

Poetic Justice for the Nonhuman Realm: Anita Moskát's *Irha és bőr* as a Tool to Reflect on Public Life



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Speculative fiction bears much relevance to how we experience the twenty-first century. After having been relegated to popular culture and discredited for offering nothing more than cheap and superficial entertainment for the masses, not only does speculative fiction constitute a sizable portion of contemporary entertainment nowadays; its tropes address some of humanity's most salient issues in the twenty-first century.

Hungarian speculative fiction has gained a strong momentum throughout the past decade. The 2010s witnessed the emergence of a new generation of authors with unique voices, new regular anthologies, and an intensified discussion of issues related to speculative fiction. Research groups and conferences are devoted to exploring the ways this subset of fiction reflects contemporary issues, and new thematic and annual anthologies are being published. Perhaps the most salient attribute of this new wave of Hungarian speculative fiction is that it is imbued with "local color." Several stories are located in an all too familiar Hungary—either in the capital or in various country regions—and the plots are embedded in the cultural, social and political context of present-day Hungary (e.g., events take place in decaying villages or rural pubs, locations well known to many readers who grew up after the transition). There is also a marked usage of motifs from Hungarian folklore, exemplified by Attila Veres's short story "Kisgömböc" [Little Hog Maw],¹ a reinterpretation of a popular Hungarian folk tale with the same title, or Alfonz Fekete I's *A mosolygó zsonglőr* [The Smiling Juggler], a collection of short stories that reach back to Hungarian folklore and the surrealist fiction of *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century Central Europe. The characteristic tropes of the various genres within speculative fiction, and speculative fiction's now generally acknowledged role as a tool to reflect on contemporary challenges, are combined with regional topography and cultural background.

This article is an analysis of Anita Moskát's 2019 novel *Irha és bőr* [Hide and Skin] by utilizing Martha C. Nussbaum's approach, which views novels as a useful tool to recognize and appreciate the plight of others. For this reason, it can enhance empathy in public life. My point is that while Nussbaum's focus was aimed at the modern realist novel, Moskát's novel also has the potential to serve as a similar tool for present-day public discourse. The plight of nonhuman animals, their moral status, and our relationship with them are becoming increasingly important matters to deal with, not only because the harm humans cause Earth's ecosystem may result in harm to humanity itself (e.g., by the perils of the decline of biodiversity), but also because the treatment of sentient beings is a matter of moral deliberation. *Irha és bőr* distinctively focuses on the perspective of its nonhuman (or perhaps semi-human) characters who need to cope with the mostly hostile

attitudes and prejudices of the human world surrounding them, and this feature makes it eligible for an analysis within Nussbaum's theoretical framework.

Irha és bőr at the Crossroad of Genres

Wolfe and Beamer's suggestion that it is preferable to avoid "replac[ing] meaningful critical discourse with ingenious tagging" (164) seems especially well-founded in the case of *Irha és bőr* considering that the novel evades categorization particularly well. Perhaps it is not entirely unfounded to claim that the novel bears the characteristics of the urban fantasy subgenre as it takes place in contemporary Hungary, and quasi-supernatural events play a crucial role in the narrative. I think "quasi-supernatural" is the proper word to use here, because while some of the phenomena in the fictitious setting are indeed not possible in real life—or at least not today and not exactly the way they are presented to the reader—they cannot be said to be supernatural in the common meaning of the word. So while the plot does take place in an urban environment, and it contains some mythic elements, it does not feature the horror tropes that, according to Peter S. Beagle, are part of the subgenre (n.p.). On the other hand, the hybrid, asymmetrical, and sometimes dysfunctional bodies of the "sentient creatures," their sometimes grotesque and repulsive appearance, and the sometimes gruesome, visceral descriptions give the novel a tinge of horror, calling to mind Carroll's thought on impurity and fusion in the horror genre (Carroll 42–45).

