

SLOVENE IMMIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA IN RICHARD FLANAGAN'S NOVEL *THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING*

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Abstract

The core of this article presents a structural and thematic analysis of a novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* (1979) written by a contemporary Australian novelist Richard Flanagan (1961-). The novel deals mainly with the life of a Slovene family, which immigrated to Australia in 1954. The story centres on the life of the heroine, Sonja Buloh, who finds herself at the end of the 1980ies in a severe mental crisis. Besides, the author of this article uses information about immigrants' life in Australia obtained from reports and sketches of a Slovene psychiatrist who treated immigrants in Melbourne. The author of this paper also calls the reader's attention to various literary allusions, which appear in the novel (e.g. Eugene O'Neill, John Keats, W. B. Yeats). It also appears that Flanagan was under a strong spiritual influence of the Indian philosopher Osho (= Bhagwan Shree Rajneshi) and his meditations upon life as published in Osho's book bearing the same title as Flanagan's novel and which first appeared in 1981. The novel is particularly interesting for Slovene readers, because it uncovers the emotional and spiritual life of Slovene immigrants in Australia.

I.

The news that in 1997 the Australian author Richard Flanagan (b. 1961) had published a novel *The Sound of one Hand Clapping* in which the main story develops around three characters who came to Australia in 1954 as refugees from Slovenia, did not only come as a surprise to the reading public in Slovenia but also to critics and literary historians who follow the development of literature in Australia. His first novel, *Death of a River Guide*, did not receive much attention in Europe, in spite of the fact that it won the Australian Fiction Award. The feature film, which was based on *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, undoubtedly also contributed to the popularity of the novel, which has since been translated into several languages. The novel would remain only another prose work dealing with immigrants and their problems, if it did not have an outstanding aesthetic value, which places it among the best achievements in Australian fiction in the last few decades.

The novel is divided into 86 chapters, each of them bearing as its title the year in which the central episode of the chapter takes place. The exceptions are the last two

chapters (85 and 86), which are untitled and leave the time period open or may simply be the present. The theme of the first chapter, Maria Buloh's singing a Slovene lullaby to her three year old daughter Sonja, and her departure from home into a snowy, blizzard night, is referred to in the novel a number of times in different variations and the same lullaby concludes the novel when Sonja's daughter is born thirty-six years later. The analysis of the time scope dealt within this novel show us that the majority of scenes take place during the years 1989 and 1990 (16 and 25 chapters, respectively), which form together with the last two, undated scenes, exactly half of the novel. However, the middle of this concluding part, consisting of 43 chapters, is broken several times, and in the final 21 chapters the break occurs after the ninth chapter, taking the reader (in six chapters) back to the beginning of the story in 1954. In the first half of the novel the jumps in time occur even more regularly, although the majority of events take place between 1954 and 1966. However, even within these scenes defined by time, the narrator includes many glimpses both of the past and of the future, so that the story of the novel is really completely intertwined; the past, the present and the future mix into an amalgamation of incidents, dreams, memories and hopes of the main characters. The theme of the novel is not only counterbalanced, but it has counterpoints skilfully and tightly interspersed throughout the whole novel.

The novel has a short motto which was written by the Serbian author Ivo Andrić in Sarajevo in 1946. In it, Andrić describes and comments briefly upon the effect of the Second World War on people in Bosnia. In his view the war turned the young ones into old people, "these youthful grey heads, from which the nonchalance of youth has been stolen". This message about the evil of wars obviously did not reach the new generations living in Bosnia and in other parts of former Yugoslavia, for at the time when Richard Flanagan wrote this novel another war was going on in Bosnia. It is ironical enough that among the intellectuals in Bosnia now, when I am writing this article (in summer 1999) a dispute is going on about Ivo Andrić's moral responsibility for these antagonisms, accusing him of his support of the Serbs against the Muslims and the Croats living in Bosnia. The Second World War and its aftermath are also closely connected with the fate of the Buloh family, with "the stolen youth" experienced by Bojan and Maria as well as of their daughter Sonja, who was only sixteen months old when her parents brought her to Australia, where they hoped to find peace, happiness and prosperity. But their dreams did not come true although by the end of the novel the author suggests that after many years of suffering Sonja and her baby may eventually lead a different kind of life.

