

# CHARACTERISATION IN THE NOVEL *KNJIGA GORKOG PRIJEKORA* (*THE BOOK OF BITTER REPROACH*) BY IVAN ARALICA

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The constellation of history and literary fiction in the consciousness of the recipient is fundamentally determined by the author's skill in characterisation and in realising literary reality. The multiple literary affirmation of the Croatian writer Ivan Aralica, achieved through his historical novels, gains particular significance with his novel *Knjiga gorkog prijekora* (*The Book of Bitter Reproach*), which is the subject of this paper. Through reflection on his own historical knowledge of the city of Zadar and of one of the most valuable fourteenth-century Croatian monuments – the Chest of Saint Simeon, commissioned by Queen Elizabeta in honour of the local saint and for the purpose of strengthening the alliance between Zadar and the Hungarian crown – Aralica constructs the identities of his characters. The destruction of a city and the construction of the historical figure of Elizabeta Kotromanić through the literary character of a young girl fundamentally reflect Aralica's ability to portray the inner states of his heroes and heroines, regardless of the level of historical and semantic hierarchy to which they belong. An interpretation of Aralica's literary technique, most evident in his methods of characterisation and portrayal of social conditions, confirms the contemporary and original nature of his literary conception.

## KEYWORDS:

Elizabeta Kotromanić, Ivan Aralica, literary character, "The Book of Bitter Reproach", Zadar



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A fourteenth-century historical event, in which Venetians resolved to conquer the city of Zadar or destroy it, provided Ivan Aralica, a prominent contemporary Croatian writer, with the narrative framework for the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*, examined in this paper. The novel was published in 1994. In the novel, Aralica returns to the distant past of the Croatian people, poetically constructing and, on the basis of historical sources, reconstructing the early youth of Elizabeta Kotromanić, daughter of the Bosnian ban Stjepan II Kotromanić. Despite the historical subject matter which it presents and on which it is based, the language of the novel is modern, although the frequency of authorial commentary is saturated with universal statements; to this end, the writer also employs gnomic constructions in which age-old folk wisdom is expressed in a lapidary manner.

Detailed descriptions of historical events, the slowed development of the plot, and the depiction of events and the state of the city of Zadar present a meticulous spectrum of fact-based historical events and scenes through which the reader makes their way at a deliberately slow pace. Although this is an extensive historical reconstruction that is not easily navigable, the focus of this paper is not on the typologisation and theoretical categorisation of the novel, given that Aralica's historical novels have already been widely discussed, but rather on the specific literary procedure through which Aralica creates and develops literary characters in the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*.

This interpretation will show that the fourteenth-century tragic events in these regions, which Aralica incorporates into the fabric of the novel following meticulous archival research, should not be read exclusively through the lens of the wartime context in which the novel was written, as has frequently been the case in literary criticism. Rather, it will demonstrate why the novel constitutes an artistically successful work, especially in terms of its characterisation. It will be shown that the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach* occupies a more significant position than that assigned to it by literary criticism, not only within Ivan Aralica's literary oeuvre but also within Croatian literature as a whole, and particularly within works that thematise the city of Zadar.

## 2. LITERARY CRITICISM OF ARALICA'S LITERARY OEUVRE

Ivan Aralica is an unquestionable classic of Croatian literature, a contemporary writer of enviable literary quality and quantity. This status has not been disputed even by the critics who, from the position of political opponents, responded to his literary

work with negative reviews and commentary.

