

LAUGHING AT CULTURAL DIFFERENCE: ALEKO KONSTANTINOV'S *BAY GANYO* AND ALEK POPOV'S *MISSION LONDON*

Miglena Dikova-Milanova, Ghent University

After postmodernism, and in the contemporary European cultural climate, difference and especially cultural diversity are still acknowledged and, in most cases, perceived as something that needs to be cherished, protected, and further developed.¹ In the general terms of what is seen as progressive cultural thinking, the recognition of difference is positive while discrimination against otherness is considered to be highly conservative, hence negative. This cultural and political recognition and expectance of difference is not, however, without restrictions and limitations that are exclusive of certain types of behavior, thinking and beliefs.² Both literature and philosophy question the commonly expected stereotypes connected to difference and venture into the realm beneath the surface of the norms for cultural correctness. Both literature and philosophy question the lurking hypocrisy behind public attitudes when it comes to dealing with difference in general and cultural difference in particular. This text will show that the outcome of some literary investigations in particular into difference could be controversial and even purely paradoxical. Literature, I argue, much more than philosophy, ridicules both progressive and conservative perceptions of difference.

When it comes to discussing difference from a philosophical point of view, French philosopher's J-F. Lyotard's ideas on the *differend* stand out. Consequently, this article

¹ The postmodern 20th-century movement in European philosophy, music, arts and architecture is associated mainly with the shift of attitudes to the concepts of truth, knowledge and meaning. The postmodernists, already in the 1960s and late 70s, question the singularity of scientific (and any other) truth and meaning. Overall, postmodernism, and its offshoots post-structuralism and critical theory, promote the notions of incompleteness and pluralism of truth and meaning. This change from universal modern approach to multiplicity and complexity of truth and meaning had their impact on the perception of culture, politics and economics. Representative of the ideas of late postmodernism, deconstruction and post-structuralism are the works of the French philosophers and thinkers J. Derrida (*The Gift of Death*, 1992), G. Deleuze (*Difference and Repetition*, 1968) and J-F. Lyotard (*The Differend*, 1983).

² For example, although the concept of political multiculturalism has its many strongholds, sometimes keeping the balance between interaction and uniqueness can be difficult. Too much investment in the interculturalism can lead to loss of cultural identity, while putting the emphasis on the preservation of singular cultures can result in cultural isolation and even conflicts with the representatives of other cultural groups.

outlines and analyses three main attitudes toward difference, that of J-F. Lyotard and those of two Bulgarian literary texts: *Bay Ganyo*, written by Aleko Konstantinov in 1894, and *Mission London*, written in 2001 by Alek Popov. The aim of the article is to interpret the literary conceptualization of difference and its cultural value while using the philosophical notion of the *differend*. The irony is that the two Bulgarian texts not only (and despite the time span between their creation) go against the idea of how important the recognition and retention of cultural difference is, but also come close to “solving” one of the traditionally most daunting philosophical problems about the impossibility of reconciling universality (the stronghold of modernity) and difference (one of the most visible concepts of French postmodern philosophy).³ It appears that the two Bulgarian texts laugh not only at cultural difference, but also indirectly mock the struggle for acknowledgment of the presence of otherness that determines the very core of concept of difference. Furthermore, is it not the case that recognition and cultivation of cultural difference could be another form of discrimination and, if so, does Lyotard’s concept of the *differend* still hold its original validity?

Lyotard and the Differend

In his *The Differend*, J-F. Lyotard speaks about difference that is beyond cultural, legal, or even linguistic recognition. It seems that, according to the philosopher, the *differend* is not a characteristic of one object, situation or person; it is rather a description of a complex relationship. While describing the *differend*, Lyotard uses linguistic, juridical and philosophical terms and metaphors. Here I will outline the main parts of Lyotard’s legal-like and linguistic reasoning on difference.

The Juridical Turn

³ A good example of a systematic modern philosophy that creates and uses universally valid rational concepts is that of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Overall, German Idealism, as part of the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment, strongly believes in the universal validity of human reason’s judgments and bases its concepts of morality, freedom and knowledge on the universality of reason.

In general, the logical and intellectual reconciliation of universality, i.e. of the believe that truth is universally valid for the whole of humanity, and the conviction that there is a plurality of truths and attitudes to justice, for example, is quite impossible. Despite the fact that Lyotard bases his concept of *the differend* heavily on the Kantian assumption (see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Eric Matthews, trans., Paul Guyer, ed. and trans., (Cambridge, 2002)) that within the universal reason there are domains whose functions should be kept separated, his postmodern ideas are opposed to the Kantian trust in the existence of one universal for all mankind discourse of truth, freedom and morality. The characters in the two Bulgarian texts “resolve” the tension between plurality and universality by simply exaggerating the power of universality (of one culture considered to be the best) or by denying the rights of difference (unwillingness to acknowledge and stand by one’s own cultural belonging and authenticity). Both approaches are related to laughter, irony, and satire.

While describing the *differend* in juridical terms, Lyotard uses the concepts of a victim and plaintiff. The difference between the two is that while the plaintiffs have the language and legal means to prove the wrong they have suffered, the victims, as paradoxical as it sounds, are deprived of any adequate means of expressing and testifying to the crimes committed against them. Consequently, if there is no proof, there is no crime. As an example, Lyotard points at a situation in which the judge and the one responsible for the damages inflicted upon the victim are the same person(s).⁴ We can define a situation as *a differend*, Lyotard continues, when one of the participating parties standing in front of a tribunal is completely deprived of the means to state their case. In such juridical situations, the official language and rules according to which the case is handled belong exclusively to one of the parties. That is to say, the victims cannot establish the reality of the wrong they have suffered within the language of the judge. Within the idiom of the judge the victim remains a plaintiff. This means, I argue, that within the language of the judge it is not possible to adequately express the non-trivial character of the wrong in question. There is no idiom, new or already existing, that signifies to the fullest, the fact of the wrong. As Lyotard puts it:

*I would like to call a differend [diffèrend] the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim. If the addressor, the addressee and the sense of the testimony are neutralized, everything takes place as if there were no damages. A case of a differend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.*⁵

The victim, one can conclude, is deprived of a voice. Lyotard uses the word 'silence' to describe the forced inability of the victim to speak. The victim, however, can speak with the voice of a plaintiff. The claim of a plaintiff can be heard in court and it complies with the idiom of the judge. Lyotard writes that in front of the tribunal "[t]he one who lodges a complaint is heard, but the one who is a victim, and who is perhaps the same one, is reduced to silence".⁶ This peculiar internal division between the plaintiff and victim within one and the same individual comes to show that within one homogeneous political or cultural environment, certain crimes or certain features of somebody's way of being cannot be expressed. The silence Lyotard has in mind is not trivial in nature; it is not just a logical or polite pause in a conversation, negotiation, court litigation or in a narrative. This silence is profound and beyond repair within the framework of the conducted exchange of words and ideas. The silenced party's true character and features are made invisible, I argue, within the contextual environment of the one who speaks and is heard. This silence is a sign of suppression of the very existence of the victimized party. Here, one should understand existence not as purely physical or formal presence, but as a recognition of one's authentic state of being with the values, regulations, habits and cultural peculiarities that are an inherent part of this existence. This content-deprived existence I consider to be form of a partial non-existence.

⁴ See Lyotard, *The Differend*, 8.

⁵ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

In this respect, Lyotard's concept of silence is related to his ideas on reality and what is real. Reality, Lyotard states, is not something that is objectively given and established beyond any doubt or intervention. Quite the opposite: what we consider "real" is a question of referring to something that is commonly agreed upon to be present. This agreement follows the workings of cultural, political, legal and economic institutions, the regulations and procedures of which Lyotard names "*unanimously agreed-upon*" protocols.⁷ These protocols produce (effectuate) one or another form of reality. What is considered real then, one can assume, is the product of a publically agreed upon strategy. By default, if something or someone does not fall under the category of the real within certain area of human activity, they do not actually exist. Within such a strategy—cultural, political or language-like—the plaintiffs can establish and prove the reality of their claim, while the victims cannot plead for justice. To put it differently, the essence of the wrong the victims have suffered is not part of the reality established by the "*agreed-upon*" protocols.

Both Lyotard's description of the functioning of the tribunal and its idiom and his distinction between the plaintiff and victim can be applied to the notion of cultural difference. In this sense, a practical person would be more satisfied in the position as a plaintiff rather than being a victim, I argue. In the former position, one can have a fully acknowledged and calm half-existence within a host culture, while in the latter, one has yet to fight for recognition. Such peculiar non-existence, or rather half-existence, is well illustrated by the fate of many of the characters in the two Bulgarian books. The characters in question are present and, at the same time, strangely non-present within the everyday life of the European countries they visit or live in. Their true and deeply rooted tastes, attitudes and aspirations meet the resistance of the new environment abroad. Part of their old cultural habits are recognized by their hosts, while other of their typical cultural features cannot be translated into the language strategies of the hosts. As a result, the characters become partially visible and partially invisible in their new surroundings. They are seen, and not seen, for who they actually are.

This suspension of authenticity is comically taken advantage of by the clever Bulgarians in order to achieve their goals for career and financial prosperity abroad.⁸ That is to say, the suspended part of the characters' cultural persona is in a position of a *differend*. That means that one part of the characters' authentic individuality is silenced and denied recognition by the foreign host culture. For the somewhat opaque logic and ethics of

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ The strategies of hiding and avoiding their full (or authentic) identity that the characters of the two Bulgarian texts employ bear resemblance to the paradoxical figures of language and logic depicted by J-F. Lyotard in his article "On the Strength of the Weak" ("Sur la force des faibles"). There, the philosopher explores the unsuspected strength of the use of language and untraditional logic by, for example, the sophist who succeeds in turning a disadvantageous situation upside-down and winning the argument. These shocking twists of logic and masterful trickery are typical for the Bulgarian characters as well. However, the argument in Lyotard's article defies yet again universality, while the Bulgarian literary characters, I argue, tend to use the logic of universality for achieving their own goals. See "On the Strength of the Weak", in *Toward the Postmodern*, Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts, eds., (New York, 1999), 62-73.

laughter, however, there is a positive side to the lack of recognition and silencing. If one is treated as a victim, then one is justified in neglecting and avoiding some of the rules and regulations of the host culture. Even more, being half-present brings the possibility for detachment from cultural restraints: there is a freedom brought by the fact that one is only half-noticed. Such comical escapes from the official rules are probably possible only within certain limits. When the inflicted damages upon the victims are a question of life and death, the context changes and seriousness returns, while taking over the making of ethical choices.⁹

The Linguistic Turn

Lyotard's second track of describing the *differend* is that of linguistic analysis. At the very beginning of his book on difference, Lyotard gives the following definition:

... a differend [differènd] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend ... would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule). ... A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse.¹⁰

The connection between language and events, or language and reality, that Lyotard establishes in *The Differend* is complex and questions the very foundation of any pretences for a universal validity of principles, ideas and strategies (philosophical, cultural, political, economic, etc.). The genres of discourse, one can assume, are language-like strategies, which give the rules of how to link together heterogeneous phrase regimens. In their turn, phrase regimens offer sets of rules for the concatenation of phrases in a certain consequential order. A phrase is shaped, Lyotard uses "*constituted*," according to the guiding regulations typical for a given regimen.¹¹ There are different regimens of phrasing: "*reasoning, knowing, describing ...*".¹² These regimens are heterogeneous and cannot be simply translated into one another. Hence, the role of the genres of discourse, whose main aim is to concatenate heterogeneous phrase regimens. This linkage is far from being unproblematic. Each genre of discourse creates sets of possible phrases. According to Lyotard, there is a *differend* between the genres of discourse and the sets of phrases they link. Additionally, there is no one universal genre of discourse that has the overruling power to settle disputes between heterogeneous genres or phrase clusters.¹³ If a genre takes on the role of a universal authority,

⁹ Lyotard's opening example (*The Differend*, 3) is on the impossibility to prove as a direct witness the existence of a gas chamber. In this case, the applicability of laughter's logic should be perused with caution and respect to the victims.

¹⁰ Lyotard, *The Differend*, xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹² *Ibid.*, xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, xii.

this genre will create a *differend* (or *differends*): many phrases will be linked against their best strategic interests and will suffer wrong.¹⁴ The linking of a phrase is always pending and cannot be postponed, as there is no possibility for a non-phrase situation. Even the silence is a phrase, states Lyotard. In other words, the linkage is always necessary, but its mode never is. Additionally, there is never a final phrase. The process of linking is infinite, one can assume.

The “good’ linkage” of the infinite line of events carries with itself an ethical responsibility as well.¹⁵ As already mentioned, there is a *differend* between two or more heterogeneous regimens of discourse.¹⁶ In the lack of universal rules for good linking of new events/phrases, the responsibility of thinking increases, as in each singular case the right phrase regimen needs to be selected. Each genre of discourse connects phrases formed within heterogeneous regimens according to a certain dominating goal, or towards, as Lyotard calls it, “a single finality”.¹⁷ The genres have different strategic aims, so they could link one and the same phrase in a distinctively divergent manner. The recognition and selection of the right link also presupposes vigilance in identifying and not overlooking the presence of a *differend*. “To bear witness to the *differend*” is the most important task of philosophical politics, states Lyotard.¹⁸ This is why, when in the process of concatenation a victim is created, or a *differend* goes unnoticed, a re-phrasing or re-linking needs to take place. Lyotard outlines the following strategy to be applied in such cases:

*To give the differend its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find its expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim. This requires new rules for the formation and linking of phrases.*¹⁹

The phrasing of the wrong then calls forward the invention of new rules for linking and new ways of phrasing—one can say, new language strategies. Overall, the cases of a *differend* require the creation of new idioms in order to correctly express each *differend*’s core. Overall, Lyotard defines the *differend* as an “unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be”.²⁰ One of the first signs of the presence of a *differend* in a need of phrasing, is silence, which for Lyotard is “a negative

¹⁴ The requirement for the lack of one set of universal rules for (ethical, political, economic, cultural, etc.) judgements, which is presented in *The Differend*, is closely related to another concept used by Lyotard in his book *Just Gaming*, namely “paganism”. In both cases—that of the *differend* and that of *paganism*—a new rule (language game, idiom, wording) has to be invented in order to accommodate the uniqueness of an event. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Just Gaming*. Wlad Godzich, trans., (Minneapolis, 1994).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xii

¹⁶ See *The Differend*, xi.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13.

phrase”.²¹ The bearing witness to the *differend*, one can say, triggers a creative act of inventing idioms “which do not yet exist,” pushes forward the development of language and thinking and assures that ethical awareness is still intact.²²

While Lyotard creates strategies for re-establishing the rights and honor of the *differend* and giving it a voice, the characters of *Bai Ganyo* and *Mission London* are busy of concocting ways for blocking, or even for completely cancelling, the *differend*. The laughter in the two texts mocks difference and is distrustful of the aptitude of thinking to do its ethical duty and recognize and word each case of a *differend* as it comes along. Laughter exposes and denounces the laziness of thought and its unwillingness to recognise its shortcomings.²³ The characters in the texts are as if aware of the scandal hidden in the core of the *differend*: the culturally inherent attitude, discourse, and language genre mechanisms for exclusion, suppression and transformation of difference. The logic of laughter here could be recreated as follows: if there are cases of a *differend* to begin with, then there are problems with thinking and the workings of culture(s), so, why not cut corners and avoid both the recognition as being different, but also the eventual negative consequences of that recognition: open exclusion and discrimination. In other words, laughter questions the very core of the agility and readiness of thinking and it reveals the frailties of the human condition. The economics of laughter saves thinking a lot of effort and aims at quicker and more efficient results.

Before applying Lyotard’s linguistic turn to the interpretation of cultural difference, the following should also be made clear. In general, each culture or set of cultural attitudes could be seen as analogous to a phrase regimen.²⁴ Consequently, the dissimilarities between cultures or cultural attitudes can be expressed by the concept of the *differend*. That is to say, cultural difference is a concept analogous to that of the *differend*. The *differend* that signifies the heterogeneity between two or more genres of discourse could be seen as a cultural sign informing about an interaction and contact between heterogeneous cultural attitudes. This means that phrases and events can be connected and given reality according to the rules of one or another cultural attitude. For example, a person who dwelled within a given culture and then travels to or settles in another culture is bound to be treated as a case of a *differend*. Namely, certain elements of his or her character, values, and skills will be lost or interpreted

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Lyotard writes: ‘What is at stake in a literature, in a philosophy, in a politics perhaps, is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them.’ (*The Differend*, 13).

