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The Many Secretive Voices of Bosnia: An Appraisal of Derviš Sušić's novel Spies

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There are few contemporary novels that appear to embody in such a convincing way the distinctively syncretic cultural and historical peculiarities of Bosnian identity – or, to quote Muhamed Filipović's 1967 seminal essay, the "spirit of Bosnia" [1] – such as *Spies* (Uhode, 1972) by author Derviš Sušić (1925-1990); significantly, the writer's son Muhamed Sušić aptly described it in a recent interview as a sort of literary "ID card" of the country, [2] pointing out how his father successfully achieved his goal to portray in a vivid and concrete manner all those elements that determined the history of Bosnia throughout the centuries, while also contributing to the development of local society's peculiar multi-religious and multi-ethnic features. In fact, the author apparently chose to give an account of the country's long and complex history by emphasizing the ability of its inhabitants to adapt and survive to the different foreign political entities that subdued (or aimed to subdue) the Balkan region, above all the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, by superficially including in their heritage the occupiers' different cultural and religious traits without acquiescing to complete submission and assimilation. Interestingly, this particular kind of resistance, which the novel implicitly presents as a unifying factor among the different ethnicities living in Bosnia, is described from the perspective both of native and foreign spies, operating in the country's territory in diverse but equally crucial time periods; indeed, the novel mostly consists in a fragmentary collection of fictional reports sent by local informers to their superiors, which, by alternating with other heterogeneous pseudo-historical text materials (such as coded messages, archive papers, hearing transcripts and even death warrants), provides a polyphonic portrayal of Bosnian society during the most significant events of the country's history. More precisely, the novel covers the long period lasting from the gradual decay of the independent Bosnian kingdom in the late Middle Ages and the subsequent beginning of the Ottoman administration up to the 19th century autonomist uprisings and the Partisan resistance struggle throughout the Second World War (which the author, as a committed Communist and antifascist, actively took part in during his youth) with its controversial aftermath, while also presenting the country's role as an intelligence secret battlefield within the diplomatically non-aligned socialist Yugoslav federation in the Cold War era; in this perspective, the choice of foreign spies and their native counterparts as the main first-

person narrators appears to be particularly important since they simultaneously both represent how outsiders perceive Bosnians and how Bosnians see themselves, while also adding a convincing dramatic tone to the overall historical account, which eventually transcends the boundaries of localistic storytelling to partially engage in wider considerations about the role of individuals as mere pawns in the dynamics of history and power struggles between rival geopolitical powers. This is primarily evident in the depiction of foreign informers, who repeatedly express in their dispatches their own feelings of uneasiness, despair, and loneliness in the apparently unwelcoming Bosnian environment, while also showing a colonial-like exploitative attitude towards the country's resources and degrading prejudices of superiority over the allegedly "barbaric" natives, whose mentality they are not actually interested in understanding (thus failing also to exert real control over them). See, as an example, the very beginning of the novel, in which an unnamed Western spy, during the rule of the Kotromanić dynasty, describe the country in the following harsh and demeaning terms, while also cynically pointing out its potential strategic value:

> "My Lord, the land named Bosnia is one unfortunate land, […] if nothing, we could use it as a safe resting station. This is not a kingdom in the way we understand it. […] This is a land of fear, carnage, and horror." [3]

The same harshness characterizes a subsequent missive sent by an Ottoman informer who, despite having spent many years in the country while paving the way for the incoming conquest, still feels isolated and uneasy among the local population and lashes out at his superiors for having tried to get rid of him:

> "…who slandered me, for I am not at fault? […] Why did you send Rubayyid, […] with a black garrote for my innocent neck? Years and years I have spent rotting among these folks of no faith […], with no law […], with no cheer – other than a suspicious smile. And for all my reports you gave me – silence, for all my assessments – disdain, for all my proposal – a few coins and no support." [4]

Therefore, the humiliating frustration experienced by foreign agents in Bosnia while trying to get the trust of natives with no avail eventually makes them realize their own marginality and replaceability in a larger and merciless power game. This perspective may also remind us of Ivo Andrić's fundamental novel *The Bosnian Chronicle* (Travnička hronika, 1945), set in the Napoleonic era, which depicts the French consul in Bosnia, Jean Daville, gradually taking conscience of his own insignificance while witnessing the locals' indifferent or even hostile reaction to the great historical upheavals of the time. However, in Sušić' s novel this realization may lead the foreigners to abandon their initial prejudices and side with those they were initially hired to spy on, as depicted in the section focusing on the rebellion led by military commander Husein-kapetan Gradaščević against Ottoman rule in the years 1831-1833; here, a young spy sent by the Istanbul authorities, after being unmasked and initially ridiculed because of his ignorance of local ways of behavior, eventually

joins the ranks of the insurgents and gains their respect after having fiercely died in battle, as recalled by one of the rebel chiefs:

> "[…] finally, the unfortunate man was killed in our army, as an excellent unit commander […]. He was brave and cruel, like all bitter men. Say a prayer for his soul. For, some of us were like that too." [5]

This excerpt in particular seems to implicitly suggest Bosnia's already-mentioned propension towards acceptance and multiculturalism, since even the foreign informant, despite being a former enemy, is welcomed among the natives (as emphasized by the frequent use of first-person plural pronouns "our" and "us") and deemed worthy of a heartfelt commemoration. The passage also aptly introduces the novel's portrayal of self-confident native Bosnian characters who, unlike foreigners, show consistent skills in interacting with people of different national backgrounds while easily understanding their real hidden intentions; this ability, as suggested by critics Nebojša Lujanović [6] and Nehrudin Rebihić [7]in their respective analyses of Sušić's literary works from a postcolonial perspective, appears to derive from Bosnia's role as a hybrid, liminal region between Eastern and Western rival hegemonic pressures, whose boundaries the locals learned to freely traverse and occasionally dismantle by developing their own syncretic identity. This is clearly stated above all in one the novel's conclusive sections, set during Cold War times, which depicts a Bosnian counterespionage agent successfully thwarting an infiltration attempt by a seductive West German spy, known as "Miss Margaret", by posing as a fellow foreign agent. After having gained her trust by falsely displaying her same demeaning views of the Balkans, the narrator finally arrests her while uttering a fierce statement about the dignity and independence of Bosnian people:

> "Since the Kotromanić dinasty until today, for almost a millennium, this tiny patch of land has been attacked by curious individuals from all corners of the world […] and all of you want to look into the heart of Bosnia […] haven't you seen that we cost more when occupied than when we're a free and equal partner? The imperial hypocrisy of the East and the West uses its dogmatic ignorance to simplify us as an object of its plans. But violence doesn't hold the keys to our gates…Our codes are unbreakable to it." [8]

Therefore, we can see that the contraposed narrations provided by foreign and native agents are both essential in defining the novel's multilayered discourse about Bosnia's history.

In particular, we could also interpret the novel's fragmentary structure itself as a sort of authorial statement about the country's hybrid and syncretic identity; in fact, according to critic Marina Katnić-Bakaršić [9], this juxtaposition of different voices and text excerpts in a composite, albeit unitary, narrative flow may allegorically depict an

ideal of harmony and cohesion between the disparate ethnicities making up the population of Bosnia. This perspective could also be confirmed by the fact that the novel, despite being mainly centered on the characteristic historical experiences of the Bosniak people [10] (as in Sušić's other historical works, such as his 1966 short story collection *Pobune*), employs characters belonging to all the ethnic groups living in the country or simply avoids specifying the ethnic denomination of native narrators, rather implying that they are all speaking on behalf of the same, all-Bosnian community. According to this point of view, we could also detect a significant link binding the writer's use of experimental techniques to his portrayal of Bosnia's past, in a way that may even remind us of William Faulkner's literary production; in fact, as the author of *The Sound and the Fury* employed the stream-of-consciousness device and other distinctive late modernist narrative strategies to describe the social decay of the American South in the post-Civil War era, in *Spies* Sušić resorted to a fragmented, multifaceted, and even chaotic narration to represent the historical burden of the many foreign dominations Bosnia had endured, while also celebrating the ethnically diverse composition of its population. In fact, across the novel's pages, the reader may hear the country herself speaking through the secretive, anguished, suspicious, resentful, or resigned voices of those who witnessed its history dramatically unfolding before their very eyes; the importance conferred in *Spies* to the narrators' monologues may also be interpreted as a significant part of the stylistic evolution undertaken by Sušić since his breakthrough satirical novel *Ja, Danilo* (I, Danilo, 1961), focusing on the first-person ramblings of a down-to-earth Bosnian former Partisan who repeatedly fails to adjust to the new Yugoslav Communist society after the Second World War [11]. Because of his increasing, skillful usage of experimental stylistic devices, which probably reached its peak with the elliptic postmodern-like prose *A. Triptih* (1985), Sušić established an additional connection between Bosnian literature and the most relevant global narrative tendencies of the time, together with his contemporaries and friends Mak Dizdar and Meša Selimović; in particular, the latter was also described by the author himself as his principal mentor in the craft of writing, and asked him to review the first draft of *Spies* [12].

Significantly, the author's lasting interest in late modernist narrative techniques makes his literary work almost unique in the history of Bosnian literature in the early second half of the 20th century; in fact, the polyphonic and fragmentary perspective that Sušić employed in *Spies* to convincingly depict the multifaceted social and historical reality of Bosnia has virtually no equal counterparts in the production of other relevant local authors, such as the aforementioned Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović, who gained considerable international attention while preferring a more traditional approach to the narration matter. However, the vivid nature of the many different voices that resonate throughout Sušić's novel makes his work and his reflection upon Bosnia's cohesive identity still significant nowadays, even after the devastating 1992-1995 conflict, which dramatically changed the interethnic relations in the country and partially triggered a controversial, politically-motivated reassessment of the writer's memory, which has been fortunately defended by unbiased commentators.

In 2017, thanks to Amira Sadiković's translation, the many secretive Bosnian voices of

Sušić's *Spies* found their place among the English-speaking readership; the author of this humble appraisal sincerely hopes that also Italian readers, sooner or later, will be granted this privilege.

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Notes

1. Muhamed Filipović, "The Bosnian Spirit in Literature – What is it?", trans. A. Kurtović, *Spirit of Bosnia 1* (2006): 1-23 (see https://www.spiritofbosnia.org/volume-1-no-1-2006-january/the-bosnian-spirit-in-literature-what-is-it/ .All of the Internet links have been accessed for the last time on June 28, 2024) ↩
2. Nedim Hasić, "*Uhode*, lična karta Bosne i Hercegovine, nastale su na kuhinjskom stolu jednosobnog stana", *Stav*, 11. 09. 2020 (see: https://arhiv.stav.ba/uhode-licna-karta-bosne-i-hercegovine-nastale-su-na-kuhinjskom-stolu-jednosonog-stana/) ↩
3. Derviš Sušić. *Spies*, trans. Amira Sadiković (Sarajevo: Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2017), 5. ↩
4. Ibid., 8. ↩
5. Ibid., 87. ↩
6. Nebojša Lujanović. "Vježbanje hegemonije – Derviš Sušić i *Hodža strah* u svjetlu postkolonijalne teorije" *Sarajevski filološki susreti I: zbornik radova* 2 (2012): 2-3. ↩
7. Nehrudin Rebihić. "(Auto)imaginativna reprezentacija Bosne u pripovjedačkoj zbirci *Pobune* i romanu *Uhode* Derviša Sušića" *Sarajevski filološki susreti: zbornik radova* 2 (2012): 210. ↩
8. Derviš Sušić. *Spies*, 142. ↩
9. Marina Katnić-Bakaršić. "Heterogenost stila Derviša Sušića kao metafora heterogenosti kulture" *Sarajevski filološki susreti: zbornik radova* 1 (2012): 113. Sanjin Kodrić. *Kako su Bošnjaci vidjeli muslimanski Orijent i evropski Zapad* (Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2018), 134. ↩
10. Sanjin Kodrić. *Kako su Bošnjaci vidjeli muslimaski Orijent i evropski Zapad* (Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2018), 134. ↩
11. Filipović, "The Bosnian Spirit". See also: Andrea Lešić. "The Socialist Robber-Baron as a Superfluous Man: Derviš Sušić's Novel I, Danilo". In *Cultures of Economy in South-Eastern Europe: Spotlights and Perspectives*, ed. Jurij Murašov, Davor Beganović and Andrea Lešić, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 169-170. ↩
12. Sabina Babajić. "Derviš Sušić – gospar bosanske prozne riječi" *NOVI IZRAZ, časopis*

za književnu i umjetničku kritiku, no. 69-70 (2018): 151. ↩