II.

The narrator opens the novel with a short presentation of the time and the place of the novel: "All this you will come to understand but can never know, and all of it took place long, long ago in a world that has since perished into pit, in a forgotten winter on an island of which few have ever heard" (1). First of all, it may seem strange that the narrator tells the reader that he will never really "know" what happened in Tasmania in 1954; however, as we continue reading the novel we see that the narrator

includes various perspectives about particular events, meditations, feelings of his characters, and that unlike the traditional, omniscient story-teller he does not take it for granted that he can tell us “the whole truth”. As we discover throughout the novel, the truth may appear to be different to different people although in reality it is composed of hundreds of facts, each one of them contributing to a more complete picture of reality. The narrator occasionally admits that he does not know what was going on in the mind of a particular person at a certain moment and therefore his tale is in a way incomplete. So, for example, he uses the syntagma “Some people say ..” (1), or “Some people even say...” (2) to leave the issue open. Characters who appear in the novel are aware that they cannot tell wholly about some event. When Sonja asks her (and her mother’s) friend Helvi, what happened to Maria, Helvi thinks that the story “was not hers to tell. She was no chronicler who might foolishly pretend it was possible to assemble all the details to begin at the beginning and end at the end, but only an old woman ..(who) understood only the unspeakable nature of it” (177). Or, the first three paragraphs of chapter 85, which is set in the year 1954, begin with a sentence expressing such uncertainty, “If this tale could be told properly it would be filled with everything..” (376), and “If this tale could be told fully, you would be able to swim through the strangeness of the weather..” (376), or “All this and more. All of this and more and more and the sea would still not be full or the story told, but of a night child Sonja lay in her bed ..” (377). The author also skilfully – like an author of a detective novel – conceals the facts connected with Maria’s departure and fate until the end of the novel. Flanagan’s narrative technique greatly contributes to the complex vision of the world which he presents in this novel.

III.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy begins his novel *Anna Karenina* with a famous sentence, “All happy families resemble each other, each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”. This statement is true for the Buloh family, although many of its features were also shared by other immigrant families which came to Australia from Europe after the Second World War. These immigrants brought with them the impact of the hardships and cruelties which happened to them and their relatives during and after the War. Although Maria Buloh only appears in the first chapter of the novel, her fate dominates that of her husband, Bojan, and their daughter, Sonja, almost until the very end of the novel. In the first chapter we see how Maria takes leave from her daughter Sonja on a cold, winter night, trying to soothe her crying baby by singing her a Slovene lullaby about a little black man, almost like Humpty Dumpty, who walks around at night and sends children to sleep. But the child has noticed that something unusual is going on and she will not be pacified. It is obvious that Maria is taking a decisive step, “she knows that she had already gone too far and that she could no longer return” (1). The narrator tells us that at that moment Maria’s awareness of the situation is such that she can notice everything around herself and including herself, as if she were an outside observer and not an active participant in life. We only learn later what kind of reasons made her take this decision which fell so hard on her husband and on her daughter.

Maria's departure increases Bojan's loneliness in this foreign country in which he does not know how to express his thoughts and feelings. He has to work hard in the new environment and he spends the evenings together with immigrants from other European countries whose knowledge of English is also very limited, so that they bridge the gaps in conversation by using vulgar words. When Bojan gets drunk – and this is not rare – he gets quickly enraged and if Sonja mentions his drinking, Bojan calls her vulgar names, often referring at the same time to “a whore of her mother” (16). He drinks so heavily to forget the past and the present, and “Days and weeks fled by with the speed of a few seconds, and a few seconds stretched into an eternity of suffering” (65). He is aware that his inability to communicate does not only prevent him from getting a better job but that he also does not know how to tell Sonja and other people what he thinks and how he feels. He swears in Italian, like the Slovenes at home, not “to profane his native tongue” (93). Through his beating of Sonja he in a way tries to establish a kind of contact with her, but this does not work. She only becomes a more introverted person, losing all emotional contact with her father.

During the war Bojan saw how people were tortured and killed and these experiences made him believe that people are essentially evil. The loss of his wife, the estrangement between him and his daughter and his disappointment with the new life in Australia are the cause of his complete disappointment with ideals he had when young, such as Nation, the Working Class, Socialism, the Future, and so on. His rule in life became not to tell people the truth or what he meant and not to trust anybody (187). He works hard, as if he wished to fight with nature when he cuts stone. When an Australian film team comes to Butlers Gorge, where Bojan is one of many immigrant workers building a dam for a hydro-electric power station, the camera-man sees Bojan as a “wild wog” (66) and the whole scene as “fucking heroic” (67), whereas in reality Bojan's life is full of misery and tragedy.

Bojan does not have a positive attitude towards the Church, because he believes that many priests in Slovenia collaborated with the Fascists during the War. His only retreat into spiritual peace is when he finds the material, the time and the energy to work with wood, to make tables, chairs, cupboards and the like, at which he is really good and he enjoys doing most. Therefore in her imagination Sonja links her father with wood, which is on the one hand symbolically connected with the fact that her father is a difficult person to deal with, a hard-headed, stubborn man, and on the other, by his ability to create something beautiful out of wood by his hard work and imagination. A strange and awkward expression of his love of Sonja is seen in the fact that he buys her the twenty-four volume set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and tells her to read it so that she would not have to have a future like his.

During one summer Bojan has a connection with a lady friend, Jean, who gets on well with Sonja too. But one morning, when Bojan and Jean send Sonja from their bedroom, Sonja starts to believe that her father's relationship with Jean could mean her exclusion, her separation from him. “She watched with unease as Bojan gently parted Jean's hair with his hands, then with equal tenderness cupped and ever so slowly rolled one of Jean's breasts” (222). This scene fills Sonja with fear that she might lose her father and that night she has a terrible dream in which she cries for help but Bojan turns away from her and embraces Jean. On the following day Sonja tells her father

that she does not wish to share him with Jean. Bojan accepts her decision, but from that moment on his personal life is even more bitter than before. When he visits a brothel in the outskirts of Hobart he meets a prostitute who knows him, but he is unable “to enter through her gates into her body” (286). The prostitute realizes that Bojan has not come there for sex, but to cry over his fate (287), and – as the narrator tells us – to achieve the unachievable, to establish a contact with his wife Maria.

Although Maria troubled Bojan’s memory for years, he only eventually realized that he did not really know her and that he does not know his daughter Sonja either (332). He came to Australia to be free, but his own life and that of his family turned out to be a disaster. The past is symbolically repeated again and again by the clockwork mechanism which plays ‘Lara’s Theme’ from the film *Dr Zhivago*. Bojan is tired of it and in anger he one day breaks the coffee cup – such an impulsive action is also characteristic of Sonja – and the music stops. “He no longer saw chaos. The storm has ended, the song finally over” (328).

The process of Bojan’s transformation which includes the rejection of the idea that darkness always prevails in life and that life is a triumph of evil (407) lasts for decades until he becomes reconciled with his daughter after twenty-two years of separation. He then accepts Sonja as her own person and he is happy that he is going to become a grand-father. But on the whole the reader can see that Bojan’s life has definitely been ruined, he still drinks, though less frequently than before. He becomes estranged even from his drinking pals. He likes to revive old memories, remembering how he and Maria fled from Yugoslavia across the Alps. In such moments he does not care about drinking, and “Even to other wogs he had become a real wog: forever different, alien even to other aliens” (308). Nevertheless he occasionally “seemed genuinely happy” (420), looking at old photographs and sitting in front of his house, with his small garden where he grew strawberries for his grand-daughter and musing with a certain wonder over memories of his past life.

In many ways, Sonja, the heroine of the novel, is the one who suffers most. After her mother’s departure her father turns into “an unrecognizable monster” (13) and therefore the abyss between her and him is deeper from one day to another. She learns not to cry when he beats her, to stifle her sobbing within herself. Sonja has very few pleasant memories from her childhood and her youth, the only exception are the Heaney children, who are considered rather wild by the neighbourhood, but whose mother takes Sonja in as one of her own. Although Sonja does not have such problems with communication as her father does, she is intimidated by him as well as by the two families where she spends her youth. She “never tried to explain herself, nor did she believe there was much virtue in talking things out”, and although she found words “interesting”, “even powerful”, they were never “reliable” (97), particularly when she wished to express her emotions. Her attitude to life changes during the years of her absence from Tasmania, when the past begins to lose a grip on her and when she begins to experience time as a positive, independent quality of life. The narrator conveys her perception of time in a Yeatsian manner: “In a growing gyre, she felt time circling her, at first slowly, as if waiting. And though it seemed dreams were being born within dreams, it was not so. It was only Tasmania in spring.” (20) Unlike the story in the Biblical parable Sonja returns to Tasmania to find there her “long lost parent” (28).

She knows now that Tasmania shaped them and that they shaped it too. This scene occurs in 1989, when changes happen not only at Sonja's personal level but when the history of many European nations changes too, when "the destructive power of evil" – like the Berlin wall – is conquered and "the redeeming power of love" (25) begins to prevail. Only then does Sonja start to capture the present, to turn it into her "dreams of tomorrow" (23) and to leave behind her past. Her change makes it possible for her father to accept her as his equal, as his partner.

Sonja has a very hard life in childhood and in adolescence. The engineer's wife, Mrs Michnik, after the disappearance of Sonja's mother takes Sonja to stay with her, but she does this on the pretence of false Christian ethics. Sonja's life there is miserable and she can hardly wait for her father to take her away. But he does not bring her home, he takes her to live with the Picotti family. Sonja is then in her early teens. Umberto Picotti, who is so jealous about his wife, has no moral inhibitions regarding his sexual desires towards Sonja. So, one day he orders Sonja to come with him for a drive "to find his unfaithful wife and her phantom lover" (128). Although Sonja has noticed that Umberto likes to watch her, to stare at her, like "an animal with semaphoring eyes sizing his prey" (126), she does not expect him to do anything bad to her. But when in the car he starts to tell her how corrupt her mother was and then "He reached over and placed his hand on the inside of Sonja's leg and began to draw it up her thigh." She gets terrified and asks him what he is doing, but Picotti just smiles and "His hand was nearing the top of her thigh .."(130). Fortunately she can escape from his car, although this incident, and Sonja's trying to make Picotti's child accept the hardships of life without crying, terminate her stay with the Picottis.

The narrator does not tell us much about Sonja's life in Sydney between 1967 and 1989. We know she made a professional career from typist to secretary, to an administrative position in an insurance company and finally to a productive assistant in a television company. This means that she is no longer condemned to a life in the diaspora (76). We also learn very little about her personal life, which is summarized in a few sentences. "She had known off and on the sweet warmth and heavy odours of a shared bed and a common life, had slept with many men, and, when younger, a few women, sometimes out of desire and more often simply for comfort. But then she found she could no longer satisfy desire nor find comfort" (59). By her late thirties she had had enough of men who cheated her, who "used her for sex or for company or for money or for any combination of the three" (61), and when she learns that she is pregnant she definitely does not wish to continue her love affair. She lays the main blame for this on her past and she makes an appointment at a Sydney clinic to have an abortion after her return from Tasmania. But her friends Helvi and Jiri try to persuade her that she should stay in Tasmania and she decides not to return to Sydney just before she should embark the plane.

Sonja realizes that life could have been different when she visits the place where Jean once lived. Jean's home has been turned into a barn, the trees have no blossoms and Jean's window no lace. Sonja feels guilty about this, as if she had betrayed her father and Jean, making the life of each one of them so lonely and miserable. There was nobody with whom she, or Bojan, or Jean could share the happiness and the sadness of life. This is "the sound of one hand clapping" (236), the emotional emptiness

and the alienation of each one who once used to share the feelings with others. The reconciliation with her father and her love and responsibility towards the baby she carries in her womb are the main reasons for her new, positive attitude towards life. After she gives birth to her daughter and becomes reconciled with her father, her emotions begin to function naturally, she can laugh and she can cry, her feelings are no longer repressed.

Sonja's decision to start leading a completely different kind of life is the only solution against despair, which forced her mother into committing suicide. Sonja hears the story about the death of "an immigrant woman" in Tasmania when she sees on the TV an interview with an old man, Preston, who used to be the AWU organizer. He was coming on a motor-bike to Butlers Gorge on the very same night when her mother left the settlement in the blizzard. He remembers that the woman wore "a scarlet coat and beneath it a dress edged in lace" (245). When Sonja wishes to extract the fact about her mother's destiny from Helvi, she avoids answering her directly and tells her only that Maria was a good woman and a good mother, who loved Sonja (178). She finally learns the truth from her father, who tells her that her mother was raped by SS soldiers during the War, when she was only twelve years old, and that the same happened to Maria's mother and her sister. Maria could never fully recover from this event, and her family's miserable life in Australia must have been another cause for her mental problems, which Bojan did not even notice. Maria wished and – at the same time – did not wish to remember her native village, set in the midst of the Julian Alps, buried in snow in winter and surrounded by green pastures and flowers in summer. The pressure of the new environment was too much for her, she could endure it no longer. Her complete lack of belief in life forced her to commit suicide.

A Slovene psychiatrist, Jurij Zalokar, who spent the years 1986–1989 as a doctor at a hospital in Melbourne, mainly responsible for patients who came to Australia from Slovenia and the rest of Yugoslavia, enumerates in his autobiographical account *Mavrična kača* (The Rainbow Snake, 1990) the main symptoms typical of migrants with mental problems. They are: alienation from society, introversion, the loss of perception of reality, unbearable nostalgia about their native country, uncertainty about moral values, hallucination, spiritual regressiveness. These symptoms are often caused, says Zalokar, by the immigrant's inability to communicate with the native population and it is particularly hard for them not to be able to communicate even with their own children. They learn English fairly quickly and because they do not wish to be different from other children, not to be ridiculed by them, many of them avoid using their mother tongue even at home (Zalokar 19–24, 81). He noticed that among the first generation of Greek, Italian and some of the Yugoslav migrants, 70 or even up to 90% of them still did not speak English although they had lived in Australia for many years. Zalokar mentions as a special cause of migrants' health problems their inability to express their thoughts and feelings, which may even induce them to commit suicide (94). These psychological observations as causes of mental distress may also – at least partly – be applied to members of the Buloh family, and Flanagan presents such symptoms in a very personal, individual manner.

On the day following Maria's disappearance from the village, the men building the dam, including Bojan, are taken by a truck to their building site. All of a sudden a

Czech fellow notices something in the wood that he saw before in the Bohemian forests, and a dozen other men see the body of Maria Buloh, “a stiffening corpse suspended upon a rope from a tall tree” (397). At first Bojan Buloh cannot even cry and then he begins to sob uncontrollably. The noise around him means nothing to him and his thoughts – not unlike the meditations of Shakespeare’s heroes – revolve in his mind about the simple facts of life. “There was birth and there was love and there was death, and there was death and there was noise, this endless noise that confused people, making them forget that there was only birth and love and that each and everything died” (399). If Sonja is troubled in her dreams with the image of her departing mother, Bojan tries to forget the sight of his dead wife in work and in intoxication. Although his tragic story is unique it resembles in some ways other stories briefly mentioned in the novel, as e.g. of his Polish fellow-worker Pavel, whose wife and children disappeared during the war, or of some other immigrants, whose lives were also ruined in one way or another.

This brings us to “the wogs”, or “the reffos”, as the Australians call immigrants from Europe who are of non-British descent. The immigrants left post-Second World War Europe and migrated to Australia hoping to find there a new, happy life, although for many immigrants of the first generation the golden promise of a better future does not come true. But most of them did not feel good in their native country either, like Jiri, who was born in Moravia, half Sudeten German and half Czech, but considered by both peoples as an outsider. Most of “the wogs” do not speak proper English and so they can only share their lives with other immigrants. They are only “prospective Australians”. Some of them, like the Greek shopkeeper whose name was changed into “John Kerr” (157), have even lost their personal identity, not to speak of losing their national identity when they become Australian citizens. They are lonely men who know that they are going to die lonely and this is why they fear the night and stay up late in the pub and get drunk to forget. At the back of their minds creeps the thought that death will do them a favour and relieve them of the burden of life.

