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Meša Selimović's Novel "The Fortress" as an Emblematic Representation of Yugoslav Socialist Modernism

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Introduction

Drawing upon my dissertation research on the subversive tactics of Yugoslav literature in the period of late socialism, I will analyze the poetics of Meša Selimović's renowned novel "The Fortress," published in 1970.

Before delving into this research, my studies focused on Russian and English literature, and I did not have an insightful knowledge of the topic. My goal was to read the classics of South Slavic modern literature and trace how the dissident authors of late Yugoslav socialism subverted the monolithic bureaucratic order. After spending substantial time researching this issue, I came to the conclusion that opposed my initial hypothesis. To my great surprise, I recognized the considerable similarity between the prevalent socialist norm and the dissident literature produced in Yugoslav socialism.

In this essay, I will briefly expound on how Selimović's novel reflects the features of Yugoslav socialist modernism and how the outcomes of my research diversify the field findings.¹

Previous writings

Before proceeding to discuss the previous writings on Selimović's novel and the poetics of socialist modernism, I want first to clarify the concept to avoid any possible terminological confusion. The term socialist modernism is an all-encompassing notion that includes diverse literary formations or movements. In this essay, the term socialist modernism is used to refer to the classic canonical writers of the socialist epoch, such as Miroslav Krleža, Mak Dizdar, Mihailo Lalić, Danilo Kiš, Slobodan Novak, Vitomil Zupan, Meša Selimović to mention just a few.

Different authors have used various terms to cover the scope of Yugoslav modernist literature. Literary critic Enver Kazaz employed the name "modernist skepticism" to denote the modernist occurrences in late socialist Yugoslav literature (2010, 36-39).

The author highlights how literature created under the banner of modernist skepticism interrogated and subjugated to skepticism the whole project of modernist enlightenment, including the communist grand narrative. Authors like Predrag Palavestra held that the modernist literature of late socialism evolved into a form of an “aesthetic ketman” (1983, 26). The strategy of ketman implied that Yugoslav writers under the pressure of repressive regulation self-censored themselves or resorted to disguised Aesopian language to condemn the communist regime. Andrew Baruch Wachtel interpreted Selimovic’s novel “The Fortress” similarly to Kazaz and Palavestra’s readings. For Wachtel, Selimovic’s novel is set in Ottoman Bosnia in an attempt to conceal criticism of contemporary socialist society, which is failing to meet the standards of the normal liberal civic state (2010, 114).

Unlike the critics mentioned, I will focus on the features of the novel “The Fortress” that reflect and share the values of socialist modernity rather than directly or subtly challenge or oppose them.

The poetics of socialist modernism

The tenets of socialist modernism are usually discussed in reference to Miroslav Krleža’s famous inaugural speech in Ljubljana on the occasion of the Third Congress of the Union of Writers in 1952. For the sake of brevity, I would skip retelling Krleža’s ideological and aesthetic idiosyncrasies that shaped socialist modernist poetics and focus instead on its main stylogenetic elements.

The common feature that underpins all literature belonging to the poetics of socialist modernism and secures language and stylistic coherence is the *function of aesthetic reevaluation*. This function implies that socialist modernist literature is marked by a perpetual search for aesthetic innovation of form and literary methods. In his foundational speech, Krleža makes it clear that the official culture of socialist Yugoslavia should not cultivate the principle of art for art’s sake, as it is closely linked with bourgeois values. Instead, the new socialist literature should use aesthetic innovation in the service of the social function – to fight against “hunger and tyranny.” In other words, the pioneers of socialist modernism believed that only literature with a strong aesthetic streak could effectively address the significant social issues of its time, which were related to increasing freedom and reducing poverty.

The strong impulse toward experimentation with form and concern with reorganizing existing social structures typical for socialist modernity can be considered a remnant of the historic avant-gardes that developed in the 1910s and 1920s. The residual reflex of the historic avant-gardes manifested itself in socialist modernism literature in the form of the so-called *optimal projection into the future*. The term “optimal projection” was coined by Aleksandar Flaker to describe the inclination in literature toward creating futuristic utopian spaces (1982, 66-72). Specifically, socialist modernist literature seeks to develop utopian, mostly socialist projects as an alternative to the current social reality. It’s worth noting that Krleža’s recommendations, while undeniably leftist, do not impose on literature any political agenda, including that of the Communist party. Rather, the literature should cultivate an environment of perpetual revolution, aiming to repeatedly transform social structures until a utopia of absolute freedom is achieved in the undefined future.