²³ Lyotard’s ideas on the *differend* are seriously influenced by the thought and philosophy of German idealist Immanuel Kant. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant talks about ‘lazy reason’ to describe human rationality’s lack of drive to reflect and criticise itself and to question the foundations of its conclusions and consequently, to re-examine its knowledge about the world we live in. On the link between ‘lazy reason’ and human reason’s proneness to illusion see Kant’s footnote in his “Critique of Pure Reason”, (London: Macmillan), A 689/ B 717, 561.

²⁴ For me the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural attitudes’ are, on one hand, synonymous. However, the notion of ‘cultural attitudes’ is more general and is not exclusively related to one national culture only. Additionally, there could be different cultural attitudes within one and the same national culture.

differently within the two or more cultures. Exactly those gaps or silences within the existence of the characters abroad create many comical and amusing situations.

The phrase that defines the event of Chavdar Tolomanov, one of *Mission London's* characters upon his arrival in London could be: "I am an actor and one day will be world-famous." Bai Ganyo could partially identify his persona, far too colorful for a one-line definition, with the phrase: "I am a merchant, selling rose oil across Europe, while trying to make profit from everything and out of everyone."²⁵ The two phrases can be linked to (at least) two potential genres of discourse: one assertive, hence closer to the characters' own perception of themselves, the other much more damaging to the personages' self-esteem and future commercial and career plans. Both literary texts explore the second case scenario, which is much more challenging for the characters.

In both Bulgarian texts, the host cultures are depicted as superior to the much more modest home cultural establishments, attitudes, and habits. Consequently, in both texts the settings for ignoring the *differend*, so as to avoid possible hustle and becoming a victim, are in place.

Mission London: Being the Plaintiff

Chavdar Tolomanov lives in London, his vocational dreams for recognition as an actor are slipping further and further away, and he makes his living as a petty criminal. Upon his arrival in the UK's capital, Tolomanov tried to approach the London studios and get a film role, but receives only rejections. Alek Popov describes Tolomanov's efforts to place himself on the professional actors' scene in London:

*He started assaulting all the available casting agencies in the city, as well as all the producers. The English, being, in principle, a polite people, received him warmly, although with slight surprise; they nodded, seemingly with some respect for his artistic CV, but then politely declined to employ him. The reason was simple—his Slavic accent. He made big efforts to cure that cruel disease, and had even made some progress. Unfortunately, the said progress made itself heard during the last phase of competition for the part of a malicious computer maniac of Russian descent, who penetrated the allies' security system. The producers decided that his accent was not expressive enough and gave the part to someone else, 100% English, who made it sound far more sinister. That was a heavy shock for Tolomanov.*²⁶

Following the structure of the utterance and connection of phrases, suggested by Lyotard, the conflict between Tolomanov and London's film making scene, a conflict which clearly indicates the presence of a *differend*, can be recreated as an interaction between an addressor

²⁵ The fact that the emblematic Bulgarian literary character Bai Ganyo sells rose oil in Europe is not trivial. This commodity had become the typical trade mark of Bulgarian produce and economic well-being. On the significant social, historic and cultural role of another typical Bulgarian commodity, tobacco, see Mary C. Neuburger's *Balkan Smoke: tobacco and the making of modern Bulgaria*, (New York, 2013).

²⁶ Alek Popov, *Mission London*, (London, 2014), 15.

and addressee. Tolomanov, who is the addressor in the above situation, formulates and sends to the addressee the phrase: "I am a good actor, hence I am fully employable." In its turn, the addressee, i.e. the British cinema industry, understands the phrase as: "He is completely unemployable, that is to say, he is not good enough to be an actor." There is no adequate phrase regimen that can correctly and accurately word Tolomanov's message, and he does not manage to establish the authenticity of his statement. That is to say, Tolomanov's alleged phrase, although also based on the actuality of the former actor's status at home, fails to conform to the requirements of the unanimously agreed upon protocol for being an employable actor in the UK.²⁷ Consequently, the phrase which defines Tolomanov professionally, instead of being linked into a genre of discourse that confirms a successful employment, is redirected towards, and connected to, a genre of discourse of rejection and professional marginalisation. The existence of homogeneity between the genres of discourse that accurately words Tolomanov's former professional status in Bulgaria and the idiom of the cinema makers in England goes on unnoticed, signalling the failure of thinking in the philosophical and ethical sense of the word. And while the wrong inflicted upon the victim Tolomanov is a fact that cannot be worded and set right without a serious additional effort, the plaintiff Tolomanov is given a very good straightforward reason for his professional misfortunes in England. Ironically enough, the reason given is a bleak echo of the *differend* that Tolomanov culturally embodies abroad: the former actor's strong foreign, namely Bulgarian, accent.

At this point, Tolomanov, and the novel's plot, could have chosen to do the right thing and restore the loss of the *differend*, while wording the wrong that has been inflicted on the character. However, for Tolomanov, Lyotard's procedure for voicing the wrong—changing the addressor (Tolomanov himself, who fails to deliver the desired right message), the addressee (the film makers in the UK, who do not believe in the addressor's abilities to formulate the right message and are distrustful of the contents of the message altogether), the signification (the assumption that he is an actor, the meaning of the event that needs to be expressed and made real) and finally, the referent (the reality of the fact that Tolomanov is an actor, also in the UK)—is lengthy and quite uncertain in its outcome.²⁸ One could only imagine what would happen if thinking could not do its job properly and not protect Tolomanov's *differend* from disappearing altogether. In his turn, Tolomanov, who is not sufficiently shaken and offended by the refusal of the British film industry to respect his inherent difference, decides to take the safe way out and to remain in the role of a plaintiff. The plaintiff is already part of the genre of discourse of the tribunal. The only obstacle that a plaintiff needs to fix in order to fully join the culture of the judge is to remove, in one or another way, the reason for the court case. So, Chavdar Tolomanov kills his heavy Bulgarian accent. Ironically, he is punished for acting as a conformist and for choosing mimicry over the defending of the *differend*: because of losing his accent, he is refused a job. The reason

²⁷ Alek Popov explicitly mentions that in Bulgaria, Tolomanov was if not famous, at least popular: "Chavdar Tolomanov was a former film actor. In the past, in the time of darkest, deepest socialism, he has played a few roles that made him famous at the local level." (*Mission London*, 35).

²⁸ For the steps that the victim has to undertake in order to voice the wrong he/she has suffered see Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13.

for the refusal is the lack of convincing and sufficient East-European accent in his, by then much improved, English pronunciation.

Overall, Tolomanov's manipulateness, his attempt to cheat authenticity and to cut corners, his decision to neglect his own rights and to pretend to be a part of a genre of discourse he is not do not deliver the expected results. The *differend* comes back with a vengeance and Tolomanov finds himself in an increasingly difficult situation in the British capital. The failure to learn the lesson of the *differend* and to stick to one's authenticity is part of the typical behavior of many of the characters in *Mission London*. Voluntary mimicry and roleplaying become their second nature. The result of the loss of genuineness and of any reference point for creating more or less persistent identity is the characters' infinite mimicry. Battling the *differend* by disguising as someone else is a bad idea but a hilariously funny one, as the novel discloses. Some of *Mission London*'s characters, Kate, alias Katya, a young woman pretending to be a student but actually an exotic dancer, and the Bulgarian Ambassador to London are directly involved in a game of roleplaying. The desperate desire to belong to the world's cultural elite, pushed to its limits, makes the representative of the Bulgarian political high circles disguise not only their own personas, but the entire country's identity. Mrs. Pezantova, the wife of a prominent Bulgarian politician, comes to London in order to promote the new sophisticated image of Bulgaria while actually hiding and ignoring the country's urgent economic and social needs. Not surprisingly, her laborious grand-scale makeover attempts are mostly ineffective.²⁹

The main reasons behind the novel's characters' excruciating and exaggerated desire to belong to their new cultural environment, and as a consequence, to ignore the calls of the *differend*, are fear and ambition.³⁰ Most of the characters share the common fear of having to return to their country of origin, Bulgaria. This fear is not noble in essence; it is not a fear of prosecution or of a totalitarian political regime. "Going back" equals a complete humiliation and loss of face. Popov points out with irony bordering on sarcasm that the administrative workers at the Bulgarian embassy live in constant paralyzing fear of the inevitable:

²⁹ Popov describes Mrs Pezantova's attitude toward the ordinary people across Europe and to the ones involved in the organization of her massive cultural promotion events abroad as follows: "*The misery of the masses at large was a good reason for the fine people from all over Europe to gather together, listen to some music, and eat some canapes. Proceeding in the light of that noble logic, she started with great élan to organise charitable events in all those European capitals which sprouted Bulgarian embassies. This was a heavy task for the mission concerned. The lady was rigorous and was not prepared to acknowledge the limited social effects of her humanitarian activity. She saw treachery, sabotage and conspiracy everywhere. The diplomats were not up to the job and did not take her work at heart; they wanted, more or less, to get the whole thing out of the way and withdraw once more into the swamp of their pitiful existence.*" (*Mission London*, 27-28)

³⁰ I strongly believe that there is nothing wrong with the attempts to fit into new cultural or social surroundings. However, there are different ways of doing this. The manner Alek Popov's characters have chosen is not the most noble, ethical or productive one.

