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The Traditional Bosnian Song Sevdalinka as an Aesthetical, Musical and Philological Phenomenon

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I

The term „sevdalinka“ originates from „sevdah“, the Arabian expression for love, desire for love, and ecstasy of passion. The Turks took this word from the Arabs, the Bosnian Muslims then added an „H“ to the Arab expression „säwda“ – black bile: one of the four bodily humors believed to determine a melancholic state. The heart of sevdalinka is the feeling of love. This central theme is explored in all its nuances: silent tenderness, yearning, desire, melancholy, and longing; happiness, cheerfulness, humor, bewitchment, excitement, suffering and passion; and above all the type of tragic and painful love that inspires the most noble emotions and moral behavior. The shyness and propriety of the girls, for example, is conveyed in sevdalinka, by their blushing.

A number of essays have been written about the traditional Bosnian song sevdalinka as a musical, philological, aesthetic and psychological phenomenon. In addition, some books have been published in recent years but none has succeeded in covering this topic in its entirety. To provide a critical analysis of sevdalinka in academic terms, we must take as a starting point the aesthetic and artistic composition of this traditional south Slavic song in the context of its philological and musical genre. For a general academic representation, a collective research endeavor of psychologists, ethnologists, and aesthetes is a prerequisite. For centuries the south Slavic peoples have been influenced by this fringe musical philological genre of oral literature; furthermore it has inspired the works of numerous European Slavists and ethnologists from the renowned Czech Ludwig Kuba at the turn of the twentieth century to the contemporary German Slavist Wolfgang Eschker. [See notes at the end of this article]. The influence of this music has, of course, played an important role in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian literary world notable in the inter war period in the works of Safvet-beg Bašagić, Osman Đikić, Aleksa Šantić, Hamza Humo, Ahmed Muradbegović, Dželaludin Kurt, Rasim Filipović, Alija Bejtić, Hamid Dizdar and, later, in those of contemporary Balkan scholars and musicologists such as Kuhač Franjo, Stevan Mokranjac,Vlado Milošević, Miodrag Vasiljević, Cvjetko and Dunja Rihtman, Kučukalić Zijo, Muhsin Rizvić, Munib Maglajlić, Rašid Durić, Muhamed Žero, to name a few.

A great piece of art is difficult to define in scientific terms. This is especially true of

sevdalinka, which, in the opinion of many Slavist, is one of the most stylish lyric creations in European oral folk poetry. This is why the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslim people as creators and as shapers of sevdalinka are very proud of this song, for they have not only enriched European culture but also contributed to the intellectual treasure of mankind. The term sevdalinka today brings to mind the association of a piece of music with melodic singing. This has been the reason for neglecting the philological, ethnological and moral aspects in all analyses to date. All previous research into sevdalinka has included at least partially, simultaneous aural and philological investigation, which has enabled at least appreciation, if not full understanding of the magic of this fringe genre of folk art.

A century ago sevdalinka was not merely a folk tradition. All that time people lived within the song tradition as the song lived through them. Today, it evokes images, half-remembered fragrances, and the sensuality of past exotic world, of former Bosnian life based on aesthetic and moral values of an even older tradition. The return to this tradition does not indicate the idealization thereof but rather indicates a sophisticated and reasoned decision to return to values proven over centuries to provide fulfillment and harmony in daily life.

Altruism and self-sacrifice for the benefit and happiness of others are themes often encountered in sevdalinka. Sevdalinka is in fact the exaltation of love. With a predominantly erotic undercurrent eminent in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian spirit, sevdalinka existed for five hundred years in the south Slavic regions. The longevity of this song to date and its future endurance result from the timeless qualities of the music and man’s fulfillment in joy, pleasure and those ephemeral moments of happiness. Sevdalinka fills us with the joy, intensity and fullness of life, it heals and strengthens our fragile souls against the cruel realities of life; it gathers our scattered being and keeps it together. Sevdalinka and sevdah cannot be written about in definite terms: it is impossible to define a phenomenon as it is impossible to experience or play the same melody the same way twice. The emotional but nevertheless precise quotation of the aforementioned German Slavist Gerhard Geseman, who was deeply moved by sevdalinka, is the most accurate: „The most beautiful and tender creation of the folk music and lyric poetry tradition.“ [1]

II

In the narrower sense, sevdalinka is the tradition of folk poetry in music and literature with love as its focus. The love between the young boy and girl is the source of most sevdalinkas, but by no means exhaustively so. Its cultural ambience, local description, both subjectivity and objectivity elevate the sevdalinka far beyond the emotions of love and make it a celebration of the urban, material, and spiritual life of modern Bosnian-Herzegovinian people. Sevdalinka reflects the urban life of Bosnian-Herzegovinian people about five hundred years: Bosnian living quarters, small streets, markets, fountains, gardens, courtyards, bazaars and many coffee houses.

The richness in tonality and the melodious sound of sevdalinka was first systematically investigated by ethnologist and musicologist Ludwig Kuba, according to whom sevdalinka has three scales, more than is common to European folk music. Other defining characteristics of this music are its employment of melismatic passages in

singing, the use of predominantly minor scales, the ancient ornamentation of the melody and the rare practice of solemnization – the naming of the notes of a scale by syllable instead of letters e.g. doh-reh-mi. In conjunction with the very oriental instrumentation (e.g. „saz“, „diple“, „tamburica“) we experience a correspondingly oriental sound. This should be viewed and considered in terms of the religious and musical tradition of Islam in the context of Bosnia: the „ezan“, the calling for „namaz“ – worship. The religious songs of the Bosnian Muslims, the „ilahija“ and the „kasida“, which were maintained within the environment of religion and family, contributed to the musical shape of the sevdalinka. It, however, is important to state that this is not an oriental, but a Bosnian creation, despite the origins of the term “sevdalinka.“ Sevdalinka is often in 2/2, both of lively and moderate tempo, and often a syncopated 4/4 rhythm, giving an overwhelmingly yearning and melancholy emotional quality to music. Notable displaying the aforementioned features are the well-known sevdalinkas „Moj dilbere, kud se šećeš,“ and „Kad ja pođoh na Bendbašu.“ Unable to resist, the listener is drawn into the magic of sevdalinka and into a world of his own imagination, he is transported far away from the concerns of ordinary life into contemplation of his dreams and desires.

Sevdalinka portrays the whole life spiritual tradition and lifestyle of Bosnian people with clarity and vividness. The gardens with their fountains and the „agony of the flowers“ therein, the Bosnian houses with their „selamluci“, the awakening and gradual development of love, the „ašik-pendžer“, a type of window especially constructed for love talks – formed the environment in which sevdalinka was the instrument for the declaration of love over centuries. At the same time, it portrays a vivid and artistic picture of the social life of Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims from the first half of the sixteenth century to the present day. Furthermore, sevdalinkas described the stone bridges, the white mosques with their slender minarets all over Bosnia; the urban treasures of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian towns that are Sarajevo, Banjaluka, Mostar, Trebinje, Travnik, Tuzla, the magical beauty of the girls of Travnik, Livno and Prijedor as well as the magnificent rivers Vrbas, Bosna, Neretva, Buna, Mošćanica ... There is hardly a sevdalinka in existence whose origins are not based upon incidents in real life. This is significant difference between sevdalinka and other types of European folk poetry. A sevdalinka does not sing of a woman, fairy or noble lady in an abstract way as the Patricians and troubadours did. The singer of sevdalinka yearns for the embrace of the one who is the object of his desire and by whom his entire soul is consumed.

