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IN FULL SWING : THE CULTURAL EMBRACE
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HAPSBURG EMPIRE IN FEAR AND SERVANT
(2000) BY MIRJANA NOVAKOVIĆ AND 20th
CENTURY BALKANS AND AMERICA AS A
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IN FULL SWING

(THE CULTURAL EMBRACE OF THE 18TH CENTURY BALKANS AND HAPSBURG
EMPIRE IN *FEAR AND SERVANT* (2000) BY MIRJANA NOVAKOVIĆ AND 20TH
CENTURY BALKANS AND AMERICA AS A PROMISED LAND IN *BUNKER SWING*
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Abstract

The paper analyzes the way popular contemporary Serbian prose writers depict the cultural encounter between the Balkans and the West. Mirjana Novaković describes the cultural meeting point between the 18th-century, medieval-looking, vampire-ridden Serbia and advanced Austrian empire in terms of what Julia Kristeva calls “a crossroad of two othernesses“. Even though Serbian capital Belgrade is described as the bedrock of bohemian lifestyle, bandits, vampires and people who “love and enjoy nothing so much as their belief that a lie is in fact the truth“, the truth is that in this novel *Devil*, falsely impersonating a secret royal investigator Otto von Hausburg, comes from Vienna.

Seen through the eyes of Mirjana Djurdjević and Branko Mladjenović, the life of Serbian immigrants in the U.S. in mid-1920s, full of hardships, is interwoven with a secret desire to return to their home country. This only underlines certain suspicion of the West and the cultural debate between East and West present in the Serbian literary prose of the 20th century. The paper investigates the following possibility: if all the world is, as Novaković suggests, a composite of varying and disagreeing truths, could the balance of the world mostly lie, in Bhabha’s words, in being open to “cultural translation“ – seeking one’s identity in a foreign symbolic and semiotic system. Therefore, this paper tries to view the cultural debate in these two novels as a cultural embrace of the East and the West.

1. Introduction

The relationship between Serbia and the West has been a rather complex one and resulted in deeply ambivalent attitudes in the 20th century regarding the desirability of the Western models. These attitudes were easily transferred into contemporary literary works, and there are quite a few examples from the Serbian fiction which can be loosely described as ‘postmodern’ which highlight the fundamental features of the relationship between the

Balkans and the West. Our past research into the Serbian literary prose of the 20th century, mainly the works of Milorad Pavić, Milovan Danajlić, Slobodan Selenić, Vesna Goldsworthy, Borislav Pekić, Danilo Kiš and Ivo Andrić, has discovered the presence of certain suspicion of the West dominated by reservations and frequent preconceptions. Its possible reason can lie in the Serbian cultural and religious heritage on which literary tradition has been deeply founded, probably trying to retrieve the “repressed histories“ (Bhabha 2007: 13).

In some of these works, the contrast with the West is used to foreground conditions at home (in Serbia), while in others the (disagreeable) images of the West give the author an excuse to describe the values entrenched and cherished in the Serbian tradition.¹ Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude noticed in these works is that the relationship between the Balkans and the West is such that the West is seen as something to be exploited, but intellectually insignificant and spiritually sterile, thus this relation is doomed to be one of not understanding.

This paper tries to investigate whether the attitudes of the newest generation of contemporary Serbian novelists and writers have changed. Mirjana Novaković is taken as an epitome of the late-20th and early-21st fiction writers as she has been appreciated by the general readership and at the same time praised by the literary critics in the country and abroad. Her *Fear and Servant* was published in the year 2000 and in the same year the novel was shortlisted for the NIN literary prize². It received the *Isidora Sekulic* literary award for the year 2000. It has been translated into English, French and German and published abroad. A play based on the novel was performed at the 2003 BELEF summer festival in Belgrade.³

In 2013 the novel *Bunker Swing* written by Mirjana Djurdjević and Branko Mladjenović was published in Belgrade. It offers an interesting but humorous insight into the lives of Balkan immigrants in Chicago in 1920s during the period of the prohibition. It has been well-received by the public, as well as highly appraised by the critics. Mirjana Djurdjević has published over a dozen books and for her novel *Kaya, Belgrade and a Good American* she received the

¹ For a more thorough insight into the results of this research, see: Čubrović, B. & M. Daničić (2013). My Name is Balkan. – Hers Europe“ : The (Un)exotic Images of the West in the Anglo-Serbian Literary Relations. *The Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 38. Osaka: The Intercultural Research Institute, Kansai Gaidai University, 7-15.

² Serbian most eminent literary prize, corresponding to the Man Booker prize in the UK.

³ The most important summer cultural happening in Belgrade, synthesizing theatre, music, visual arts and artistic dances.

regional literary prize *Mešo Selimović* for the best novel published in 2009. This prize is significant because it covers the literary works published in Serbia, Montenegro, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the panel of referees includes literary critics from each of the mentioned countries. Along with the fact that all her books have been published in several editions (only *Kaya* in five, in addition to its English and German edition), this makes a solid reason for the authors of this paper to take Mirjana Djurdjević as another contemporary exemplar of Serbian prose.

2. Edging the dark out

Fear and Servant tells the story of the 18th-century Belgrade, described as a misty, foggy town surrounded by solid stone city walls which detach it from the outer world(s). Its inhabitants with their talks of murder, rebellion, war and vampires only strengthen this gloomy atmosphere. The main character and one of the two narrators is Count Otto von Hausburg, falsely impersonating a secret royal investigator from Vienna. At the same time, he is suggested by the author to be Satan in flesh and blood. The Count has arrived to investigate the recent, much-talked-about appearance of vampires in Serbia. The idea that Devil is an envoy of the Hapsburg monarchy on an undercover mission in Serbia already triggers a certain suspicion of the West. However, this suspicion is quickly undermined by the appearance of his trust-worthy servant Novak who happens to be an uneducated but witty and extremely resourceful – Serb.

The second narrator, equally postmodernly unreliable as the first, is Maria Augusta, Princess of Thurn and Taxis, wife of Prince Alexander of Wurtemberg, the former regent of Serbia. Somewhere through half of the novel, the author brings the two narrators together (they travel to a place where there have been indications of vampires killing people at night) and the essence of the novel becomes clear – in the complex play of von Hausburg's and the princess's versions of lie and truth, the story changes from a mere hunt for vampires to an extended examination of the nature of good and evil.

Moreover, the novel deals with the clash of two cultures, juxtaposing Hapsburg (i.e. Western) with Serbian culture in the light of postmodern view that it is not really possible to sharply distinguish between fact and interpretation in history. If we look at the historiographic facts, the Kingdom of Serbia was a province of the Hapsburg monarchy from 1718 to 1739. It was formed from the territories in the south of the rivers Sava and Danube, conquered by the

Hapsburg armies from Ottoman Empire in 1718. It was abolished and returned to Ottoman Empire in 1739. Owing to the meticulousness of the Hapsburg administration, there are historical documents nowadays kept in the Austrian State Archives showing that ‘vampirism’ occurred in the Serbian village of Kisiljevo in 1724-25. A Petar Blagojevic was believed by his fellow villagers to be the first vampire both in Serbian and world history. The case was investigated by Hapsburg captain Frombald, whose report was the first account about a vampire which reached wider public.⁴ This sensational news found its way to Vienna, the Hapsburg capital, and on 21 July 1725 an article “Vampir von Kisiljevo” was published in the Viennese newspapers *Wienerisches Diarium*.⁵ Ever since the word *vampire* (Serbian: vampir) has been used as a loan word in numerous languages. In fact, it is the only Serbian word which has become an internationalism. The Serbian etymological ownership of the word being universally accepted,⁶ Novaković’s literary use of this topic may not be incidental.

