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# Questions of Language and Culture in Erzsébet Juhász's *Border Novel*

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**Abstract.** The paper gives an account of the linguistic and cultural questions dealt with by Erzsébet Juhász in her novel *Határregény* [*Border Novel*]. It attempts to interpret the novel and to present the relations of its heroes to their environment. The narration covers the areas in which cultural and ethnic diversity, as well as linguistic colourfulness are present due to the coexistence of different nations. The novel's central theme is spatial separation and separation evoked by political borders; the concept of border is introduced as early as in the novel's title. The story of the Patarcsics is an inter-generational family story. Its members are characterized as people struggling with identity crisis and the uncertainty of national belonging. Wartime events, the behaviour and the way of thinking of families torn apart by border changes—with the mentality becoming the legacy of the next generation—are perfect reflections, illustrations of changes forced upon human lives pushed to the periphery. Not only identity and language loss, language replacement but introversion, seclusion and distantiation can also be observed at some characters. The work is exposing ruptures created by wars, and how these ruptures transform identity and cultural heritage, only to show us later how a new culture and mentality are created.

**Keywords:** border, language, culture, identity

## 1. Introduction

The Treaty of Trianon in 1920 led to the disintegration of Hungary. The Hungarian writers who suddenly found themselves outside the territory of the country had to reconsider their belonging to Hungarian literature and to set new goals for themselves.

Erzsébet Juhász was born on 19 April 1947 in Topolya. She already belonged to the generation which was born within the borders of the new state formation. She died on 25 September 1998 in Novi Sad; her novel entitled *Határregény* [*Border Novel*], first published in 2001, is a posthumous release. Erika Bence in her study

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entitled *Concepts Constructing Genre (Types) in the Hungarian Literature of Vojvodina* formulated the idea that this particular novel by Juhász is "noted as one of her most studied works and one that calls to life to several significant discourses" (Bence 2011, 93).[1] It has already been pointed out in the reception of the novel that the *Border Novel* depicts cultural diversity and a concomitant linguistic mix and variability. It primarily deals with matters of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identity. The narrative incorporates areas where cultural and ethnic variegation and the variety of language use appear due to the coexistence of different nations.

Éva Hózsa characterizes it as a "novel of border and death consciousness," highlighting the novel's opening towards intertextuality, its possible interpretation as a Trianon novel, its attachment to the literature of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and explains the novel's "connections to the domestic novel's architextual system of relations and 'lineage-climbing' attitude, moreover, its relations to the travel novels of the Enlightenment, and to the traveler's point of view at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." (Hózsa 2001, 59)

The concept of border already presents itself in the title of the novel. This is the central idea of the novel, representing spatial separation, separation by means of political borders. In the story spanning over generations identity crisis and uncertainty about nationality are common characteristics of the members of the Patarcsics family. As a consequence of wars and border readjustments, the behavior and mentality of family members separated from one another well reflect the imposed changes on human lives getting to the periphery. This is also passed onto the lives of the following generations. The loss of identity and language, the language exchange, the separation and seclusion can all be observed in the lives of the heroes.

## 2. The novel's borders

> During the decades following the First World War, the Vojvodinean Hungarians became a minority in the worst sense of the word, not only in numerical proportion, but as citizens inferior in rank, right and value, therefore inferior also as human beings and as artists; consequently, their intellectual orientation, art, and literature were profoundly pervaded by the behaviour originating from this state: insecurity, loss of direction, loss of faith, introversion, and as a concomitant symptom: intellectual and linguistic impoverishment, a worrying fall of standards and value level. (Szeli 1974, 9)

Together with the change of borders "the flow of intellectual goods from the literary workshops of Budapest ceased or declined, the process emigration of talents also came to a standstill..." (Bori 1998, 69)

1 Quotations from Hungarian literature and specialist literature were translated by the author.

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While investigating the genres of Hungarian literature from Vojvodina, Erika Bence states that in the work of Erzsébet Juhász "border readjustments and establishments following the disintegration of the Monarchy activate the patterns of domestic and travel novels, creating a type of fiction that relies on both the traditional and more recent figurations of the historical novel." (Bence 2011, 93) The chapters of the novel tell the tales of the ancestors; it can be said that "it moves on the border of the domestic novel" (Hózsa 2001, 59), however, considering its spatial structure it has to be treated as a unique type. The novel follows the stories of the members of a family who got separated in the course of time, and by presenting these private life stories "its view of history embraces the whole twentieth century." (Bence 2007, 128) It can be interpreted as a border novel, because it contains the life experience of border novels, namely homelessness and the experience of foreignness, and because "its events unfold along the borders that got formed during the wars of the century and along the roads crossing them." (*ibid.*)

When the members of the family meet again, they tell each other their experiences and stories. They tell their stories in retrospect, therefore the novel can also be related to the genre of the domestic novel. It can be analyzed as a travel novel as well, since the characters traverse a specific area in the course of the novel, namely the countries of the historical Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, this is why the "Monarchy experience" acquires a special significance (Toldi 2012, 20).

