

Minority Hungarian Management of Conflicting Cultural Identities in Post-Trianon Intercultural Romania as Reflected in Literature

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The culture of early twentieth-century Carpathian-Basin Hungarian community was subjected to a shock (the Trianon Peace Treaty), in whose wake a culture formerly regarded as a unified whole was splintered into fragments and underwent a transformation. The fragmented parts of what used to be a majority culture up to that point were pushed into minority existence, in which changed position they rebuilt themselves by relying on their sustaining communities, roots, traditions, as well as on their cultural and national identity. The impact of Trianon on Transylvanian culture, literature, and education, as well as on the Hungarian language is clearly negative.¹ Paradoxically, Transylvanian literature owes its existence to this very trauma as a so far Budapest-centered literary life now became decentralized.

Through the centuries, Hungarians regarded their language, culture, traditions, and religion as resources for their identity. The cultural shock of what came to be referred to simply as “Trianon” foregrounded, however, the issues of national and cultural identity as well as intercultural communication. Conflict, a characteristic feature of all societies of all times, assumes various forms on the levels of intercultural communication (on levels of communication see Karl Erik Rosengren below). Communicational conflicts of individual, group, societal, and national communication are generally closely related to state policies of identity formation. The question I pose myself, through examining a representative novel, is how all of these manifest themselves in Transylvanian literature?

This time I intend to seek answers to the following questions, using the text of Rózsa Ignác’s novel *Anyanyelve magyar* (“Native Language: Hungarian”).

1. What kinds of conflicts are generated by stereotypes in collective identity and culture in general, and in Transylvanian—a geographically, historically, anthropologically, and culturally typical Central European—consciousness in particular?
2. How does conflict-avoidance become a strategy of identity-crisis management and lead to forfeiting identity completely?
3. Does minority linguistic identity provide enough protection to prevent conflicting majority-minority communication from splitting minority identity through manipulative strategies of “false consciousness” employed by the majority?

I. Theoretical background

Identity is a basic need of the human being, of human consciousness. It also provides us with a sense of security as we must all know who we are, what we are. The mother tongue is not a sociolinguistic category because it embodies the symbolic and emotional value system that the speaker and a whole community of its users assign to their native language. If a speaker or a community identifies itself with a given language to distinguish itself from others, it intensifies the symbolic value of the mother tongue (Péntek, 2010, pp. 161-162).²

¹ Much more than just a “peace treaty,” Trianon for Hungarians meant then and has meant ever since, the shock of losing two-thirds of historical Hungary’s territory, nearly two-thirds of her population, and two-thirds of her public collections.

² All Hungarian quotations in this essay have been translated into English by the author (E.D.).

“Identity is a basic condition of human existence, and one of the most characteristic manifestations of collective identity is national identity . . .” (Bitskey—Fazakas, 2007, p. 11). It is a fundamental human right to determine one’s identity and profess it too. Originating from this is the right to language, that is the freedom of choosing and using a language. Identity is not modelled after a given pattern. Most European identities depend on citizenship. Diaspora identities are tradition-based to a great extent. Peoples living in minority do insist on their own language, since it can guarantee survival in some cases, and a source of renewal for endangered identity in others. Identity is not citizenship-related in the literary example discussed below.

Colonial—postcolonial theory

I find certain categories of *Homi K. Bhabha*’s theory useful to describe the phenomena that manifest themselves in the intercultural communication of posttraumatic Transylvania. The conceptual sphere of colonial—postcolonial can itself be adopted to characterize the situation, since it was a dominant cultural discourse that decided (metaphorically speaking) to colonize a subjected (“subaltern,” Bhabha and Spivak would say) culture. Bhabha introduces his well-known term *mimicry* to express the reaction of the colonized to that subjection in the colonizer-colonized discourse, according to which the colonized simulates acceptance of the colonizer’s culture, behaviour, and habits. Simulated acceptance may yield three results.

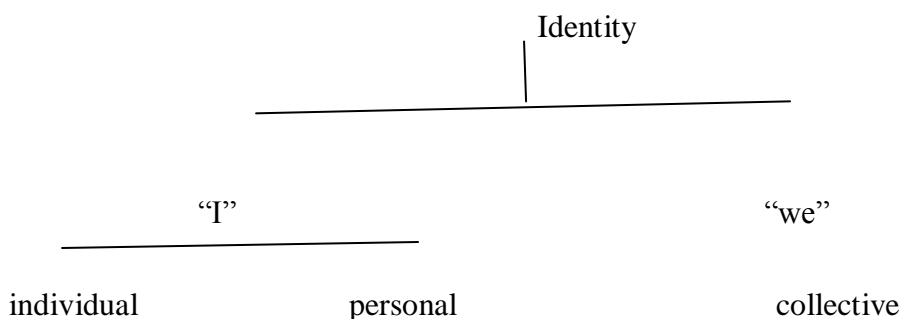
The colonized subject

- goes into hiding, thus protecting his/her culture;
- makes a show of pretended cultural conformity, but *himself/herself undergoes a certain degree of transformation* under the influence of the colonizing culture;
- may develop *a series of mixed cultural reflexes*.

