

The Ministry of Pain

Ministarstvo boli

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“Ministarstvo boli” (2004) (“The Ministry of Pain”) is a novel by the distinguished Croatian writer, essayist and professor of literary studies Dubravka Ugrešić (1949–2023). The work focuses on crafting the literary image of the post-Yugoslav expatriate community in Holland. The reasons for the protagonists' exile and nomadism seem to stem not only from the consequences of the war in Yugoslavia (1991-1995) – such as fleeing death or pauperisation of a significant part of the society after the disintegration of Tito's state, but also from the political conditions that emerged with the establishment of the nation-states. For some, these conditions were difficult to accept: awakened nationalisms, the rule of the conservative right, and issues of political correctness in the face of the new order imposed from above. The expatriate characters grapple with a traumatic experience of war as well as with the disintegration of the state in which they were born and raised, along with the collapse of the language, cultural codes and, consequently, their sense of identity. What saves them is the shared prosthetic memory and remembering of the past. In the 1990s, D. Ugrešić became a target of a political witch-hunt, which is why she left the country. Hostile circles accused her of indulging in the discredited Yugo-nostalgia and of lacking a patriotic stance in the newly established state. Ugrešić lost her job at the University of Zagreb and, what is more, she and her family received death threats over the phone. The writer's attitude, reflected in her work, became a literary form of protest against the political climate of the 1990s in Croatia, under the presidency of Franjo Tuđman (1990-1999), the leader of the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica), regarded as the “father of Croatian independence”. In the construction of the protagonist, we can discern the author's alter ego. Marked by Ugrešić's experience of exile, the (auto)fictional dimension of this novel facilitates the transition of the author/narrator/protagonist from the position of a biological person to a political one.

The Ministry of Pain is dominated by a distinct perspective on the “Balkan sub-continent” and the fate of its migrating inhabitants, whose experience came to be dominated by such concepts as ex-Yugoslav, post-life, being “nowhere” or “in-between”, Yugoslavia as a fallen civilisation, utopian state, an exodus from the Atlantis-like state etc. What emerges is a map of the character's émigré existence in a foreign land; most often, it includes bars, cafés, restaurants where only those from the old “Yugo” meet, or flats where regular ritual-like gatherings take place to nurture both collective and individual memories of Yugoslavia-Atlantis. In Ugrešić's novel, the émigré cartography also includes the space of the university in Amsterdam. The message of the novel is also a vivisection of the émigré existence. The author weaves the anthropological notion of sleepers into the (auto)fictional discourse. Sleepers are émigrés who begin to lead a “normal” life, learn the language, integrate, and adapt; yet after some time, a sudden awakening occurs: a longing to return to a homeland that no longer exists. According to Ugrešić, sleepers are an émigré tribe stigmatised by the “Columbus' mistake”. They are nomads journeying westward (in search of a better, more peaceful life), yet they always find themselves arriving in the east. Returning to their countries of

origin means literal or metaphorical death, whereas staying in the countries where they have arrived often proves to be disillusioning.

The novel is set mainly in Amsterdam and episodically in Zagreb. The main character, Tanja Lucić, a professor of South Slavic Literatures at the University of Amsterdam, grapples with a professional dilemma of how to teach the literature of nations that were once part of Yugoslavia, given that they waged war against each other and the country ceased to exist. Tanja gathers her students, ex-Yugoslavs, whom she calls “convalescents”. Classes in Yugoslav literature turn into a kind of informal psychotherapy that helps the lecturer and the students rebuild their lost identity. The therapeutic canon includes Slavic mythology, a shared cultural code: Yugoslav consumerism, music, film, literature, jokes etc. The plot also revolves around the immigrants' struggle to assimilate in a foreign country – a process complicated by their reserve towards strangers, lack of trust, the locals' sense of superiority, stereotypes and prejudices. The opposition between here and there forms a strong and intrinsic topos in the novel's world-building. Here denotes the country of emigration, whereas there signifies towns and small homelands of the former Yugoslavia that the protagonists left behind. There evokes a distant and unfamiliar – irrevocably changed place and no longer theirs – where renamed streets are inhabited by, from then on, different people and new neighbours. The characters emotionally navigate between their lost homeland and their new place of residence. Occasional visits to their native country turn out to be a painful and difficult experience, which deepens the feeling of alienation and being lost. An émigré belongs nowhere – feeling out of place among family, old friends and acquaintances, and equally alien in his new country of residence. The living space of the modern nomad is most often a cramped, shabby rental apartment in rundown, unfriendly neighbourhoods. An interesting example of an assimilative mimicry is Ines, a background character of Croatian origin, who marries a Dutchman in an attempt to adapt to her new country and cultural environment. However, she ultimately cannot sever ties with her past. In Ines's home, her pride is reflected in works by Croatian artists, literary works by Croatian authors, as well as family heirloom silver, Croatian olive oil and a cake baked exclusively with Zagreb poppy seeds. Émigrés view Holland as “a flat, damp oblivion, a country without pain; Dutch plains are like a good old blotting paper – they absorb everything, memories and pain”. It is a country of mimicry, where people lie dormant like amphibians, waiting to emerge from hibernation. Ines's attempt to assimilate by marrying a local means her social advancement. Unlike Ines, Tanja (the author's alter ego) nurtures a sense of pride that drives her to leave her country as an act of protest against the new political situation.

The novel is written in a realist manner. Ugrešić's works have often been identified with postmodernism. In *The Ministry of Pain*, a typical feature of Ugrešić's writing is evident: intertextuality – references to literary canon and writers of her native literary tradition, as well as a polemic with them. At times, the novel's serious and pessimistic discourse is interrupted by ludic elements, stylised as a trivial love story (the ambiguous relationship between Tanja and her student Igor). The novel also contains traits typical of women's writing – a courageous female voice speaking out within the patriarchal environment of the Balkans, addressing political and social issues traditionally dominated by men. The author shows that emigration and refugees' fate are determined by current politics. While some leave, others return. In the 1990s, there were also mass returns of earlier (anti-Yugoslav) emigrants who came back to Croatia “lured by the call of Tudjman's trumpets”. Both the protagonist and the writer suffer from a kind of phantom post-Yugoslav pain. Ugrešić's voice and her literary portrayal of post-Yugoslav emigration are not isolated. This reflects the stance of the so-called stateless writers, rebelling against attempts to erase fifty years of shared history and existence in multi-ethnic Yugoslavia, in favour of exclusivist nation-states that impose a top-down revision of national memory.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: