Post-Yugoslav in Others' Languages: Memory and Identity among 1.75 Generation Writers

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Abstract:

There have been many discussions about the common cultural space embracing the former Yugoslavia countries. Under the term of "post-Yugoslav literature," scholars have argued the importance of works produced by exile writers, such as Dubravka Ugrešić and David Albahari, and their potentiality to transcend the national boundaries. Is the post-Yugoslav literature a transitional phenomenon, as some critics contend, or will it be a lasting legacy? To consider this question, this presentation will examine and compare two works written by the younger generation of novelists, Sofija Stefanovic and Pajtim Statovci, who wrote in their adopted country's language. Stefanovic's novel *Miss Ex-Yugoslavia* (2018) chronicles the story of a young woman who left Serbia in her childhood and grew up in 1990s Australia. Statovci's first novel, *My Cat Yugoslavia* (Finnish: *Kissani Jugoslavia*) (originally published in 2014, translated into English in 2017, and translated into Serbian in 2020) explores two intertwined stories: The first story follows a young man who moved to Finland from Kosovo as a child, and the second story begins with the youth of his mother, set in the 1980s Kosovo. The novels of Stefanovic and Statovci differ greatly in their style and structure. In addition, the protagonists' attitudes towards the Yugoslavia era are diagonally opposite: one is inclined to nostalgia, and the other is prone to resentment. Nevertheless, there are interesting affinities. One such example is the personification of Yugoslavia, which is traditionally represented as female but represented as male in both stories. With this clue to go on, this presentation will explore the question of memory, gender, and identity in an ever-changing post-socialist culture.

Keywords: Post-Yugoslav literature, Exile, Migration, Gender

1 Introduction

Many discussions have focused on the common cultural space encompassing the former Yugoslavia countries. Under the term of "post-Yugoslav literature," scholars have argued the importance of works produced by exile writers, such as Dubravka Ugrešić and Alxandar Hemon, and their potential to transcend political boundaries (Milivojević, 2021, p. 149). As some critics argue, is post-Yugoslav literature a transitory phenomenon, or will it be a long-term legacy, and in what form (Matijevi, 2016, pp. 103-105)? How can the recent literary production be positioned in this continuum, in contrast to the works of post-1989 writers who became "the citizen of a ruin" during their careers (Ugrešić, 1998, p. 172)?

To address this question, this essay examines and compares two books by 1.75 generation writers[1], Sofija Stefanovic (b. 1982) and Pajtim Statovci (b. 1990), whose works share a common trait of being written in their adopted country's language. Stefanovic's book *Miss ex-Yugoslavia* (2018) chronicles the story of a young woman who left Serbia in her childhood and grew up in 1990s Australia. Statovci's first novel, *My Cat Yugoslavia* (Finnish: *Kissani Jugoslavia*) (originally published in 2014, translated into English in 2017, and translated into Serbo-Croatian in 2020), explores two intertwined stories: The first story follows a young man who moved to Finland from Kosovo as a child, and the second story begins with the youth of his mother, set in the 1980-90s Kosovo. The works of Stefanovic and Statovci differ significantly in their writing style and structure. In addition, the protagonists' attitudes towards the Yugoslavian era are diagonally opposite: one is inclined to nostalgia, and the other is filled with resentment. Nevertheless, there are interesting affinities between the two stories. Through comparing these works, this paper explores the question of gender, memory, and identity in the ever-changing post-socialist culture.

[1] People who migrated in their early years (before age 5). See Rumbaut (2004).

2 *Miss ex-Yugoslavia* as a Memoir of Community Inverted Gender Representation

The prologue of *Miss ex-Yugoslavia* (hereafter abbreviated as *Miss ex*) begins with a beauty contest organized by the former Yugoslavia migrant community in Melbourne. The narrator-protagonist, a student in cinematography, aims to make a documentary film of the competition while attending as one of the contestants. According to her narrative, the contest is meant to select the "beauty queen of a country that no longer exists" (Stefanovic, 2018, p. 1), underlying the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Among nine contestants aged sixteen to twenty-three, the narrator focuses on Nina, a Bosnian refugee from Sarajevo. Nina has a scar on her leg from a Serbian bombshell. Even though the protagonist is slightly uncomfortable with Nina because of her affiliation with the "assailant" country, she still tries to include Nina's story into her documentary. Nina understandingly cooperates with the protagonist, and the story develops around the subtle feeling of solidarity among the competitors. When they prepare themselves, they join forces thanks to their shared language and culture, representing the remains of a disintegrated community. Their feelings are described as follows:

> Back in the safety of our dressing room, we pose for a photo. In our beautiful gowns and our carefully made-up faces, we look like we're dressed for prom. Except we don't have dates. Like nuns are the brides of Christ, we are the brides of a dead Yugoslavia. (Stefanovic, 2018, p.15)

In the Serbo-Croatian language, the gender of the word "Yugoslavia" is feminine. Accordingly, Yugoslavia as a country was traditionally represented as a woman. A notable example in pop culture is the music video of Lepa Brena's song "Jugoslovenka (A Yugoslav Woman)," where the singer plays a woman worshiped by male singers representing constituent republics of Yugoslavia. However, in *Miss ex*, Yugoslavia is represented as a male figure. It suggests that the narrator's expression is detached from the common expression derived from Serbo-Croatian grammar. Moreover, that "man" is described as dead and absent. The contest format assumes that Yugoslavia is not so much a unity as a disintegrated polity. The contest is modeled not as a competition within a country, but between now independent republics.

Stereotypical Perception of History

The figure that embodies the "dead" Yugoslavia is revealed in the first chapter. This chapter entitled "Hello, Collapsing World" deals with the protagonist's birth in 1982. As the chapter title indicates, the "World", or Yugoslavia, is narrated as something meant to collapse because President Tito, who could have embodied Jesus or the dead bridegroom, passed away two years before. However, his image was still omnipresent at that time. When the protagonist's mother went into labor, the father accompanied her to the hospital and returned home, discovering the images of the state funeral of Tito on television.

> He settled into his chair, lit a cigarette, and flicked the television on. Tito had died in 1980, two years earlier, and they were replaying his funeral.
> "Do they play this every single night?!" Dad said. "I swear this was on yesterday!" (Stefanovic, 2018, p. 25).

Tito's funeral was a significant event that brought together over one hundred international delegates. The end of Tito's life was, in a way, the zenith of fame for the state of Yugoslavia. The gloomy ceremony of the funeral is juxtaposed with the happiest moment in family history, as if it were a prelude to the collapse of the state.

In this way, Yugoslavia is embodied by Tito. The narration has some reservation and distance that indicates that the family members were not devoted supporters of Tito. Tito is nevertheless described as the pillar of Yugoslavia. On the contrary, the person appointed as the instigator of the breakup is Milošević. His notorious speech in 1987 is mentioned as follows:

> Tensions between the growing Albanian population and the minority Serbs simmered until 1987, when an ambitious Serbian politician named Slobodan Milošević went against Communist Party lines and took the side of Serbs. Favoring one group over another was a violation of Yugoslavia's guiding principle of "Brotherhood and Unity." "No one will beat you," he said to the Serbs who claimed they'd been mistreated by Albanians. (…) Milošević's statement, which was broadcast nationwide, was enough to unravel everything Tito had done to quiet nationalism (…) (Stefanovic, 2018, pp. 42-43).

In this quote, Milošević is described as the main one responsible for the antagonism against Albanians and the rise of Serbian nationalism, contrasting with Tito, who was represented as a moderate leader who tried to curb the excesses. The story then develops around the harassment by Croatians against Serbians, and Serbian-Croatian antagonism during World War II. On the contrary, the story hardly mentions other groups' suffering. In *Miss Ex*, the issue is not so much to directly face the Serbians' infliction of injury as to place almost all responsibility on Milošević. The passage from Tito's "Brotherhood and Union" era to Milošević's nationalist era is a stereotypical way to describe the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Tito personifies Yugoslavia, and his death opens the way to the destruction instigated by Milošević. Such is the framework of historical conception throughout the story of *Miss ex*. Apart from its importance as a political structure, little is mentioned about other aspects of Yugoslavia's existence. One of the few examples is an episode where the protagonist in her childhood danced in the tram like Lepa Brena, an "icon of the contemporary folk genre" of Yugoslavia (Stefanovic, 2018, p. 38). The memory of her interest in Lepa Brena and in the world of show business is undoubtedly related to her future participation in the beauty contest. However, her childhood memory refers to a mild humiliation because her imitation of the singer was not applauded as expected. At least, it is to be noted that this episode does not emphasize the feeling of Yugoslavia's cultural unity.

Memoir as a Literary Device

In *Miss ex*, the narrator's name is Sofija, the same as the author. In the author's note, the writer insists that her work is based on her memory.

> This is a memoir, not a history. It's a collection of memories: a story from my point of view, and not necessarily one that others would relate. I have changed some names and distinguishing details. Though my intention has been to convey the essence of everything I recount, certain events and scenes have been compressed or expanded to fulfill the needs of the story. Finally, as is the nature of memoir, dialogue is an approximation (Stefanovic, 2018).

The *memoir* is growing in popularity recently as a form of storytelling that deals with the author and their family from an intimate point of view. The author is also an organizer of a writing workshop for *memoirs*. A *memoir* is defined as something different from a novel: for example, a *memoir* is usually written chronologically and sticks to the past tense. The *Miss ex*'s particularity is that it has a prologue and epilogue in the present tense. In other words, this *memoir* is framed in the present tense. This structure emphasizes the personal character of the narrative in the main chapters, but that narrative is not simply based on her memory. Instead, it is structured around a collective memory of her surroundings, and the beauty contest symbolizes the ex-Yugoslav migrant community. In short, Yugoslavia as a community is drawn together through one person's narration. The protagonist is a device that recapitulates an epoch.

3 *My Cat Yugoslavia* as a Novel of Solitude and Generational Friction Struggle against Masculinity

My Cat Yugoslavia (hereafter, abbreviated as *My Cat*) is a novel with two main characters: Emine and her son Bekim. The story is structured so that two storylines are told alternately from each character's childhood perspective to the present. Emine is an Albanian woman born in the countryside of Kosovo. She marries a handsome Albanian Bajram working in the capital Prishtina. After the death of Bajram's father they move together to Prishtina and then Finland when political turmoil begins. In Finland, their relations deteriorate, and finally, Emine chooses to live alone. She decides to stay in Finland and does not return to Kosovo. The other protagonist, Bekim, emigrated with their parents to Finland and is a university student. As an immigrant and gay person, he faces problems in communicating with people and lives in solitary. During his travel to Prishtina and his mother's village, Bekim confronts his father's death, who has returned to Kosovo. This voyage makes his breakup with the homeland definitive. On the way back to Finland, he comes across a Finnish man and starts to live with him. Although the author's biographical background is reflected, it is inappropriate to identify Bekim with the author.

Despite the title of *My Cat*, no character bears the name of "Yugoslavia" in the novel. Certainly, Bekim meets an anthropomorphic cat in a gay bar and begins to live with him. The cat tries to dominate Bekim and mani-

pulate him psychologically. Finally, their relationships ends. This cat is represented in an anthropomorphic figure dressed in a suit on the cover illustration of the English edition, but his name is never revealed. The title *Yugoslavia* is suspended, with no reference to concrete existence.

In the novel, characters encounter other cats with symbolic meanings. For instance, Emine's mother tells her daughter about the role of the cat at the wedding ceremony.

> About a week before the wedding, the villagers snared a cat. They kept it locked up, waiting, the girl's mother explained in passing as though this was a detail that didn't require any explanation. But because she wanted her daughter to prepare for any eventuality, she told the girl that in some places it was customary for the groom to bring the cat to his newly wed bride on their wedding night and kill it with his bare hands to demonstrate to his wife his supremacy, to teach her to fear him. (Statovci, 2017, p. 28)

This vicious masculinity, symbolized by the cat slaughter, is a recurring leitmotiv in the novel. In the story's latter half, Bekim visits Kosovo, picks up a cat, and travels with it to his mother's home village. Bekim's narration does not describe his act at the village when his rage explodes. According to his grandfather's narrative in a phone call to Emine, during the conversation about his father's death, Bekim went into mad and threw a viper at his grandfather. After this brutal incident, there is no mention of the cat, and Bekim starts to live with a male human. In contrast, Emine begins to live with a black cat that her colleague gives to her. She no longer fears her husband and acquires a certain serenity.

As already mentioned, in *My Cat*, the name of the anthropomorphic cat is blurred. It is inappropriate to identify this cat with Yugoslavia. However, the episodes that deal with cats have a common theme of masculinity. Although one of the main characters is feminine, her male family members cause her anxiety. Overall, the central theme of the story is the struggle against masculinity.

Similarity in Historical Perception

While the story of *My Cat* develops in the same period as *Miss ex*, the perspective of Albanians in Kosovo is different from other communities. As opposed to *Miss Ex*'s description of uneasiness and harassment experienced by Serbians, *My Cat* gives a detailed account of Albanians' anxieties and the menace and oppression imposed by Serbians. Despite this contrast, the framework of historical perception is strikingly similar.

In 1980, Emine's multiday wedding celebration was interrupted, causing significant stress to her, due to the announcement of national mourning for Tito. As in *Miss ex*, the happiest moment in personal history is tarnished by state affairs. Emine is almost the only person who talks about Yugoslavia in the novel and her narrative always describes Tito as the symbol of Yugoslavia.