In Bhabha’s view, the colonized-colonizer discourse is unstable, fragmented, and *hybrid*; consequently, “in the very practice of domination the language of the masters becomes hybrid” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 33). We are born “linguistic animals,” but the use of language is *basically unstable*; therefore, *any attempt at homogenizing or fixing language* is bound to abort. A racist stereotype or fixed discourse is doomed to failure (Bhabha, 1994, p. 191).

Cultural identity

Jan Assmann argues that “[i]dentity is a matter of consciousness, that is becoming aware of an otherwise unconscious image of the self. This applies both to individual and to collective life” (Assmann, 2011, p. 111, emphasis added). Identity has two forms: “*I*” identity and “*we*” identity. The former “grows from the outside in” and “builds itself up individually by participating in the interactive and communicative patterns of the group.” “*We*” identity or collective identity, “does not exist outside of the individuals who constitute and represent it.” To understand how “collective or sociocultural identity” works, the “*I*” must be divided into “individual” and “personal” (ibid. p. 112).



(ibid. p. 113)

Individual identity is constructed in the individual consciousness and has to do with the core self, the individual’s basic concerns and corporeal existence; *personal identity* is shaped by “the roles, qualities, and talents” that fall to the lot of the individual from the social network and relate to “social accountability and recognition.” Both are “sociogenic” and culturally determined. “The collective or ‘we’ identity is the image that a group has of itself and with which its members associate themselves.”

Thus collective identity is a matter of *identification*, with “no existence of its own.” Its strength depends on “its presence in the consciousness of its members and its motivating influence on their thoughts and actions.” (Assmann, 2011, pp. 113-114)

Communication

Karl Erik Rosengren maintains that *communication* is a fundamental condition for every human community. It is a process through which collective knowledge is expanded, but the latter will also incorporate conflicting interests and views, thus, instead of *collective consciousness*, conflict will arise. But clashing parties also need to communicate with each other. The nature of their communication will depend on the size and degree of complexity of the communicating sides as well as on the distance of time and space between them (Rosengren, 2000, p. 1).

Conflict is a main characteristic feature of society and a propelling force for it. Conflict and *consensus* do not exclude each other, the difference between them being a matter of shifting emphasis. Actually, Rosengren suggests a difference between the humanities, behavioural sciences, and social sciences based on how they position the role of the two (conflict or consensus) (Rosengren, 2000, p. 5). In my study I will be guided by the consensus-oriented concept; i.e., conflicts do exist, but no society is conceivable without consensus that transcends conflicts, thus making social survival and progress possible. Conflict can be masked; the strategy of such concealment is to generate and foster—Rosengren adopts the Marxist term here:—a “false consciousness.” Opposed to “false consciousness” is “ideological critique,” which is bent on unmasking received social ideologies (ibid. p. 35).

Human communication can take place on different levels. The ones that are most relevant to us of those that Rosengren distinguishes, in the light of what is going on in the literature under discussion, are what Rosengren specifies as individuals; groups; communities and networks (local, regional, national, and international); formal organizations; communities of various municipalities; societies, nations, and states (ibid. p. 46). What matters to us first and foremost in this work is cultural communication that takes place inside any or all of these frameworks of communication, in various situations, under post-Trianon traumatized conditions.

II. Rózsa Ignác: briefly about the author and her novel

Rózsa Ignác was born in Kovászna (Seklerland³) as the child of a Reformed Church minister. She never joined any political party, nor was she aligned with any political ideology. Her oeuvre is informed by a deep commitment to her native land: her explicitly avowed Seklerhood and strong national consciousness are present in every work of hers in such a fashion that we also get to know a liberal, free thinker standing up for human freedom. Her messages address the community, dealing with issues of national fate, mission, and tasks in each case.

Native Language: Hungarian is a story of one school year that takes place in a Kolozsvár Reformed high school redesignated to appear to be a dormitory. The characters are students, teachers, Romanians, Hungarians, Transylvanian Saxons, and Jews. What unfolds in the novel is how people relate to each other and to the Romanians, the latter exerting the weight of state power. At this time the new state does not yet exert the melting-pot pressure; it handles the various peoples of Transylvania, that lived in peaceful coexistence up to this point, merely as ethnic groups. It can be strongly felt, though, that Romanians and Hungarians do run into conflicts, and the Jews wrestle with racial discrimination and persecution. Economically and socially, it is the Hungarians who are in the most difficult position—collective fate in Transylvania is revealed through *them* (Kárász, 2009, pp. 331-32). Where Kárász’s points (that I fully accept) need a slight modification is the term “melting-pot pressure”: “assimilation pressure” is *both* more concretely descriptive of what is exerted on Sekler-Hungarians in Transylvania by the Romanian official cultural discourse *and*, through the “assimilation model” of Ashworth-Graham-Tunbridge’s *Pluralizing pasts* (2007, pp. 73-75) these authors’ complete system of plural societies (i.e., intercultural typology for our purposes).

³ Land of the “Székely” (also: Seklers or Seclers) in the eastern part of Transylvania. The Sekler-Hungarians of Transylvania speak Hungarian, have a strong sense of Hungarian identity but have a history that developed special features to that identity.

III. The problematization of intercultural communication in the multicultural world of Native Language: Hungarian

III.1. Multistage minority identity-crisis management under pressure (from mild confrontation through near-compromise and near identity-colonization to cultural-identity mimicry): Ilona Kovács

Ilona Kovács and Ferenc Borbáth are Sekler-Hungarian characters in the novel. The Sekler girl, Ilona, is a student of Kolozsvár's (Cluj by post-Trianon Romanian name) Reformed High School, with a not quite confident command of Romanian, the language in which she has to study most of her subjects. She is a youth of strong will and unflagging perseverance, who graduates from high school in Romanian, and whose Hungarian is no longer faultless either, as a result: "Geography, history, constitucia. Constitucia. What is that in Hungarian? Good Heavens! You lost your command of Hungarian. [...] Think in Romanian—the [Romanian] history teacher, Mademoiselle Suciú said—then you will not use so many incorrect expressions." (Ignácz, 1990, p. 21)

Ilona is determined to meet the new school-leaving examination requirements and have her diploma so that she can avail herself to the opportunities beckoning to a young intellectual and step over the limiting barriers a minority citizen is confined by. "Nothing else matters now but to finish the schoolyear well and secure the baccalaureate. [...] Entrance is made difficult for minority now. Numerus valachius is not applied yet, but tacitly enforced already."⁴ (Ignácz, 1990, p. 21) Ilona was socialized in Seklerland and was very young at the time power changed hands in Transylvania as a result of Trianon. She is a person of conscious and deep-rooted Hungarian national and cultural identity, but as Hungarian culture ceases to be effective in the world around her step by step, so her compatriots are disappearing from her cultural environment, and so Ilona's "I" and "we" identity start changing.

Feri Borbáth, the other Sekler-Hungarian character, is a man of conscious and professed Hungarian identity. The help Ilona obtains from him enables her "I" identity to resist the distorting effects of Romanian cultural influence as well as encroaching false consciousness as far as possible. Feri can navigate with much more ease in the midst of cultural multiplicity, since he has been to other countries, has experienced the foreign-language-speaking world. The young man's steadfast "I" and "we" identity will save Ilona too from becoming submerged in the sea of Romanian culture, whose waves are pounding more and more aggressively. Borbáth, formerly a student of the Technical University in Hungary, decided to return to Transylvania once he completed his studies, to make his way in the world there. His stay in the mother country (Hungary) made his commitment to his homeland proper (Seklerland) only more intensive. But his Hungarian diploma is not recognized in Romania, so he works as a "homeless" labourer to earn enough money for his further education in Romania. Neither tough circumstances, nor constant humiliation, nor the hopelessness of his situation can discourage him or tax his persistence. He remains an obstinate, "hard-headed Sekler," his strong national consciousness and his desire to make his way in the world protect him from all attempts to pressure him into assimilation. His unwavering vision of the future is that he will be able to realize his Sekler-Hungarian dreams, with Ilona Kovács on his side as his wife.

Ilona does not yet have a personality developed enough for her to understand what to her is a foreign (Romanian) culture: her sense of being a minority citizen in that culture, also bad conditioning as far as social stereotypes are concerned nearly lead her in the wrong direction. She wants to prove herself, even at the cost of entering the world of labour as "Ileana Kováciú" (the Romanian version of her Hungarian name). Her "I" identity needs the support of Feri, her fellow sufferer and life-companion, while her "we" identity is brought more and more under the influence of the group whose principles and ways she begins to insist on. She develops an identity crisis, exactly because her stereotypical thinking convinces her that the Romanian female students are culturally superior, cleverer, and she herself is "only" a poor, defenceless, culturally inferior citizen. She watches her Transylvanian Romanian roommate with near-admiration: "And how beautiful she [the Romanian joint tenant] is, how elegant. Roman features . . . She herself maintains that she represents the pure Romanian race. She is a descendent of Transylvania's Dacian natives and the Roman legionaries." (Ignácz, 1990, p. 77)

⁴ "Numerus valachius" was a law implemented in Romania in 1937, directed especially against the Jewish but also against all non Romanian citizens, the Sekler-Hungarians included, as it prescribed proportional participation in Romanian life in absolute favour of the "Valach" (the Romanians).

The techniques and stages of her identity-crisis management unfold as follows.

Stage 1: mild confrontations. Ilona keeps a distance between herself and students of other nationalities. She cannot accept the Romanian schoolgirls, who regard her as socially and intellectually inferior (the latter because of her language deficiencies). She reduces communication with them to the minimum and responds to unavoidable confrontative situations by withdrawing to an even greater distance from them. And she refuses to identify with the aggressive manifestations of Romanian culture in general.

