Prosecutor Serge Brammertz confirmed in a conversation with the Montenegrin ambassador to The Hague, Vesko Garčević, that neither this nor any other literary work would be used in court proceedings before the tribunal." (Šuvaković, 2014)

These are just some of the episodes representing daily events we read about mental models⁵ that address the misuse of Njegoš's work, which has thus become a means of conveying messages, attitudes, and ideologies.

The social environment in Montenegro in recent decades has created a fertile ground for the spread of topics related to identity issues, which favor national and religious divisions, undermining the civic concept of society. Attacks on Njegoš and his defense have alternated depending on who is shaping their identity and deconstructing the identity of the Other (Foucault, 2005). The media and social networks are productive channels through which the ideological intentions of individuals or groups quickly reach the social context:

Note finally that the links between discourse and ideology run both ways. Not only do ideologies influence what we say and how we say it, but also vice versa: We acquire and change ideologies through reading and listening to large amounts of text and talk. Ideologies are not innate, but learnt, and precisely the content and form of such discourse may

.....
4 Van Dijk's terminology (1980).

5 Van Dijk's terminology (2012).

be more or less likely to form intended mental models of social events, which finally may be generalized and abstracted to social representations and ideologies. (Van Dijk, 2012, 67)

Creating a social environment in which individuals fall into the trap of the collective unconscious and form a flawed value system that manifests in various forms is a significant concern. Ideologies thus indirectly influence teachers who are part of such a context. If a teacher lacks critical consciousness or is employed by specific political parties to propagate certain ideologies under the guise of education, they may be inclined to spread their value system through the educational system, adapting any literary text to align with it.

This context can have a detrimental effect on the education system. Under the guise of the educational process, a literary work and its macro and microstructures can become a medium for conveying messages, attitudes, ideologies, and the language of the literary work itself can transform into a language of power in extended action. This process allows the messages to be passed on continuously over years or decades, impacting several generations of students.

Depending on the teacher's value system, *The Mountain Wreath* can become a medium for conveying incorrect attitudes, ideologies, discriminatory messages, and even verbal violence. One must keep in mind that a literary work is an aesthetic creation, modeling a special world, the world of the artistic work, regardless of the material the author embeds in its fiction. It should not serve as a historical truth, especially not as an indisputable fact about people or events retroactively transferred from the past to the present social context.

On the other hand, educational institutions must ensure the presence of responsible individuals with developed critical thinking skills and an awareness of the educational space and the young people they are both educating and raising.

The question arises whether the discourse of media or the discourse of literature is more influential in shaping the values of young people. When it comes to young people, the influence of the media is immediate because information is quickly disseminated and short-lived in their memory. In contrast,

the education system continuously introduces cultural patterns and value systems, which form their long-term value structure.

The Mountain Wreath is especially susceptible to misuse in Montenegrin society due to its language, which is burdened with heavy phraseology, representing a language of conflict throughout the work. Additionally, Njegoš holds the position of the greatest intellectual authority that lives in the cultural memory of the Montenegrin people throughout history, as he was a ruler, bishop, and writer. These three roles of his are inseparable, and his work is often directly connected with his ideological focus. The image of Montenegrin society from that time, as portrayed in the work, is frequently distorted by subjective or insufficiently informed interpreters into a portrayal of persecution, violence, and discrimination that still lingers today. This breaks down interculturality and reduces Montenegrin society to one nation and one religion, with Muslims suffering the most, as they are often associated with the "Turks."

In this context, excerpts from texts, microstructures, and interpretations are used in political discourse to either attack or defend the 'Other,' whether that refers to a different religion, ethnicity, or nation. The ideal segments for such misuse are those in which characters, shaped by phraseology and ideological focus (Uspensky, 1979), construct the image of the Other, whether it be the image of Turks and Montenegrins, or Muslims and Christians. In *The Mountain Wreath*, Muslims are often referred to using derogatory terms such as 'renegades,' 'plague,' 'devil,' 'demon,' 'unbaptized,' 'local evil,' and others. When these microstructures are misinterpreted and presented to students in the wrong way, they can create space for verbal violence against Muslim individuals or fuel religious intolerance.