The fact that Ivan Aralica has been the subject of writing by both leading and lesser-known figures in Croatian literary criticism is further demonstrated by the contribution of Hrvojka Mihanović-Salopek, which merits mention in any discussion of criticism devoted to his literary oeuvre. In two volumes of selected writings titled *Aralica in the Eyes of Literary Criticism*, Mihanović-Salopek compiled 125 representative literary reviews, critiques, afterwords, and essays by literary critics addressing Aralica's literary work. The authors of these texts include, among others, Ivo Frangeš, Miroslav Šicel, Cvjetko Milanja, Viktor Žmegač, Dubravko Jelčić, Krešimir Nemec, Luko Paljetak, Igor Mandić, Veselko Tenžera, Banimir Donat, Julijana Matanović, Velimir Visković, Ivan Bošković, and many others. This also shows that Ivan Aralica has not always been written about in accordance with the "rules of the profession," that is, in an argument-based, scientifically grounded, objective, and professionally rigorous manner. The literary oeuvre of one of the most prolific contemporary Croatian writers has also been the subject of numerous social polemics, political-ideological debates, and pamphlets. Nevertheless, it is beyond dispute that Ivan Aralica occupies an unquestioned position as a classic in all major histories of Croatian literature, a status that cannot be undermined even by occasionally tendentious or erroneous critiques. Thus, in his 1987 *History of Croatian Literature*, published jointly by Cankarjeva založba and the Publishing Institute of Matica hrvatska, Ivo Frangeš presents Aralica's prose in an affirmative light, justifiably placing him in a lineage that extends from Mirko Božić to Vojin Jelić, from Ivan Raos to Nikola Pulić and Jozo Laušić, that is, among writers of a region shaped by language as a distinctive and richly expressive cultural force. Frangeš highlights his historical novels, which, as he notes, "stirred both the reading public and the critics," and emphasises that Aralica is one of the greatest narrators we have ever had. In his 2003 *History of Croatian Literature*, Slobodan Prosperov Novak attributes to Aralica an obsession with politics and power, while Dubravko Jelčić, in his own *History of Croatian Literature*, emphasises Aralica's indisputable status as a classic of contemporary Croatian prose. In the third volume of his *History of the Croatian Novel from 1945 to 2000* (2003), Krešimir Nemec justifiably places Aralica alongside Šimunović, Božić, Kaleb, Desnica, and Laušić, while also situating him within the lineage of authors of historical novels or novels about history, alongside Fabrio, Šehović, Supek, and Ivanac. Nemec emphasises that, after a prolonged search for his true thematic domain, Aralica ultimately found his authentic voice in the genre of the epic, expansively structured historical novel. Since this work by Nemec constitutes a fundamental reference for the study of the development of the Croatian novelistic

tradition, it can be regarded as one of the more reliable accounts of Aralica's literary production.

However, although Ivan Aralica's literary work has generally been written about extensively and from various perspectives, and studied through different approaches and disciplines, the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach* has received little scholarly attention. Apart from a few relevant contributions, cited later in this paper, it has remained almost entirely unexplored. One of the reasons may also be found in the earliest critical responses to this Aralica novel, which unjustly abstracted it from the corpus of Aralica's works considered worthy of scholarly study and thus, in a certain sense, "labelled" it. It is a fact that this novel constitutes a "dense" literary-historical and semantic field, which, once traversed, reveals an entire spectrum of complex layers that are highly potent in the sense of literary research.

### 3. LITERARY CRITIQUE OF THE NOVEL *THE BOOK OF BITTER REPROACH*

Unlike Aralica's other historical novels, *The Book of Bitter Reproach* has attracted the attention of only a few scholars, and even when it has been addressed, this has occurred primarily in the form of brief reviews or passing remarks, usually within broader studies of Ivan Aralica's literary oeuvre or of historiographic novels. Perhaps this is because the novel was unjustly compared with Aralica's earlier works or perhaps because it appeared at a time of social upheavals that were themselves shaping Croatian history. Thus, in one of his valuable contributions to literary scholarship, Krešimir Nemec, when examining the relationship between Ivan Aralica and the model of new historiographic fiction, states:

When reading successive parts of Aralica's epic fresco, the symptoms of fatigue and the mannerisation of the narrative model become easily noticeable. The chosen model of historiographic fiction became "worn out," gradually losing its freshness, which could be observed at all levels, from modes of meaning production, the narrative instance, and the insertion and modulation of ancillary stories, to the use of archaic lexis, the forced reliance on sententiousness, and meticulous description, and finally the creation of characters and the functioning of the actantial level, among others. These shortcomings would become particularly evident in the subsequent historical novels *Tajna sarmatskog orla*

(1989) and *Knjiga gorkog prijekora* (1994), with which Aralica no longer succeeded in matching the aesthetic achievements of the tetralogy. This was probably also the reason for the thematic shift and the search for new narrative solutions in the subsequent novels *Okvir za mržnju* (1987), *Majka Marija* (1992), and *Četverored* (1997) (Nemec 2020: 16).

Unlike Nemec, who is categorical in his evaluation of this novel, Ivan Bošković and Antun Pavešković offer an ambivalent but more concrete critical insight into the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*, while Ivica Matičević undertakes an analysis of the novel from an affirmatively oriented scholarly perspective.

On the one hand, Bošković emphasises that with this novel Aralica confirmed the strength of his writing and that the work once again realises the finest qualities of Aralica's style, such as skilful story construction, the ability to engage the reader through numerous digressions, and the universality of expression. On the other hand, he points out that "the book is burdened with gnomic statements and a didactic tone (voiced through Peregrin, Matafar, and the old duke Purča, as well as through the comments of the omniscient narrator), while its dynamics are weighed down by retarding descriptions of family ties and relationships among the European nobility (...)" (Bošković 2006: 137). Here, Bošković also refers to Aralica's inconclusive characterisation of the main female character, the girl Elizabeta.