Ilona does engage in conflict, though, but very cautiously. She tries to help her Hungarian classmates when they communicate incorrectly in the foreign language environment. The Romanian teacher, Rebrescu, is determined to punish inadequate command of the language. Ilona rallies to the support of her Hungarian friend when he does not comprehend the penalizing grade: “Fülöp, please, Miss Rebrescu failed you because you mispronounced the names of Maior and Sincai. In the Hungarian way. – but it does not mean you do not know the subject. – pardon me, Miss Rebrescu.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 31) In other words, at this stage Ilona does meet the challenge that hegemonic culture means, but she does it in sophisticated ways.

Stage 2: cultural-identity compromise under antagonistic hegemonic barrage (mimicry). As it becomes more and more certain that she can get along in life only on condition that she accepts the new regime’s rules of the game, she consents to more and more compromise as half-hearted mimicry. She no longer dares to confront the teacher Rebrescu. She develops the dominant fear that the teacher may get angry with her and will not aid her progress. She does not even respond to the teacher’s provocative question: “So, Miss Kovács, you hard-headed Hungarian, where are you with your contrary opinion?” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 32) The self-confident but otherwise sympathetic and committed teacher relates to Ilona that she herself graduated from a Beszterce Hungarian school and did not fall short of becoming “a good Romanian in the Hungarian school,” in spite of the fact that she had to do every subject in Hungarian. She provokes her student further by wanting to know what she thinks about Dezső Szabó’s *Elsodort falu* (“Swept away Village”)⁵: “I know it. I have read it. It is a good book. Tell me, Kovács, do you think that this Dezső Szabó is an irredentist writer?” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 33) The Sekler girl’s “yes” consents to compromise. Nor does she call a spade a spade when asked about the Romanian army’s 1916 invasion of Hungary; rather, she circumscribes it: “where the novel speaks about nineteen-sixteen.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 33) At this point even her readiness for mild confrontations is gone; what we have here is full-blown (self-protective) mimicry. Rebrescu’s response to Ilona’s “yes” is sharp: “Wrong, Miss Kovács [...]. Great writing, but it did you disservice as political matter. You will understand when you grow up. I will give you a real irredentist book. Authored by my renowned cousin Liviu Rebreanu:⁶ *Forest of the Hanged*. [...] You can learn irredentism from it, you Hungarians, it is timely for you now.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 33) But Ilona evades confrontation, gets lost in a cultural mimicry, which will make it possible for her to transcend the difficulties she is bound to experience as minority in the process of the school-leaving certification and when hoping for college admittance.

Thus her main concern now is to do her best to master Romanian language in order to be able to graduate from high school successfully. It would be no problem, were it not for her native language wearing away, in direct proportion, in the process. False consciousness attempts to win her over several ways: among other things, she comes under the influence of a Romanian schoolmistress whose persistent effort is to put Ilona on the track of Romanian “we” identity. Ideological critique steps in, though, represented by Feri Borbáth, whose main purpose is to counteract the Romanian teacher’s strong human and cultural influence. But Ilona is less and less ready to engage in conflicts.

Stage 3: estrangement from cultural identity, identity capitulation. “Covaciu maturanda” succeeds in graduating from high school, passes the examination with bravura, an achievement that appears to the strong national consciousness of her Hungarian form-master--a betrayal. “You inflicted pain upon us and ashamed us ... You know that very well: by your enthusiastic performance. [...] Your country, which is entitled to official respect is Romania, Yes! But your motherland? Transylvania. [...] Not that you said anything that was not true, but the manner, the stress, the way you said it, my child.

⁵ Dezső Szabó (1879-1945), an influential figure on the interwar Hungarian literary scene. *Swept-away Village* is a social panorama, thematizing Szabó’s pacifism. A diehard example of so-called “peasant romanticism,” the novel regarded the peasant class as the real source of Hungarian values.

⁶ Liviu Rebreanu (1885-1944), Transylvanian Romanian writer, a master of the interwar Romanian social novel. *Forest of the Hanged* is one of his outstanding novels.

You elicited the remark from them: - a good Romanian! It is the end of us, Kovács, the end of Hungarians in Transylvania if Hungarians become good Romanians!” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 316). She turns away from the successful Sekler-Hungarian high-school graduate and denies her help in recovering her stolen diploma. Ilona is on the point of soliciting the Romanian school-commissioner’s help, but, confronted with the fact that her very name has been changed to Covaciu—something that would have meant a final and irretrievable identity capitulation—defiance and the spirit of Sekler-Hungarian struggle for survival take possession of her, as a decisive motivation to move on to stage four of identity crisis management.