A well-intentioned critic of *The Mountain Wreath* should not only explain the use of such harsh words within the context of the work but also direct the analysis toward developing a positive attitude. This involves critically distancing oneself from the derogatory language and focusing on the broader meaning of the text. Interculturality, which requires understanding and respecting the relationships between carriers of different cultures, must be emphasized. Thus, the role of the teacher in the educational process should be to strengthen intercultural connections. The teacher should guide students in understanding the context of the work, always distinguishing the reality of

the artistic work from objective reality, and striving to portray the “Other” as it is represented in the work—not as someone might want to misrepresent it.

The distorted image of the “Other” contained in the phraseology of the characters, which is burdened with racist undertones, should be balanced with images of peace. These images of peace, alternating with those of war, can be found in numerous verses in the work, such as the depiction of Istanbul from Mustaj-kadija’s perspective. Through these contrasting images, a more nuanced interpretation of the text can be developed, emphasizing unity and coexistence over division and conflict:

Oh Istanbul, earthly delight and joy,
 a honey’s cup, a mountain of sugar,
 the sweetest spa of human existence,
 where the women bathe in honied sherbet! -
 O Istanbul, palace of the Prophet,
 the source of his power and his holy shrine,
 it is Allah’s pleasure to rule the earth
 only from the palace of the Prophet.
 What can ever separate me from you?...
 (...) What other faith can compare with this one?
 What altar stands closer to high heaven? (Petrović, 2022, 61)

The influence of Njegoš’s work on Montenegrin identity and cultural code is undeniable. His work has evolved into a heterotopia (Foucault, 2005), becoming a unique form of cultural memory. His verses, especially the gnomes, are rich in expression and have entered everyday language, often used as idioms. There is a pervasive belief that nothing can better capture a certain situation or person than a verse from Njegoš. *The Mountain Wreath*, at its core, is a portrayal of the culture, customs, and historical conditions of late 17th-century Montenegro. It intertwines Montenegrin, Turkish, and Venetian influences, offering a comprehensive cultural snapshot of the time.

The work features a wide range of active characters, with the narrative shifting focus from one to another, thereby constructing the image of the “Other.” Through the portrayal of Christian and Muslim characters, Njegoš not only defines the self but also characterizes the “Other,” offering a complex depiction of identity formation in a period of cultural and religious tension.

The shifting language of conflict to the language of peace makes this work problematic. Depending on which perspective is followed and in which context it is placed, the work itself can be susceptible to misuse. Thus, separating one semantic line from another, leads to the fragmentation of the work, and removing individual parts from their context problematizes its micro- or macrostructures. Through the phraseological, psychological, and ideological perspective of Bishop Danilo, the social context and the broader image of the struggle for the preservation of the Montenegrin people's freedom are portrayed. In such circumstances, Montenegrin Muslims, by faith, are closer to the Turks and are viewed as the "Other" and different. In this context, the Bishop's moral dilemma how to resist the Ottoman Empire without fighting against his fellow countrymen becomes evident. The Bishop is both a figure of light and darkness: a man of reason who seeks peace, yet the people and the social context pull him into war. Throughout the work, these two forces light and darkness, to be or not to be, the language of war and the language of peace alternate, as reflected in the quoted verses:

Plague of mankind may God's wrath be on you!
Is half a world you've already poisoned
with your mean deeds not large enough for you,
that you had to spew out all the venom
of your black soul on this hard rock as well? (Petrović, 2022, 13)

Bishop Danilo refers to the Turks as a plague that has engulfed half the world, eventually "vomiting poison" onto this stone, which symbolizes Montenegro, a rocky and resilient land, he also describes compatriots who convert to Islam as "dirty misfits."

May God strike you, loathsome degenerates,
why do we need the Turk's faith among us? (Petrović, 2022, 13)

But the language of reason followed:

When I think of today's council meeting,
flames of horror flare up deep inside me.
A brother will slaughter his own brother,
and the arch-foe, so strong and so evil,
will destroy even the seed within mothers.

O wretched day may God's curse be on you!
when you brought me to the light of this world. (Petrović, 2022, 14)

Just as the chronotope (Bahtin, 1989) of war shapes the language of war, *The Mountain Wreath* is colored by such phraseology. The burden assigned to the man of war is meant for humanity, regardless of faith or nation. This is best exemplified through the phraseological and ideological perspective of Iguman Stefan.