Antun Pavešković will point out that:

A narrative voice that is simultaneously heterodiegetic and homodiegetic, personalised in the third person and impersonal in the first, precisely in its attempt to be literally everything, cannot function convincingly. That is, it can function where it is absent. However, as we have seen, the problem arises when such sections need to be integrated into the overall fabric of the narrative. For this reason, the structure of this otherwise not overly intricate plot appears unusually complex (Pavešković 1994: 754–755).

Addressing the structural level of literary analysis, Pavešković concludes that the novel is "too predictable in its outcomes, overly documented in its attempt to generate meaning, and insufficiently transparent to communicate its message to a collective of the scope with which it seeks to establish a dialogue" (Pavešković 1994: 755).

Aralica's skill in emphasising the political influence on both the past and the present, as well as his approach to characterisation, one that serves ethics more than the

structural coherence of the novel, finds particular expression in the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*, prompting Ivica Matičević to note the following:

Elizabeta's naive perspective, her lack of knowledge of reality and of the pernicious possibilities of political action, served as a living probe for determining the depth of political evil. At certain moments, she also appears as the voice of the author himself, conveying his ethical inquiries, especially when she questions the responsibility of those who ought to be responsible, those who deserve a critical gesture and a contemptuous gaze, for nothing else can be done with them... only bitter reproach as the sole punishment that the humiliated and deceived can direct at them. Politics is (...) the striving for personal power (...)  
(Matičević 2013: 292).

Unlike the ambivalent views of these critics, who in *The Book of Bitter Reproach* pointed out not only certain "shortcomings" but also its aesthetic values, Nemec is unequivocal:

The same applies to the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach* (1994), which situates the story of the life path and maturation of Elizabeta Kotromanić, the daughter of the Bosnian ban Stjepan, within the historical backdrop of the Venetian siege of Zadar (1345–1346). Once again, historiographic sources and chronicles are extensively cited, but the work is devoid of parabolic potential and of a universal, timeless projection of the concrete historical experience, and thus turns into little more than a sumptuous historical picture book and a retold chronicle (Nemec 2003: 286).

What literary criticism has in common when addressing this novel is the tendency to treat the Homeland War as a key to its interpretation; however, critics do not point to concrete reasons for such reading, and it appears that this approach is based primarily on the historical moment in which the novel was written. However, the meaning of this shared critical feature can be located in the category of universality as a modern-historical element through which Aralica articulates the essence of a story about history, precisely by unveiling contemporary scenes of life, especially those that were unfolding in Croatia at the time the novel was written. Through this approach, the author creates a modern-historical novel that simultaneously raises intellectual and emotional questions, offers moralistic responses, and at the same time achieves literary and aesthetic value.

#### 4. ABOUT THE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

As a potent element of the structure of a literary work, one that exists in a specific relationship with the reader's interpretive and overall experience, the literary character has always occupied a special place in literary studies; in this regard, Vladimir Biti also emphasises the following:

Views on the interpretation and naming of the literary character have changed over time, depending on its presentation within the historical cross-section of a genre, as well as on prevailing conceptions of literature in the broader scholarly sense, according to models that have elaborated notions of the human being, the subject, the individual, identity, and related concepts (Biti 1997: 204).

In his historical novels in general, and in this novel in particular, Ivan Aralica presents real historical figures alongside an entire array of fictional characters that conform to a realist paradigm. It is precisely the fictional characters, grounded in real persons and a historical paradigm, that reflect the ethical dimension of the "cycling" of history, which repeats itself because it mirrors human nature's failure to learn from its own mistakes. The central characters, however much power they may wield, are weak individuals through whom the author conveys the tragedy of the ordinary person and of a people who, regardless of the historical period to which they belong, find themselves in an atmosphere of an ever-present "some" authority—a paradox of their well-being: authority is difficult to live with, yet impossible to live without.

The protagonists of *The Book of Bitter Reproach* are seemingly presented as objects of historical events, "weak characters," and victims of unfolding circumstances. The author portrays them within everyday human life, with almost accentuated human flaws, yet does not deny them virtues.

A distinctive feature of the characterisation of Aralica's characters in this novel is also evident in his "rapidly sketched" figures, such as Marko, the son of Anđelo the goldsmith who minted coins for the ban, and Antal Forgách, who provoked Purča and was not left "unrepaid" for his insults, but took revenge on him with the ban's permission. Doroteja is the ban's second lawful wife and Elizabeta's stepmother, serving the characterisation of Stjepan and Elizabeta, as does Pavle Radišić, the ban's illegitimate son. Then there are Margarita, Ludovik's first wife; the Queen Mother; and Veronika, a prostitute—characters who, through Elizabeta's perception of them, sustain and shape Elizabeta's view of the world and of other people. The semantic potency of these characters is manifested through sketches of their identities, which primar-

ily serve the characterisation of Elizabeta. Culler distinguishes several determinants of identity: “with regard to birth, the rises and falls of characters, and the personal qualities that characters reveal in tragic moments of life. The most crucially defined identity is the one that results from the actions of characters, a product of their relationship to the world” (Culler 2001: 129–130). It is precisely through these secondary characters that Ivan Aralica affirms this final type of identity identified by Culler as a connotation of ethical relevance.

Particular semantic significance is conferred upon the characters of Elizabeta and Stjepan by the figures of Purča and Peregrin, through whom the author establishes a relationship of thesis and antithesis, similar to a duality that is reflected in the process of characterising Elizabeta and Stjepan.

Purča has been Stjepan’s trusted man since early youth—coarse, simple, and strong:

- Stipan – forgetting in his rage that he should address his childhood companion Stjepan Kotromanić by the title of ban – what are we going to do with this pumpkin seed?
- Do whatever you know how to do, just don’t cut off his head, don’t hang him and don’t drown him in the Danube. Purča, this battlefield is called a congress, after all (Aralica 1994: 34).<sup>1</sup>

Unlike Purča, Peregrin’s role in the lives of Stjepan and Elizabeta serves an entirely different purpose and aim:

And thus he gained in Peregrin his second adviser, different from Purča Dabišić. While Purča instructed him in the wisdom of the people from which they came and of the land in which they lived – wisdom such as that of the bull’s hide and that of the sparrow that fell from the nest. Peregrin taught him about the wisdom and customs of the wider world, just as he instructed him on what votive gift he should bring to Zadar (Aralica 1994: 65).

Each of these characters is marked by the linguistic “non-homogeneity” characteristic of Aralica, since the novel is set in the fourteenth century, yet the language of these characters is almost equally classical and modern:

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Ivan Aralica’s novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach* included in this study were translated from Croatian into English specifically for this paper by the translation agency SINONIM d.o.o., Podravlje (Osijek), Croatia.

What was happening there, not in the abysses of souls, but in the two royal tents, Elizabeta eagerly awaited the chance to see when her father told her to dress nicely and comb her hair; they would go to the royal tents so that she might meet the Queen Mother, her aunt, who had expressed a wish to see her sister's daughter. She would also meet her aunt's son, King Ludovik, his wife and some other nobles. Therefore, she was to be properly dressed and, her father implored her, to behave properly! And she would behave properly if she spoke as little as possible, if she did not open her mouth and display her foul tongue (Aralica 1994: 108).

Although the literary characters in this novel, as in most of Aralica's historical novels, function as a kind of allegory through which contemporary power, politics, and ideology are depicted, and thus carry a didactic connotation with elements of moralism, these characters, especially Elizabeta and Stjepan, also produce specific, individually emphasised flashes that simultaneously portray both weakness and strength. Through their characterisation, a distinctive feature of Aralica's literary method becomes apparent, one that lends a particular mark both to this novel and to his poetics.

## 5. ON THE SMALL, WISE, AND LOVELY WITCH

Aralica's Elizabeta Kotromanić is described as a "small, wise and lovely witch" (Aralica 1994: 70), a character of particular significance for the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*. The character of Elizabeta, the daughter of Stjepan II Kotromanić, is portrayed as an exceptionally spirited and dominant personality who, despite her young age, defies her own position, the historical moment, her father who embodies authority and loves her deeply, as well as the stereotype of "womanhood" of the time and patriarchy in general:

He loved her wholly as he had never loved anyone before. (...) Come – he would say to his daughter as if speaking to someone in misty distances – your father and your Stipan will deny you nothing. Come and do not sulk with me! – Elizabeta would laugh, spread her little arms and embrace him around the neck. Those arms of hers around his neck! God, Creator of heaven and earth, is there anything more beautiful in the world? (Aralica 1994: 48–49)

Although numerous women passed through Stjepan's life, two lawful wives, ten lovers, and others who offered themselves to him and "crossed his path," all of whom he loved in turn and whose number is beyond counting, not a single one ever cast a shadow over the importance and position Elizabeta held in Stjepan's heart and life:

– Whoever she may be, your Stipan will never leave you alone. You are his, and you are the only one. – He embraces her and spins her around in his arms, while the little girl cries out with joy. And so it went on, until, dizzy from the spinning, they fell together, still embraced, onto the bed (Aralica 1994: 57).