III

The gradual process of oriental Islamic civilization influencing the medieval Bosnian culture (in which sevdalinka was created) lasted from the second half of the fifteenth century up until the beginning of the twentieth century. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, dozens of urban settlements were established throughout Bosnia with all the material aspects of urban civilization, from which source and inspiration the music and oral lyrics of sevdalinka were drawn: „mahale“ – urban districts with cobbled streets – „kaldrmli sokaci“, houses painted in white, town houses with attics „on four waters“, with „mušepci“ – mullions, and „kapidžici“ – balconies jutting out into the street, the houses with lots of windows, „hamami“ – baths, „caravanseraies,“ „tekije“ – monasteries on isolated ground, „ćuprije“ – bridges over river, and so on.

The material background of Islamic civilization in Bosnia and Herzegovina, from where sevdalinka took its motifs existed for over 450 years of Turkish rule and continues to do so. However the material and intellectual ambience and the tradition which shaped sevdalinka have been waning since Austro-Hungarian occupation Bosnia in 1878. As the manifestations of Islamic civilization faded, so too faded the material, social and moral structure of life which had previously ensured the preservation and continuation of sevdalinka.

A superficial view alone of sevdalinka and philological and textual structure of sevdalinka is sufficient to recognize the influence of the rich Islamic culture, and the numerous loan words from three oriental languages namely Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. Sevdalinka is rich in Balkan orientalisms. Due to this it is only possible to immerse oneself entirely in this wonderful intellectual and spiritual world through a clear understanding of the deep mental and emotional demands on the listener. Sevdalinka portrays all the aspects of the intellectual tradition in the life of Bosnian people: the gardens with flowers, the white houses with balconies, other with the court for the „ašikovanje“ – courting, the gradual conquest of love, and of particular importance the ašik-pendžer – a window designed for love talk. From these lyrics we can gain an accurate picture of Bosnian life at that time. Sevdalinka also describes the distinct type of hunting with greyhounds and falcons practiced by Bosnian nobility in the arcadia of the Bosnian forests and mountains. (e.g. sevdalinka „Lov lovio Muhareme oko luga zelenoga, pusti hrte u ravnine, a sokole pod oblake“ and sevdalinka „Sabah uči, ja se u lov spremam“). This kind of hunting was practiced in feudal Europe and preserved by the Bosnian Muslims until the twentieth century. Due to the lack of trustworthy documents, sevdalinka, for those who fully understand must be assumed to be an authentic description of real life and the traditions of social life in Bosnia at the time of the Turkish rule. In retracing the path of sevdalinka, one discovers places and people are brought to life once more; people and places immortalized ba sevdalinka for their deep love and eternal qualities. Although sevdalinka originates from the deepest desires of the soul, it also represents a radiant, creative and intellectual feat of mankind.

Sevdalinka came into being in the days when the oriental culture of Islam penetrated every aspect of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially that of the Slavic population in Bosnia who had accepted Islam as a modus vivendi and as a modus procedendi. Bosnia-Herzegovinia’s sevdalinkas have not remained the treasure of the Muslim people exclusively; all Bosnians „are born“ with sevdalinka, grow up with it and are enraptured by it. Over the centuries it has gained intellectual value and respect not only in the Bosnian but in Balkan and in all South European countries. Because of the near universality of its emotion and appeal, it „has traveled“ from Bosnia into the treasure chambers of the world, where it has indeed attained a high level of respect for its artistic value. In the last 150 years, Bosnian oral poetry and sevdalinka have been translated by leading poets into many languages, in particular during the Romanticism.

IV

Sevdalinkas are usually sung and accompanied by a musical instrument called „saz“, an unusual instrument of Persian origin which was adapted to the Bosnian taste,

language and character. Each performance of sevdalinka can be regarded as a discovery and revelation of oneself. The interpreter is expected to restrict his voice to the level of the closest and most intimate surroundings. Sevdalinka is not the song of the masses, but of the most narrow social environment, in particular the family itself. The interpretation of an original sevdalinka is always a deep and intimate process of re-evaluating emotions in their complexity, and re-examination life and its meaning. The art of harmonizing the thoughts and emotions of the interpreter with those of the listener of the song sevdalinka is always delicate and difficult to achieve, and seldom completely successful. (These are the best song sevdalinka singers and interpreters of this time: Dr. Hašim Muharemović, Dr. Himzo Polovina, Emina Zečaj, Zehra Deović, Safet Isović, Nedžad Salković, Zaim Imamović, Nada Mamula, Zekerijah Đezić, Muhamed Mešanović – Hamić, Hanka Paldum, Mostar Sevdah Reunion, ensemble Prijatelji.) The renowned German expert in Balkan oral folk lyric, Gerhard Gesemann, mentioned above, defined sevdalinka as follows:

> Although known to some scholars by its Turkish name it cannot be regarded as of oriental Turks; the Turks themselves considered the sevdalinka as foreign in its origins. Sevdalinka originates from Türkish expression „sevda“, another Turkish term „dert“was then added. Both words may be Turkish, but this expression is inhabited by the Bosnian soul: in this word the Bosnian soul flourishes. [2]

Sevdalinka is an art form in which passion and reason, hedonism and Gnosticism meet. The song is a gift from Bosnians and their country Bosnia-Herzegovina to the world to treasure:

> Happy is the man who is able to experience the flowing richness and melodious sound of sevdalinka, one of the world’s most stylish and dramatic love lyrics. [3]

This is how Skender Kulenović, one of the leading contemporary poets in the Bosnian language, described sevdalinka. For the greater sevdalinka is a poem about the desire for love and about unfulfilled love. The levels of meaning contained in sevdalinka are considerable. Its creators, interpreters and singers immerse themselves in a happier, more sensual world. Sevdalinka is characterized by diapason, rich in literary, philosophical and one whole aesthetic literary inspiration. Its depth of imagery and emotional content are important dimensions that distinguish it from other love poetry and related genres. Therefore it is necessary not only to analyze sevdalinka in a musicological, ethnographical, ethnological, philological context but also to focus on its creative origins.

Let us now focus on a lesser-known sevdalinka „Ćemalušo, mali Carigradu“ – O, Ćemalušo, you little Constantinople – singing of the Sarajevans in past days. It creates a beautiful image of the Sarajevo city (šeher Sarajevo), of the material civilization in the days of the Turkish rule and a vision of comfortable relaxed Muslim life on their

native Bosnian soil that is more highly regarded than life in Constantinople:

> Ćemaluša, you little Constantinople
> emperors and viziers live within you!
> The emperor calls the vizier through the pearl,
> „My vizier, why don't you come to me?"
> The vizier answers through gold:
> „O, pasha, how shall I come to you?
> If I can't walk through the streets,
> Passing the corners and mullions,
> The boys and the girls,
> The saz of Porčin Avdija,
> And the knocker of Hadžajlić Muša,
> The feather of Hrgo's Šerifa,
> And the beauty of Fejzaga's Šida. [4]

Translated by Alison Harthill

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Poetic Lyrics of Selected Sevdalinka

1. **Emina: The Text of of writter Aleksa Šantić, composer of melody of song**

unknown –

Sinoć kad se vraćah iz topla hamama,

prođoh pokraj bašče staroga imama.

Kad tamo u bašči, u hladu jasmina,

s ibrikom u ruci, stajaše Emina.

Ja joj nazvah selam, jest tako mi dina,

ne htje ni da čuje lijepa Emina.

Već u sebren ibrik zahvatila vode,

pa niz bašču đule zaljevati ode.

S grana vjetar duhnu, pa niz pleći puste,

rasplete joj njene pletenice guste.

Zamirisa kosa ko’ zumbuli plavi,

a meni se krenu bururet u glavi!

Za mal’ ne posrnu mojega mi dina,

al’ meni ne dođe lijepa Emina.

Samo me je jednom pogledala mrko,

al ne haje, alčak, što za njome crko’

Po bašči se šeće, a plećima kreće,

ni hodžin mi zapis moći pomoć neće.

Ja kakva je, pusta, moga mi imana,

stid je ne bi bilo da je kod sultana!