A very different view about the life of migrants than the one presented in Flanagan’s novel is shown in the personal account of a Slovene immigrant Ivan Kobal, who came to Australia in 1950 and spent the years 1954–1958 helping to build the Snowy Mountains hydro-electric scheme. His presentation of the hard life, human suffering and deaths which occurred during these years is much more warm-hearted and optimistic than the story of Flanagan’s novel. Kobal sees the above-mentioned project as “A challenge and a reward, a battle and a victory in time of peace ... (as) a model case of human endeavour, a test of faith in a better future” (4). For him this enterprise is a statement how men of different nationalities build the mosaic of multicultural Australia.

Flanagan does not depict “the old settlers” in Australia in a very pleasant light either. Those who represent the administration, the power, are often conceited, self-satisfied and they wish to make Australia a copy of Europe. They believe that the new immigrants will receive from them the greatness of British civilization, its language, belief in justice and fair play and in return they expect from them hope and determination (44). They do not wish to remember that the land was not empty when their ancestors got there and that they took it away from the “blackfellas”. They deny the history of

Australia and the author makes a parallel between them and the Chinese Emperor Shih Huang Ti, who ordered the construction of the Great wall of China and the destruction of all books preceding his reign. They build enormous electric water-power stations to make Tasmania one day "Australia's Ruhr Valley" (21), but in reality these monstrous projects are the sign of their vanity. Even within the time scope of the novel the dam begins to decay and it seems to Sonja "an historical oddity as curious and as inexplicable as a Mayan temple in a Mexican jungle", as "a relic from another age" (26). One of the reasons why Sonja wishes to visit Tasmania again is that in spite of some ecological disasters Tasmania has on the whole still preserved its natural heritage. Sonja wishes to see again "the peculiar Tasmanian light and what it touched upon, what it was that stood between the sun and the earth, that strange light of negative images, whereby the sky could be dark as pitch and the earth could glow ruby gold, and only shadows holding the two together" (17). But such an attitude reflects also the change in Sonja's view upon life, the change for which she has searched for a long time.

IV.

The novel is extremely rich in imagery and in many literary, historical, political and religious associations, which make Richard Flanagan's work *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* a literary masterpiece. The author creates a gloomy atmosphere by his presentation of a wild blizzard in which Maria is seen like an angel, or like a spectre, which will be sucked up in a gale. Her scarlet dress is contrasted with the white snow and black clouds, which "shroud the star and moonlit heavens", indicating Maria's tragic end and they are accompanied by "the whispering land" (1) of the settlers in Butlers Gorge. Maria wears "burgundy-coloured shoes" (1) which are also suggestive of blood and of her premature death.

When Sonja returns to Tasmania and stops at the dam, the narrator uses the transferred epitheton to present her feelings as "the coldness of the stalactite tears falling down the dam face" (33). She begins to dig the bush covered peat in the rainforest and she finds pieces of porcelain, which bring her the memories of childhood, but which are also connected with her father's rage. When Sonja returns to Tasmania she is physically beautiful, she sees in the mirror her ripe body, like the wings of the swan growing from her padded shoulders, almost like that of an angel or like a dove in Henry James's novel *The Wings of the Dove*. Sonja no longer needs to complain about false friends (like King David in *Psalms* 55:6) to give her "wings like a dove" so that she could fly away "and be at rest", because she has found her inner peace and is no longer under the wings of "the terrors of death". She has found peace under the wings of God who is Love (*Psalms* 17:8, 57:1) as well as in her "trust in Life" (*Psalms* 36:7, 61:4, 91:4). Flanagan's use of Biblical symbolism suggests a variety of allusions and an optimistic ending.