The ghost of going back! This ghost was a constant, inexorable presence around them. It sniggered maliciously in every corner and poisoned their lives with the memory of the finely scented black earth of their birthplace, from the very first to the very last day of their mandates. The subject of 'going back' was a taboo, shrouded in painful silence. To ask somebody when he thought he might make the return journey (a blatant euphemism) was considered an act of bad taste, base manners and even hostility. Nobody talked about going back, nobody dared to say it out loud for fear of catching the attention of the evil powers that that slumbered somewhere deep in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³¹

For the diplomatic workers, the superstitious fear of the return is as strong as the fear of death. Needless to say, their compatriots, who dwell in the far less privileged realm outside the embassy, share the same strong negative emotion. For Tolomanov, to return home means to admit defeat and his own humiliating inability to be successful in the land of success and plenty—the West, in general, and England, in particular. There is no worse punishment for the former actor than having to go back with a bowed head and with his tail between his legs. In Popov's words, Tolomanov:

... was aware of his gradual descent, but was too afraid to go back to his country, where, he guessed, only venom and spite awaited him. His compatriots, like typical Eastern Europeans, were inclined to forgive the people who were leaving the country, but not the people who were coming back, because they tarnished the image of The West – the last hope of those desperate souls, who had inherited the debris that was the post-communist era.³²

The fear can explain even better the characters' shared tendency not only to neglect, but to actively silence and uproot the *differend*, as every evident link to their birthplace might justify an eventual "going back" event.

The second contributing factor to the comical and out-of-proportion cosmopolitanism of the novel's characters is the wish not only to belong but to be exceedingly successful while belonging. The nearly delusional dreams of Chavdar Tolomanov and Mrs. Pezantova for fame and recognition cannot be achieved on the somewhat limiting and narrow home stage. These dreams need the scope and spaciousness of the most prestigious world podiums. Both Chavdar and Mrs. Pezantova feel cheated by fate for being born in such an insignificant place, which does not provide opportunities for world recognition. Hence, they both intend to beat the world at its own game and rise in its social ranks. Tolomanov considers his popularity back home to be rather a misfortune than an asset:

... this popularity (specifically popularity, not fame!) was too little for him compared to the dazzling summit of greatness, being reached by such stars as De Nero, Kevin Costner, Michael Douglas and even that bed-wetter, Brad Pitt. Chavdar, naturally, was not going to lose out to them; the problem was that some several thousand miles

³¹ Alek Popov, *Mission London*, 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 16.

*away from the place where the stars were growing, cruel destiny had dumped him in an entirely different climate in which only shapeless potatoes grew. For this reason he had decided that he must act to correct this entirely unfair situation, by moving to a more favourable place. Afterwards, having been denied an American visa for no apparent reason, he found himself in London ...*³³

Devorina Pezantova's dissatisfaction with her humble origins and her insufficiently active and rewarding role of being only a Bulgarian politician's wife is described as follows:

*She could not possibly accept the secondary role handed to her by history and hungered for her own aura as a woman of social significance. As often happens with such simple folk, lifted suddenly by some twist of fate to the very peak of the social hierarchy, her head was a murky vortex of boundless ambition and grandiose plans. Mrs. Pezantova frantically aimed to join the exclusive club of the world elite, without sparing resources – above all state resources. She dreamed of seeing herself amongst the shiny entourage of celebrities, who filled the chronicles of those fat western publications.*³⁴

Alek Popov's use of "hunger" as a verb makes one associate Mrs. Pezantova's ambition with appetite, eating, swallowing and digestion.³⁵ The first name of the character, Devorina, from "devour," refers to an enormous appetite and to the desire to consume more and more of the world.³⁶ At the same time, Devorina Pezantova is devoured by ambition and eats through the already thin state budget in order to achieve her dreams for fame and glory. Metaphorically speaking, both the fear and ambition of the characters devour and annihilate the *differend*. The latter does not stand a chance when confronted with Tolomanov's and Pezantova's overwhelming and all-threatening hunger for success. They are even ready to swallow parts of themselves, their uniqueness, in order to get where their ambition

³³ Ibid., 35.

³⁴ Ibid., 27.

³⁵ The character of Bai Ganyo has left strong traces in Bulgarian literature throughout the decades and it is not a coincidence that there are several literary books describing the adventures of Bai Ganyo's so-called "grandchildren." This powerful feeling of continuity that carries Ganyo's unfortunate character features and his rough energy from one generations of Bulgarians to another is also present in Alek Popov's book. One of the characters that can be seen, metaphorically speaking, as a "grandchild" of Bai Ganyo, due to her inexhaustible drive to conquer and "swallow" the world, is Devorina Pezantova. On the books portraying Bai Ganyo's "grandchildren" see Nia Stefanova, "Vnucite na Bai Ganyo," <http://litenet.bg/publish30/nia-stefanova/vnucite.htm>.

³⁶ In its turn, the family name of Pezantova is directly connected to her personal qualities and behaviour. She is a peasant, a snob, so her surname is "Pezantova." The English "Pezantova" is a translation of the Bulgarian word for peasant, 'selianin.' Consequently, in the Bulgarian text the character's surname is "Selianova." In the original Bulgarian version of the text, Alek Popov uses the same name "Devorina." See Alek Popov, "Misia London," (Sofia: Izdatelstvo "Zvezdan", 2001).

commands. The characters eat through cultural differences, multiplicity and the *differend* alike so as to make and keep the world univocal so that their potential success is absolute and cannot be questioned in any alternative worlds. For some of *Mission London's* personages, ambition is aligned with or reduced to the simple yet powerful drive to survive. This appetite for life, this need to keep on going no matter what, could be another explanation for the characters' laughter-provoking choice not to claim the rights of the *differend* as to avoid complications. This cowardice, in spite of an assertive and economical attitude, defeats in a funny and ironic way Lyotard's dignified and serious call for justice and bearing witness to the *differend*.³⁷ Overall, Alek Popov's humor mocks the seriousness of the *differend*, while questioning its very purpose, reliability and cultural adequacy.

Alek Popov's ironically disturbed upside-down world bears resemblance to the universe inhabited by another, much older Bulgarian character, Bai Ganyo.

Bai Ganyo, the Differend and the Victim

Aleko Konstantinov's book consists of independent short stories about Bai Ganyo, told by eyewitnesses. The narrators are representatives of the Bulgarian intelligentsia and have studied and met Bai Ganyo abroad. Ganyo is judged by them and the reader sees him through their eyes. The author's voice joins the group of narrating friends and on rare occasions makes itself heard as an autonomous narrator. This framing of the stories creates a complex dynamic when it comes to two things: establishing who is actually laughing at Bai Ganyo and who are the judges that have to pass on the verdict in the case of Ganyo's *differend*. Is the laughing and judging audience mainly Bulgarian or generally European? That is to say, whose genre of discourse puts Bai Ganyo in the position of a silenced victim: that of the group of narrators or that of the spectators in the foreign European countries Ganyo visits?