Umro stari pjesnik, umrla Emina,

ostala je pusta bašča od jasmina.

Salomljen je ibrik, uvelo je cvijeće,

pjesma o Emini nikad umrijet neće!

2. **Azra – Kraj tanana šadrvana The text *„Azra“* of German writter Heinrich Heine; translate of writter Aleksa Šantić, melody of songs composer**

unknown

Kraj tanana šadrvana,

Gdje žubori voda živa,

Svakog dana šetala se

Sultanova kćerka mila.

Svakog dana jedno ropče,

stajalo kraj šadrvana.

Kako vrijeme prolazilo,

ropče bljeđe, bljeđe bilo.

Jednog dana pitala ga

sultanova kcerka draga:

„Kazuj, ropče, odakle si

iz plemena kojega si?“

Ja se zovem el Muhamed

iz plemena starih Azra

Što za ljubav život gube

I umiru kada ljube.“

3. **Voljelo se dvoje mladih – Žute dunje; The text of poet Aleksa Santic, the melody of songs’ composer is unknown.**

Voljelo se dvoje mladih.

Šest mjeseci i godinu.

Kad su htjeli da se uzmu,

da se uzmu, aman, aman,

dušmani im ne dadoše!

Razbolje se lijepa Fatma,

jedinica u majke,

zaželjela žute dunje,

žute dunje iz Stambola.

Ode dragi da donese,

žute dunje carigradske.

Al’ ga nema tri godine.

Tri godine, aman, aman!

Nit’ se javlja, niti dolazi!

Dođe dragi sa dunjama.

Nađe Fatmu na nosilima.

„Dvjesto dajem, spustite je,

tristo dajem, otkrijte je,

da još jednom vidim Fatmu,

moju Fatmu na nosilam!“

4. **Kad ja pođoh na Bendbašu**

Kad ja pođoh na Bendbašu, na Bendbašu na vodu,

ja povedoh bijelo janje, bijelo janje sa sobom.

Sve djevojke Bendbašanke na kapiji stajahu,

samo moja mila draga na demirli pendžeru.

Ja joj nazvah „Selam alejk, selam alejk, djevojče!“

Ona meni „Alejk, selam, dođ’ doveče, dilberče!“

Ja ne odoh istu večer, već ja odoh drugi dan,

drugog dana moja draga za drugog se udala!

5. **Ima l’ jada ko’ kad akšam pada**

Ima l’ jada ko’ kad akšam pada, kad mahale fenjere zapale.

Kad saz bije u pozne jacije, kad tanani dršću šadrvani.

Aman, jada kad akšam ovlada, u minute kad bulbuli šute,

Kad bol sanja kraj đulova granja, a dert guši i suze osuši.

Usne male kad šapću iz tame:„Slatko gondže, da l’ još misliš na me?“

Draga dragog doziva bez daha: „Aman, luče, mrijem od sevdaha!“

6. **Da sam sjajna mjesečina**

Da sam sjajna mjesečin, aman, samo jednu noć,

pa da mi je sa večera iznad Bosne proć’!

Kad se tihi šapat prospe, aman, po sokacima,

tad se nježni uzdisaji, dižu zvijezdama.

Sve bih momke zagrlila, aman, sjajnim zrakama,

samo jednog grlila bih bijelim rukama.

A još kad bih na njegovoj, aman, ruci zaspala,

pa makar se za života, ne probudila!

Notes

1. Gezeman (Gesemann) Gerhard: Prolegomena povodom gramofonskog snimanja bosanske narodne pesme. In: journal Prilozi proučavanju narodne poezije. Knj. IV, Sv. 1-2, Beograd 1937, 222-240. ↩
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3. Kulenović Skender, Iz smaragda Une. In: Izabrana djela S. Kuleenovića. Knjiga VI. Eseji. Sarajevo 1983, 157-158. ↩
4. Maglajlić Munib, 101 sevdalinka. Mostar 1978, 157-158. ↩

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