Throughout the novel, the author logically and psychologically convincingly grounds Elizabeta's self-awareness in her father's immense and unconditional love, as well as in a particular quality inherited from her mother.

The degree of defiance that the author attributes to the twelve-year-old girl Elizabeta is so pronounced that, on the one hand, she becomes an unconvincing character, as she "stands out" from the historical period, customs, and culture of life. Ivan Bošković also points this out, stating:

Despite all her qualities, it is difficult to escape the impression of Elizabeta's "overdimensioned" role; despite her royal origin, she assumes roles inappropriate to her age and experience, just as her desire to "grasp" the secret language of politics and her father's role within it appears unconvincing (Bošković 2006: 137).

On the other hand, in an allegorical sense, and when viewed through the lens of the historical affirmation of this queen remembered in popular memory and history, whose crown is still preserved today as one of the greatest and most valuable Zadar artworks in the Museum of Gold and Silver (SICU) in Zadar, this otherwise, in certain parts of the novel, "impossible" and unconvincing power of striving, action, and adaptation of reality to her own will acquires its connotation:

Several years after her mother's death, when her daughter was introduced at the new congress in Višegrad, it was seen that the mother had bestowed upon her daughter, along with her name, her own likeness. Heavy hair the color of wheat straw, the gait of a fawn, blueness in her eyes and the ability to be noticed yet never fully seen. Those who knew her well up to the age of twelve, when this story of bitter reproach begins, as her father and her stepmother knew her, also

knew that from her mother she had inherited possessiveness mixed with her mother's concealed frivolity (Aralica 1994: 46).

The author carefully gradates the structure of this female character's personality, from a small, spoiled and much beloved girl, conveying to the reader her historical power:

- You know everything, my little wise one! Still, this time you will not go with me. Purča says that women and odd numbers bring misfortune on a journey.
- Tell your Purča that I will come after you (Aralica 1994: 78).

to a strong female ruler whose will asserts itself in reality:

The delegation set out at dawn. When day broke, Doroteja found Elizabeta's bed empty. She raised alarm and sent guards to her uncle in Milodraž, instructing him to find her. Vladislav sent a pursuit along the road taken by the delegation. The next day the pursuers found Elizabeta near Vranduk, starving, filthy and frozen. She could not be persuaded to return. They had to bind her and transport her between them, for she scratched and bit everyone around her. To relieve Doroteja of worry, her uncle took her to Dreževica, to Duke Grgur Gojslavić, and ordered that guards watch her day and night. She did not escape, but in the two rooms where she was held she smashed everything that could be smashed and broke everything that was breakable. When there was nothing left around her to destroy, she began systematically, one scratch per day, to tear at her arms, legs and body. Only her face she spared. When the ban returned, he found her covered in wounds that were beginning to heal (Aralica 1994: 78).

The author constructs this unusually powerful female character by grounding her origins in what is historically known. Namely, various historical sources state that Elizabeta Kotromanić, the real historical figure, was described by her contemporaries as an effective and ruthless politician who did everything within her power to preserve her authority, that is, to secure the rule of her daughters: "Not only was she possessive, not only was she brazen and frivolous, but Elizabeta had also learned how to blackmail" (Aralica 1994: 80). The scene in which Elizabeta blackmails both Purča and her father, Ban Stjepan Kotromanić, occurs at the moment when Purča asks the ban to adopt Crnuga, who would later accompany and protect Elizabeta. Elizabeta,

aware of her influence over her father, initially urges him not to comply with Purča's request, only to then blackmail Purča: if Stjepan does grant his wish, Purča must persuade the others to allow her to accompany them to Bihać. Until the emergence of her emotional attachment to Zadar, and thus the beginning of her affirmative emotional development, Elizabeta's affirmation in the novel is consistently achieved precisely through her opposition to ethics and to the historical moment in which the events of the novel take place—she simply believes that “her destiny is the same as her will” (Aralica 1994: 99).

All the characters in the novel are confronted with political power that exceeds their personal capacities, including Stjepan himself, who is caught between Ludovik and Venetians—except for Elizabeta, who within the sphere of her lived world is the most powerful character, possessing an exceptional and, in novelistic terms, convincing ability to shape reality according to her own will. This remains the case until the very last pages of the novel, when she is finally subdued and reproached—bitterly. And this occurs because of the single affirmative emotion that the author grants her in the novel: her love for Zadar. For what she experienced as Zadar and with which she identified. Zadar was betrayed so that Stjepan's daughter Elizabeta might be secure and this was something she neither could nor should have known. Elizabeta loved Zadar. It is precisely through the emergence and development of this love for Zadar over the course of the narrative that the author builds her psychological credibility and renders her a literarily successful and convincing character:

What attracted Elizabeta in all this was not Križan's clumsy handling of weapons; she was drawn to the life of the *klapa*, a community she had not known. Watching them from the side as they mocked one another and competed among themselves, competition that did not produce inner division but inner strength, she, God knows how far removed from them and their lives, began to feel within herself as part of their community. Even if this was only the role of an observer, which they might or might not notice, since she was not the only one watching them. And as the entire decena was absorbed in Križan, dragging his son Dragotin behind him like his destiny, so she too, with her eyes and her feelings, became entangled in everything that this young man did, half male and half female (Aralica 1994: 180).

As such, a character animated and strengthened by emotion becomes the protector of the only “thing” in the novel that the reader learns Elizabeta truly loves—the city of Zadar. Everything else in the novel Elizabeta “merely” covets. It is precisely through

the paradox that this “only important” thing to which Elizabeta is devoted and of which she is the avowed protector cannot be protected, but is instead betrayed and sold for her own benefit, that this female character acquires a tragic dimension, one that resonates both with her historical way of life and with her death.

The author’s emotional attachment to the city of Zadar, its autochthonous culture, and the nation is deeply expressed through the construction of the character of Elizabeta, who represents the author’s imaginative vision of the care that ought to be shown towards the endangered ordinary person and the oppressed people. However, the author chooses a literary strategy that reflects the actual state of affairs as borne out by history, which in turn justifies both the presence and the abundance of universal statements in the novel, filled with stoicism and a critical stance towards folk wisdom concerning a distorted form of power that produces a society in defiance of the moral code:

- All of this is a great lesson, my Elizabeta! Two years ago you were a child, and now, after all this, you are a grown woman. When you collect yourself a little, with the knowledge you have received from your father, you will not perish in the distant world. You will be grateful to him more than you curse him today. Be reasonable, Elizabeta! Is he truly to blame for Zadar’s cruel fate? Would Zadar not have suffered the same even if the ban had not profited from its misfortune? You will live and see that holy deeds and holy people are rare. That holiness is more a matter of chance than the product of deliberate intention (Aralica 1994: 408).

## 6. ON THE POWERLESS MAN OF POWER

Ban Stjepan II Kotromanić, like Elizabeta Kotromanić, is a real historical figure, significant in history because Bosnia experienced its greatest territorial expansion during his reign.

This strong male character, who is unusually weak when it comes to his only daughter, is constructed by Aralica as a kind of anti-hero, or more precisely, as a paradoxical hero. As both ruler and father, he will sell a city for the happiness of his daughter, disregarding his given word and the fate of a people. He will sell Zadar for the money with which he will secure Elizabeta’s material safety and a good marriage. He is a great father, but a small man and a harmful ruler.

Stjepan Kotromanić, a powerless wielder of power within the broader network of

rulership in which he is entangled, is marked and connoted by the author at the very beginning of the novel in a way that anticipates his final characterisation at the novel's end, identifying him through the description "the offspring of the dark abysses of your soul" (Aralica 1994: 17). The father sells the very thing through which Elizabeta's existence is affirmed; he betrays Zadar for financial gain in order to secure her livelihood:

I wanted you to read them; that is why I left them there. Had you read them, you would have known for whose sake I had ended up in the litanies as a disciple of Belial. And you would have known that you have no right to call me that. Everyone else may call me so; you must not! You wanted me to do what I did. I had read that desire in your eyes. Do not try to defend yourself! Did you wish to find yourself where your mother came from? Did you wish to live near your cousin the king? I had seen all of this in your eyes and I had to do as you pleased. And was it I who then betrayed the people of Zadar? You betrayed them, Elizabeta! You! ... But time lies before you, my *Kujavka*! You will have the chance to erase me from the litanies as a disciple of Satan and to put me in there as a great benefactor (Aralica 1994: 408).

At the beginning of the novel, the seventeen-year-old Louis (*Ludovik*) I of Anjou, heir to the Croatian-Hungarian king Charles Robert, summons his vassal Stjepan II Kotromanić by letter to gather an army and join the royal forces in a campaign against Venetians. This letter, which serves the author as a motivating device that prompts Stjepan to reflection, decision, and action, is also instrumental to his characterisation, since from the very outset of the novel it clearly foregrounds political intrigues, betrayals, and espionage, phenomena neither unknown nor foreign to Stjepan, and very much present even in the fourteenth century given the high-level "circulation" of information:

Even before Ludovik had sent letters to his vassals, one of them to the one who held court in Sutjeska, probably while the Royal Council was still preparing the decision to launch the punitive campaign, news reached Venice of the danger posed by the young king who, in three years of rule, had shown that he made decisions swiftly, pursued their execution with full force, but also withdrew quickly if resistance to his will proved fierce. He withdrew only briefly. Once he had gathered strength again, he would fall upon his victims like a hawk upon a sparrow (Aralica 1994: 7).