The other elements that define the text's link to the *differend* are the book's general division and the changed features of the main character. The book has two parts: in the first one Ganyo is funny, awkward and entertaining; in the second part, the character returns to Bulgaria and his public actions there are neither laughable nor could be taken lightly. Abroad, Bai Ganyo's shortcomings, his lack of manners and education, contrast with the far more refined behaviour and cultural habits of his hosts. The clash of attitudes and the cultural misinterpretations from both sides create the comical effect in the first part.³⁸

³⁷ On another point, the affiliation of the features of laughter in the novel with both, mimicry and the functions of the human body, as hunger and devouring, makes one think about Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the culture of laughter and its closeness to the life of the body's lower stratum. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Hélène Iswolsky, trans., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

³⁸ In her article on Aleko Konstantinov's book, the Bulgarian literary critic Iliana Krasteva points out that the comical in the book's first part is mainly the result of the very apparent gap between Bai Ganyo's loud self-esteem and showing off and the norm-observing behavior of the others around him. The Bulgarian quote is: '*Комизмът на ситуациите в повечето случаи е предизвикан от драстичното разминаване между Бай-Ганьовото самочувствие и показно перчене и поведението на останалите, което е в рамките на*

Overall, in the other European countries, Ganyo's difference, his foreignness, is loud, uncultured, and bullish, but energetic, amusing and overall still harmless for the spectators. After his arrival in Bulgaria, the laughter is still there, but it becomes more and more bitter. At home, Bai Ganyo is a cruel and corrupt journalist and politician, ready to abuse the rights of his less wealthy and less fortunate compatriots, to manipulate their votes and opinions, and to use extreme violence when he thinks necessary. This drastic change in perspective testifies to Bai Ganyo's general position on the ethical requirements of the *differend*. While still abroad, Ganyo is a potential victim, whose authenticity does not yet have an adequate idiom that words it and puts it on the European cultural map. In Bulgaria, the same Bai Ganyo is the author of an extremely brutal political genre of discourse, which has pretences for all-engulfing universality. At home, the character creates many victims and shows aggressive ignorance to the *differend's* calls for justice and multiplicity of languages of public expression.

I argue that what has changed in the second part is not so much the character himself, but the balance of power and his set of goals. That means that Bai Ganyo's frame of mind in relation to the *differend* remains unchanged throughout the book. Ganyo is simply not capable of being a victim. Even in the book's first part, the character lacks any sensitivity to difference; hence, it is impossible to victimize him, as he would be blissfully unaware of any such attempts and would dismiss them as mere nonsense. While abroad, in an unfamiliar and somewhat hostile context, Ganyo manages not only to escape a victim's faith and sadness of a possible inflicted injustice, but to take an upper hand and to severely criticize all foreigners for their lack of intelligence, culture, hospitality and healthy common sense. This behavior of the main character abroad, which is inadequate to the balance of power, is what is hilariously funny and triggers the laughter in the book's first part. To put it differently, Bai Ganyo, without giving the situation a second thought, imposes his universalizing idiom on the spectators and events that are already governed by another, and most likely also universal in essence, genre of discourse. Abroad, the score of the clash between the idiom of the judge and that of Bai Ganyo's cultural attitudes delivers no winner. Additionally, while travelling in Europe, Ganyo's goals are not political or educative in nature; he has the single economic objective to sell his rose oil and to make a big as possible profit. After his return, Bai Ganyo reassesses his goals and sets his eye on much more solvent activities such as politics and journalism. In Bulgaria, the balance of political and economic

общоприетите регламентации на „етикета“. Със своите приумици колоритният българин често „взривява“ тези регламентации и скандализира европейците („...Бай Ганьо я оскърбил с действие, похванал я и не само я похванал, ами си извъртял и ръката със стиснати зъби. Тя искаше да вика полицейския. Скандал!“), а своите спътници - българските студенти - кара да се червят от срам. Героят обаче няма съзнание за конфузността на ситуацията, в които изпада. Напротив - смята, че е покорил със своето ориенталско обаяние европейците и гордо се бие в гърдите: „- Булгар! Булга-а-р!“ See Iliana Krasteva, "Struktura i smisal na Bai Ganyo ot Aleko Konstantinov", (<http://litenet.bg/publish7/ikrysteva/aleko.htm>).

power is changed in favour of Bai Ganyo and he can show the full range of his ferocious methods of governing the country.³⁹

While concentrating on the book's first part, I argue that Bai Ganyo's actions and judgements defy Lyotard's call for expressing the *differend* in a still laughter-provoking manner, but opposing that of Alek Popov's. Instead of hiding and disguising as a plaintiff, instead of trying to blend in and belong to his new cultural environments, Bai Ganyo introduces his own code for the shaping of reality and demonstrates its workings with readiness and unnerving determination in front of his horrified or amused—depending on the turn of events—European public. As a result, when Bai Ganyo claims upon his arrival abroad: "I am a merchant, selling rose oil in Vienna, while trying to make profit from everything and out of everyone," the phrase has a reality that is immediately effective. Aleko Konstantinov's character does not need to undergo the procedure of phrase linking, agonizing in its randomness and uncertain outcome. The only valid genre of discourse, the phrases Bai Ganyo utters can be linked to, is the one built around his own ideas and beliefs. He then links "phrases from different regimens to a single finality," a finality defined by his own cultural and political interests.⁴⁰ By default, Bai Ganyo can never be a victim or bear witness to the *differend* as he, by the sheer specificities of his behavior, neutralizes the possible addressor, addressee, sense and referent of the phrases worded in any distinct way from his own genres of discourse.⁴¹ Ganyo's actions turn others into victims (he neutralizes the credibility of their idiom by linking all possible uttered and exchanged phrases into his own idiom), then denies recognizing their position of a victim (refuses to acknowledge the wrong he has inflicted by neglecting the heterogeneity of the other idiom) and, finally, ends up treating the victims of his universalizing genre of discourse as mere plaintiffs (refuses to bear witness to, or to word, the *differend*). Using Lyotard's terminology, one can say that when it comes to expressing cultural difference, Bai Ganyo employs a genre of discourse that has fixed "rules for linkage, and it suffices to observe them to avoid differends".⁴²

Bai Ganyo's lack of cultural flexibility and ethical sensitivity to difference is pointed out on many occasions in the first part of Aleko Konstantinov's book. Bai Ganyo, although otherwise observant⁴³, is apparently and completely blind to cultural difference. For

³⁹ This extremely violent and cruel side of Bai Ganyo, which depicted in the second part of Aleko Konstantinov's book, is analysed in Victor Friedman's article on the Bulgarian character. See Victor A. Friedman, "Violence in *Bai Ganyo*: From Balkan to Universal". *Ulbandus. The Slavic Review of Columbia University* 13, (2010): 52-63.

⁴⁰ For this quote see Lyotard, *The Differend*, 29.

⁴¹ Lyotard uses the described above process of neutralization of the addressor, addressee and the sense to illustrate the mechanism that results in the creation of a victim (*The Differend*, 3). I use the description to refer to Bai Ganyo's analogous actions of turning his conversation partners, hosts, compatriots, foreign cultures, etc., into casualties of his own domineering language game.

⁴² Lyotard, *The Diefferend*, 29.

⁴³ Aleko Konstantinov mentions Bai Ganyo's excellent observation skills as one of the character's few positive personal characteristics through the words of one of the narrators in the book's first part. Ganyo is defined as "observant – especially observant" (*Bai Ganyo*, 81). The full quote is used further in this article.

example, he is not at the least curious about the artistic, intellectual or architectural landmarks in the countries he visits. His reply to an invitation to go and see Vienna is: “*What’s to see in Vienna? A city is a city: people, houses, fancy stuff. And whenever you go, everybody goes gut morgin and everybody wants money. Why should I give our money to the Germans? We’ve got people at home to take it from us.*”⁴⁴ This observation, wise on the surface, hides Ganyo’s deep suspicion of everything foreign. When on a new Bulgarian train, travelling to the Prague Exhibition, Bai Ganyo is very quick to blame the lack of light in the compartments not on the Bulgarian organizers but on the foreigners—on any foreigners who might have been involved in the provision of lamps for the trip.⁴⁵ Ganyo loudly complains: “I just know that it’s not our fault. It’s those foreigners again, damn them! They’ve done this on purpose to make fools of us! That’s because they’re jealous! They’re all like that!”⁴⁶ After passionately delivering his outburst, Bai Ganyo finds a suitable victim, one of the foreigners in his compartment, and stares angrily at him until the seriously frightened man leaves the premises.⁴⁷ Needless to say, the list of Bai Ganyo’s deeds can continue.⁴⁸ The character’s undermining attitude toward foreigners, regardless of their country of origin, occupation, and character, is closely associated with his false but loud and aggressive patriotism and his desire to return home. This is yet another of the significant dissimilarities between Alek Popov’s characters and Bai Ganyo. The former are genuinely and intensely afraid of “going back,” while the latter despises the foreign habits and culture and is more than ready to go back to the place where people know when to hammer a nail in the wall, eat delicious, spicy food and can non-problematically tell the difference between an accessible and well-respected woman.⁴⁹ Anyhow, Bai Ganyo carries his habits everywhere he goes. Aleko Konstantinov summarizes Ganyo’s resistance to change and cultural blindness as follows:

⁴⁴ Aleko Konstantinov, *Bai Ganyo*, 20.

⁴⁵ Aleko Konstantinov has in mind the Prague Exhibition of 1891.

⁴⁶ *Bai Ganyo*, 34.

⁴⁷ See *Bai Ganyo*, 35.

⁴⁸ For example, during the same visit to the Prague Exhibition, Bai Ganyo signs readily and a little bit too quickly a petition he thinks will exclude him from any further sightseeing trips in Prague. Actually, Bai Ganyo signs the guest book placed in the house of one of the Czech wealthy and generous hosts, Mr. Naprstek. See *Bai Ganyo*, 46.

⁴⁹ In “Bai Ganyo at the Baths”, the main character bitterly complains about the intellectual inaptitude of the Germans, who fail to pound into the baths’ walls a single nail so that people can hang their precious possession in full visibility while bathing. See *Bai Ganyo*, 26. Additionally, while visiting Professor Irechek’s home in Prague, the soup that the hosts serve is a bit bland for Bai Ganyo’s tastes and he crushes a hot chili pepper into his bowl. See *Bai Ganyo*, 53. One possible example of Bai Ganyo’s confusion and lack of manners when it comes to impressing women can be found in the story “Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting”, where he confesses to his companion, the student Bodkov, that: “*You can’t figure who’s a maid and who’s a mistress here; they’re all so shiny, all dressed in clean clothes. One will plant herself in front of you, simper at you sweet as pie; you think she’s a maid, you catch hold of her, and you’ve gotten yourself in trouble.*” (*Bai Ganyo*, 60).

... after all there must be some sort of difference between the West and our homeland. Bai Ganyo, however, didn't perceive this difference, and how could he? Wherever he goes, he brings with him his own atmosphere, his own manners and customs; he looks for lodging according to his own tastes, he meets with his own kind of people, those he's accustomed to and in whom, of course, he sees nothing new. If he goes to Vienna, he'll stay at the Hotel London. It's just as stuffy there, it has the same smells of cooking and hydrogen sulphide, as at home; he meets with the same Turks, Greeks, Armenians, Serbs, and Albanians that he's used to meeting every day; he won't go to the café Hapsburg, since he's afraid that they'll fleece him. Instead, he'll go to the Greek coffeehouse, where it's just as dirty and stuffy from eternal smoke as in our own coffeehouses. If he's travelling on business, he'll go to the Bulgarian merchants, and because they are his intermediaries, he doesn't even realize that he's coming into contact with Europeans. And that it is precisely outside of this circumscribed sphere that European life begins is something that neither knows nor even cares to know. The upbringing, the moral world of the European, his domestic situation, the fruits of centuries of tradition and the gradual refinement of intellectual movements, social struggles, and manners and customs, the museums, the libraries, the philanthropic institutions, the fine arts, the thousands of displays of progress do not burden Bai Ganyo's attention.⁵⁰

Bai Ganyo is wrapped in his world and uses it as a protective harness against any kind of heterogeneity. While dwelling mostly within the familiar, Ganyo cannot be in many situations which involve dealing with a *differend*. At the same time, the known faces, heavy smells, scenes veiled in tobacco smoke and routine business transactions shelter Bai Ganyo from finding himself in the position of a victim and from falling into the gap of silence carved in the no man's land between heterogeneous genres of discourse and clashing cultural habits. However, the goal of the author is precisely to shake Bai Ganyo's world and to push him out of his cultural comfort zone into the unknown realm of the evolved European life. One cannot but notice that in the core of each story told in the first part lies the motive of Bai Ganyo venturing right into the cultural heart of the so-called "world of the European". Ganyo, as the titles of the stories also show, goes to European homes, to opera performance and exhibitions, to the baths and to European cafes and everywhere he is forced into a comical brush with the novel, for him for the most part inferior, European customs.⁵¹ Bai Ganyo's travels in the first part of the book are not so much trips to one or another foreign European country, as they are journeys outside his own confined and enclosed universe.

⁵⁰ *Bai Ganyo*, 64-65.

⁵¹ Some of the titles in the book's first part are: "Bai Ganyo at the Opera" (*Bai Ganyo*, 21); "Bai Ganyo at the Baths" (*Ibid.*, 24); "Bai Ganyo at the Prague Exhibition" (*Ibid.*, 34); "Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting" (*Ibid.*, 55), etc. That is to say, almost all titles in the first part refer to some cultural public or private location representative of the European countries Bai Ganyo visits. While in public spaces, at the opera, baths, museums, on the street and in cafes, Ganyo encounters the foreign official institutionalised culture. When invited or self-invited to private homes, Bai Ganyo sees the everyday customs of the Europeans: their table manners, food and cuisine, their attitude to the kitchen and house help, etc.

The narrators of the stories mostly accompany Ganyo on his trips to the world outside. In other words, Bai Ganyo is compelled by his author, Aleko Konstantinov, to face and live within cultural difference. In this sense, Konstantinov makes the character's contact with the *differend* inevitable. While narrating his gesture of purposively throwing Bai Ganyo in the midst of European cultural diversity, Konstantinov is not exceedingly kind to his character and does not spare him from any ridicule or humiliation. Additionally, Konstantinov's use of "European" in the passage quoted above seems to suggest at least two things. First, "European" is different from Bulgarian, Greek, Albanian, Turkish, Armenian and Serbian cultures, as "European life" starts where the small shady world inhabited by Bai Ganyo ends. Second, the "European" culture is much more advanced than the cultural environment customary to Bai Ganyo, as the former is the result of a centuries-long, refined tradition. Consequently, Bai Ganyo needs to open his eyes to positive difference, venture into the unknown, better world outside his confinement, and learn how to be truly cultured, morally enlightened and refined himself. In this way, Konstantinov could be accused of being guilty of both "balkanization" and "self-colonizing".⁵² As for the former, he describes the

⁵² In her article "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention", the historian Maria Todorova refers to the term "*balkanization*". She writes: "*By the beginning of the twentieth century Europe had added to its repertoire of Schimpfwörter, or disparagements, a new one which turned out to be more persistent than others with centuries old tradition. Balkanization not only had come to denote the parcelization of large and viable political units but also has become a synonym for the reversal to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian.*" See Maria Todorova, "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention", *Slavic Review* 53, No. 2 (Summer, 1994): 453. Aleko Konstantinov's portrayal of Bai Ganyo could be read along the lines of "*balkanization*", as the character's many negative features depict him as basic, savage-like and inferior to the representatives of the other (non-Balkan) European cultures. In the same article, Maria Todorova mentions yet another term, "*balkanism*". In general, the term "*balkanism*" (or "*nesting balkanism*") describes the existing and persistently negative discourse which is used when it comes to analysing political, historical and economic events that take place in the European region of the Balkans. On "*balkanism*" see also: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, (New York, 2009).

In his article "The Self-Colonizing Metaphor", the Bulgarian literary critic and academic Alexander Kiossev defines the concept of "*self-colonizing*" as follows: "*The concept of self-colonizing can be used for cultures having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the west without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact. Historical circumstances transformed them into an extra colonial "periphery," lateral viewers who have not been directly affected either by important colonial conflicts or by the techniques of colonial rule. The same circumstances however put them in a situation where they had to recognize self-evidently foreign cultural supremacy and voluntarily absorb the basic values and categories of colonial Europe. The result might be named "hegemony without domination."* See Alexander Kiossev, "The Self-Colonizing Metaphor", (<http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html>) Aleko Konstantinov can be seen as describing Bulgarian culture as peripheral and consequently, as attempting, through the manner he contrasts Bai Ganyo's ethical norms and behaviour with those of the more developed Europeans, to voluntarily

Balkans in a traditionally negative light and in the case of the latter, he voluntarily accepts external cultural models that are considered more advanced and in doing so hinder one's own unique path of cultural growth. As far as the tense relation of Bai Ganyo to the *differend* is concerned, it looks as if Konstantinov is pushing his character to accept the position of a victim in relation to the stronger and superior European culture, while Bai Ganyo himself is stubbornly resisting surrendering to such arrangements. It also seems that the voices of the narrators in the book's first part side with the author in severely judging and criticizing Bai Ganyo's many shortcomings, which are made especially visible by Ganyo's clash with the foreign European context. One can say, that while Konstantinov is doing his best to silence the *differend* that Ganyo embodies, the character himself is bravely fighting to keep his cultural authenticity and uniqueness. All of a sudden, the tables turn on Konstantinov, as Bai Ganyo appears to be the carrier of positive cultural characteristics and ideas. Luckily, one may think that Bai Ganyo, as has already been pointed out, is extremely resilient and not only cannot be easily victimized, but goes a step further and behaves as if he in turn can exploit and dominate the foreign European cultures. This outlandish struggle between the author and his main character is also an important element of the funny and laughable in the book's first part.