Stage 4: proudly embracing minority existence. Ilona leaves for home, proudly accepting minority existence now. The novel is thus open-ended. The question left unanswered is: does Ilona really give up her identity? Two possible answers come to mind. One, the return to her own community will even things out as far as her “we” identity is concerned; her own cultural environment will reaffirm the individual and the personal side of her “I” identity; consequently, Ilona Kovács will never be Ileana Covaciu; rather, she will be a human being consciously avowing her minority existence. Two, if she remains in the multicultural big city, seeking success and social recognition there, reconciling herself to losing touch with her sustaining Hungarian cultural community, her “I” identity will be slowly undermined; she will be estranged from her “we” identity and will come under the sway of the “we” identity of the culturally and socially dominant majority group. This will put her on the track of assimilation, and what remains is an empty ID-card and passport item (as the title of the novel suggests), without meaningful cultural identification: her native language is Hungarian.

What does it all mean on the different levels of Ilona’s intercultural communication? Individual communication with members of other minority communities is undisturbed; troubles beset only her communicative relation to the girls who enact the role of the Romanian majority. Group-level communication keeps stalling since it is rather hard for the Hungarian *community* to strike the right note with the Romanian community, and it is the state that erects artificial hindrances to frustrate communication. If these artificial obstacles did not exist, communication would be possible perhaps. In her heart of hearts Ilona maintains: “as if it were the way they dress that would make them different, and that they shape the human voice into words according to different laws ... But the human being, the material is the same. [...] She cannot stand antagonism, unceasing hatred. Hatred wounds not only those that it targets after all. (Ignácz, 1990, p. 128). However, members of the same group have no problem communicating with each other—something that represents a sustaining force on the level of individuals. The different minority groups form closed communities, providing their members with a protecting membrane as it were. Social communication does not work in Ilona’s case—a failure that follows from the state’s formalized communication, which state, abusing its monopoly, deliberately incites animosity between the groups. One of the tools of Romanian propaganda is the attitude that makes them interpret history the way they do, and this obstructs communication further between ethnic groups. In her words spoken to the child of a Romanian Kolozsvár woman (the child is asking her about the King Matthias statue⁷), Ignácz makes that attitude clear:

“Who is ... he, that ugly old man riding that horse, Mom?” asks the child. “That is the statue of a great Romanian king: Matei Corviné,” the mother instructs the child. “And those old men dipping their flag before him? Tell me, who are those?” “Those are the subjugated Hungarians,” the woman corrects her history, dragging the little boy away. (Ignácz, 1990, p. 129)

Ilona is slowly losing her native Hungarian language. She is a victim of the Romanian educational system, which requires Hungarian students to pass examinations in a language foreign to them. It is an over-heavy burden for a young girl since she does not even have enough time to acquire the new state language profoundly. What is more, she was not raised in a multicultural environment either and never had an experience of any language other than her native Hungarian. She has no idea that her Hungarian vocabulary is leaving her slowly, as it is harder and harder for her to find the proper word. Not that it ever means that she would ever abandon her native language of course; that never becomes an issue; but the prevailing foreign language exerts a devastating effect on her command of the native one. Not to mention that Romanian school certification is a precondition to making her way in life, to an intellectual occupation.

⁷ Mátyás Hunyadi (Corvin) (1443-1490), one of the greatest and most esteemed Hungarian kings. He reigned from 1458 to 1490. He established central royal power and set up the first ever Hungarian mercenary army; was a patron of arts and culture, as well as founder of Corvina library.

In what used to be multilingual Kolozsvár, even English was losing out at that time. Even English teacher Miss Percy, who got stuck in the city, has no work. „She has no students, nobody wants to learn English in Kolozsvár today. Those who would wish to, cannot afford it; those who can, learn French. Kin language is the fashion today.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 9) The Hungarian student of Romanian domination endures double pressure. On the one hand, deliberate repression of minority language use splits a given nationality’s identity as no national and cultural identity can be preserved without native language use. Ilona often indulges in day-dreaming, recalling her cultural memory in her imagination: “Budapest ... She wonders what Budapest can be like? Will she ever see it? [...] What is it like to be in Budapest, where everybody is allowed to speak Hungarian? Strange: you can ask for a stamp in Hungarian in the post office, for example!” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 218) But reality provokes other thoughts in her too: “Would the Romanians accept me as one of them over there?”⁸ Tough little Hungarian, Rebreșcu sneers at me at school. I wonder how they would tolerate me, would they also sneer at me in the student’s canteen, with my Mongolian cheekbones?” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 222) On the other hand, as manipulative false consciousness is gaining momentum, so members of the minority community are losing their cultural identity gradually, unless what Rosengren calls “ideological critique” intervenes. (Rosengren, 2000, p. 35) The only way for Ilona to make her way in life, it seems, is what her teacher formulates for her: “Take my unsolicited piece of advice, Kovács! In your case, the clever thing to do, if you want to go to college and want to amount to something, is to pretend what is useful for you, and do what you have to—and inside you can feel and think what you want! If ... you turn out to become a doctor Covaciu, that alone will not hurt you that much.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 252) Under Rebreșcu’s influence, she does indeed assume the disguise of cultural mimicry—but only to hide and protect her own Sekler-Hungarian identity. However, in the process of pretended accommodation—and before the final strategic stage (number four above) Ilona Kovács herself seems to undergo transformation, imperceptibly by the cultural mimicry (that actually starts with the compromise of stage two), without noticing that colonizing culture is taking possession of her (number three, identity capitulation above). It is not identity colonization fully realized yet, in her case, but the possibility makes itself felt at that third stage.⁹