Stjepan's generally affirmative attitude towards women in the novel renders him a convincing figure in the role of a father who unconditionally loves his daughter Elizabeta. Through Stjepan's positive disposition towards women, manifested in the novel in his consistently "courteous conduct" towards them and in affirmative relationships accompanied by the "generous gifts" he bestows, the author points to the ruler's gentle and fair character:

(...) In his forty-seven years, Stjepan Kotromanić had two lawful wives, one deceased and one still living, both of royal lineage, and ten noblewomen who, as he travelled through the land, whether to satisfy his passion or the hidden intentions of his family, would come out to meet him and embellish the pleasures of his journeys. Among these ten, the most prominent place was held by Luca Radišić. In addition to these twelve, he had still other women, whose number and names he could neither recall, who, uninvited and unknown, would run out before him on the road or linger along the paths around the court. In his willingness to embrace all who crossed his path, he did not distinguish himself from his subjects. Yet, truth be told, he never took any woman by force. He had neither the will nor the need to do so. He would gift each one and kiss her at parting, wishing each of them good fortune. It may be considered certain that the ban's courteous conduct and generous gifts, much talked about throughout small Bosnia, attracted and emboldened many women to come out to meet him and to slip into his bed at roadside inns (Aralica 1994: 23).

It is precisely through the necessary and abrupt shift in Stjepan's attitude towards that for which he is willing to give everything, his honour, his word, and his integrity, for the sake of his unconditionally beloved daughter Elizabeta that the author's skill in characterisation, as embodied in Stjepan, becomes evident. The paradoxical power(lessness) of his parental love, which he actively demonstrates through the act of betraying an entire city, is so great that he does not appeal to love or parental authority, but rather to the function of the "ban" and the power vested in that office. Thus, for the first time in the novel, on its final pages, Stjepan as a father issues an order to his spoiled, beloved, and adored daughter and causes her pain, for the sake of her personal good:

What do you need to know? Everything at Zadar went well, nothing unexpected, everything as had been foreseen. And you, my daughter, do not think of Zadar! Think instead of Višegrad, to which you will soon depart. You will go to

the place where I met your mother. And remember this: from now on, no more pestering about Zadar! Your father is the ban, you may do what no other woman can, but a ban's daughter, if her father is to remain ban, must not say to the ban: 'I will not.' (Aralica 1994: 375)

Unlike the character of Elizabeta Kotromanić, who as the protagonist embodies personal growth through generational destiny and experiences a personal "bitter reproach" of universal significance through an affirmative emotion, Stjepan II Kotromanić, as a literary character, does not assume responsibility for the pragmatism of his actions. By placing personal, individual interest—the well-being of his own child—above all statesmanlike and broader social interests, he becomes at once a "great" father and a "small" man:

- You lied to me, Stipan! And you are still lying to me – said Elizabeta, who in these two years had grown from a girl into a woman. – How could you do this, and how can you keep doing it, disciple of Belial?
- Lied? – the ban repeated and paused to reflect. – One could put it that way. Forgive me, I meant to say that Matafar might reproach me for such a thing. When I hear 'that lying ban' from his mouth, it sounds true to me, but when I hear the same from you, my *Kujavka*, it wounds me deeply and strikes me as a coarse untruth. As a lie about a lie! For I betrayed Matafar, and he has the right to call me both liar and traitor, but you do not. Not only have I not betrayed you, not only have I not lied to you, but I conceived and carried out this entire lie, this entire betrayal, in order to remain faithful to you, to fulfill the deathbed vow I gave to your mother, that I would return you to the place where I found her (Aralica 1994: 406–407).

Through the character of Stjepan and his actions, which are ambivalent in every sense, as he simultaneously betrays his daughter and remains faithful to her, the author imposes upon the recipient an almost philosophical framework of reflection, a dilemma concerning a "given value" that is (not) realised at the very moment when the presented historical facts are called into question, whether this concerns the fourteenth century in which the narrative is set or the period of the Homeland War during which this novelistic narrative was written:

(...) political and historical thematic preoccupation offers the reader an opportunity to interpret and compare the past with contemporary social events. Ac-

cordingly, novelistic narration in postmodernism does not represent a problem but rather a *given value* that is realised at the moment when the presented historical facts are called into question. This is, namely, fundamentally different from modernism, which resists an understanding of the past, viewing it as a *nightmare* (...) (Hutcheon 2002: 50).

Through such a complex literary procedure, in which the author intertwines novelistic narration, philosophical reflection on life, national consciousness, and history, most clearly manifested in the characterisation of Stjepan and in the portrayal of the state of society, Aralica's original and contemporary literary conception is affirmed.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach* asserts itself through the richness of its poetic construction of history and historical reconstruction of real events, despite the density of its narrative texture, which repels as much as it attracts. Through historical facts combined with novelistic interpretation, Ivan Aralica reflects on and aesthetically successfully shapes the moral and ethical dilemmas of individuals and nations. The relativity of power and power wielders, of history, betrayal, surrender, and struggle is thereby connoted, and within the entire constellation of events and characters, the figure of the young girl Elizabeta Kotromanić, the daughter of the Bosnian ban Stjepan II Kotromanić, serves the author as a means of expressing his own relationship to the city of Zadar and to his people. Through the character of Ban Stjepan, Ivan Aralica abolishes the heroic role of the protagonist and places at the centre the tragic fate of a people brought about by the selfishness of an individual who is unwilling to sacrifice himself for the good of the oppressed community and instead does the very opposite—selling the people for his own benefit. The author places the immoral actions of individuals under an imperative precisely in order to strengthen a sense of awareness that collective solidarity forms national identity; however, he does so through the form of paradox and in a specific manner, which is why his literary procedure is validated as contemporary. Faithful to his own tendency to mitigate tragedy, Ivan Aralica concludes the novel with an ideological-ethical message and a universal statement of relativity, according to which, as he puts it, “noble deeds and glorious victories” are always somehow ours, while “villainies and defeats” are invariably someone else's.

Aralica bases and intertwines his literary fiction with the (con)text of history, drawing on the work “The Siege of Zadar”, which he believed—an opinion that was gen-

erally accepted at the time he was writing this novel, though no longer so—to have been authored by Nikola Matafar (Kurelac and Karbić 2007: 17–18). For this reason, Matafar also appears as one of the novel’s characters and is a figure who deserves separate and further literary-scholarly and historical investigation. However, when historical facts and critical judgments, some of which are ends in themselves, are abstracted from consideration, the novel *The Book of Bitter Reproach*, by virtue of its multilayered literary and scholarly potential, calls for further readings, reflection and study and, as such, deserves a significant place in literature rather than the rigid mold into which it has been confined.

The ability to construct the complex characters of Elizabeta and Stjepan through the prism of paradox, a dense veil of history, and a network of intrigues affirms Ivan Aralica as a writer who fundamentally realises Hans Robert Jauss’s concept of great aesthetic distance, as he significantly transcends the horizon of expectations. The bitter reproach foreshadowed in the opening pages of the novel achieves its semantic completeness on the final pages through a reproach addressed to the human spirit, embodied precisely in the act and choice of Elizabeta’s father, Stjepan, despite his office of a statesman and the responsibility that office entails. Through the paradox of Stjepan’s betrayal of Elizabeta—for Elizabeta’s sake—the author’s contemporaneity and timeless relevance are affirmed.

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## KARAKTERIZACIJA LIKOVA U ROMANU *KNJIGA GORKOG PRIJEKORA* IVANA ARALICE

MIRELA ŠUŠIĆ

### SAŽETAK

Konstelacija povijesti i književne fikcije u svijesti recipijenta u bitnome je određena autorovom umješnošću karakterizacije likova i realizacije književne stvarnosti. Višestruka književna afirmacija hrvatskog književnika Ivana Aralice realizirana njegovim povijesnim romanima, posebnu važnost zadobiva njegovim romanom *Knjiga gorkog prijekora* kojom se bavi ovaj rad. Aralica kroz refleksiju vlastitoga povijesnog znanja o gradu Zadru i o jednom od najvrjednijih hrvatskih spomenika 14. stoljeća, škrinji svetog Šimuna koju je kraljica Elizabeta naručila u čast lokalnom svecu i u svrhu osnaživanja saveza Zadra i ugarske krune, gradi identitete svojih likova. Destrukcija grada i konstrukcija povijesne ličnosti kraljice Elizabete Kotromanić kroz književni lik mlade djevojke u bitnome odražavaju Araličinu sposobnost prikazivanja stanja njegovih junaka i junakinja bez obzira na to kojem stupnju povijesne i značenjske hijerarhijske ljestvice pripadali. Interpretacijom Araličina književnog postupka, koji se ponajviše očituje načinima karakterizacije likova i prikazom stanja društva, ovjerava se Araličina suvremena, originalna književna koncepcija.

### KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

*književni lik, roman, Knjiga gorkog prijekora, Ivan Aralica, Zadar, Elizabeta Kotromanić*