Irha és bőr takes place in Hungary in an imagined world, in which millions of animals cocoon themselves and undergo inexplicable transformations. The result of these transformations is the emergence of a large group of half-human, half-animal beings called "chimeras" or "sentient creatures." For the record, it should be noted that the original Hungarian text uses the derogatory word "*fajzat*," a word used to emphasize the tainted bloodline or descendancy of its object. The chimeras are in no way "regular" hybrids; the proportion of their human and animal organs and the degree of their transformation are absolutely arbitrary, nor do they necessarily serve any meaningful purpose. They are more or less capable of rational thought (this feature also varies according to the development of their human brain). Humans are dumbfounded and disgusted by the inexplicable appearance of the new race and restrict them to ghettos and meticulously regulate their social life. At the time of the novel's plot, tension mounts as the dissatisfaction of chimeras in the ghettos rises. In Hungary, a referendum is being initiated with the support of August Dahl, an activist of the International Organization for the Cause of Chimeras (*Nemzetközi Fajzatügyi Szervezet*, hereafter NFSZ) and a protagonist of the novel. Meanwhile, a mysterious, sect-like organization, led by the Black Sheep, a sheep-human hybrid, is causing revolt among chimeras. The incredibly complex and multi-layered novel relates the conflicts and struggles of chimeras in the shadow of an overheated discourse of nonhuman rights.

Partly through an omniscient, third-person narrator, partly through the narratives related in the blog posts of one of the protagonists, Kirill, a deer-human hybrid, the novel tells about the calamities that ensued after the inexplicable transformation of millions of animals all over

the planet. There are three main protagonists of the novel. The aforementioned Kirill is an activist for the oppressed, who wants to uncover the atrocities the chimeras have to suffer. He is animated by an unrelenting desire for justice and revenge. His curiosity leads him to the Black Sheep, but it is his desire for revenge that makes him the Sheep's follower and finally becomes his undoing. August, the NFSZ activist, is sincerely, even desperately, concerned with the plight of chimeras, but he is forced to face conflicts and difficulties that arise from the differences between his seemingly upper-class position as opposed to the underclass position of his impatient and ghettoized protégés who, under the influence of the Black Sheep, consider him a traitor to the cause of chimera liberation. The appearance of the Sheep also unfolds a series of events that make August face his true origins. Pilar, the badger-human hybrid, was initially exploited by her former master who posted footage of her to social media and thrived on her ever-increasing fandom. Pilar, after her master gets rid of her, begins learning about and wondering at the real world while gradually leaving the mediated illusions of her former life behind. This journey is full of perils and misunderstandings, but in the end, she becomes an indispensable key to discovering the origin of the chimeras. Through the omniscient, third-person narrator, the reader gets to understand the perspectives and ambitions of the various characters.

The novel focuses sharply on the emotions and motives of its characters, but the abstract issue at stake, equality of human and nonhuman (or partly human), is not marginalized as the plight of chimeras is one of the primary factors that influence the decisions of the characters and creates tensions. The reader is driven to experience what it's like to belong to an outcast group. Paradoxically, the excluded group does not consist of ordinary humans—its members are beings that could easily be monsterized in a B-movie and are in fact monsterized by the millions of humans in the story who are perplexed at their emergence; yet the novel lets the reader see the plot through the eyes of three chimeras. Mentally, the chimeras are often closer to humans than animals, even though they display various animal features—for instance, the collective consciousness of Kirill and his herd of does—and this makes it easier for the reader to empathize with them. So much so that some passages in *Irha és bőr*, like the one about the “galambok[,]akik gyermeket akartak” [“doves who wanted a child”] (93), describe emotions in a way that if one did not know the context, they could be about any human beings who behaved contrary to negative expectations.

***Irha és Bőr* and Literary Imagination**

Recent advances in cognitive science concerning literature confirm the suggestion that reading fiction enhances people's ability to be more empathic and receptive to the feelings of others. For example, Oatley argues that fiction is not so much an imitation of life as “a kind of simulation that enables exploration of minds and their interactions in the social world” (626). Fiction can engage the reader by inference (the skill of understanding others by indirect signs), transportation (being capable of involvement with the fictional situations), and pluralism (fiction's tendency to introduce alternate realities) (621-624). Overviewing related research, Wolf concludes that “the capacity for compassionate knowledge of others may be our best antidote to the ‘culture of indifference’”

(53). These findings correlate with Martha Nussbaum's theory, elaborated in the 1990s, that the novel can construct a "paradigm of a style of ethical reasoning": it takes a "general idea of human flourishing" and couples it with a concrete situation. As a result of this pairing, we can obtain "universalizable concrete prescriptions" (8). In other words, novels can confront us with imaginary situations. These imaginary situations are related to certain general principles of right and wrong, and contrasting these two, the reader can draw their own conclusions about the issue at hand. Nussbaum herself exemplifies this in her chapter on Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, arguing that that novel "contains a normative vision of a scientific political economics and of the scientific political imagination," making these ideas the target of "withering satirical attack" (13).

Nussbaum carefully explains why she chose the novel as a subject of her inquiry. In her view, the novel has a peculiar commitment to the individuality of persons; it attributes importance to what happens to individuals; it describes the events of life from an inner perspective; and it pays special attention to the ordinary, the everyday life and struggles of people (32). Of these four attributes, only the last one can be said to be untrue of speculative fiction for the obvious reason that this genre presents "modes of being that contrast with their audiences' understanding of ordinary reality" (Gill 73). While of course we should not be encountering chimeras any time soon—at least in the sense of the hybrid beings in *Irha és bõr*—the problem of animal rights is an all too real one, more timely than ever, and the issue is basically a moral one. Protecting the environment in general, and the animals in it, is a goal that serves the interests of human society as well, because the effects that come from subverting nature's processes can be harmful to humans too. However, there is also the question of whether we should consider nonhuman animals as beings with inherent values and the right to be treated accordingly. This latter viewpoint is distinct from direct advantages, and concerns whether nonhuman animals are entitled to a respectful treatment. This is the approach the novel takes, and it is aided by representing the dynamics of the psychology of the mostly nonhuman characters in a subtle, complex, and realistic way. We may also tangentially mention that "chimeras," in the sense of human/animal admixed embryos utilized for scientific and biotechnological purposes do exist, and pose a significant challenge to human identity as contrasted with nonhuman animals (Sharpe 130–33). Aside from the aforementioned nonconformity with the virtues of the novel as described by Nussbaum, *Irha és bõr* fits well with the other elements of the enumeration: the feelings, motives, and acts of the individual characters play a crucial role in the story, and their individual personality is detailed and realistic.

The plot of *Irha és bõr* takes place in an environment of outright inequality between humans and nonhumans. Chimeras are abhorred by humans because of their monstrosity (by human terms) and the prejudice that they are inherently inferior because of their half-animal state. The situation evokes a debate that is analogous to the issue of animal rights. Jeremy Bentham, one of the earliest open proponents of animal rights, argued that the common denominator that may one day ground animal rights is their capacity to suffer (Bentham 142–143., n. §). Pioneering animal rights activist Peter Singer agreed and dwelled extensively on the factors that underlie the argument (9–17). He goes on to consider the question of killing animals, arguing that to avoid

speciesism, animals should be granted the right to life, just like humans, because species borders cannot constitute a legitimate reason for the different treatment of humans and nonhumans (19). The capacity to feel pain and the deconstruction of borders between species is demonstrated in the novel as well. Singer attempts to prove indirectly that animals have the capacity to feel pain: “there are no good reasons, scientific or philosophical, for denying that animals feel pain. If we do not doubt that other humans feel pain we should not doubt that other animals do so too” (15). This argument is, of course, intuitively appealing, and supported by scientific evidence. However, it is still presented from an external point of view. Singer, obviously, cannot flawlessly reconstruct the experience of other—nonhuman—creatures because his imagination and experiences are inevitably human so they:

will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. (Nagel 439)

Moskát's novel seems to take this a step further to understand the perspective of nonhuman animals by the means of fiction. One of the novel's tools to create an approximate phenomenology of nonhuman animals is the use of chimeras, who are partly human, which makes it easier for the reader to empathize with them, and partly animal, which leaves its mark in the characters' consciousness and behavior. This motif is most salient in the representation of Kirill, who experiences a telepathic bond with the community he is related to, be it his herd (9) or the Black Sheep (332-333). More importantly, the evolution of the chimeras into a conscious, semi-human state is often accompanied by a power to express themselves by language, which makes their voice heard. From his infancy, Kirill was convinced that “a történeteknek erejük van” [“stories have power;”] (577), and it was this conviction that motivated him in writing a blog to relate the plight of chimeras throughout the world. Writing the blog, on the one hand, made the voice of chimeras heard: they could express themselves by the very means humans use to convey messages about oppression, unfair discrimination, and exploitation. On the other hand, giving the chimeras a narrative is more than that: it is about giving them an identity, and in this regard, one should be very careful about what narrative one relates. This is the very reason Kirill refrains from telling their origins after learning that the “creation” of the chimeras was unintended and imperfect.

The chimeras' struggle for legal recognition is fraught with distrust, and the individual stories that are presented to the reader give a glimpse of why this could be so. The three main protagonists of the novel have markedly different backgrounds. August, the activist of the NFSZ, is introduced as an upper-class human man. Kirill is relegated to a small flat in a ghetto, experiencing poverty and oppression first hand. Pilar—whose role in the store is less important for this study—is found abandoned in a garbage deposit. The issue at stake: the “general idea of human flourishing” is the equal legal acknowledgment of sentient beings in an environment where human exceptionalism is the self-evident and unquestioned norm, and the situation is worsened by fears of the unknown

posed by the absolute lack of knowledge concerning the reproduction of chimeras. The “concrete situations” that are contrasted with the general idea are forcefully expressed in the intermittent blog posts that report on dehumanizing, humiliating, and outright abusive practices like illegal experimentation (124-126), uses of chimeras as live target for bow shooting (167-168), lynching (282-284), or sexual exploitation (458-460). In the meantime, not only do we learn that mutually respectful relationships can be formed between humans and chimeras (283), but also, and more importantly, due to the novel’s focus on the viewpoint of chimeras, we can identify with their emotions and experiences, and understand their decisions.

These and other instances of discrimination presented in the novel make the tension more palpable as the reader can relate to the anger felt by many chimeras, and the conflict of August and the Black Sheep becomes more vivid. August strives to achieve legal equality by negotiation and persuasion; the Black Sheep takes a revolutionary stance that draws on the vengeful bloodlust of his followers. One manifestation of this conflict is the spectacular and brutal murder of Theodor Holm and the gruesome profanation of his corpse, which possibly contributed to losing the referendum because of the general fear such a crime arose in the public (343). Another manifestation is the debate between the Black Sheep and August about the former’s implausible and impractical list of demands (505).

While the sectarian fanaticism of the Black Sheep is doomed to failure, the drawbacks of August’s campaign are also vividly demonstrated in the novel. The figure of the activist is presented as a different type of fanatic, who stops at nothing to arouse sympathy among the public: he comes out as a chimera in a live interview for the benefit of the equal rights referendum campaign (40), he is prone to using others for his goals (253-254), and he arranges a failed attempt of assassination against himself so that he can morally triumph as a martyr of his cause (453). All these sacrifices deserve attention not only because, at this point, the novel reflects on the hardships of being an activist, but also, and more importantly, because the various personal conflicts that ensue from August’s decisions highlight new aspects of the characters’ emotional lives.

Conclusion

Irha és bőr is an odd mixture of the realist novel and speculative fiction; its quasi-supernatural elements are placed in a very real-life Hungary. This exceptionally multi-layered novel reflects on a variety of issues out of which I attempted to focus on the struggle of chimeras for legal recognition. I applied the thesis contained in Martha Nussbaum’s *Poetic Justice*, according to which the realist novel can be used to imagine social situations that are related to principles of right and wrong, and by this, the novel can become a tool of public discourse. My hypothesis was that this thesis can be extended to works of speculative fiction too, because even though this genre focuses on the irregular and the extraordinary—instead of the ordinary like the realist novel does in Nussbaum’s view—speculative fiction is capable of achieving the emotional involvement and empathy in the reader that helps them understand the situation and the dilemmas of the characters. Therefore, deliberation on public affairs is no less possible. Moskát’s novel frames

the issue of legal equality between human and nonhuman, sentient creatures. The individual narratives in the fables within the novel illustrate vividly what fates may befall the chimeras in a regime where they are not protected by law. The behavior of the chimeras as rational agents provides a contrast with, and makes the reader reflect on, the self-evident norm of the essential difference between the human and the nonhuman.

Notes

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

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