III.2. Monometric, zero-degree identity-management of majority consciousness (majority identity, embedded in hegemonic power discourse): Corina, Leticia, and the Ventura sisters

Corina, Leticia, and the Ventura sisters are the young female students of the novel, with Transylvanian Romanian, Wallachian, Moldavian students among them. In full awareness of their majority position, they humiliate the Sekler handmade of the old Hungarian house whenever they can. Leticia scorns the Sekler-Hungarian housemade with these words: “Where did you put my galoshes, you stupid bumpkin. Au tu unuroaica tu!”¹⁰ [...] This is another refined place, I can tell you, what servants!” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 12) They do not regard Ilona Kovács as their equal; in a condescending manner, they relate to her with material, spiritual, and cultural superiority; they speak to her in Romanian only; they do not even attempt to establish good relations with her. They have no respect for their senior Hungarian hosts, their opinion about Ilona Kovács is also devastating: “She is here cost free. Hungarian [...] These Hungarians support each other, you can see. She is not their relative, only a stranger, but they assist her so that she can study. Kind of servant...” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 64) It cannot be stated that they have conscious national identity. It is not an essential question in the novel; for Romanian students, sheltered by their belonging with the majority, to have a sense of national identity is not a vital issue after all. They exercise their right for education, make use of the social opportunities available to them: money, schooling, the fascinating life that multi-coloured Kolozsvár life can offer. They are irresponsible as no social responsibility is imposed on them; as for the life and fate of a student of a different nationality--they could not care less. They live their student life as creatures of superior social standing, to become, possibly, the intelligentsia of the Romanian nation and prefer to ignore the distressful problems of the minority. Leticia, a medical student, prides herself on her pedigree:

⁸ I.e., in the “sea” of Romania, figuratively speaking, outside the “island” of Transylvania but especially Seklerland inside that.

⁹ I introduced the notion of “identity colonization” in an essay under publication “A nemzetiidentitás-narratívák interkulturális dimenziói az erdélyi magyar irodalomban a trianoni traumát követően” (“Intercultural Dimensions of National-Identity Narratives in Transylvanian Hungarian Literature after the Trianon Trauma.”)

¹⁰ “You Hungarian, you!”

“Leticia is of noble descent, then. And of Hungarian nobility at that. ‘Papa played an important public role even before the union,¹¹ didn’t he,’ Leticia liked to say. And Leticia does indeed speak fluent Hungarian, except that she does not like to. A barbaric language, she says. Asian. Ah, Latin languages, that’s different! Come la dolce lingua italiana, et la langue française surtout, La France! Incomparabil!”¹² (Ignácz, 1990, p. 14).

This female student, a Transylvanian Romanian, has a better sense than most Romanians, of the Kolozsvár multinationality problematic in several respects as she was socialized in Transylvania, among Romanians, Hungarians, and Saxons. Sometimes she even engages in conversations with Ilona, her joint tenant (the manner and style of those conversations are a different matter), trying to make her understand why Romanian gaining ground in all respects is justified. Her grandfather used to be a representative in the Hungarian Parliament, so she thinks of herself as a genteel Romanian: “Us, old-stock Transylvanian genteel Romanians, ours is a different ambience. I can relate to the Hungarians too; nevertheless, the thing is that we are the ruling race.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 76)

They also live, as does Ilona Kovács, in the house of the has-been Kolozsvár aristocratic ladies. Transylvanian Romanian Leticia offers a characteristic interpretation of the multicultural climate: “This place smacks of poverty to me [...]. These [...] old women, though—how to put it? Papa trusts this old Hungarians (sic.) [...]. Papa says these Kolozsvár autochthons, are guaranteed genteel environment [...]. Papa does life (sic.) in the old ways (sic.), of course, you can feel the last century, Hungarian supremacy in him even today.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 14). These Romanian young women have no need for strategies of identity-crisis management, since the Romanian state will tackle the issue for them. They are, even if unaware for the time being, the flourishing supporters of the identity colonization of those others who are minority.

III.3. Zero-degree identity crisis management of minority consciousness (escape into minority cultural memory): Aunts Lenka, Minka, and uncle Nándor

Aunts Lenka and Minka, together with *uncle Nándor* are representatives of the impoverished, failed Hungarian aristocracy of Kolozsvár of whom Leticia spoke so beratingly above. All three of them are advanced in years, with a difficult and unjust life, living on the *charity of foundations their families created once*. Lenka and Minka used to be first in the ranks of Kolozsvár girls: “believe it or not, we used to own Miklós street and public-baths street. Ten magnificent villas with gardens on the banks of the Szamos dike.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 6) They rent the rooms of their middle-class apartments, their own property, to young students; Romanian girl students pay room and board. Their Sekler-Hungarian handmaid (Ilona) tries to keep up household standards for the „mistresses” of the house by selling whatever valuables remained. What bothers the aunts is not the aggressive social and cultural gaining ground of the new Romanian world; rather, they miss bygone Hungarian times. Their Hungarian national identity manifests itself in the never-ending stories they keep relating to each other and to those around them about their once glamorous life, wealth and social rank. The misery of minority existence is beyond them; their cultural memory broods over quondam glittering balls. Uncle Nándor is a tarnished knight of those bygone days, who watches unflinchingly how the cultural life of Kolozsvár falls apart, and the irresponsibility that characterized the way he related to social problems in his whole life, remains unchanged. In other words, the strategy of identity management here is zero-strategy management: these figures are the ostriches of an antagonistic intercultural present, who bury their heads in the sand of cultural memory.

III.4. Zero-degree minority identity management as decreed by majority law (group identity deprived of the possibilities of intercultural identity management): Éva Engel, Magda Ember, and Ilona Hirsch.

Éva Engel, Magda Ember, and Ilona Hirsch are Jewish students, whom Romanian law requires to be removed from the Hungarian high school. The Hungarian head-master of the school breaks the news of the state decision to the students heartbroken and with the deepest grief: “The more and more frequent and increasingly violent antisemitic demonstrations compel us, already a few days before the decree will be enforced anyway - the decree orders the removal of Israelite students from denominational Hungarian schools - to take leave of three eighth-form students of ours.”

¹¹ The unification of Transylvania with Romania, December 1, 1918.

¹² “Like sweet Italian language and especially French language, France! Uncomparable!!”

(Ignácz, 1990, p. 40) What happens to them foreshadows the foreseeable future of the Jewish population of Romania: they are discriminated against on every level, in every respect. There are a very few even among their own classmates who agree with the measure the state has taken: “Come now, The Romanians are right. The Jews are not Hungarians. They are minority like us. Let them set up Jewish schools, or let them go to state ones.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 43) However, the majority of the students (Ilona, Margit Buda-Hátszegi, and others) are shocked to hear the news and stand up for their Jewish classmates in an exemplary manner. The Jews stick together as a minority; their strong sense of identity, deep-rooted cultural memory, and their religion add up to be a sustaining force on the group level. The Hungarian and the Saxon students put up a silent protest against the dismissal of their Jewish schoolmates, to no avail, of course. Their protest is a fine example of how minority groups under the same oppression can sympathize with, and fully feel, each other’s misfortune. Jewish survival amidst minority conditions is an eloquent testimony to how strong “we” identity can be as a sustaining force.

III.5. Ignored necessity of minority identity-crisis management (aristocratic arrogance of cultural superiority as an immunizing factor): Countess Margit Buda-Hátszegi.

Countess Margit Buda-Hátszegi is a young-generation Hungarian aristocrat, who does indeed realize what is happening around her, but relates to it with the standoffishness of an aristocrat. She is a young descendent of the Monarchy’s quondam Hungarian ruling class who has a strong sense of national identity as far as claiming Hungarianness goes, but it is not coupled with social responsibility. She does not take her secondary school studies seriously, since she knows that her family connections are still functional, and (the gradually decreasing) opportunities still beckon to her. Countess Margit lowers herself to the middle-class level in a condescending manner. She is all mockery when it comes to the school’s expectations: “I behave as a little girl going to public school is expected to. [...] I betted him that I would become perfect middle class by the end of the year.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 93) She has no other choice since she is supposed to graduate from that school. She tries to meet the expectations of the new regime with the superiority of the ruling class while constantly signalling that she is doing a favour, that she will in fact always remain an aristocrat deep in her soul, no matter how much her social-political environment has changed.

She is a person with deep-rooted cultural memory, a circumstance that protects her from aggressive assimilation too. Many many years later her classmates still talk about her because of her strange behaviour:

“You remember Hátszegi? [...] You remember the history class when she told Suciú that she was not supposed to learn things that hurt her self-respect? Her ancestors—she protested—no matter what the Romanian schoolbook maintains, were not stocky, bow-legged, raw-meat-devouring Asian hordes. Nor was she willing to believe that when our ancestors conquered this place,¹³ the Romanians had already been here.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 192)

Countess Margit is not capable of meaningful communication either with her schoolmates or at the group level as she “has imbibed” an atavistic sense of social and cultural superiority during the centuries and is driven by misconstrued social stereotypy. She does not take the changed world seriously, goes to school on horseback, and if this generates problems (finds its way into the local newspaper), she could not care less:

“Romanian newspapers? Bagatelle, old sport. The student countess wanting to create a sensation [...] I certainly don’t, damn it. One cannot be blamed for the fact that whatever one does, attracts the attention of the plebs. Count Pál will take care of the matter anyway. A neat sum, and tomorrow the paper will say it was a mistake.” (Ignácz, 1990, p. 96)

No identity crisis bothers her since she is not exposed to the troubles of everyday life. The aristocracy’s ever-decreasing wealth takes care of her problems, and her smoothly working social network helps her through her minority difficulties. The school-leaving examination is of no vital significance for her as she can afford to do her graduation abroad. Her social and cultural sphere are immune to the pressure of cultural colonization, and her strategy of survival is: leaving the country.