## 2.1. Political borders

> The discourse so far on channel and city novels [...] leads us to a third very important regional genre constituting element, namely to the concept of border and its circle of signification. If it were only about the frontier in a political sense, obviously we could only be talking about novels thematizing the Trianon trauma. But this is not the case, not only because the experience of being stuck between frontiers had already been known in the regional narrative tradition before Trianon, but also because the frontiers created their spiritual figurations also beyond the minority existence, such as cultural and linguistic identity frontiers. (Bence 2011, 92)

Border readjustment separates family members, and people suddenly find themselves in an environment where the loss of their identities is at stake. "The political frontier also signifies cultural separation and linguistic foreignness and vice versa." (Bence 2008, 116) People feel alienated in their own environment, no matter whether they had drifted from their homes as a consequence of war, sometimes due to marriage or any other circumstances. The border readjustment does not necessarily mean resettlement, but getting into a different environment,

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a different social situation or being attached to another country is surely an experience of alienation.

All the characters in the novel are confined within and isolated by borders. The war separates families, and draws impenetrable borders between family members, forcing them into emigration. The characters are compelled to continue their lives separated from one another.

> Frontiers are, on the one hand, historical formations, results of wars, conclusions of peace and political treaties; they are summoned into existence by true or untrue political-cultural-national interests—but at the same time they have linguistic, cultural and social consequences, they trigger identity traumas, discords and losses. Their dimensions overlap with the borders of social justice and individual freedom. (Bence 2008, 117)

The unfolding stories form part of Emi's family history, and these family legends "are destroyed by the frontier readjustments following the two world wars." (*ibid.*)

## 2. 2. Spatial separation

"The 'border novel' is not an unknown genre in Hungarian literature" (Hózsa 2001, 59); still, it can be said that "so far there has been only one literary work where the main structuring, text organizing principle relies on the figurations of spatial separation" (Bence 2008, 116), and this is Erzsébet Juhász's *Border Novel* [*Határregény*].

The first chapter of the novel is about the wars of the 1990s, told from Emi's perspective. Her husband, Boro had left the country, and since Emi was unable to follow him, they got separated. As a consequence of this war, Emi lost her university friends. This circle of friends had provided its members a sense of stability. Although it had seemed as it would last forever, and be indestructible, it was destroyed by the war. Running away from the war had its consequences, physical distantiation and separation. "Some people had moved even before the war started or immediately after that, most of them to Hungary, but there were some who settled in Germany, in the Netherlands, in Canada, or in the USA." (Juhász 2001, 13)

It had already happened in Emi's family several times that the war had torn family members apart. Her grandfather, Miklós Patarcsis, had been separated from his younger brother, János, by a border for years. "After the Great War [...] he went missing." (*idem*, 30.) So "János had to wait until 1923 for a kind-hearted person [...] to finally deliver, after twenty-six, the twenty-seventh letter, which signified life for both of the Patarcsics brothers, in the deepest and truest sense of

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the word." (*idem*, 32–34 ). Far away from his home János "couldn't even imagine or believe that after all these Subotica could still exist." Together with Kálmán, his father-in-law, he saw the absurdity of the situation and was horrified by the way it was organized that "the Suboticians decide with popular vote that they would like to belong to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes." (*idem*, 41) The gradual elimination of Bratislava's Hungarian character began in the period between 1919 and 1938. "The most troublesome times began in October 1938 [...]" (*idem*, 48) According to historical data, in this period education in Hungarian and German was almost completely abolished in Bratislava; Hungarian related statues were removed or destroyed.

János Patarcsics had already been living in Bratislava for twenty years at that time, still, for him "the new rearrangement of the borders was not a second loss of home, [...] but somehow it was as if the ground had been pulled out from under his feet." (*idem*, 50–51)

Emi's grandmother was born in Szeged, and "came from Ila's hometown to Subotica in November 1911." (*idem*, 57) For more than fifty years she had not gone back to Szeged. It was only in 1968 that she made a brief visit again thanks to her son Endre. She was sceptical about it, "neither did her face show any emotions, nor did her eyes well up with tears" (*ibid.*); the sight of the town she had been talking about for years did not impress her. After the visit, "she never mentioned Szeged again." (*idem*, 58)

Ila "had never missed the city where she had been born and had grown up, she was always buried in work." (*idem*, 57) When she saw the places from her old stories, they were not the same as the ones she once left, "she didn't recognize her birthplace, or she simply didn't want to recognize it." (*ibid.*) Perhaps the fact that she was able to adapt made integration easier for her, and maybe this is why she felt different about border readjustments.

Her husband, Miklós, desperately longed for the Hungarians. This strengthened in him after the war, and perhaps this was the main cause of his insecurity. "Not long after the war the borders were rearranged, and Subotica was placed within the borders of the newly founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes." (*idem*, 61–62) After this, Miklós was forced to write his name in conformity with Serbian orthography. In 1944 the Russian troops marched into Subotica. Then Miklós "had the horrible suspicion that from then on the Russians [...] would force him to declare himself a Russian." This terrible thought may have caused his death.

Lexi turned out to have chosen separation himself. After moving to Austria he broke off every direct contact with his family, and this estrangement was even made easier by the frontiers.

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## 3. Cultural, ethnic, linguistic and national variegation

Due to the readjustment of the frontiers that followed the war, some areas came under the authority of foreign states. "The consequences of the frontier readjustments after the Treaty of Trianon are thematized by several novels written at the end of the twentieth and in the first decade of the twenty-first century." (Bence 2011, 93) As a consequence of the Treaty of Trianon, not only Hungary fell into pieces, but Hungarian literature as well. "The Treaty of Trianon led to a limiting transformation, the structural decay imposing a new state, a new discourse upon the citizens of the disintegrating Monarchy. Becoming a 'minority' generates a new situation." (Hózsa 2001) Territorial losses also entail cultural damage, as significant Hungarian intellectual centres like Bratislava, Košice, Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Subotica and Novi Sad came under foreign authority. People living in these cities were compelled to integrate into the cultures of the new state formations. Erzsébet Juhász "emphasizedly thematizes the issue of identity" (Toldi 2009, 85). The search for identity acquires a central role and always originates from some kind of feeling of lack.

### 3.1. The cultural alienation of the Patarcsics family

In her study entitled *Issues of Cultural Identity in Erzsébet Juhász*'s *Border Novel* Csilla Utasi discusses how the novel and its characters relate to culture. She states that the novel "is part of the group of Central European, Balkanian literary works" (Utasi 2011, 55). She justifies her statement with the fact that the "characters' identities are determined by their relation to culture" (*ibid.*), and the universe of the novel portrays cultural diversity based on cultural differences, thus pointing out the conflicts among societies living in the Balkan region. The relationships between the characters are also determined by their attitude to culture.

The disintegration of the Austro-Hugarian Monarchy, the Treaty of Trianon imposed frontier readjustments, which led to the identity crisis, exclusion and alienation of the characters in the novel.

Miklós and János Patarcsics were separated because of the frontier readjustment following the Treaty of Trianon. János, who was born in Subotica, settled down in Bratislava. János "was completely trodden down by the consequences of 13 November 1918 [...]" (Juhász 2001, 31), as the violent demarcations detached large territories from Hungary and the former Hungarian crowning city, Pozsony, became the capital of Slovakia under the name Bratislava.

Angeline's first love was born in Novi Sad, this is why the city was so dear to her, but she never met him during her long stay. She was unable to integrate into the community of Novi Sad. The experience of cultural differences haunted her till death. All Angeline could do was to relive again and again the tram rides and the memories of her unfulfilled love.

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János Patarcsics came to Bratislava after the war; he settled down and started a family there. During the war he was persuaded not to go home, because Subotica probably no longer existed. This was the reason why he stayed in Bratislava until his death. However, in his letters which he wrote to his brother, he always said that his stay in Bratislava was only temporary; his "naturalization" eluded him till the end of his life. At the end of these letters he "never failed to write that he felt homesick." (*idem*, 34.) In his dreams Subotica and Bratislava merged together and he saw himself "a homeless stranger, who drifted from Subotica to Bratislava." (*idem*, 36)

### 3.2. Identification crisis in the Patarcsics family

It is the space of memories that gives the opportunity for the characters of the novel to express their identities in their stories. "Memory brings fateful events to the surface, and the act of someone listening to these remembrances articulates the demand of 'genuine stories.'" (Toldi 2009, 87) Alienation often forces the characters to escape into their past. "Angeline had already transposed the era of her existence into the period preceding the First World War." (Juhász 2001, 7) "The perspective of the present gets intensified in parallel to referencializable historical facts and to the destruction of families and countries." (Toldi 2009, 91)

The novel clarifies that it is not only the identities of those who were forced into emigration that were endangered, but also the identities of those who remained in their homeland. "At the same time the escapee is the member of the majority, s/he has a sense of the future, while the ones living in the minority do not, therefore they are unable to change." (*idem*, 90)

The locations are also important for the characters in terms of identity. "The novel's chapters start from clearly identified regional locations, and have an important function in the plot development and in the portrayal of alienation." (*idem*, 86) The scene of the novel is intercultural; the coexistence of cultures and their interaction are well represented in the novel.

The decline caused by the war and the loss of her husband made Emi think about methods of commiting suicide. The realization that "she in fact never had a homeland in true sense of the word" (Juhász 2001, 14) came to her when personal and historical events converged. When she found her old schoolbook, she had to realize that "everything was strange and uninteresting for her" and she found the idea of homeland disgusting even as a child. As Éva Toldi remarks, the "belonging to different cultures and identities cannot be tolerated, because it bears the risk of the loss of identity." (2009, 87–88)

The omniscient narrator is capable of entering and mediating the characters' thoughts and feelings. Dreams metaphorically mediate the psychological state of the characters. "The feeling of alienation sets topographically labeled and

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interculturally determined dimensions into motion; they become important novel organizing elements without eliminating the existential aspects of fate and the universality of being an outcast." (Toldi 2009, 91)

### 3.3. Linguistic variegation

Complete chaos, confusion around identity and uncertainty about nationality characterize the Patarcsis family; the language use also reflects this diversity. This is already rendered by the first words of the novel, in the different spelling variations of the same name: "Angeline Nenadovits (Nenádovics, Nenadović)" (Juhász 2001, 5). This phenomenon of spelling variations of names can be observed later as well. The name of Cecília Bájics (Bajić) is always written with two different kinds of spelling; the reader also witnesses the imposed name change of Miklós Patarcsics to Nikola Patarčić due to the frontier readjustments. A different type of variation can be observed as well: Lina Rösch's cousin is called Ödön Ross (Toldi 2009, 86). This is a typical example of how people are trying to adapt to the official language.

Miklós and his brother, János, declared themselves Hungarians. In fact, Miklós's death was caused by the lack of his linguistic identity, when the Russians invaded Subotica. Their father's conviction was that the family came from Slovenia, while for their mother, Cecilia Bájics, "it was completely irrelevant if she was Bunjevac, Croat or perhaps some kind of Serb, the only important thing was that she should not be believed to be Hungarian, because that was the worst." (Juhász 2001, 60) She never spoke one word in Hungarian.

The mix of identities is reiterated in the value system of the next generation. Emi's relatives in Bratislava and their friends proudly declare themselves Slovaks, Germans and Hungarians or Bunjevaces, Germans and Slovaks at the same time.

Ila's mother, Amália Eichinger "felt a curious longing for the German language and had some treasured books in German" (*idem*, 66); in the end, it was her eldest son, Sándor, who made use of them. His mother "always spoke in German with him, moreover, she taught him to write and read in German" (*ibid.*) The boy got to Timişoara, to the Rösch family, where "the conversation was a mixture of Hungarian and German" (*idem*, 68) and Sándor thought that "this specific manner of speech could best be described as intellectual coquetry, because its source was never the knowledge of one or the other language, it always meant a little bit of mocking characterization." (*ibid.*)

According to Erika Bence, "Language appears as a specific formation of intellectual borders in these stories" (2008, 120). The prohibition of language usage appears as a trauma, similarly to the matter of national identity. What Miklós wanted more than anything was the clarification of his identity, so he could declare himself as a Hungarian, "he knew that if he could only once truly feel as a Hungarian that would mean fulfillment for him [...]" (*idem*, 61). But for

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his wife the use of different languages in the family was natural. He did not have a talent for languages, he did not even like to converse. For him, the only purpose of language was orientation.

## 4. Conclusions

Besides the era, the society, and the situation, it was the person's individual stance that most determined how one can prevail in life. Kornélia Faragó's thoughts below, from her epilogue to the novel, can be quoted as the best argumentation supporting the border character of Erzsébet Juhász's work, sensitive to the Central European dualities and controversies:

> In the duality of the linear order of causality and the eventuality of the Central European chaos-game, the variations of the experience of closeness (the remarkably well elaborated, chaotic-emotive family relations scrutinized with peculiar irony), the figurations of essence-comprising distance and recurring lack (tragically passionate and lifelong, but never mutual love affairs, perfect brotherly congruencies despite temporal and spatial distances), remembrance and self-oblivion, language and identity, war and escape, the experience of home and being-elsewhere are organized into a narrative. (Faragó 2001, 96)

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