Bojan's renunciation of Yugoslav citizenship and his acceptance of naturalization is compared to a storm in the Adriatic sea and "the young girl-Queen and Ming Menzies circled around him like wolves" (42). When Bojan has a nightmare he sees in his dream "a fucken Tassie tiger" (58), which is supposed to be extinct, and when the tiger

opens its jaw Bojan sees in it terrible things which had happened in Slovenia and elsewhere in Europe during the War (58). After the disappearance of his wife Bojan's mind seems to exist in "a huge dark tunnel" (65) – almost like the tunnel often described by people who were on the verge of death –down which he is travelling towards some distant and almost unreachable ray of light. The novel is full of imagery of light and darkness and it is paradoxical that the evil of life, which is so often present, is terrifying but also in a way beautiful like Blake's tiger, and the symbol of light is like starry nights in Australia, which are also beautiful, although the stars cannot be reached.

Maria and Bojan are symbolically defined by two powerful images, that of lace and of wood. Sonja's mother walks out into the night in a dress embroidered with lace and lace often appears in Sonja's dream related to her mother (19). In some regions of Slovenia lace is still a typical product connected with folk art. It is characterized by its fragility, its endurance and its beauty, and these qualities may also denote the character of the person who made it. In Slovenia making lace ornaments has a long tradition and lace is thus connected with the past (also in Sonja's life). Even Preston, who only very briefly saw Maria on the night of the blizzard, remembers her by the embroidery of her dress (245). Bojan's friend Jean has a window curtain embroidered with lace and Sonja is afraid that her father might – like her mother's lace – one day dissolve into air or in the wind (260, 387, 400).

The colour which is closely associated with Maria is red, the scarlet and the burgundy shades of it. The red colour sometimes has a positive connotation in colour symbolism, but in this case it is linked with blood, with death. The scarlet coat, which Maria wears, may represent a deconstruction of the symbolic red letter "A", denoting adultery for Hester Prynne, the heroine in Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. But Maria was, unlike Hester, raped and lost her innocence forcefully; nevertheless this incident left a lasting imprint of shame and guilt on her soul and it was known to her surroundings. In many ways she reminds the reader of another destruction of a character, that of Mary Tyrone in Eugene O'Neill's play *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Mary's husband James, like Bojan in Flanagan's novel, expects her to be on the one hand like the Virgin Mary, a faithful wife and a good mother, and on the other, to be his sensual mistress. Sonja even places the picture of her mother on an elevated place, together with the picture of the Virgin Mary. Sonja, unlike her mother, does not wish to give way to the destructive, nihilistic forces which also exist in her, and she knows that she is not faultless. But she realizes that life is not perfect and that her dreams to be like a toy ballerina "forever frozen in a single beautiful dance, circling within a circle forever" (325) cannot come true. Flanagan joins here various images from John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium", and he counterpoints them with Sonja's awareness that she is not a fair and happy maiden proclaiming "beauty is truth", nor can she be a golden bird living forever. In Flanagan's modern world the old myths connected with man's hope for eternity are destroyed, they are acceptable only within the limitations of human imperfection.

Flanagan's diction and style are extremely rich and varied, ranging from vulgar language to everyday and elevated, poetic language. The rhythmical structure of his sentences is sometimes even closely linked with the Biblical style (repetitions, oppositions, terseness and conciseness), as for example in the description of Bojan's

lament over his uneasy relationship with his daughter Sonja (e.g. 51–59, 263). The author also includes a Slovene song, a lullaby, which is the *leitmotif* through the whole novel. A number of other Slovene words, which are included in the novel appear in a context which provides their easy understanding. They are mostly written phonetically so that their Slovene pronunciation can be guessed by English readers.

V.