¹³ I.e., settled in the Carpathain Basin.

III.6. Monometric minority identity-crisis management transcended through group mimicry: the Graafs

Kató Gráf (Graaf) a Saxon-minority student, whose position is not less difficult than that of her Hungarian schoolmates. She is bent on doing her best at the school-leaving examination. She comes from a well-to-do Saxon family of merchants with a good name, for whom minority existence is no news. They have to endure the hardships of the new social situation, the changing of the imperiums forced them to change course, but they do find the ways and means of survival. Their cultural mimicry means that they conceal themselves, fear for, and protect, their national and cultural identity, forming a closed community. Their developed sense of national and cultural identity is a cementing force for the group; which force, in turn, fosters their trading talent and guards their considerable wealth: “because the owners of the Graaf villa are not from Cluj, nor from Kolozsvár; they call themselves, inside, beyond the stern railing of their wire fence, amongst themselves: us uhrwohniger Klausenburgerek...” (Ignác, 1990, p. 84) They communicate with the Romanian rulers very well indeed and manage to sustain their social status. They are not so defenceless as impecunious Sekler-Hungarians are.

Theirs are highly effective strategies of identity-crisis management that make it possible for them to accept compromise without their identity as minority getting hurt. They have an inclination towards consensus in a conscious and organized manner, communicational conflicts are therefore insignificant. If conflicts arise, Transylvanian Saxons seek settlement at a group level. For the time being (as things stand in the novel), they are not exposed to the dangers of the Romanian state’s identity-colonization pressure.

Summary

1. The intensity of the conflicts of the various communicative levels as well as the reluctance to conform with consensus depend on how strong the formerly fixed stereotypes are. Intercultural communication as presented in the novel is also determined by how sure the collective or “we” identity is on the different levels. The stronger “we” identity is, the more effective intergroup communication is, and conflict-impact can be diminished by adequate consensual response (that does not require surrender of identity) (Ferenc Borbáth). But very strong “we” identity renders the communicative process more difficult since there is no way for consensus to gain ground in such cases. Thus, intercultural communication can proceed unencumbered only if the individual and personal side of the individual’s “I” identity (as Assmann is quoted about it above, “both are ‘sociogenic’ and culturally determined”) develop in such a fashion that the individual is in constant and equal-partner cultural contact with the communicative agent of the cultural Other.

2. Rosengren contends that conflict and consensus are concomitant to, and prime movers of, every society. In a multicultural environment and under aggressive cultural pressure, communicative partners are unable to avoid conflict. Whether you do or do not engage in conflict depends on your social position. If you do, it makes much difference whether you engage in it as minority (Ilona Kovács) or as a member of the majority or dominant group (Leticia, Corina). Engagement in conflict on the individual level means confrontation, which excludes the possibility of wholesome consensus. On the other hand, refusal to engage in conflict calls for strategies of identity-crisis management which may lead to total surrender of identity; i.e., assimilation may take place. Group-level conflict engagement provides the individuals of the group with better opportunity to aim for a wholesome consensus while keeping the individual’s “I” identity and “we” identity intact. The sustaining power of the group and its well-chosen strategy of crisis management will protect from alienation from nation and culture (Kató Gráf).

3. I quoted Bhabha above on how attempts at homogenizing or fixing language are bound to fail; consequently, racist stereotyping or fixed discourse can yield no result. The phenomenon we meet in the present novel is not the mixed-language case of the Csángó¹⁴ of the other Ignác novel *Born in Moldova*, which contradicts Bhabha’s point. Quite the contrary, an aggressive, fixed cultural discourse can indeed produce assimilation. In the case of Ilona Kovács and her fellow-Hungarians in distress (Borbáth, aunts Lenka and Minka), the Romanian state’s attention is not directed at the homogenization of the Hungarian language. Its goal is total linguistic, national, and cultural assimilation through the gradual displacement of minority language and purposive weakening of cultural memory. Linguistic identity is unable to hold up a state machine that suppresses the natural spaces and media of native language use and forces the minority to use the language of the majority.

¹⁴ Ethnic Hungarians of Moldova province in Romania.

This way the use of the mother tongue is slowly but certainly suppressed, a development that splits identity. The chief storehouse of cultural memory that determines identity is language after all. By suppressing language, that is, locking up the storehouse of cultural memory step by step, Romanian state discourse—through hegemonic pressure and by generating false consciousness—pushed the Hungarian minority, deliberately and systematically, as far as intercultural communication is concerned, into the disadvantaged position which necessarily drifted those who lost their identity into colonial cultural existence; i.e., it colonized their identity.

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