

My Cat Yugoslavia

Kissani Jugoslavia

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The politics in Pajtim Statovci's *Kissani Jugoslavia* (2014 [My Cat Yugoslavia, 2017]) can be imagined as an upside-down triangle. At the top, widest part is global geopolitics—the level at which the heads of NATO decide, in a bunker somewhere, to bomb a faraway city in the Yugoslav wars. Next comes pan-European politics in which war, ethnic cleansing, and other atrocities send refugees to the other faraway corners, such as Finland. Narrowing down, one comes to national politics in which a nation state disintegrates, as happened with Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Beyond city (Helsinki, Pristina), Kosovan village, and family politics one finally arrives at the individual. The entire weight of this triangle pushes down on his or her life and reality.

This text portrait will concentrate on two levels of this political triangle: that of the disintegration of Yugoslavia and some of the atrocities that took place there and the resulting experiences of the two narrators living as immigrants in Finland. The point is that the personal is political or, put another way, when the mechanisms of geo- and national politics move, when war and atrocities start to play out, the effects concentrate down on the lives of individuals who suffer the consequences. Literature is specifically good in making readers aware that the newspaper headlines one reads, the TV news reports that one watches, have consequences for real individual people and families (even if these are fictional characters).

After the death of Tito, Serbian nationalism began to rise in Yugoslavia, spearheaded in fiery speeches by Milošević. This led to a state in which “Albanians started being systematically removed from their jobs, from positions in hospitals and the police, and when it became impossible to study in Albanian, the situation turned desperate” (Statovci 139; this is from David Hackston’s translation). The squeezing of employment and education for certain ethnicities leads to the following in Bosnia, also part of Yugoslavia at the time: “they were driven out of their homes, their houses were bombed, pregnant women were tortured and raped and taken to concentration camps” (Statovci 139). Eventually, the father of the family declares: “*We have to leave, [...]. If we don’t leave, we’ll die*” (141).

This is the political context for *Kissani Jugoslavia*. It shows that for the family in the novel, migration from Kosovo to Finland is not so much a choice as something that they’ve been pushed into to survive. That context is crucial for understanding the experiences of immigrants in Finland as portrayed in the novel.

As mentioned, *Kissani Jugoslavia* has two narrators: a son, Bekim, and a mother, Emine. Emine’s sections begin when she is a youth in Yugoslavia in the 1970s and she describes her engagement and marriage to a man named Bajram. On her wedding day in May, 1980, Josip Broz Tito, the long-time leader of Yugoslavia, dies. The days-long wedding celebration is cancelled and, unknown to

Emine at the time, the political disintegration of Yugoslavia is put into motion. It is this political process that will, one day, be responsible for taking Emine out of her rural village and into the world—as a refugee to Finland.

Emine's son, Bekim, narrates the other sections of the novel. The long chain of political repercussions that began on that day in May, 1980 when Tito died lead to Bekim, who lives as an ethnic and sexual minority in Helsinki. For Bekim, the novel is a coming-of-age story concerning his experiences being in between cultures and identities. Nationalist ideas of a 'pure' people, culture, and society exist not only in Finnish society, but in Bekim's internalized vision of himself as aberrating from this ideal. Bekim's central struggle is to kill off his own self-image as the immigrant Other. The novel challenges the idea that there live two kinds of people in Finland: those who, from generation to generation, have always been in Finland and those who, even from generation to generation, are from somewhere else and hence will never really be Finnish (Nissilä 277).

The novel's historical context is the shift in Finland from what was perceived as a largely homogenous society up through the 1980s to the arrival of refugees—Somalis, Kurds, and Kosovars and Bosniaks from Yugoslavia, etc.—from about 1990 onward. The demographic, political, and sociocultural changes that followed the arrival of these migrants brought about a new genre of Finnish literature: immigrant literature. The term 'immigrant literature' was used for literature written by authors who were not originally from Finland, or whose parents were not from Finland, etc. It was still widely used by literary institutions up through the 2000s (Nissilä).

When *Kissani Jugoslavia* was published in 2014, it was not categorized as 'immigrant literature' (Nissilä) but rather as Finnish literature. The paperback's paratext illustrates this Finnish-ness even as it nods to globalization: on the back one reads the blurb *Aidosti Suomesta* [authentically from Finland] and learns that the novel won the 2014 Helsingin Sanomat literary prize (presented by Finland's leading newspaper). The lined swan symbol on the back is a Finnish environmental marker and, in the first pages, one finds the key symbol allocating that this product was produced in Finland ("Tehty Suomesta / Made in Finland"). The review blurbs, however, on both the front and back are from the *New York Times*, hence positioning the novel as a globally translated hit. There is no reference to immigration on the front or back covers of this version of the novel; rather, it is a "a magical debut novel about fear, love, death and a cat" (paratext, translation by the author). It's globally successful Finnish literature. This illustrates a recent political shift in Finland concerning who can be considered Finnish.

Kissani Jugoslavia illustrates, among other things, what it feels like to be in between Finnish and Kosovan cultures and the resulting Othering, racism, and lack of belonging. It is the character of a humanoid Cat, whom Bekim meets in a gay bar, that represents the unrestrained id of majority-culture Finnish society: he's homophobic, hates immigrants, and thinks, e.g., that Bekim is an "utterly dreadful" name. Bekim means 'blessing,' we're told in the novel. "Well, in that case it's the worst possible name you could have!" (Statovci 54) says the cat (what a jerk!). Anything that falls outside narrowly and conservatively defined categories and norms disturbs the Cat a great deal. The Cat tells Bekim, "*Living and going to school in Finland is like winning the lottery. Remember that*" (Statovci 57).

As commented upon by literary scholar Olli Löytty and literature blogger Koko Hubara, interviewed by Nadja Nowak on YLE, the national broadcaster, in 2017, it is Bekim's experiences facing the highly recognizable Finnish attitudes, as encapsulated by the figure of the Cat, that speaks most powerfully to many majority-culture Finnish readers. Racism and xenophobia, as well as homophobia, are portrayed vividly and straight-forwardly, as well as the 'softer' nationalism of living

in Finland being associated with winning the lottery. The fact that it comes from a Cat is an ironic distancing technique: it's not really a Finn talking such nasty nonsense but "*just a cat*" (Statovci 156) (wink wink). This is the political heart of the novel: showing majority-culture Finnish readers what it feels like for an immigrant to encounter prevalent Finnish attitudes.

The novel manipulates the emotions of readers to achieve an 'a-ha' moment of self-recognition: xenophobia, racism, fear of the Other, following narrow definitions of what is normal, good, and correct are, readers can see and feel from the text, provincial, narrow-minded, and distasteful, not to mention hurtful. By readers recognizing themselves in the text, they may question the social, cultural, and ultimately political borders set up to police the idea of 'Finnishness' as being defined against anyone or anything different. That's the novel's central political message.

Works Cited

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