

The Balkan Post-modern Writers – Between Story tellers tradition and Western Patterns

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Abstract: *In the Balkans, no matter which the political or cultural climate was, there was always a great pleasure for storytelling and that is why here there are mainly storytellers, compared to novelists among the prose writers of the region This paper will focus on Meto Jovanovski, a Macedonian author of the "Hoar Frost on the Almond Tree", the Romanian Constantin Toiu, the Albanian Ismail Kadare and the winner of the Nobel Prize – Orhan Pamuk. They are representative authors of the Balkan post-modern literature who bring into light the folklore background and at the same time use modern writing techniques, quite similar to cinema ones.*

Key words: *Post-modernism, story teller, constructivism, Balkan, national identity*

INTRODUCTION

In the Balkans, that many people consider to be a place generating conflicts and negative energy, everything is under the charm of a never ending number of fairy tells. Oral traditions, as well as family or war stories, legends about national brave heroes and partisans, there are all part of a string on which the reader may rebuild the life of certain Balkan regions, countries which were part of different states and which have fought for their national identity. Macedonia's fate is probably one of the most dramatic, because it became an independent state quite late, at the end of the 20th century. A famous region in Ancient times, when due to Alexander the Great it was the centre of the known world, Macedonia crosses anonymously the Middle Age, escaping lately the Ottoman Empire just for being split among Greece, Bulgaria or former Yugoslavia, so building a national identity turns into a difficult task. The Macedonian spirit was not destroyed by historical difficulties and there is now a national Macedonian literature. Albania, the native country of one of the most important Balkan writers – Ismail Kadare is now a small country where Christians and Muslims learn how to live together, fighting to design its identity. Romanian or Turkish literature face similar problems when they have to choose between their traditions, influenced by Byzantine, sometimes even Oriental traditions and various Western influences (French in the 19th and Anglo-American in the 20th century) despite the Western patterns and the fight for being "Western" Romanian, Turkish or Albanian writers preserved the old pleasure for telling stories.

Generally speaking there is a dichotomy between *old* and *new* (in our case Postmodernism) or between West and East. In the case of the cited writers all those aspects have melted and lead to a new form of postmodernism as well as to a correct mirror of their country's cultural profile. Starting as novelists or short-story writers, representatives of the Postmodern and realistic way of writing, Pamuk, Toiu, Kadare or Meto Jovanovski are actually reinterpreting the way in which Scheherazade, the heroine of the *1001 Arabian Nights* used to tell her stories.

The quoted authors are not the only ones on whose work the influence of oriental way of telling stories can be detected, but they are, according to the author's of the article personal opinion, the best representatives. If Kadare and Pamuk are world wide famous and their insertion in the analysis does not need further arguments, Toiu and Meto Jovanovski are less known. Their presence is due to their way of writing as well as to the topic of their novels. Toiu, as Pamuk, turned his beloved town Bucharest into the main character of his novel no matter the story; Meto Jovanovski writes about loneliness, war and cultural differences as Kadare.

The main purpose of the presented article is to reveal the originality of the Balkan writers who are able to use old literary strategies to create a modern prose. According to Martin Heidegger any art is essentially Poetry, which should be considered as the

most representative aspect of literature. Literature in general is a privilege act of the human spirit, capable of conferring on the artistic fact a hue of identity that cancels distances and enables encounters beyond particular limits of each language [Anghelescu, 2008: 21]. This phenomenon can be illustrated by the epic of all those national literature, a common frame in which different writers as, the Albanian Ismail Kadare, the Romanian Constantin Toiu or the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk are linked in the same rhythm and imaginary background. Inside the frame accents change and particular aspects build up an area of confluences, due to an original combination between old and modern, a melting pot of the Orient and Occident.

On the whole, the literature review shows that in spite of having difference of opinions rejecting or admiring their cultural heritage, the Balkan writers were not able to escape the influence of the multicultural strata background of the region. The purpose of this study is to underline the similarities between different authors, the expression of different national identities, the sharing of a common historical background. As the title points out they are at the same time novelists according to the Western perception and story tellers due to the cultural tradition of their region.

CONSTANTIN TOIU-NEW AND OLD PERSPECTIVE

The Balkan cultures were, up to the 19th century, with the notable exception of the Greek culture, based on the oral tradition of rural essence and huge paremiological lore, shared with slight differences in transcriptions, yet with the same moralizing finality by all the people in the region [Muthu, 2008: 34] and this characteristic lead to the preservation of old fairytales up to the 20th century. When Constantin Toiu's novel *Wild Wine Gallery* (*Galeria cu viță sălbatică*) appeared in 1976, the Romanian readers were not at all familiar with the postmodern way of writing. Despite the wall which separated the South-East European countries, writers started to be influenced by the new trend and to write in a different way. The *Wild Wine Gallery* is a novel where irony and deconstruction play a major role, a fact that turns it into one of the first postmodern novels in Romanian literature. Yet its great success in the 1970s was due to the author's talent as a story teller. The term *postmodernism* and some of the concepts associated with it (self-referentiality, metafiction, textualism) had been used at the beginning of the 1980s by some theoreticians to characterize the revisionist prose of some novelists, to whom Constantin Toiu was also included.

The *Wild Wine Gallery* is the story of a young writer and journalist unable to adapt to the communist regime during the dark period of the 1950s. Supposed to be the background of the novel Bucharest, the city where the action takes place, turns into a hero. Each place in the old part of the town has a story with a lot of characters and those characters have their own stories connected to other part of the city. Like in the *Arabian Nights* the string of the stories seems to be endless. The guide in this maze is an old antiquarian, a symbolic character who reveals the old face of the city to his young friend. The young hero feels trapped in the city, but his friend, the antiquarian reveals to him that there are some lights in the dark. The enlighten parts were very small and they did not help him to survive.

Toiu published some years later another novel called *Obligado* where the heroes are different, but the background, the force that keeps together different episodes, is again his beloved town Bucharest. The melting between postmodernism and storytellers pattern is even more obvious than in the *Wild Wine Gallery*. In this novel the role of Scheherazade is taken by an architect who starts telling stories about different buildings in Bucharest's Old town centre. A building evokes facts, meetings that happened inside, picturesque stories. Another building may bring up funny characters, anonymous ones, but representative for an epoch and its way of thinking. The dark atmosphere of the '80 covers the city and

marks people but the architect stories, coming one after another reveal a beautiful lively city. In this novel as in oriental tells storytelling is a gift healing people.

Constantin Toiu's deconstructive experimental texts struggle to create a space of individual reflections and imagination [Bertens, 1997: 437]. It is a place where Oriental story tellers and post-modern novelists can both find themselves and may start fruitful dialogues. The stories are fragments of deconstruction and lead to a reconstructed image of the city.

A MACEDONIAN VOICE

Meto Jovanovski¹, a writer who has become famous after 1950. He wrote in former Yugoslavia, but considered himself a Macedonian prose writer. His novel *Frost on the Almond Tree* is the story of a Macedonian village, a book with a metaphorical title illustrating the hard destiny of a Balkan nation. The novel is a fresco of an archaic society trying to find its way to modernity, a story which starts before the First World War, during the Ottoman Empire, continues with episodes from the First World War, and ends during the Second World War. The novel is quite short and is different of what we may expect from a historical novel, being mainly a history about comings and leavings, native country, a story about home nostalgia according to the vision of a people who can hardly define that space, a way of assuming identity. Macedonian life before the First World War is reconstructed in the Postmodern way by many stories coming one after another, each one starting from the previous one and giving birth to a new one.

The story starts with an unusual fact, shocking the community: Svezda, a woman with light morality, kills a frontier guard, Janici, by throwing him into a fountain. The place has a special signification for women of the Balkan villages who meet at the fountain, gossips are spread from this place and local mentality is modelled. The fact looks irrational, but is the expression of certain state of spirit. From the first chapter the author's ability in changing the plans from concrete to abstract, from lyric to comic is noticeable. The frontier's guard death became an important fact in the community life. His death is the starting point of other stories like the story of the peasant who claims his property by throwing periodically a cat in the fountain, so that the community would not be able to use it. This turns into a comic aspect a very serious fact, because the community does not need that fountain anymore, so the peasant's attitude is useless and ridiculous. He seems to be a kind of Pacala² expressing himself in a universe where dramatic facts look simple, aspects which leads to a ridiculous image in the eyes of the community. This common aspects interrupted by Svezda's action. The reader expects a hard punishment and he is worried for the little village inhabitants. In fact there are not serious consequences of her action, except the impact on common mentality. It is the starting point of a series of dramatic facts, each one with its own story, all of them leading to a common story of war, partisans and fights. Svezda is an interesting woman who has her own miraculous story. As in a postmodern novel, the story is retold several times from different perspectives, in order to underline the relativity of a message. It is a personal fact, which gains nationalistic connotations due to war background.

The main hero is the narrator who watches the village stories from the porch of his native house (a kind of young and less experienced Nasreddin Hogeia), fragments of what he heard when "people gather for gossips". Svezda's story, that of his elder brother Vojne, the story of a Macedonian village where Italians, Serbs, Bulgarians are coming and going. As the child, the village inhabitants are searching for their identity. Fantasies, specific for a

¹ Meto Jovanovski (b. 1928, village Brajčino) published in Macedonian language short stories and novels. *Frost on the Almond Tree* (first edition) was published in Macedonian in 1965. Later, the writer chooses television and cinema as main way of artistic expression. The analysed novel was translated in Romanian by Valentin Deşliu and published by Minerva Publishing House in 1979.

