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Multicultural Australia in fiction

TSIOLKAS, Christos. **The Slap**. London: Penguin, 2010. 482 p. ISBN: 9780143117148.

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'Case dismissed'. It's the verdict that the Australian female judge pronounced in a case in which Harry was sued for slapping a four-year-old boy Hugo, the undisciplined, nuisance-mongering son of Gary and Rosie, during a neighboring suburban Melbourne barbecue. The slapping episode anchors Tsiolkas's narrative but is easily peripherized by the problematization and the dissection of social mores, family life, tensions, conflicts, loyalty, happiness, beliefs and desires in 21st century multicultural Australia, focused from a rather pessimistic stance. Tsiolkas's *The Slap*, which won the 2010 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, has been preceded by *Loaded* (1995), *The Jesus Man* (1999) and *Dead Europe* (2005). Melbourne-born Tsiolkas (born in 1965) has not fared well with critics even though the book blurbs are unflinchingly laudatory.

The Slap portrays multiculturalism in Australia in all its subtle characteristics and with all its hyphenated characters: Greeks, Italians, Arabs, Indians, English, Aborigines, Slavs, Jews, with no separate ethnic enclaves; religious miscegenation is rife, mostly featuring atheists, Muslims and Greek Orthodox; the age-bracket ranges from 4-year-olds (third generation), to middle-age married people, to 70-year-old patriarchs (immigrants of the 1960s) with the subsequent maelstroms highlighting schooling, preparation for life, education, sex (including extra-marital), bisexuality, homosexuality, drugs, heavy smoking and drinking, filthy language, anger, hate. It is not merely a picture of contemporary Australia, even though one may suspect the seedy scenes somewhat exaggerated in their intensity and frequency, but a novel that tries to be Australian and not a traditionally British or Irish derivative written by an Australian. In an interview for *The Times* in May 2010, Tsiolkas explains his point. He thinks that Australian writing had been locked up in the shadow of the English and the Irish, in the sense that Australians didn't want to write the Australian novel but wanted to write the perfect English novel or the perfect Irish

novel [...]. He stated that he wanted to write in a language that was the language Australians speak now, the way they express themselves now. For about a decade, he insists, Australians have read fiction in English with this sense of removal from the vital, from the passionate, from the emotional and there had been good reasons for that. It has been the collapse of certainties and a mark of contemporary generation. This statement is corroborated when in the ABC News of April 2009 Tsiolkas defines *The Slap* as a novel of the middle class: Tsiolkas wanted to write about suburbia and he wanted to write about a new kind of middle class that had its roots in the old working class. It felt like that it had never been represented in previous pages and had never been shown on contemporary screens. The ABC News insisted that maybe that was an element of the book that challenged people or interested people.

The story is 'told' by eight characters-focalizers, four men (Hector, a civil servant, married to the vet Aicha, and father of two children; Harry, a successful businessman and the 'slapper', married to the Serbian Sandi, and father to Rocco; Manolis, the old Greek patriarch, married to Koula, and father to Hector, Harry and Elizabeth; Richie, a gay friend of Connie, Rosie and Gary) and four women (white Australian Rosie, married to the convict-descendant alcoholic Gary, and spoiling mother of Hugo, the slapped child; Connie, an orphaned teenager, whose bisexual father was HIV-infected, now living with her aunt Tasha; the Anglo-Indian Aisha, mother to the children Melissa and Adam; Anouk, a single and childless Jewish female, friend to all). There are other characters, highly important for the development of the plot, such as the Aboriginal-turned-Muslim Bilal (formerly Terry) and his Muslim wife Shamira. In fact, the novel, basically dealing with identities and personal relationships in a multicultural society, is a multilayered narrative with several threads flashing back and forward firmly controlled by the narrator.

Although the slapping episode is just an event in the lives of the people concerned, except for Rosie and Aisha, it opens wide the characters' identities with all their ups and downs and triggers memories with successive flashbacks. The 'self-righteous' but husband-faithful Rosie who sues Harry for slapping her child reveals her sexually promiscuous attitudes as a teenager back in Perth. "She got back at them [her school mates] by sleeping with their boyfriends, with their brothers. She fucked their fathers. She continued doing it at the new school, the state school, full of boys to fuck" (TSIOLKAS, 2010, p. 288). The Aborigine Bilal is now a devout Muslim steadfastly shunning beer-drinking - several flashbacks reveal him as a rowdy, filthy, alcoholic fellow. This is actually Tsiolkas's narrative technique: the present reveals either dedication to the family or degrading attitudes which are then layered upon by analepses respectively dealing with the opposite. Past and present delineate the character and their repercussions form their unstable, angry and edgy reactions to circumstances.

Focalization is another important technique used by Tsiolkas. The chapters headed by the name of the characters are not autodiegetic; rather, a heterodiegetic narrator lies close to the character and reveals dialogue, thoughts, feelings and activities. The strategy by which the dialogue between characters is subtly interrupted by their thoughts brings forth effective suppleness to the novel. This may be seen in the would-be reconciliatory dialogue between the 70-year-old Manolis and his daughter-in-law Aisha long after the slapping episode:

'Rosie loves Hugo'.

'Why she no stop her son when he was very bad?'

'Hugo is only a child. He doesn't know better'.

Exactly. Exactly the damned problem. He doesn't know better because he has not been taught to know better.

'She is terrible, a terrible mother'. He didn't care anymore, he was no longer interested in cajoling Aisha, in being gentle. (TSIOLKAS, 2010, p. 338)

The focalizer's interruption, actually Manolis's non-expressed comments (I placed them in italics), has the same effect as the chorus in a Greek tragedy, or rather, they reproduce the underlying objective moral admonition which, by the way, goes unheeded by Aisha who prefers Rosie's friendship and consequently the animosity of the others to admitting the relative insignificance of the case.

Tsiolkas's prose is not free from clichés (people looking at mirrors), shopworn phrases ("Her mouth tightened"), platitudes ("She nodded appreciatively"), whereas insights, nuances, subtleties and striking

descriptions are not so frequent and deep as one would expect in a book which received the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. On the other hand, through satire, the author criticizes the very texture of Australian modern life with its working class turning bourgeoisie and becoming worse, its selfishness, its lack of forgiveness and pardons, its absence of pathos for old age, its liberalism in dealing with children (they go uncensored) and young people (drugs condoned by middle-aged people). It is a scathing criticism on the false possession of 'truth' and 'the politically correct' and provokes the readers to question their steadfastly held beliefs. It even criticizes one of its core themes: the use of terms such as 'wogs' (Greeks, Arabs, Italians, Maltese, Aborigines), 'bogans' (working class) and 'Austrolezi' shows that multiculturalism is not a total antidote (both ways, of course) against racist and social bias.

Further, Tsiolkas, who is a homosexual, finds himself enmeshed in feminist and queer issues. There is a high degree of sexual equality in the novel, and males, even older European immigrants, are not particularly patriarchal in their attitudes. Females take initiatives in sexual fantasies and activities, follow careers at will, drink heavily and go to bars alone or with others accordingly. However, the domestic life and its chores are their fate, they are still generally seen as a sex object and a slightly more extensive freedom may be perceived underlying the activities of most male characters. Richie, the fledging queer character in the novel, reveals the difficulties that homosexuals have in constructing their identity and living up to their specific sexual options. Although the social environment may be tolerant, the character's many ambiguities, mistakes and wrong decisions symbolize the anguish of being oneself in a hegemonic heterosexual environment. By putting Richie as the novel's last focalizer and by highlighting the novelty of Australian young people's activities, Tsiolkas seems to make a case of a new world in which what is absurd now (the intermarriage of Trojans and Aborigines) is "the future that had begun to creep up".

The Slap is not a novel that "[...] shows how a single action can change the way people think about how they live, what they want, and what they believe forever [...]", as the Penguin cover review would like readers to believe. Still the 'ethical' problems brought about when a child (with no moral boundaries) is beaten and when more serious ones are raised do not place existential doubts and interrogations in the readers, as a novel is wont to do. It is rather a bird's eye view of the deeply impacting negotiations among people of different ethnic and

social backgrounds vying with themselves and their 'genes' in multicultural Australia. Gilroy's term 'conviviality' rather than 'the melting pot' describes their ethnic integration without complete assimilation. *The Slap* may not be 'the' Australian novel of the early 21st century, but it is surely one that shows future trends for multicultural literature and independent postcolonial writing.

TSIOLKAS, C. **The Slap**. London: Penguin, 2010.

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