3. The cultural embrace

The hunt for vampires led and organised by an Austrian princess and Satan himself calls into being two parallel worlds: the one of the local Serbian community and the other of the ordered Hapsburg military administration. A cultural collision can best be seen in Maria Augusta’s impression of Belgrade, the most-eastern city under the Hapsburg rule at the time:

[I] stood looking out over the Sava and the Danube where they meet, and at the land on the far side of the rivers. At the time I did not realise, although I know now, that *this very spot offers the first and best view of Europe*⁷. Shall I explain? I say the first view because it’s where Europe begins, and the best view because you can only appreciate the meaning of Europe, its true vulnerability and its true might, by standing outside it, sometimes *regretting* that you cannot enter, and sometimes *glad* you’re not inside it. (Novaković 2009: 65)

⁴ The copy of the report exists in Staatsarchiv in Vienna in the stand Türkei (Turcica) entitled “Copy of the letter dated 1725 of the imperial cameral provisor of Gradiska district in the Kingdom of Serbia, Mr. Frombald, which relates to the so-called vampiri or blood-suckers, which were notorious in the Kingdom of Serbia in those times”. The letter is filed into the documents relating to January-February 1725.

⁵ This aroused an endless curiosity in Europe and resulted in vampires being the theme of quite a few works of fiction, Bram Stoker’s being the best-known one. Nowadays, the computer game *Vampire Legends: The True Story of Kisilova* takes the forth place in the world in popularity based on the players’ votes.

⁶ *OED* in 1903, German *Brockhaus* in 1903, Spanish *Encyclopedia Universal Illustrada* (1930-33).

⁷ Italics are used in this paper for emphasis.

The two deeply ambivalent attitudes to Europe described in this passage (regretfulness and gladness) only show two streaks permeating Serbian intellectual circles throughout 20th century: 'the traditionalist' and 'the European'. The first generated the notion of "the rotten West", whereas the second perceived the West as a liberal, bourgeois model, and made strenuous efforts to de-Ottomanise, i.e. Europeanise popular beliefs, customs, attitudes, value system after centuries of Ottoman rule. These two positions have survived throughout the existence of the modern Serbia and have been two enduring positions in Serbian intellectual and political life.

This ambivalence, to use Homi K. Bhabha's terminology, can be seen as the conflict of 'ethnocentrism' and 'otherness'. The ambivalence functions as "one of the most significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power" (Bhabha 2007: 95), providing the meanings which are most often "intentionalist and nationalist" (Bhabha 2007: 97). In Novaković's text, the fundamental gap between the cold, reserved, unexciting and ultimately unexotic West and the vivid, thrilling, passionate, mysterious East continuously functions as the mode of representation of *otherness*. It seems to von Hausburg that the wild nature of these people living on the very edge of the largest Western empire at the time can never be tamed and cultivated:

"I wish you to go and pay some *wild-looking Serbs*" – *as if there were any tame-looking ones* – "to introduce themselves to Radetzky". (Novaković 2009: 75)

'Otherness' in Serbian contemporary prose is pervaded by authors' own assumptions which often cannot be affected by the other culture. Therefore Bhabha's concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness is more than applicable. Fixity as the sign of cultural (or any other) difference is "a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (Bhabha 2007: 94). It often relies on stereotyping, "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in 'place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (Bhabha 2007: 94-95), like the notorious superficiality and frivolity of the Westerners. For instance, when von Hausburg and servant, provoked by the spreading rumour of vampires, go to a local inn to meet with two eye-witnesses who have supposedly seen vampires red-handed at their gruesome work, they only fall into a well-prepared trap and become victims of robbery. Western affluence and wealth are repeatedly seen as a positive

sign of spiritual drought and sterility and no literary Easterner will ever show respect to this abundance of riches.

The rigidity of Bhabha's fixity lies in the fact that Novaković's novel is based on a historical event from 18th century when Belgrade became notoriously popular among the Europeans for the accounts of night-walking, blood-gorged, plague-spreading undead corpses, which gave the author a chance to metaphorically show the image of the Balkan (the East) by the Hapsburg Empire (the West). On the other hand, the disorder of Bhabha's fixity lies in the character of von Hausburg, the emissary of the West, who is described as a kind, decent, well-mannered, wealthy, knowledgeable, educated, well-spoken, elegantly dressed person conversant in at least four languages, but somewhat reserved and remote at social events, smelling of brimstone and occasionally referring to himself as the devil with infernal powers. Nevertheless, when he is required to act or be an immortal figure of evil, he becomes afraid, vacillates, and often flees, because he fears being wounded. And, we realise that what we can witness here, in this novel, is similar to what we have read so many times before in earlier works – a dichotomy of the wild, but spiritfull Balkans and cultivated, but spiritless West. It seems that the Balkans (and its peoples?) represent an even more radical otherness to the West than Eastern or Central Europeans. This region is seen as the European frontier, or the doorstep of Europe, neither inside or outside. Novaković depicts this cultural *difference* (if not clash) through Maria Augusta's reflections on the two rivers flowing to Belgrade and merging below the city walls:

I stood there looking out over the Sava and the Danube. The rivers were different. The Sava was brown, and the Danube had more of a bluish colour. And I wondered whether the colour of rivers depended on their length, whether the water could only be purified by flowing long enough. Or does the clarity depend on the places the river flows through, the rocks and soil, and the people who enter its waters? *Is purity the result of a long struggle, carving out a channel to flow in, twisting and turning all the while, or does it just come drifting along on the current, carefree and easy?* Or does a river remain the same from its source all the way to the end, and nothing along the way can alter it? (Novaković 2009: 65)

Almost 1,000 km long, the Sava is the longest river in Southeast Europe, with its headwater in Slovenia, flowing through Croatia, along the northern border of Bosnia-Herzegovina (considered to be the natural border of these two countries), and then flowing through Serbia

to its capital where it flows into the Danube. It is considered by many,⁸ to be the northern boundary of the Balkan Peninsula and the southern border of the Central Europe, thus representing the geographical divide between the two othernesses. Novaković describes it as brown in colour, i.e. muddy, but its *muddy waters* speak for the centuries of turbulent history which at the end of 20th century resulted in a violent disintegration of one country in which the Sava, before the breakup, was located completely inside its borders and was the longest river with its entire course within the country.

On the other hand, Novaković portrays the Danube as crystal-clear blue in colour, as it is the river which symbolically “embraces the edges“, i.e. connects the Central and the Southeast Europe, touching the borders of ten countries⁹, emphasising the need for collaboration – economic and industrial, but also linguistic and cultural.

4. In full swing

Bunker Swing tells a story of 1920s Chicago after the prohibition had been in force for seven years. A young widow Frau Andjelka Weiss inherited a grocery store (Bunker) after the death of her husband. But, because of his enormous gambling debts that she has to settle, she is having second thoughts about returning to Serbia, her home country. Yet, she decides to open a diner for the workers from the nearby construction site and, as her last resort, she rents room to three countrymen – Tričko, a young and lively musician from eastern Serbia who eventually gets a chance to play with Benny Goodman’s band; Braša, a stocky and peaceful butcher from the northern Serbian region of Vojvodina, and Žarko, a soldier who fought in the Great War and suffers from epileptic seizures, originally from central Serbia. When they discover by chance a boiler for distillation in the Bunker basement, they secretly begin to produce raisin brandy (*rakija*). They prosper financially, but, as a price, get involved with the Italian mafia, Serbian Orthodox church and an excommunicated Montenegrin priest. This entertaining novel tells a story of distressful immigrant life, of love and passion, swing music, nostalgia and home sicknesses, paradoxes and dilemmas, human contradictions in which

⁸ Reliable geographical resources, as well as Wikipedia.

⁹ Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Moldova.

laughs and tears easily blend. In Serbian literature, it is a unique example of joint female and male writing.

Chicago of 1920s is described as a postmodern city, since it is viewed through the eyes of migrants and minorities (Serbian, Italian, and Irish). Besides many underlying narrative threads, the subject of exile becomes one of the main problems this novel dramatizes. Is grass always greener on the other side? Each of the four main characters arrives in America because they try to run away from something: Andjelka runs away from her tyrant father, Braša thinks he has killed someone and wants to escape prosecution, Tričko by mistake, and Žarko needs to escape the past, as well as the depressive mood caused by his illness. It turns out that the land in which dreams come true offers them personal and financial safety, but no consolation and peace of mind. Additionally, their success is the result of their mutual background, close ties (linguistic, cultural) and social values they share. The migrant culture of the ‘in-between’, the minority position, the cultural untranslatability (Bhabha 2007: 321) impede their assimilation into a foreign environment. To readers, they seem like lost souls who manage to strive through life in a foreign country only because of their strong friendship and love. Nevertheless, when Andjelka makes a secret arrangement for all four of them to come back to their homeland, she is unsure how to present this idea to the three men:

For a few evenings now Andja has been pondering about how to start telling them this piece of news that she has been working on over the last months, exchanging letters and telegrams with Krcedin and Novi Sad. And she has always postponed it. She knows all three of them very well, she knows how each of them will react. Žarko will remain silent and listen to what he is being told; Braša will start grumbling and hesitating, but Tričko and his Hollywood dreams worry her most. What if he really has a successful career before him, if a different life, or happiness awaits him; does she really have the right... [...] Oh, dear Andjelka, *will you ever find some peace and calm in your life?*¹⁰ (Djurdjević & Mladjenović 2013: 293)

Raising the question of cultural and every other difference, Andjelka is obviously deeply convinced that there will be no peace and calm for them as long as they live in a foreign country, but she spends days and nights trying to figure out the best way to convince her companions to return with her to Novi Sad. Finally, she presents it as a business proposal, and it appears that they embrace it only too readily. The novel ends with their embarkment on a

¹⁰ The translation of the passage is done by the authors of the paper, since the novel has not yet been published in English.

cross-Atlantic ship that will take them back to Europe. Even though it may seem to the readers that the American and their native system of values are incompatible, this novel underlines the importance of tolerance and respect for others, accordingly its leitmotif is Benny Goodman's *And the Angels Sing*, in which typical swing melody is intertwined with *kolo* (Serbian national dance). It epitomizes a specific cultural translation from cultural differences into cultural diversity in the Bhabhian sense.

5. Conclusion

If all the world is, as Bhabha suggests, an unchanging order as well as disorder, or as Novaković suggests, a composite of varying and disagreeing truths, could the balance of the world mostly lie, in being open to “cultural translation“ (Bhabha 2007: 61) – seeking one's identity in a foreign symbolic and semiotic system? Can two different systems of cultural references presented in *Fear and Servant* be interpreted as a cultural embrace?

As Radin points out in her research, the vampire can be classified as a *cultural category*. (Radin 1996: 5) It can be seen in the folk tradition that the vampire is a daemon from the underworld, epitomizing the primeval evil which revisits this world to seek revenge on the living and endanger their survival. (Radin 1996: 30) In Novaković's novel, von Hausburg is the very embodiment of such a revenant. His character becomes a mixture of the folk beliefs and Hapsburg ideology. In this way, the author tries to show that otherness reaches from within, as well as from outside, because “cultural difference does not simply represent the contention between oppositional contents or antagonistic traditions of cultural value“ (Bhabha 2007: 233), it also introduces the processes of “cultural judgment and interpretation“ (Bhabha 2007: 233) of the self. The meeting of the East and West in *Fear and Servant* tends to mix the muddy waters of the Sava with the transparent Danube and thus make a unique cultural blend in which the hunter (von Hausburg) becomes the hunted (the Devil):

It was Belgrade [...] Once inside, it looked like any other overgrown backwater in the East, with the thinnest veneer of Europe. [...] Belgrade was East and South, those two less-desirable corners of the world (for it stayed on its own

side of the rivers, and anyone inside it was the poorer for it).
(Novaković 2009: 242)

Rakija is another cultural category ranked high in the hierarchy of Serbian traditional values. In *Bunker Swing*, its role is to demonstrate that two distant cultures can be connected; as a form of pleasure it is a bridge for Andjelka's small enterprise to come closer to otherness, to initiate the process of identification with the alien. Thus, the meeting of East and West in Chicago is very similar to the one in *Fear and Servant* and it leads us to the conclusion that by ignoring the complexity, the ambivalence, the occasional contradiction in their relation, there can never be "the unproblematic reading of other cultural and discursive systems" (Bhabha 2007: 100).

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