

The Imam of Fear

Hodža Strah

Presented by: Ewa Szperlik

“Hodža Strah” [hɔdʒa strah] (The Imam of Fear) (1973) is one of the major works of contemporary literature from Bosnia and Herzegovina, a predominantly Islamic cultural region of the former Yugoslavia. The author of the novel, Derviš Sušić (1925–1990), worked as a teacher in Srebrenica and Tuzla. He served on the editorial board of “Oslobođenje” and “Zadrugar.” Sušić was also a member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Notably, as the son of a Muslim cleric, he was an atheist and remained faithful to socialist ideals until the end of his life. During the Second World War, he witnessed fratricidal struggles in Yugoslavia. In 1941, Sušić was admitted to SKOJ (Savez komunističke omladine Jugoslavije, the League of Communist Youth of Yugoslavia). He managed to flee from occupied Sarajevo. Together with a group of friends, he joined a partisan movement in the Foča area, where he met Josip Broz Tito. Sušić regarded the achievement of the ideals of the national liberation struggle and socialist revolution as the pinnacle of world order. He believed in peace, prosperity, and social class equality. “Hodža Strah” is the most profoundly inspired by Islam and suffused with Muslim spirituality of all novels in Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature. The dominant theme concerns the colonial past of the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who, after the collapse of the medieval state, were thrust into a geopolitical reality defined by dependence, exploitation, and marginalisation at the hands of major powers – first the Ottoman Empire and later Austria-Hungary, which wielded considerable influence across the Balkans. The novel is a historical narrative of the fate of the Bosniaks (Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina) as a collective, told from an individual perspective and situated within the tradition of history from below, in which overarching historical processes shape the lives of ordinary people. The Bosniak nation is portrayed as perpetually subject to the domination of others, representing not sovereignty but subordination and service, “cannon fodder,” soldiers conscripted into the armies of the sultan. In the work, Bosnia emerges as a land on a bloody frontier between East and West, a valuable prize for conquerors. However, it gradually becomes an insignificant fragment of territory, divided by internal borders – a “land of widows,” a dark backwater (*tamni vilajet*). In this case, literature serves as a medium of memory. Going against the epic tradition of the Balkan region, the author does not highlight the famous and heroic deeds of heroes of bygone times celebrated in songs; instead, he focuses on the ordinary individual and depicts the tragedy of participating in wars not their own, acts of courage, the fear of death, and even desertion. Sušić presents internal Bosnian self-understanding, the borderland nature of Bosnia, and its heterotopic character. The depiction of the historical tragedy of the nation caught between the interests of great powers renders Sušić’s novel a political text that foregrounds a strong anti-colonial resistance.

A postcolonial discourse predominates in the novel. The metanarrative of victory is countered by a modernist, anti-victory narrative of the subjects. Within the diegetic world of the novel, the centres of power are represented by Stambul and Vienna. In Edward Said's view, colonial power invariably seeks to suppress and efface the history of the conquered and colonised. Sušić evokes the forgotten histories of Bosnian rebellions and uprisings against the violence and rule of alien powers. Moreover, the class divisions and social stratifications within the community do little to facilitate attaining the common goal, namely, uniting all the Bosniaks. With the fall of the Kingdom of Bosnia in the second half of the fifteenth century, Ottoman domination in the Balkans and progressing Islamisation disrupted the process of forming a European national identity among the region's inhabitants. Although under Tito's rule, Muslims were recognised as a distinct ethnos, the way in which their earlier history was narrated was subsumed in the general stream of the history of all nations of former Yugoslavia. The histories of Bosnia and its inhabitants thus became diffused within a polyphony of narratives and were left unsaid or neglected, which is why the Bosniaks once again became an "unarticulated nation." The significance of the novel's title is multidimensional. *Hodja* is an honorific title used throughout the Ottoman Empire and India, historically employed in Muslim culture to denote a teacher, clergyman, master, or an expert in the Quran and Islamic law. The unusual collocation of hodja-fear may denote a timid and apprehensive individual who is subject to humiliation. In a different interpretative frame, it is a man who positions himself in the centre of power and instills a sense of fear among others.

