

Job of an Interpreter: An Analysis

*Damir Kahrić **

Introduction

Within the plethora of contemporary writings, few are the works which stand out, and even fewer are those bodies of literature which make a difference in this day and age. After the events of 2020, our contemporary world has entered a new era: the post-postmodern era, the epoch of digital postmodernism. In this new timeframe books have emerged, monographs, papers, scientific and artistic works have appeared far and wide. However, when we consider the contemporary academic, scientific and artistic scene of Bosnia and Herzegovina, we cannot find too many bright examples which genuinely touch the souls and minds of readers; has the notion of *dulceet utile* failed in Bosnia and Herzegovina? This review will argue against such a notion, by exemplifying one particular book which abolishes such ideas.

In 2022, a change occurred within the world of Bosnian writing. Namely, in the midst of good literature, bad literature, constructive criticism, negative criticism (which is by Pope-like standards even worse than bad literature), a new piece of fiction arrived. It was a novella written by a respectable and well-known university professor, Shahab Yar Khan, PhD. Professor Khan, who is teaching at the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, has written a novella, giving it the title: *Job of an Interpreter*. As the old Romans would proclaim *nomenest omen*, many different meanings and interpretations can be derived from such a title. Yet, the basic quintessence remains hidden within the pages. Professor Khan's book *Job of an Interpreter* is by standard classifications a novella, a piece of (short) fiction, however this work can be perceived as a

-
- PhD Candidate: Doctoral Studies in Literature (DOS LIT)
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo
Job of an Interpreter, by the Associate Professor Shahab Yar Khan, PhD
Job of an Interpreter published in: Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

collection of narratives. It is a collection of experiences, memories, fears, thoughts and ideas which tackle some of the basic aspects within the readers. We, the readership, are able to delve deeply into Khan's opus and discover something about the unknown world of 'far-far-away', yet at the same time we are able to discover something about ourselves. This novella becomes, in Kafkian terms, the axe for the frozen sea within us. We break the icy surface and then begin to interpret, translate and decipher elements which affect our community and global societies (e.g. the refugee crises). In order to analyse and understand Khan's work theoretically, we first have to tackle five basic steps: the title, the form and genre classification, chapter selection, the narrator, and lastly postmodernist features.

Since the author of the work is a Shakespearean scholar, a professor of Shakespearean drama and poetry, Khan implements various references from his area of expertise. His subject is vividly noticeable even within the table of contents, and it becomes apparent to a keen eye that numerous references can be detected. The Great Tradition prevails through Shahab Yar Khan's postmodernist twist.

Job of an Interpreter: An Analysis

Undoubtedly, Professor Khan's novella is a postmodernist piece of fiction. It is an intriguing work which reflects the content through the form. Namely, the first 'clue' in deciphering the basic notions of this novella is to look at the title. Just as the character of the Interpreter interprets and translates, jumping from one linguistic context into another, so are the (informed) readers obliged to 'interpret' between the lines. Upon entering the borders of the book (basically the front covers), the readers are allowed an opportunity to experience the world in different ways. By interpreting the text through reading, different readers are able to attribute a meaning which is very personal, individual, unique and known perhaps only to them. It appears that the title itself prompts the academically-trained literary scholars to recall the reader-response theory.

Reader-response theory is defined in the following:

“Reader-response theory is a theory which gained prominence in the late 1960s, that focuses on the reader or audience reaction to a

particular text, perhaps more than the text itself. Reader-response criticism can be connected to poststructuralism's emphasis on the role of the reader in actively constructing texts rather than passively consuming them. Unlike text-based approaches such as New Criticism, which are grounded upon some objective meaning already present in the work being examined, reader-response criticism argues that a text has no meaning before a reader experiences—reads—it. The reader-response critic's job is to examine the scope and variety of reader reactions and analyze the ways in which different readers, sometimes called "interpretive communities," make meaning out of both purely personal reactions and inherited or culturally conditioned ways of reading" (*Reader response theory*, 2022).