Richard Flanagan's novel *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* presents a new perspective upon the lives of Slovene and other migrants in Australia in the period after World War Two. Igor Maver expresses the following opinion about the book: "Is it perhaps an exaggeration to say that with Flanagan the Slovene migrant experience entered Australian 'mainstream' literature and Australian consciousness, that it broke loose from within the borders of the Slovene ethnic group living in Australia? Definitely so ...It is also a subtle artistic depiction, a document of a certain historical period in Tasmanian past and of its people, a region not too frequently represented in the landscape of Australian literature. And finally, the book is a domestic novel, testifying to a domestic migrant family tragedy and survival, which can be achieved through love and understanding" (Maver 81–2). Flanagan shows how the treatment of immigrants coming from non-English speaking countries by the rest of the population and by the government administration put these people – at least the first generation – in an inferior position to the rest of the population. However, the second generation of immigrants to which the heroine of the novel, Sonja Buloh, also belongs, becomes equal to the rest of the Australians. Her journey is painful not only because of the social and racial prejudices with which she was faced in her youth, but also as a result of the unhappy personal and family circumstances in which she grew up. Richard Flanagan gave an interview to a Slovene TV reporter Aleksander Čolnik (Flanagan 1999). In this interview Flanagan says that his wife Majda, who is of Slovene origin told him about her family struggle to survive in Australia, where her parents came after the Second World War: "They left their homes and they never really found a new home, they forsook one language and they never really gained a new language" (*Ib.*), they had to go through terrible experiences, but most of them saw their experiences in a tragic-comic way. Flanagan chose to write about a Slovene migrant family because he believes that Australia is a country of migrants, and because that was the world he knew best. These people had experienced great tragedies, they had traversed certain depths of the human soul and therefore their view upon life is more profound.

This brings us back to the meaning of the title Richard Flanagan used for his novel. Although he says in the above-mentioned interview that the title appealed to him because of its openness to interpretation, because it is enigmatic, it is possible to surmise that Flanagan knew at the time of his writing this novel of a book of meditations, written by an Indian philosopher Osho (= B. Rajneesh, 1931–1990). These were published in 1981 under the very same title as Flanagan's novel (Osho, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*: 1981). Some of the main views expressed by Osho about his "new religious consciousness" may very well be linked with the state of mind as

reflected in Sonja at the end of the novel. Osho's meditations lead the reader to accept the necessity of greater self-awareness, and this is also the point Sonja reaches at the end of her spiritual journey. Osho mentions many times in his meditations that one should surpass alienation from society and from oneself by finding one's true being, by making one's life genuine, sincere, in union with the universe, with its totality and wholeness, in order to achieve a state of blessedness, God's kingdom, which exists in every human being. In order to achieve this goal one should first of all get to know oneself and one's nature (17), to reject the limitations imposed on one by society (24), to realize that time is only the past and the future, whereas the present time is our real being, our real existence (32). According to Osho, life is energy which can create love or serfdom, and the latter leads us to material and sensuous experiences of life that are only the surface of our being, and are not the authentic, spontaneous life (32, 35, 37, 42, 253). The truth of life cannot be found in one's ambition to conquer the world, but in self-awareness, in meditation in blessedness, in the innermost circle of one's being, in one's self-identity and integrity (63, 147, 282). Life should be transformed into "growing in love", into friendship, into the experience of innocence and truthfulness (206, 212, 225). Only when one can hear the music of the sound of one hand clapping within himself, the song of the heart, can one reach the state of self-less love, of blessedness, sacredness, of celestial music linking the human being with the universe (57, 92, 113, 115, 124), and only then one can transcend time and death (92). Blessedness is experienced in man's deepest loneliness, in the existential experience of finding the meaning of one's life which brings him into unison with God (146, 163, 243 etc.), when man finds absolute happiness and beauty of existence within his inner self, when he can listen to the music of one hand clapping (344). Regardless of the fact whether Richard Flanagan knew these thoughts when he was writing the novel we can see that the spiritual parallels between Osho's meditations and Flanagan's solution of the novel are very close, if not almost identical.

The author deconstructs in the novel several myths which are closely connected with aesthetic, social, political, historical, religious and other Western traditions and norms. Flanagan's rich use of imagery and his accomplished style make the novel a modern work of art in which the story of the Buloh family transcends personal and historical limitations. Time in the novel is seen as a construct very much depending on the point of view from which it is perceived, but when the life of European immigrants to Australia is interpreted references to broader social and historical dimensions should also be taken into consideration. Although Flanagan's characters are ordinary people they do not capture through the artist's vision only personal relevance, or relevance connected with Slovene and other European immigrants to Australia, but they also embody the spirit of modern man. Thus Richard Flanagan's novel becomes open for many interpretations to readers throughout the world, not least to the above-mentioned meditation by the Indian philosopher Osho.

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