The further analysis of the complex nature of the laughter in *Bai Ganyo's* first part, I argue, can bring to light even more unsuspected turns hidden in the text. In the book, Bai Ganyo is laughed at constantly; everywhere he appears, he does something that goes against the established habits and good manners of the local European inhabitants and they end up amused, shocked, or scared by Ganyo's daring deeds, often incomprehensible words, and energetic body language. However, the collective and at times loud laughter of the Europeans is sifted through and conveyed by the perception and words of the narrators of the stories told. That means that the rest of Europe laughs at Bai Ganyo in an indirect and hearsay way. The ones who are actually and directly laughing are the author's well-educated and cultured Bulgarian friends. That is to say, the potentially enormous European audience witnessing and laughing at Bai Ganyo's antics is reduced to the cozy symposium-like space of an anecdote-telling session among long-time friends. Within this intimate space, the grand-scale European laughter is reduced to a critical echo.

A closer look at the structural relationship between the narrators and Bai Ganyo reveals an interesting dynamic. The storytelling friends are passive, while their common subject, Bai Ganyo is extremely active: travelling across Europe, eating, drinking, running after trains, chasing women, worrying about his precious rose oil, meeting people, bathing. The passive narrators are the viewers of Bai Ganyo's European drama, or farce, as it unfolds. The friends reminisce about past encounters with Ganyo and comical or awkward situations they have experienced. In other words, the friends are reflecting on and sharing thoughts about their own past as well. They all remember being shocked, ashamed, or angered by Bai Ganyo's actions. In other words, they feel responsible for Bai Ganyo's deeds and words in

impose on himself and his compatriots "*the basic values and categories*" of the considered supreme European culture.

front of the spectators from other European cultures.⁵³ Their contemplations, then, contain a strong element of self-reflection. Furthermore, in their self-reflection, Bai Ganyo plays an important role as the element opposing and highlighting the ideas and cultural attitudes they hold significant. On another point, there are some characteristics that the narrators and the subject of their irony have in common. Bai Ganyo's physical appearance—he is dark-eyed and dark-haired—is very similar to that of the Bulgarian students abroad, a group to which the most of the narrators used to belong, who are also dark-eyed and dark-haired.⁵⁴ Despite their telling differences, Bai Ganyo, the narrators, and the author belong to one and the same home culture.

The critical laughter of the author and the narrators seemingly compensates for Bai Ganyo's complete lack of self-criticism. The novel's frame, provided by the storytellers' judgments, functions as a reflective mirror in which Ganyo can see himself clearly for what he really is and eventually correct his ways. However, the criticism of Bai Ganyo could be

⁵³ For instant, at the funeral of Bai Ganyo's sister in Dresden ("Bai Ganyo in Dresden"), the narrator and the other Bulgarian students, who have been invited to the burial of their early deceased compatriot, are painfully ashamed of Ganyo's behavior. They try to cover for him, blaming his rough looks and lack of visible grief on the shock he is still in. Finally, Bai Ganyo noisily blows his nose using not a handkerchief but his thumb. The students cannot find any plausible explanation for this action. The narrator describes their defeat: "*It would have been possible to excuse even that, you might say, owing to the haste of his departure; in his haste and confusion the unfortunate man must have forgotten to take even a handkerchief, you might say. But no! No because immediately after this procedure Bay Ganyo unwrapped the yellow paper package and pulled out – what do you think? – a whole dozen handkerchiefs and began passing them out to those present ...*" (*Bai Ganyo*, 32-33) Bai Ganyo gives almost everybody present a handkerchief, so that his sister's soul can rest in peace, as one does on such occasions, following the Bulgarian tradition.

⁵⁴ The physical description of Bai Ganyo is given in the third story of the first part of the book, "*Bai Ganyo at the Baths*". See *Bai Ganyo*, 24. In addition, in "*Bai Ganyo Goes Visiting*", Konstantinov describes how Ganyo has no difficulties recognizing the group of Bulgarian students in one of the Prague cafes due to their distinct looks. Konstantinov writes: '*Bai Ganyo turned and recognised his own dark-eyed, dark-haired compatriots clustered together.*' (*Bai Ganyo*, 55) In her article on Bai Ganyo, the Bulgarian academic and literary critic Milena Kirova already stresses the importance of Bai Ganyo's gaze of recognition that he points at the Bulgarian students gathered in a Prague café. Her analysis, however, is based on the psychoanalytical tradition in reading literary texts, while in this article I connect *Bai Ganyo's* text to the contemporary continental French philosophy (J-F. Lyotard) and Russian philosophy and literary theory (Mikhail Bakhtin). See Milena Kirova, "Bai Ganyo – poglastastiat chovek", (<http://liternet.bg/publish2/mkirova/baj-ganio.htm#1a>).

seen as a form of self-criticism, I argue.⁵⁵ The very dynamics of the interdependence between Ganyo and the narrators strongly resembles a typical philosophical structure of self-reflection.⁵⁶ In order to become more self-aware and efficient, the human mind and human rational faculties critically reflect on their own workings, shortcomings and misconceptions. In this way, critique and self-critique, one of the most important intellectual tools of the Enlightenment, aim to improve the human condition altogether. Lyotard's requirement for approaching the linking of each new phrase as problematic and to word the *differend* is part of the same tradition of thought's self-reflection. One has to critically examine the correctness of each linkage in order not to silence the event of the *differend*.

⁵⁵ My use of the notion of the notion of "self-reflection" can be compared to the mirroring metaphors used in the articles of Mary Neuburger and Roumen Daskalov which analyze Konstantinov's *Bai Ganyo*. In her article "To Chicago and Back: Aleko Konstantinov, Rose Oil, and the Smell of Modernity", Neuburger points out that in his writings Aleko Konstantinov makes himself and his compatriots see themselves through the eyes of western Europe. This mirroring, I argue, can be interpreted as a form of self-reflection. In his turn, Daskalov speaks of the different interpretations of Bai Ganyo's identity and the way in which they mirror the different stages in the Bulgarian process of modernization and cultural development. I argue, however, that the opposition in Aleko Konstantinov's book is not "European" versus "Bulgarian", but rather "Bulgarian" versus another form or state of the same "Bulgarian". The mirror held in front of Bai Ganyo is not Europe, but Bulgaria as part of Europe. Instead of mirroring, *Bai Ganyo* is above all a book about direct self-reflection. See Mary Neuburger, "To Chicago and Back: Aleko Konstantinov, Rose Oil, and the Smell of Modernity", *Slavic Review* 65, No. 3 (Autumn 2006): 427-445, and Roumen Daskalov, "Modern Bulgarian Society and Culture through the Mirror of Bai Ganyo", *Slavic Review* 60, No. 3 (Autumn 2001): 530-549.

⁵⁶ For example, in his "Critique of the Power of Judgement" (1790), the German idealist and enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant develops his theory about the judgement about the sublime. The structure of this judgement contains a mechanism for self-reflection that allows pure human reason to become better aware of its own architecture (Kant's term for this is *architectonics*) and to discover the existence of ideas. This mechanism for self-reflection is universally valid, as for Kant reason and reason's categories and concepts are universally valid for and applicable to all of humanity. In view of this Kantian universalism, if we accept that Aleko Konstantinov uses a similar mechanism for self-reflection, in which one part of the Bulgarian culture (the narrators, i.e. the Bulgarian intelligentsia) reflects on the body of the whole culture and discovers the malfunctioning parts (some, not all, of Bai Ganyo's attitudes) and also the way to remedy those malfunctions (by acting according to better moral, political and cultural principles), then we can assume that Aleko Konstantinov attempts to impose universal norms on the unique Bulgarian culture. This could mean that the accusations of "self-colonizing", i.e. of voluntarily accepting superior idealized cultural values, are true. However, there is an essential difference between the universality of self-reflection and the gesture of "self-colonizing". The former uses abstract rational concepts and speaks of abstract ideal universality, while the latter refers to very concrete categories and values typical for colonial Europe. See *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Eric Matthews, trans., Paul Guyer, ed. and trans., (Cambridge, 2002), CJ 260-267.