The aforementioned interpreter is only the mouthpiece of the author himself, while every reader individually is able to become an interpreter for himself/herself. It remains to be seen how the audience will respond to this novella in their own reading interpretation within the following 20 years. After the brief exploration of the title, the very form of the book becomes particularly interesting. Khan's book is a shorter type of prose writing, and can therefore be classified as a novella. This particular sub-genre can be defined in the following manner: "Novella (literally, "a little new thing"), which was a short tale in prose" (Abrams, 1999, p. 190). By all accounts, Professor Khan's book is a new thing – it is fiction, novella, yet it is comprised of different short stories which correlate to one another. Through the mouthpiece of the Interpreter these stories are combined into the framework of the novella, which neatly combines different chapters. Thirdly, the sections of the book are also relevant for the overall analysis of the book.

The chapters are arranged according to quotes from Shakespearean dramas. In other words, one of Shakespeare's quotes can be found at the beginning of every chapter/section/short story. Moreover, the final line of the previous chapter is a 'prologue' to the thematic opening in the subsequent chapter. The author's own profession is reflected in a number of Renaissance references. The age of Renaissance transcends the boundaries of history and vividly shows up in Khan's literary achievement. However, allusions to the Immortal Bard of Avon, the Renaissance age and other well-known aspects of tradition will be tackled hereinafter, within the final step relating to the world of postmodernism.

Once the actual reading of the text begins, the readers are able to immerse themselves into the first line, the opening sentence, which will undoubtedly find its own place among those other very famous canonical and non-canonical opening lines. Namely, Khan begins the novella by saying: “I am an interpreter. My job is to move around this camp and observe if the new arrivals are in need of communicating with the camp authorities” (Khan, 2022, p. 15). The very opening reminds the readers of certain elements derived directly from previous traditions. Namely, two historical works come to mind – *Everyman*, and *Moby Dick* respectively. The matrix narrator of the work, who is also the self-introduced Interpreter, remains somewhat of a *persona muta* throughout the story. Yet, he is by no means voiceless. His retelling of the story paints the mosaic and entwines fates, experiences, views and sufferings by and large. The Interpreter is nameless. He has no documented identity, such as a name or surname, yet the author spreads clues which can direct the readers towards the identity of this ‘implicit I’. The ‘implicit I’ seems to resemble the first letter of the word ‘Interpreter’, however this narrator is also a projected imagine, a representation of every man, moreover every reader. This nameless guide actually helps every reader to better fathom the circumstances of the story. Since the reader interprets the story-telling, the textual Interpreter becomes the ‘guide on the side’ for the reading subject. One would not be wrong in perceiving the speaking voice as the projection of the author himself, however the reading subject quickly realises that he/she also interprets, collects, retells and transcends the barriers of the narrative. In fact, the mediaeval dramatic character of *Everyman* seems to emerge between the reading subject and the read object (the Interpreter). In a true postmodernist twist, the genre boundaries are erased, and distinctions between fact and fiction are blurred. The interpreting subject seems to merge with the interpreting object/the narrator – both sides become the postmodern *Everyman*.

Besides subtle mediaeval references, allusions to Herman Melville and his monumental work *Moby Dick* also come into play. Melville begins his novel with perhaps the most famous opening line within Anglophone literatures: “Call me Ishmael” (Melville, 2008, Loomings). We are never given the true and exact identity of this Ishmael, and similarly enough, we are never given even a speculative name of Khan’s Interpreter. Ergo, we as readers are left to wonder if the Interpreter is Professor Khan himself, if he

is one of us readers, or if he is just another nameless entity who gives us didactical and moral guidance, opening our eyes to the horrors and the beauties of the world.

Finally, the phrase ‘postmodernist fiction’ should be analysed within the theoretical backdrop of this paper. *Job of an Interpreter* represents one of the newest pieces of postmodernist fiction, especially for the Bosnian context. Several postmodernist features, in fact, have been described even earlier in this review, yet aspects of meta-fiction have not yet been tackled. To briefly describe the term ‘postmodernism’, we should look into the poetics of Linda Hutcheon. She states in the following excerpt what exactly postmodernism represents for her: “I would like to begin by arguing that, for me, postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges—be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography” (Hutcheon, 1988, p.3). Professor ShahabYar Khan’s book entwines such contradictory phenomena. It subverts the notions of contemporary geopolitics, it re-questions the immigration issues, it playfully applies language and psychologically gives us insights into the human mind. For one, Khan’s book subverts the notions of classical genres, playing a subtle game of novella-short stories hybridity. Moreover, if we take the author’s own experiences into account, autobiographical elements can likewise be added.

