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OTHERNESS AND GENDER IN THE LITERATURE CLASSROOM IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This study explores the literary construction of Otherness within the Macedonian high school curriculum, focusing on three canonical works: Chekhov's Uncle Vanya, Balzac's The Magic Skin, and Cervantes' Don Quixote. Through qualitative observation of classroom discussions and interpretive analysis, it examines how identity is forged against the figure of the outsider, tracing the persistence of exclusion across emotional, social, and gendered dimensions. From the alienated longings of Chekhov's characters to the class anxieties of Balzac's hero and the quixotic ideals of Cervantes' knight, Otherness emerges not as a static label but as a dynamic tension through which power, desire, and belonging are negotiated. Feminist critique sharpens this inquiry, exposing the subtle yet enduring ways in which patriarchal structures inscribe womanhood as the perpetual Other.

Keywords: Otherness, Literature curriculum, Literature classroom

Introduction

The notion of Otherness is as old as human civilization itself. From the earliest records of antiquity, we witness how language, culture, and belief became lines of demarcation between those who belonged and those cast aside as different. The ancient Greeks, upon hearing foreign tongues, dismissed them as the incomprehensible chatter of "barbarians," reducing entire peoples to the status of outsiders—those who did not speak as they did, who did not belong. In this construction of the Other, exclusion was not only possible but justified: as Sarkanac observes, the barbarian could be treated with violence, the enslaved and the woman condemned to indifference, denied the rights of citizenship and the dignity of equality.

Through the Middle Ages, the contours of Otherness shifted but did not soften. Religious dissenters, homosexuals, and women branded as agents of darkness carried the burden of exclusion. Later epochs found new Others: unfamiliar cultures, heretics, foreigners at the edges of empires, all marked as existential threats or as objects of suspicion. This pattern persists even in the modern age. The early twenty-first century still fabricates new categories of outsiders – illegal migrants, asylum seekers, political exiles, Muslim "terrorists," Balkan "invaders", all figured as Others against which the stability of the self-proclaimed center is defined.

This persistence of Otherness makes its study not only relevant but urgent. In the wake of renewed feminist struggles and ongoing debates on identity and belonging, the question of how the Other is represented acquires fresh resonance. And yet, despite its presence in philosophy, politics, and everyday discourse, literature, the most fertile of human cultural expressions, remains underexplored through this lens. Scholarly attention has rarely paused to consider how Otherness is imagined, inscribed, and perpetuated within the texts that shape collective consciousness. Even less has it investigated the literary

curriculum, where young readers in secondary schools encounter prose works that may, silently and powerfully, frame their perceptions of the "Other."

This study, therefore turns its gaze to the representation of Otherness in prose literature studied in Macedonian language classes in high schools. By examining a purposeful sample of three curriculum-approved books, the study aims to explore Otherness; to trace the shadows cast by identity itself, and to ask what kind of futures might be possible when the margins are no longer merely margins, but voices in their own right.

2. Literature review/Broader research context

The concept of Otherness has emerged as one of the central concerns of cultural and literary theory at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Its trajectory as a theoretical term reveals a rich crossing of intellectual traditions—first appearing in hermeneutics and psychoanalysis before finding broader resonance within poststructuralist thought. In hermeneutics, the Other is conceived as a projection of the Self, a necessary interlocutor through which identity takes shape, while in psychoanalysis, the relation is inverted: the Self is itself always a projection of the Other (Biti, 1997: 73). This dialogic tension has provided scholars with fertile ground to rethink subjectivity, difference, and the very act of interpretation.

As the term gained broader usage, its meaning multiplied, generating new definitions, expansions, and contextual deployments. Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949) is one of the earliest works to position Otherness explicitly within the framework of gender studies. Beauvoir insists that in a male-dominated culture, woman is not recognized as an autonomous subject but rather as the Other against which man defines himself. She is rendered insignificant, derivative, and secondary, positioned as the inessential, while man is constructed as the essential, the Subject, the Absolute. By framing woman in relation to man rather than the reverse, Beauvoir exposes an asymmetry that underpins not only gender relations but the very cultural logic of domination. Her work, situated within post-war Western feminism, opens a path to understanding Otherness as a structural condition of power.

Parallel to this, in the field of colonial and postcolonial theory, Otherness finds powerful articulation in the works of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks (1952) explores how colonial systems impose racialized hierarchies, coding Blackness as Other within a white-dominated cultural matrix, thereby producing psychological alienation and a fractured selfhood. Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) takes these questions further, revealing how the West systematically constructs the East as its Other—exotic, backward, threatening—an imagined opposite through which Western identity defines itself as rational, modern, and superior. These seminal works enrich the discourse by situating Otherness within structures of race, class, nation, and empire, demonstrating its reach beyond the individual psyche into the vast networks of cultural and political domination.