In this sense, the narrators in Aleko Konstantinov's book examine their own cultural heritage while exposing and exploring its deepest and well-hidden sides, represented by Bai Ganyo's actions and attitudes. Aleko Konstantinov's gesture of forcing Bai Ganyo to leave his familiar murky habitat and to resurface into far less familiar cultural realms is analogous to an intellectual act of self-critique. The laughter at Bai Ganyo is a laughter directed at one's own failures and inadequacies. Consequently, it seems that Konstantinov was trying not to silence Bai Ganyo's audacity but to word his own, Konstantinov's cultural *differend*, which materializes when some aspects of this culture are placed in the bigger European context. The character of Bai Ganyo is part of the moulding into words and images of this *differend*.⁵⁷ Then, maybe, Aleko Konstantinov is guilty not so much of balkanization or self-colonizing, as rather of extreme, open, and sarcastic self-critique. The upshot of this self-reflection is Bai Ganyo, with his many negative and still some positive cultural features.⁵⁸ The laughter of the author and his circle of close friends, with this laughter's bitter and ironic undertone, expresses predominantly Bai Ganyo's many flaws. However, there is another kind of laughter in the book's first part as well.

This other, much lighter and spontaneous laughter is not an expression of any deep self-reflection or worries about the cultural faith of the *differend*. It is a laughter of sheer acknowledgment of a *differend*'s presence. The concrete incident of this laughter can be traced back to take place at the Viennese opera, where in the middle of a fascinating ballet performance, in the words of the narrator:

*... hysterical laughter split the air. I turned to my left and saw that everyone in the rows behind me is giggling and pointing at something on my right. I was seized by a terrible foreboding. I turned toward Bai Ganyo ... Oh my God! What do I see? Bai Ganyo has stripped to his shirtsleeves and unbuttoned his vest, which was constricting the wide sash wound tight around his waist, where he had stuffed – for safekeeping – all his **muskali**. One of the ushers had him by the sleeve with two fingers, gesturing unambiguously with his head for him to leave. Bai Ganyo stared back at him and answered with gestures of his own: 'What? Who are you trying to scare?' It was his blustering bravado that had made a young girl sitting behind us burst into hysterical laughter, and her laughter infected the entire theatre.*⁵⁹

⁵⁷ If one assumes that Bai Ganyo is the embodiment of Aleko Konstantinov's own culture's *differend*, than Konstantinov's intentions towards this *differend* are very similar to those of the characters in Alek Popov's *Mission London* toward their unwanted *differends*. However, Aleko Konstantinov is not trying to hide or eradicate Bai Ganyo (i.e. Konstantinov's own *differend*), he is attempting to expose and reform him. Additionally, the analysis presented in this article is focused on Bai Ganyo's, not Aleko Konstantinov's relation to Lyotard's concept of the *differend*.

⁵⁸ In the last story of the first part, "Bai Ganyo in Russia", one of the narrators, Vasil, surprisingly announces that at certain point he felt genuinely sorry for Bai Ganyo and listed some of the character's main positive personal characteristics as observance, potential spiritual strength and energy. See 'Bai Ganyo', 81.

⁵⁹ Aleko Konstantinov, *Bai Ganyo*, 22.

This laugh signals the recognition of Bai Ganyo's overwhelming and somewhat oddly disturbing visibility in the heart of Europe. This is the laughter of the universally joined European public, to which Aleko Konstantinov and his friends belong as well, when letting go of ethical and cultural concerns about the seriousness of Bai Ganyo's countless drawbacks. The young girl's contagious laughter is a linking phrase of a special kind. It is ambiguous in essence and seemingly postpones the actual linkage of the event (Bai Ganyo's presence at the opera/in Europe) to a well-defined genre of discourse. The girl's sudden unplanned laughter as a link lacks the decisiveness of Aleko Konstantinov's reflective irony, which connects Bai Ganyo and all of his actions to the idiom of cultural self-critique. The giggle at the opera mocks the seriousness of the *differend* in its own way, by opposing to Lyotard's strive toward multiplicity the frivolous and optimistic universality of a world turned upside-down. A world in which strict manners are not observed and people laugh not at the stage performance but at what is taking place in the audience hall. This is a world in which the distinction between stage and auditorium, between performance and spectators is swept away. Finally, this laughter is an echo of the assertive optimism and brave claims for universal validity of the carnival's culture, as Mikhail Bakhtin describes it.

It seems that in *Bai Ganyo's* first part the claims for universality are put forward under several guises. One of them is Bai Ganyo's neglect for the *differend* and his strong inclination to link every event under the fixed rules of his own cultural idiom. The other is Konstantinov's self-critique, which aims to improve the workings of his home culture by bringing it up to standards that are universal and applicable to any culture, or to culture in general. Finally, there is the universality of laughter itself, which suggests that, in an opaque world, the places of a victim and plaintiff, or of a judge and victim, could be reversed anyway. Overall, while Lyotard's philosophy of the *differend* is relentlessly trying to suppress universality, the two literary texts' characters, those of *Bai Ganyo* and those of *Mission London*, are tirelessly aiming at the suspension of this very same *differend*. Literature then, one can say, ridicules philosophy's seriousness and plays with its concerns.

Conclusion

Bai Ganyo and *Mission London* mock the seriousness of the concepts in *The Differend*. Lyotard stresses among other things the urgency of the linking of phrases, by insisting that the linkage should happen "now". The pressure to create a new idiom, that is to say, to word the *differend*, is always immanent. Laughter, in its turn, toys with and procrastinates the linkage. Laughter in its ambiguity keeps the event suspended between regimens. Furthermore, laughter questions the very need for the wording of an event, of a *differend*. Laughter in its own right is already a sufficient enough testimony to the fact that the event is present. Hence, the wording after the laughter is rendered redundant. When it comes to culture, it seems that laughter doubts the ability of words to adequately express all the complex nuances of cultural difference. Within fictional literary discourses like *Bai Ganyo* and *Mission London*, laughter has better control over the language and games with it, while reordering and re-examining the well-known and taken as normative culture and cultural habits. Laughter is not a typical element of theoretical and philosophical discourses, so it derides and challenges their assumptions from afar, by indirectly exposing their hidden shortcomings and logical deficiencies.

In *Bai Ganyo*, laughter shapes the language of Ganyo and the narrators in such a way as to reveal the intricate anatomy of cultural difference by showing that being a victim of discrimination is a question of choice and certain moral sensitivity. As a result, Bai Ganyo's own cultural prejudices shield him from situations in which he can become the victim of a similar unfair treatment. In addition, Aleko Konstantinov's text discloses that one and the same cultural persona could be both a victim and a victimizer. In its turn, *Mission London* displays the ambivalence of language heterogeneity itself. The novel's characters attempt to appropriate and make their own the language idioms of the different host culture. Laughter shows that language can be used to deceive, to hide and disguise one's authentic cultural identity. That is to say, Alek Popov's *Mission London* unveils language's ability to shift and mimic. Consequently, for the characters in *Mission London*, the linking between heterogeneous phrases is unproblematic and there is no need for new idioms to be created, as the unworded *differend* willingly goes for the shortcut and assumes the language structure of the already existing, stronger regimens. Overall, the persistent metamorphosis of identities and values depicted in the novel disallows heterogeneity of regimens as they continuously flow into one another. *Mission London* points out that admitting to be the victim of a cultural wrong can put somebody in an even bigger peril than before. In other words, the text plays with the advantages of simply going with the flow and pretending to belong.

Even though the laughter in *Bai Ganyo* and *Mission London* does not negate the theoretical and ethical significance and merit of Lyotard's justice model based on the concept of the *differend*, it exposes this model's concealed universality and limitations. While fighting the stiffening universality of modern philosophical systems, by introducing a tool for combating the very possibility of the creation of universal discourses—the *differend*—Lyotard himself falls victim to the far-reaching grip of universalization. Namely, as laughter shows, every theoretical model, even the most open and democratic one, relies on certain fixed conceptual structures, which have to be followed and respected in order for the model to work. Those indispensable conceptual requirements, as Lyotard's insistence on wording and bearing witness to the *differend*, for example, constitute a form of universality. That is to say, they postulate a universally applicable frame, which shapes culture and reality in general, after a certain specific fashion. On another point, the fact that there are exceptions, as *Bai Ganyo* and *Mission London* demonstrate, to the justice model suggested by the *differend*, comes to prove this model's inability to unfailingly expose and fight universality, hence, injustice.

Finally, it may be the case that wording cultural difference is impossible and wrong altogether. Laughter and the cultural intuitions and passions it reveals are far better witnesses to cultural heterogeneity than any (philosophical) discourse.

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