Moreover, Khan’s work actually creates a postmodernist flower from the ‘soil’ of Great Tradition. Namely, the author relies on the canonical writings, yet he creates his own authentic twist of the narrative. Khan relies primarily on Shakespearean echoes in his works, but there are also references to mediaeval theatres, Transcendentalist authors, etc. Such literary elements help the Great Tradition survive, to be re-read, while at the same time a new piece of authentic writing is formulated. Furthermore, *Job of an Interpreter* is both meta-fictional and meta-fictional in a historiographical manner. Namely, the work is meta-fictional because it is self-reflexive, the narrator is fully aware of the connection between him and the reader, and the narrator in the story is well-aware of his own fictitious nature, all the while being immersed into real-life allusions. Furthermore, the nameless Interpreter breaks ‘the fourth wall’ of illusion,

goes meta-/beyond the prescribed narrative and even addresses the readers: “I hope this tale offers you the ground to fight against injustice as well” (Khan, 2022, p. 18). The work is filled with intertextual references, but it also shows allusions to movie actors, places in the Sub-continent, references to Gautama Buddha, and many other features which break the continuity of illusion.

This work is as real as are these typographic letters. It provides criticism and humour, satire and tragedy, essentially it provides hybridity in motion. Just like other postmodernist authors, Khan uses the polygon of language to be witty and playful, to present gloomy aspects in an entertaining manner. Nonetheless, Khan also applies aspects of historiographic meta-fiction, or meta-fiction in a broader sense. He actually applies data of travels, geography, history, warfare, distant and closer cultural and social past, which would be likewise reflected in our own day and age. The contemporary immigrant crisis of the book, which is one of its thematic focal points, shows exactly this. History affects the present, the man-made chains of history follow us, and they are entwined with imagination, dreams, fiction, and all of them together venture beyond epochs and societies. They are global. Khan uses such historiographic facts, retellings of real-life people as well, and subverts them, shows us their dangers, but also ridicules them, and gives us advice on how to progress. Such a postmodernist work is, to return to my initial thought, an example of literature which will both delight and teach us – *dulce et utile*.

Conclusion

Motion pictures, novels, dramatic pieces, religions and philosophical traditions, geographies, historiographic ‘facts’, figures and many other elements are intertwined in the Interpreter’s story. The refugee camp is a true collection of memories, and the Interpreter is the scribe behind these memories. Yet, like any other postmodernist work, this book also deconstructs the notions of memories. It shows us that the meaning behind human stories is never truly fixed. It ventures outside the prescribed norms of the mind. Memory is even unreliable, therefore the preachers of memories may be seen as unreliable. We are henceforth faced with a realisation – there are no objective truths and everything is relative. In Khan’s book too, the experiences of various characters can be perceived differently. Some can be seen as better than others, and vice versa.

Nevertheless, both the author and his speaking voice give us an opportunity to decide for ourselves what the truth is. We do not necessarily have to imagine one single objective correlative, but we can at least agree that hermeneutically this book speaks to us, giving us its relatives, and we in turn imbue it with our own personal and individual truths.

ENDNOTES

- Abrams, M. H. (1999). *A Glossary of Literary Terms (7th Edition)*. Heinle&Heinle.
- *Glossary of Poetic Terms*. (2022). Reader-response theory. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/reader-response-theory>.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. Routledge.
- Khan, ShahabYar. (2022). *Job of an Interpreter*. ShahabYar Khan.
- Melville, H. (2008). *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* [eBook edition]. Project Gutenberg. Retrieved from <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>. (Original work published in 1851).

Abstract

This article aims at explaining a novella *Job of an Interpreter* which is intertwined many elements such motion pictures, dramatic pieces, religion and philosophical traditions, geographies, historiographic facts and figures in the Interpreter's story. The refugee's camp is true collection of memories and the Interpreter is the scribe behind these memories. Like any other postmodernist work, this book also deconstructs the notions of memories. It shows that the meaning behind human stories is never truly fixed. It ventures outside the prescribed norms of the mind. Memory is even reliable; therefore, the preachers of memories may be seen as unreliable. The experiences of various characters can be perceived differently. Both the author and his speaking voices give the readers an opportunity to decide what the truth is.

Keyword: Novella, postmodernist work, deconstruct, truth, memory, reliable