This world is a tyrant to the tyrant,
let alone to a truly noble soul!
It is work of infernal discord:
in it the soul is at war with the flesh.
in it sea is at war with the shores;
in it cold is at war with the heat;
in it the winds are at war the winds;
in it creature is at war with creature;
in it nation is at war with nation;
in it a man is at war with others;
in it the days are at war with the nights;
in it spirits are at war with heaven.

(...)

No one's happy, and no one is content,
no one is calm, and no one is at peace.

Man laughs with scorn at all his fellow men:
a monkey sees himself in a mirror. (Petrović, 2022, 161)

The specificity of the language in this work lies in the use of stylistic figures such as metaphor, allegory, symbol, personification, and hyperbole, which are semantically active and open to various interpretations due to the numerous hidden meanings they contain. This, in turn, allows for great potential for action through these figures. As a result, there are many different approaches to this work.

Conclusion

The work of Petar II Petrović Njegoš has been, and continues to be, subject to misuse, serving as fertile ground for the expression of racist ideology through literary discourse. It is an example of how harmful ideologies can significantly influence language and discourse, including the language of art.

The Mountain Wreath reflects Montenegrin culture of the 17th century, which is both Christian and Islamic. The misuse of this work or the displacement of the literary discourse into the discourse of social reality of this time can lead to misunderstandings or distortions of its real message. In *The Mountain Wreath*, the Other most often refers to the Ottomans, or Turks, who are portrayed as the main enemies of the Montenegrins. Njegoš uses strong symbolism and language to portray the Turks as a fundamental threat to Montenegrin identity, freedom, and religion. In this way, the characters can be semantically burdened, and their perception transferred to the modern context can be seen as a means of demonizing the Other.

Such a binary opposition between Muslims and Christians can contribute to stereotyping and dehumanizing the Other, justifying hostilities and violence towards the Other. Through political discourse, this has contributed to the shaping of a negative image of Muslims in Montenegro - one that does not reflect the actual relationship with this community in the country.

Literary discourse has a strong influence on shaping social attitudes, making the responsibility of authors, literary critics, and interpreters significant. A proper understanding and critical reading of such texts can help recognize and overcome prejudices and promote a more inclusive society.

The compromising of Njegoš's work and its presence in the ongoing ideological agendas of certain groups make it appear discriminatory, which ultimately harms its aesthetic value.

Bibliography

- Agović, Š. (2017): Zloupotreba "Gorskog vijenca". <https://bosnjaci.net/prilog.php?pid=60909/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2024).
- Agović, Š. (2018): Zločin u učionici. <https://www.bosnjaci.net/print.php?pid=65568>. September 1 2018 (Accessed 14. 12. 2024).
- Bahtin, M. (1989): O romanu. Beograd, Nolit.
- Genette, G. (1985): Figure. Beograd, Nolit.
- Janković, S. (2014). Odluke Podgoričke skupštine su već poništene. Radio slobodna Evropa. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/odluke-podgoricke-skupstine-su-vec-ponistene/26764280.html>. (Accessed 14. 12. 2024).
- Foucault, M. (2005): Hrestomatija. Novi Sad, Vojvođanska sociološka asocijacija.
- Petrović Njegoš, P. II. (1847): Gorski vijenac. Dunaj.
- Petrović Njegoš, P. II. (2022): Mountain Wreath. Podgorica, Obodsko slovo.
- Šuvaković, Z. (2014): Za Hag Njegoš nije kriv, iako je sumnjiv. <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/284815/za-hag-njegoss-nije-kriv-iako-je-sumnjiv> (Accessed: 14. 12. 2024).
- Uspensky, B. (1979): Poetika kompozicije, semiotika ikone. Beograd, Nolit.
- Van Dijk, T. (2012): Ideology and Discourse. Barcelona, Pompeu Fabra University.
- Van Dijk, T. (1980): Macrostructures. Hillsdale, New Jersey.
- Vuletić, M. (2013.): Spor oko Njegoša: U blatu dnevne politike. Radio slobodna Evropa. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/zloupotreba-i-nacionalno-svojtanje-njegoss-u-blatu-dnevne-politike/25191123.html/> (Accessed 14. 12. 2024).