² Pacala is a well known Romanian folklore character, whose humorous aspect is due to the contrast between his unconventional attitude, apparently stupid and the society expectations.

teenager, design a fantastic world, a dreaming landscape helps the author to change the communication registers: "As usual when I was alone I started thinking how I should reach the mountain peak. For my children eyes it was a completely natural target and for my soul an easily fulfilling desire. If I did not do it yet it was because everybody considered that he was too young [Jovanovski, 1979: 275]. Started as a dream, the communication gets a realistic tone, even a little bit sarcastic all of a sudden, the dreamer comes back to reality: "... to be correct I postpone it a little bit because of fear of bears and wolves hidden under each bush." [Jovanovski, 1979: 283]. Reality is turned by the writer's fantasy, who transforms the mountainous village in a fairy tell land place of unbelievable stories.

A NEW WAY OF RECREATING HISTORY

An outstanding characteristic of the Balkan postmodern novel is its preference for historical evocation, a quality that distinguishes it from other European works in postmodern prose. Kadare's and Pamuk's works are based on historical facts, but the evocation is made through a lot of stories told by different characters, mirroring different perspectives. The postmodern features are due to the multi perspective vision as well as to the fact that the deconstruction and reconstruction. In the Balkans the authors have a particular vision upon history due to the absorption of myths and legends largely used to represent their people. As in legends and fairytales the action is set in a quite uncertain time, real historical fact being just a frame for the story. For those writers history is considered a mythical refuge in front of an unfriendly reality [Muthu, 2002: 91].

One of Pamuk's famous novels *My Name is Red*, a marvellous description of old Istanbul and a miniaturist painters' group, can be interpreted as a collection of stories told by different people: the painters, the Jewish merchant, the Barber, Seküre [modern interpretation of Scheherazade]. Pamuk helps his readers to identify the connection between the well-known Arabian heroine and Seküre by describing a miniature which is considered to be a representation of Sherezade's real existence. This minature was given to her by her lover, a gifted painter and maintained the heroine's love for him along many years, even during her first marriage. When Red came back to Istanbul the miniature helps the heroes to express their feelings.

Kadare's historical evocations are meant to give a metaphorical representation of Albanian people along history and in contemporary times. The *Place of Dreams* is a political allegory set in the Ottoman Empire's capital. Under the mask of a historical novel, the book is actually a brilliant denouncement of the tyranny and absurdity of the communist regime and a description of real patriotic feelings.

In *The Castle* (published in French under the title *Les Tambours de la pluie*³), the writer depicts the figure of the famous Albanian national hero Skanderberg and the fight between Albanians and Turks in front of a city⁴. Even if the Ottomans have to go back at the end of summer, when the rain started, none of the fighters are winners. The novel describes a moment mirroring the end of Albanians' fight for freedom. The beginning of that historical conflict is depicted in *The Three-Arched Bridge*. Through the journal of the fictitious monk, Gjon Ukcama, we enter the Balkans of the fourteenth century. It is a region perched on the brink of war; local lords bicker among themselves, while the first wave of Ottoman Turks prepare to march against the remnants of the crumbling Byzantine Empire. It is an age of intrigue and an age of confusion. Gjon, an expert in foreign languages and a collector of folk tales, serves as an interpreter between various forces of occupation and his own prince. His journal, adroitly masked in political naiveté, concerns itself with the building of a bridge; stone by stone, we see the Balkans of our time taking shape [Muthu, 2008: 35]. The novels are based on real historical facts, but Kadare presents them in mythological vision, more like legends than like reality, metaphors of contemporary life.

³ The Romanian translation uses the French title *Mesagerii ploii*, editura Humanitas, București, 2010

⁴ That is why the Albanian title can be translated as *The Caste* (translation in use) or as *The Citadel*

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

Taking into consideration the above analysis the author of the article has led to the following conclusions:

Balkan novel literary value lies in the way in which the writers of the region were able to use the oriental tradition in a western frame. The observation made by E. M. Foster, who underlines the fact that no matter the literary trend or cultural fashion, the English novel always has had some particular aspects leading to design its national profile [Forester, 1971: 29], can be applied in analysing the novels of the Balkan writers, mainly the authors on which the present research is based. This personal touch is due to the combination of different tradition as it was set in this article.

A practical application of the developed analysis may be found if referring to Milan Kundera's opinion according to which the novel is an European artefact [Kundera, 2008: 14]. The way in which Balkan novelists used the oriental and folklore tradition in the frame of European models leads not only to an original way of writing, but also to a new theoretical perception of novel and its borders.

In the future the analysis would be extended to other writers and other national literature of the region. This future research should focus on both similarities and differences in order to become an accurate mirror of post-modern literature in the Balkans.

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