In addition to the optimal projections, socialist modernist literature very often contains elements of the so-called *fin de siècle* poetics. The residuals of the *fin de siècle* in socialist modernist literature were recognizable mostly for certain secessionist stylizations of the fictional space.² In terms of language, the secessionist stylization implied increased interest for folk culture, vernaculars, and dialects. Whereas in terms of diegetic space, the secessionist mannerism in literature prompted the aestheticization of the prominent historical episodes. Taken together, the secessionist manifestations in socialist modernist literature sketched particular national collective identities within the Yugoslav supranational formation. It is important to note that the concern with collective identities within Yugoslav multinationalism exhibited the spirit of national emancipation and accommodation of diverse ethnic groups within the shared South Slavic political project rather than a push for claiming territorial division. That is, national identities were constructed to promote the ideology of brotherhood and unity of the Yugoslav people and ensure that the controversial episodes of the historical past were interpreted in a way that did not pit Yugoslav nations against each other.

Apart from optimal projection and elements of *fin de siècle*, Yugoslav socialist modernism was marked with *existentialist content*, which it received from its horizontal connection with dominant trends in the Western European cultural complex. The existentialist philosophical mode attained more activist and less contemplative character when transposed in the Yugoslav literary context. As a result, social engagement against regressive historical forces was understood as a background of the universal human fight against metaphysical evil. That way, in the socialist modernist literature, the individual struggle against repressive social institutions is presented as reflective of the universal existential condition of humans.

Finally, socialist modernist writings often contain elements of *socially engaged literature*. The poetics of socially engaged art introduced in Yugoslav socialist modernism the patronizing attitude towards workers and peasants and instrumentalization of class struggle.

The prevailing ideological tenet associated with the poetics of socialist modernism was concerned with acquiring more freedom for one's collective. Evidently, the tropes of a struggle for freedom, justice, truth, and similar modernist dogmatic values had socialist ideological meaning. One should keep in mind that the fight for freedom stemmed from earlier heroic traditions and evolved to embody more socialist ideals in the context of the second Yugoslavia. As a result, *the heroic canon of the past* provided a foundational backdrop for the development of other aspects of modernist poetics.

Not all literature associated with socialist modernism showcases the mentioned characteristics. However, every socialist modernist specimen will demonstrate the function of aesthetic, social, and ethical reevaluation of the existing norms and the presence of future utopian transcendence.

The novel "The Fortress" by Meša Selimović can be considered a typical example of socialist modernist poetics as it incorporates all the identified features, including the optimal projection of the historical avant-gardes, elements of the *fin de siècle*, an

influence of existentialist philosophy, a propensity for socially engaged art, and the foundational heroic canon of the previous epochs.

The Fortress - the embodiment of the socialist modernist poetics

Selimović's "The Fortress" is a modern novel that draws heavily on realistic conventions. The plot is set in a concrete chronotope - Ottoman Sarajevo of the seventeenth century. The Bosnian remote setting provides a picturesque and ornamented backdrop against which unfolds fictional political intrigue. The novel opens with a war episode of the Battle of Chocim that introduces the main protagonist, Ahmet Shabo, who is also the primary story consciousness. The hero returns after the war to Sarajevo only to find out that all his family has died of the plague. His appalling condition improves after he is offered a job by his friend whose life he saved in the war. Finding solace in love and marrying his Christian neighbor additionally contributes to his recovery. Ahmet Shabo's fortunes, however, take a turn for the worse when he offends the powerful city authorities by echoing words spoken by a student named Ramiz. Ramiz ends up imprisoned in a fortress for daring to criticize the authorities and gaining public support. Driven by a sense of justice, the main hero plunges into a complex web of political intrigues and conspiracies to secure Ramiz's freedom. The hero's quest to save Ramiz unveils the concealed feuds and power intricacies, painting a vivid picture of the disrupted city dynamics in Ottoman-ruled Sarajevo.

As already mentioned, the action is predominantly set in Ottoman Bosnia. Selimović evidently paints the Bosnian milieu in a secessionist manner and uses it as a setting for political intrigues. The secessionist stylization of Bosnian cultural realia has been determined as an expression of the fin de siècle artistic style, which socialist modernism has embraced as its ideological and aesthetic principle.

The clash with authorities and subsequent political intrigue ensued after Ahmet Shabo repeated in front of the city officials the following words he had heard previously from Ramiz:

"The life of this people consists of hunger, bloodshed, suffering, miserable vegetation in their own country, and senseless dying in a foreign one. All my comrades at Chocim died like dogs, without knowing why, and thousands of other poor devils the same". (1999, 64-65)

The political message conveyed by student Ramiz and reiterated by Ahmet encapsulates the fundamental tenets of socially engaged literature, which were also strongly advocated by socialist modernism. The statement clearly exposes the social and economic divide between the wealthy and the impoverished, who live miserably in their country or die in the foreign, protecting the interests of the powerful. Selimović's novel appears to align well with the principles of socialist modernism, which prioritizes the safeguarding of the rights and welfare of the underprivileged and oppressed classes.

"The Fortress" also communicates well with the legacy of the historic avant-garde.

The character of Ramiz performs the function of the utopian telos and thus symbolizes the yearning for a brighter future and the highest humanistic and possible socialist ideals. Similarly, it can be noticed that the main hero, Ahmet Shabo, embodies the previously discussed optimal projection. Once Ramiz ended up in the fortress, Ahmet projected all his human, social, and creative forces into orchestrating the dangerous scheme to rescue the prisoner. The harnessing of all one's individual potential into accomplishing a political and revolutionary feat that has relevance for one's collective well-being is the most striking feature of socialist modernist novels. The building up of suspense moves toward creating a revolutionary tension that steers social and historical currents toward the pursuit of absolute humanistic ideals. The entire novel can be interpreted as a mythologization of the revolutionary consciences projected in the character of Ramiz but also Ahmet, which serve as ideological nuclei of the novel.

Ramiz and Ahmet's dispute with the city authorities prompted literary critics to interpret the conflict as a disguised criticism of the socialist establishment. Even though that interpretation is valid, I still want to point out that the revolutionary pose displayed by Ahmet, relentlessly settling accounts with political opponents, prioritizing the public good over the private need in a way mimics the function of the socialist authoritarian rule. The fact that Ahmet Shabo displays cognitive apparatus and revolutionary consciousness that was privileged by the socialist state weakens the argument of the novel's supposed opposition to socialist rule.

The introduction of the existentialist theme adds complexity to the novel's supposed skepticism toward socialism. Ahmet clearly views Ramiz as a prophet and a conduit for the human "ancient dream," which he believes must be passed on as a hope to the next generation. However, Ahmet realizes that if Ramiz were to seize power, he would become "the most ruthless enemy of his former self" (1999, p. 156). In other words, the novel depicts power, rather than socialism, as the corrupting force capable of distorting even idealists like Ramiz. Further on, the existentialist subtext portrays social and political corruption as a mere reflection of cosmic constellations. Drawing on that analogy between social and metaphysical evil, Ahmet's quest for greater freedom and justice in a specific historical context takes on an allegorical significance, symbolizing the human existentialist condition and the timeless struggle against universal evil. The influence of existentialist philosophy certainly enriches the novel's depth of meaning. However, it also seems to attenuate the novel's potential for providing a sharp critique of authoritarian rule.

Selimović's novel also reproduced the enduring values of the previous heroic epic canon. The heroic tradition placed the highest value on the fight for liberation and freedom of one's collective. By portraying a revolutionary act set in the distant Bosnian past, Selimović reinterpreted Bosnian history as the groundwork for a socialist revolution that would propel society toward achieving a utopian future goal. One might argue that "The Fortress" integrated the Bosnian Ottoman history into the broader Yugoslav socialist legacy. In addition to promoting the fight for freedom inherited from the heroic canon, the novel expanded the topic of freedom to include freedom of speech and artistic autonomy, which can be seen as a socialist diversification of the heroic epic heritage.

It is important to note that the freedoms promoted in the novel are rooted in socialist

ideology and may thus significantly diverge from liberal and contemporary societies' concepts of human rights. The female characters, which are very few, operate in a patriarchal environment and are completely deprived of agency and excluded from the political intrigues. Furthermore, the novel omits any exploration of sexual freedoms and presents homosexual inclination as deviant behavior.

I would also like to draw attention to some sort of contradictory nature of socialist modernism. Namely, the main hero, Ahmet Shabo, who is depicted as a pacifist poet prone to contemplation, does not hesitate to resort to violence when it becomes the only way to save his life or to carry out the rescue mission of Ramiz. The tolerance for violence reveals itself as a blind spot of socialist modernism, which omits to condemn violent behaviors as a means of attaining utopian goals. Danilo Kiš was the first author to identify this flaw and successfully deconstruct Yugoslav socialist modernism in his polemic book "The Anatomy Lesson."

However, it should be recognized that at the rhetorical level, the novel did promote love as an alternative to hate, injustice, and revenge. The novel ends with a strange incantation in the foreign land of the grim-sounding names of Bosnian villages. I'd like to conclude the essay with these words, which signify poverty but also a deep love for the native language and a longing for home.

"Luckless, Blackwater, Mudville, Thornystake, Burnt Ash, Hunger, Wolfsden, Thorny, Misery, Snake-hole..." (1999, 391)

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Notes

1. See the author's Bosnian text for more extensive discussion and quotations from the South Slavic

authors mentioned. [←](#)

2. "This term refers to the artistic movements around 1900, not to political secession in which part of a country leaves it. [←](#)

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