> Everyone began to miss Tito because if Tito had still been in power the Serbs' demands would never have passed through parliament. The people of Yugoslavia had feared this moment for years, the moment when the man who had risen from a modest peasant family to lead us all finally died. Who would lead Yugoslavia once Tito was no longer around? (Statovci, 2017, p. 138)

After Tito as an embodiment of Yugoslavia, Milošević appears. The chapter titled "1980-1993 The Alchemy of a Nation" suggests that Milošević triggered off the upsurge of Serbian nationalism. The episode mentioned is the same as *Miss Ex*, the Milošević's 1987 speech.

> Only a few years after Tito's death, Prishtina became a dangerous place to live. Milošević gave speeches in which he promised to look after all Serbs in the province who lived- without any good reason- in fear of their position in society. *Nobody shall beat you again*, said Milošević. We followed the rise in nationalist fervor his speeches caused in a state of shock. Nobody had beaten the Serbs. Nobody had so much as touched them. (Statovci, 2017, pp. 138-139.)

In addition to historical perception, other structural similarities can be found between two works. In both of them, the main female character is not so interested in politics itself because it is considered a background for the security of family life. The male character (father, husband) decides to emig-

rate. Yugoslavia's culture is briefly described through the lens of popular culture. In this regard, Emine's memory is encapsulated in television, such as partisan movies and music. As is the case of Lepa Brena in *Miss ex*, her idol, Zdravko Čolić, represents the girly and dreamy side of her recollection. She "knew every song on his album *Ako priđeš bliže* by heart", though she "didn't understand the Serbian lyrics in the least" (Statovci, 2017, p. 16). The two stories are curiously similar regarding the description of Yugoslavia's reality: it is the same mixture of stereotypes about "Yugoslavia".

Novel as a Literary Device

However, there are meaningful differences between each story. In *Miss ex*, the accent is given to the positive side of the migrant community. In *My Cat*, the story unfolds differently. In Finland, Bekim's father suffers from discrimination against Muslims. On the other hand, his interpretation of Islam caused a conflict with multiculturalism in Finland, and he finally lost his job at a school. He tries to find his place in the migrant community, committing a robbery with Albanian friends and continuing criminal activities. His last son, Bekim, starts to have nightmares, and he begins to fear snakes and cats. His parents ask the Imam to give him an exorcism, which has no significant effect. Bekim's nightmare stops only after his father beats him because of his rebellious attitude. That means Bekim's natural source of fear was his father.

Bekim continues to fear snakes when he grows up. To overcome his fear, he intentionally starts living with a snake. In the last stage of the story, he fights against a snake and kills it. This episode reveals that the snake represents Bekim's solitude and distress: living with a talking cat and a snake are a reminder of his disconnection from human beings.

The novel's structure also reflects the theme of the friction between generations. In *My Cat*, Emine's and Bekim's narratives are separated, and the two stories do not converge. Each viewpoint describes no shared experience of an event. However, this estrangement does not make them unhappy. They live separately and find stability in their own lives: the mother develops a friendship with her colleague, and the son finds new love with a fatherly man. In stark contrast to *Miss ex* which describes contentedness in the community, *My Cat* recounts individual trajectory.

4 Conclusion

These two works effectively represent each genre. In *Miss ex*, the voices of family members and friends are integrated into the narrator's account, emphasizing the role of community. In *My Cat*, the solitude of the protagonist is described in several ways, making the most of the literary language of the novel. The two stories have a lot in common in their relationship to the history of Yugoslavia, such as the reference to Tito's death and Milošević's speech. Although it is represented as the experience of first-generation migrants, this is a stereotypical perception of history with little sign of individuality. It is challenging to read mixed and contradictory feelings inherent in individual trajectories of the first generation (Williams, 2013, p. 95). Instead, what is represented here is a conventionalized perception held by second-generation migrants. Second generations, or more precisely 1.75 generations, face hardships in adapting to the host country, but their distress differs from the experiences of their predecessors. 1.75 generation writers do not necessarily "live a doubly estranged life" as the first generations do (Biti, 2016, p. 45). The similarity between the two stories lies in their storyline, in which the protagonists find a certain peace of mind in host countries. In that process, the protagonists, like the first generation, try to restore their memories. The mention of Lepa Brena and Zdravko Čolić is an example, but its importance is limited. The literary works of young migrants testify to the ongoing process of leaving the story of a nation, where the specificity of Yugoslavia is gradually diluted. First-generation literature is usually defined as Post-Yugoslav literature that emphasizes the homelessness and in-betweenness. In contrast, the works of younger generation writers can be termed migration literature in a broad sense, in that they explore the theme of belonging, rather than unbelonging, from their own perspectives.

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