In the first part of the work, the protagonist and narrator, Vehab Koluhija, is a Bosnian soldier, a survivor from the bloody Battle of Vienna (1683), in which Sultan Mehmed IV's army, commanded by Vizier Kara Mustafa, suffered a crushing defeat. The Danube carries countless corpses of Turkish soldiers "returning them to the East." With a mixture of terror and awe, Vehab describes the military power of Polish cavalry (hussars) under King John III Sobieski. The Turkish army was composed of many diverse nations and included many elderly men as well as women who fought disguised as men. Vehab depicts the long and exhausting march on Vienna, as well as the irregularities in the ranks of the sultan's army. Life in the camp was shaped by unequal rules: "Turkish soldiers ('Istanbulites') munch on halva in silk tents while Bosniaks chew grass of their own breastplates," Vehab recalls. Disobedient soldiers were beaten by the Turks. The image of the sultan's army as a unified collectivity is undermined by a division between "us" and "them." There were also acts of desertion. On the return journey, Vehab appropriates a bag with golden ducats that he finds beside the corpse of another soldier. In his understanding, this way he pays his debt and gets even for participating in a war not his own. He decides not to return to his family's village. Instead, by assuming a new identity, he has a chance for a new life and can change his life from that of a subject who cannot decide about his own fate. The protagonist renounces his ideological subservience to the Ottoman state as the centre of authority. The next part of the novel is set in the 18th century and concerns the events of the 7th Austro-Turkish war (1737-1739) and the Siege of Banja Luka (1737). Seid Koluhija from the third part of the novel is the titular Hodža Strah (Hodja Fear) and the descendant of Vehab Koluhija. He witnessed the occupation of Bosnia by Austrian authorities in 1878. From a position of "nobody," Seid comes to be appointed the leader of the Bosniak uprising against the Austrians. From this point onward, he embodies authority and becomes a centre of decision-making power; he inspires fear and fights to secure the Bosniaks' right to a voice between two competing centres of power – the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian. The protagonist feels fear of the immense authority of both the sultan and the emperor. He is also wary of his own compatriots who serve the sultan in exchange for substantial benefits, as well as of all foreigners who have penetrated the lands of Bosnia and Herzegovina, above all Hungarians and the so-called "Swabians" (German-speaking people). He is convinced that Vienna continues to

press Bosnian territory in retaliation for the 1683 incursion. Seid wonders whether Vienna will bring vengeance and destruction, or whether this time it might offer aid, enlightenment, and prosperity. The Austrian incursion into Bosnia will mean yet another shift of power that does not solve any problems. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, much like the Ottoman, is a “prison of nations.” Wearing the blue uniforms of the empire, men from diverse nations fall for the “debts of Vienna,” just as the inhabitants of the Ottoman-conquered Balkans had perished for the “debts of Istanbul.” Detailed descriptions of battles and omnipresent death convey a message about the fragility of human existence, caught in the web of political conflicts and wars. The text is imbued with a fatalism typical of the culture of the Orient and with the narrator-protagonist’s belief that were it not for the Turkish march on Vienna, Europe would never have united in the face of the Ottoman threat and the politics of revanchism. The Bosniaks find themselves trapped at the very heart of a political and civilizational clash. Interestingly, hostile to Bosniaks, blue (imperial) uniforms are worn among others by Croats and Serbs, who are contemptuously described by Austrian commanders as “these damned Slavs, no one really knows who they actually are.” The Austrians seem to have forgotten that it was the colonial and imperial politics of great powers that led to the blurring of the identities of small nations.

The novel was written in a realist style. It belongs to the current of new historicism and it foregrounds individual narratives of ordinary people, which, paraphrasing Frederic Jameson, construct a comprehensive representation of the historical experience of a given community. Sušić’s work bears hallmarks of existential literature rooted in the philosophy of the absurd, in which Bosnia serves as a symbolic embodiment of the tragic and universal human condition (a man caught in the machinery of great history). The narrative has been enriched with elements of onirism. Structurally, the work may be regarded as a diptych or even triptych, since each of the three parts could function as a separate novel; nevertheless, they are connected by a common theme and by the shared destinies of the Koluhija family’s protagonists. A significant element of the digetic world is the vivid portrayal of Bosnia and Herzegovina’s local colour, including the topography, period-specific attire, descriptions of the characters’ homes and interiors, social customs shaped by Islamic culture, and a language full of orientalisms, further supported by a glossary at the end of the book. The work may be regarded as a saga or family chronicle. The novel *Hodža Strah* was published in 1973 by the Svjetlost publishing house in Sarajevo and received wide acclaim among readers. In 1977, a Slovak edition (“Hodža strach”) was published in Bratislava. In Croatia, it was not published until 2005 by the V.B.Z. publishing house. Although the novel was written during the period of socialist Yugoslavia, when the state promoted a secular ideology, Sušić created a work strongly imbued with religious motifs. By returning to historicism, the writer found an effective way to tell his nation’s past from his own perspective, rather than that of an outsider. Sušić’s work stages a dialogue between the collective’s heroic (epic) narrative and the individual’s (lyrical) perspective. D. Sušić’s oeuvre occupies a prominent place in the canon of contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing