Derviš Sušić

Imam of Fear

Hodža Strah

Presented by: Filip Kučeković

Although he is the least read of the three, Derviš Sušić, together with Ivo Andrić and Meša Selimović, forms a trio of writers who, regardless of which national literature claims them, have included some of the most fascinating lines about the Ottoman share of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the consequences of that power in literature. The question of power, colonial claims and relations will play a central role in one of his most famous novels, *Imam of Fear* from 1973.

The novel is divided into three parts, which deal with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the weakening of the Ottoman administration in Bosnia and Herzegovina at three points in time. The first part is set in 1683, when the Ottoman Empire unsuccessfully attempted to conquer Vienna, the second in 1737, when the Ottoman Empire defeated the Habsburg army for the last time near Banja Luka, and the third in the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878. Therefore, Bosnia, as a peripheral area, an area of interest of two great powers, becomes a place where Sušić's narrator will find figures in which he will write in many political ideas, projects and movements, the most important of which is precisely the politics of writing, as will be explained below.

At the beginning of the first part of the novel, Vehaba Koluhija is returning to Bosnia, to his village of Kudelj, after the defeat at Vienna in 1683, having experienced the cruelty and senselessness of the war to which he was sent by the Ottoman administration. The experience of war made him remember his uncle Hafiz Demir Koluhija, a member of the Hamzevi dervish order founded by Hamza Orlović, which was based on anarchist ideas and recognised neither secular nor religious authorities, which is why its members were declared heretics and persecuted. He taught the boy how the world functions, and the most important lesson he repeated every day was: "... that any empire, founded on the plundering of the weak by the greedy and the strong, on the violence of the powerful and the tears of the powerless, on the hypocrisy of servitude paid for by the powerful and on the hanged corpses of those who tried to free themselves from violence, (...) that such an empire, is...". At this point, his uncle's lesson was interrupted for Vehab Koluhija, as he neither remembered it nor wrote it down, so he was condemned to interpret its meaning himself, which he did incorrectly. Therefore, after returning from the battlefield, he decided not to return to his home, but to settle temporarily near the village of Vukojedine, where he would treat the villagers and the mufti, the local representative of the authorities, exactly as had been described in his uncle's lesson, asking them to serve him food and drink and requiring the women of the village to clean and prepare his tent. The mufti agreed and waited for the arrival of the army he had summoned to free them from the highhandedness of the arriving soldier, but in the meantime he moved on, taking the widow from the village with him.

The second part is written as a stream of consciousness of seventy-seven-year-old Vehab Koluhija, who was mortally wounded after the Battle of Banja Luka, and reflects on his own life, his achievements and mistakes, as well as on Bosnia's position between two empires with colonial pretensions.

The last part of the novel takes place one hundred and fifty years after the second part, and its hero is a descendant of Vehab Koluhija, Hafiz Seid Koluhija, an imam who was nicknamed Imam of Fear by his villagers because of his shy nature and willingness to endure various hardships. This is the case until Hafiz Koluhija is called to Sarajevo on the occasion of the Ottoman cession of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Austro-Hungarian occupation, and the Sarajevo beys and the Imam authorise him to lead an army in resistance against the occupation. After he has gathered about a hundred people around him and returned to his position, his nickname changes from "the feared one" to "the fear-monger". A tyrannical commander who punishes his own villagers and family members for everything they have done to him in the past, Imam of Fear leads his army on a suicidal mission to fight the technologically and numerically superior Austrians. After the failure of the operation, Imam of Fear is sentenced to death as a fanatical savage who does not fit into the new geopolitical constellation of relations.

In Sušić's novel, writing plays an important role in shaping his political world. Vehab Koluhija has not written down his uncle's lessons about empires based on violence and injustice, and is condemned to repeat this violence in his relationship with the villagers of Vukojedina, whom he treats in the same tyrannical manner against which he nominally fights. Instead, he records the fates of his comrades from his village, Kudelja, who died near Vienna, thus repeating in the form of a biography and an account the devastating consequences of the war that shaped him. Writing, as well as the absence of writing, thus reveals itself as a compulsion to repeat, or rather as the action that shapes the world with its content and the way in which it is written down. It is a complex world located on the border, on the edge of two realms, as well as on the border between the written and the spoken word. Just as Koluhija correctly states that the position between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire is necessarily that of the oppressed and exploited, and that serving one and being against the other does not significantly improve one's position, he does not understand that it is just as pointless not to write explicit political instructions as it is to write biographies of the dead, in which death spills over from the text onto the reader.

This is the moment when the form of the novel proves to be the most political possibility of writing, because it can take all other forms, from oral instruction to anarchism to records of the deaths of fighters under Vienna, and make them collide precisely with their literariness, making them complement each other and forming a world governed precisely by writing and the writing down of what cannot be repeated and the repeating of what cannot be written down. In the third part of the novel, Hodža Strah, as the novel is called, completes dialectically what Vehab Koluhija has begun, He rejects the two empires as two sides of one evil, and opts for a smaller empire as a lesser evil, i.e. in favour of the concept of a nation state. At the same time, he formulated his views as an anticolonial idea in opposition to the new Austrian administration, which was attempting to "civilise" the savage country. This completes the centuries-long journey from the anarchism of the dervishes to the nationalism of the 19th century, which, like the writings of Vehab Koluhija, is inscribed in the margins of two empires.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

This title was not censored before publishing