Building on these intellectual foundations, Juri Lotman (2006: 191) further elaborates the opposition between the Self and the Other, or between Us and Them, through the powerful binaries of black and white, or good and evil. He concludes that the opposition of "own" versus "foreign" is often perceived as a variant of moral contrasts such as "just" versus "wrong" or "good" versus "bad." In this framework, what is foreign is imagined as inherently wrong or threatening, a fundamental distortion that nurtures exclusion and fear. This conceptualization echoes deeply in cultural narratives, reinforcing how difference becomes synonymous with fault or danger.

Noam Chomski (2007: 133) offers a scathing commentary on similar dynamics in the colonial context. He points to the colonial attitude of "we", the colonizers, toward "they," the indigenous peoples, whom they derisively label as merciless savage Indians who nearly eradicated them. Chomski extends this biting irony to include the racialized treatment of Black populations and Chinese immigrants, exposing a pattern of dismissiveness, violence, and dehumanization inherent in the colonial "us versus them" rhetoric. These perspectives best show how the construction of the Other is not just a cultural or theoretical abstraction but a lived political reality with devastating consequences.

Thus, from its roots in hermeneutic and psychoanalytic theory to its expansion within modern discourse, the term Otherness has evolved as a prism through which power relations and cultural identities can be interrogated. It signifies more than mere alterity: it reveals the asymmetries at the heart

of representation, the ways in which narratives of belonging and exclusion are woven into both social structures and literary texts. For literature, this opens the possibility of reading not only for what is said, but also for how Otherness is inscribed: who speaks, who is silenced, and how the margins teach us to see the center anew.

3. Methods

The study employs a qualitative methodology with a comparative approach aimed at 1) Analyzing the phenomenon of Otherness in prose literary works studied in the classes in Macedonian language, at a high school level, and 2) The elaboration on the notion of Otherness during these classes. The research design is descriptive, focusing on the collection of data aimed at detailed description.

The purposeful sample consists of three literary works and three teachers, chosen intentionally by the researcher to serve the study's objectives. The selected texts include Chekhov's Uncle Vanya (analyzed with 1st year students), Balzac's The Magic Skin/The Peau de Chagrin (analyzed with 1st year students), and Cervantes' Don Quixote (analyzed with 2nd year students).

Data collection involved a thematic analysis of the selected works and a systematic and direct observation of teachers and students during Macedonian language lessons in three high schools: "Taki Daskalo" – Bitola, "Kuzman Shapkarev" – Bitola, and "Josip Broz-Tito" – Bitola. Observations were conducted over a one-month period from November 21 to December 21, 2023. The language lessons were carefully observed using observation protocols developed by the researcher, which served as tools to gather accurate and comprehensive data for subsequent analysis. The analysis adopts a general qualitative interpretive-inductive method, allowing patterns and meanings related to Otherness to emerge organically from the observed data.

4. (Analysis), results and discussion

Classroom observations focused on how students engaged with the selected works: Miguel de Cervantes's novel Don Quixote, Anton Chekhov's psychological drama Uncle Vanya, and Honoré de Balzac's novel The Magic Skin. It is important to note, however, that while the concept of Otherness was never directly named or emphasized by the teacher, the pedagogical methods implicitly guided students toward its underlying dynamics.

Observations of the class sessions on Uncle Vanya revealed students at work on the text. The teacher's use of the "Five Whys" technique encouraged students to investigate opposing questions, like "Why is it so?" and "Why is it not so?", which inherently led them to uncover binaries such as is–is not, sad–happy, and dissatisfied–satisfied (Lotman, 2006). This interactive approach implicitly introduced Otherness as a dynamic tension within human experience and literary characterization, rather than a fixed academic label.

During these lessons, students observed that the characters are deeply unhappy, with their pain often stemming from unmet desires and feelings of alienation generated through relationships with others. This was analyzed using a framework informed by Freudian psychology, which locates sources of suffering in tensions between the self, the external world, and the social Other (Freud, 1988). Discussions highlighted specific examples: Vanya's unrequited love for Elena, Astrov's emotional distance, and Sonya's loneliness, all illustrating the intersection of marginalization and emotional wellbeing.

It is also interesting to note that class dialogue centered on the female characters, Elena and Sonya, marking a shift from earlier literary works where women were often marginal or merely symbolic. Students demonstrated awareness of the patriarchal cultural frames that have historically positioned women as "Other." Feminist critiques shared in class challenged the reduction of women to objects of desire or moral sentiment, highlighting debates around hyperfeminism and nationalism and the struggle for women's visibility and agency in literature and society (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Showalter, 1977).

In studying Balzac's The Magic Skin, students worked directly with the text and participated in class discussions focused on the critique of bourgeois materialism and social stratification. They explored how the protagonist, Raphael, experiences a form of implicit Otherness through his poverty and exclusion from the affluent elite, mirroring real social divisions between "us" and "them." Classroom

dialogues reflected on critiques, such as those by Chomsky (2007), suggesting that democracy often hides persistent power imbalances and control mechanisms that perpetuate these divisions. Raphael's pact with the magic skin, which grants wishes at the cost of his lifespan, was discussed not only as a literary symbol but as a metaphor for human desire and the limits of social mobility in unequal systems.

The female characters in The Magic Skin also made for a vivid class discussion, again without directly invoking the term 'Otherness.' Fedora was depicted as manipulative and selfish, which students identified as an example of stereotypes used to justify patriarchal marginalization. Pauline, by contrast, was viewed as an embodiment of modesty and genuine love, which challenged negative tropes and aligned with feminist efforts to reclaim women's moral and social identities beyond caricature (Showalter, 1977; Tong, 1998). These discussions revealed students' understanding of how the novel's gender dynamics reflect and reinforce patriarchal power structures, and how feminist criticism offers tools to critique and rethink these portrayals.

Observations of classes on Don Quixote focused on students' exploration of the protagonist's delusional reality and his interaction with the socio-historical norms of 17th-century Spain. Students analyzed Don Quixote's transformation of ordinary inns into castles and common farm girls into ladies, engaging with the concept of an individual's internal world clashing with external, shared reality. The classroom discussions implicitly addressed the Othering of difference by examining how the world and its inhabitants react to Quixote's refusal to conform to prevailing sanity and social structures.

4.1. Further Discussion and a Feminist Perspective

One could argue that Don Quixote shines a spotlight on the construction of Otherness through the contrasting figures of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. This iconic duo embodies an interplay of opposites – madness and sanity, fantasy and reality, idealism and pragmatism, that illustrates how cultural stereotypes and ideological narratives shape perceptions of Self and Other (Lotman, 2006; Taylor, 2004). Don Quixote, the quixotic dreamer, chases chivalric fantasies, while Sancho, his loyal squire, navigates the world with earthy wisdom and skepticism. Their relationship is profoundly dialogic and symbiotic: Sancho anchors Don Quixote's illusions with practical sensibility, and in turn, Don Quixote lifts Sancho beyond mundanity toward something noble and transformative (Vitória, 2016; SparkNotes, 2025). This dynamic reflects identity as relational and perpetually contested, undercutting any notion of fixed or stable selves.

In Uncle Vanya, Otherness is more intimately tied to emotional suffering and social estrangement, most acutely expressed in gendered terms. Elena and Sonya reveal how patriarchal structures cast womanhood as the eternal Other—framed as objects of desire, sources of emotional turbulence, and bearers of marginalization (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Their Otherness is no abstract theory but a palpable condition shaped by power hierarchies and cultural norms in both Balkan and global contexts. Feminist perspectives enrich this reading by challenging reductive portrayals, contesting the invisibility and instrumentalization of women, and emphasizing the complexity and agency ignored in patriarchal narratives (Showalter, 1977).

Likewise, The Magic Skin stages Otherness in socio-economic terms. Raphael's outsider status in the bourgeois order embodies the persistent "us versus them" divide typical of hierarchical societies (Chomski, 2007). The story's women—the manipulative Fedora and the modest Pauline—mirror contrasting gendered stereotypes that feminist criticism interrogates. Fedora exemplifies the trope of the femme fatale, weaponizing beauty within patriarchal confines, while Pauline's humble virtues reclaim a dignified, nuanced femininity (Showalter, 1977; Tong, 1998). Their portrayals reflect historical patterns of female marginalization and the ongoing feminist project to highlight women's multifaceted moral and social identities.

Across these works, Otherness emerges as a prism through which identity, power, and social relations are refracted—provoking reflection on the fluidity of human difference and the ethical need to transcend simplistic binaries. Feminist readings further underscore how gendered Otherness is both constructed and contested, urging a more equitable engagement with the diverse voices and experiences that literature can reveal.

A feminist lens reveals that the Other is most enduringly gendered. Across these texts, women occupy positions of desire and disruption, their bodies and voices framed as tests of male identity. Elena and Sonya in Uncle Vanya embody the quiet endurance and frustrated agency of women whose lives are shaped by patriarchal expectations; Fedora and Pauline in The Magic Skin are cast as archetypes—the dangerous seductress and the redeeming angel—through which male ambition and anxiety are played out. Even in Don Quixote, where gender recedes behind the spectacle of madness and idealism, the chivalric fantasies that drive the hero are steeped in the romanticization of female virtue. Feminist critique unsettles these portrayals, refusing the comfort of archetype and insisting on the complexity of women's subjectivities. It reminds us that to confront Otherness is also to confront the historical silencing of women, and that every act of reading can become an act of resistance—a reclaiming of the margins not as shadows of the center, but as centers in their own right.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of these three texts and the class observations demonstrate that Otherness is not merely a theoretical construct but a lived and felt reality: emotional, political, and profoundly human. Each work stages encounters with the unfamiliar, whether in the restless hearts of Chekhov's characters, the perilous temptations of Balzac's bourgeois world, or the dream-chasing defiance of Cervantes' errant knight. Yet beneath their differences lies a shared pattern: the Self becomes legible only through its relation to the Other. In the classroom, this recognition implicitly invites students to question the moral comfort of binaries, to see how language and narrative can both wound and awaken. Literature, in this sense, becomes an ethical arena, urging readers to move beyond inherited hierarchies toward a more capacious understanding of identity – one where difference is not a threat but a possibility.

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