

Exodus of the Dead

Shpërngulja e të vdekurve

Presented by: Tea Hodaj

This novel by Kim Mehmeti intricately explores themes of memory, migration, and identity within the Albanian community living in present-day North Macedonia. Set in a small, rural village on the outskirts of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, the novel blurs the boundaries between the living and the dead, reflecting the weight of history and loss borne by its inhabitants. The village becomes a symbolic space where traditions, myths, and personal struggles intertwine, capturing the enduring impact of displacement and the generational search for belonging.

Forced to leave their ancestral homeland of *Reka e Epërme* (en: Upper Reda, mk: Горна Пека), an ethnographic and geographic subregion located in North Macedonia, due to the constant threats coming from the ever-expanding Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which soon after came to be known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Albanian community relocates in Skopje. The story is imbued with elements of magical realism, where the dead interact with the living, symbolizing unresolved traumas and unspoken truths. This blending of reality and myth draws upon the rich folkloric traditions of the Balkans, creating a tapestry of narratives that transcend time and space. The dead are not just spirits but manifestations of collective memory, serving as reminders of the past's indelible influence on the present.

Through the story of his own family, the author narrates the broader experiences of an entire community, while subtly revealing the political dynamics of the region during the last centuries of the Ottoman Empire, and the Balkan Wars (1912-1913). The novel begins with an intimate setting: we are gathered around the fireplace with the narrator's grandmother, listening to her captivating tales that blend magical elements with historical truths. These early chapters delve deeply into the Balkan tradition of oral history, where accounts of the past are interwoven with mythical elements to enchant both children and adults alike.

As the narrative progresses, the author introduces the narrator's parents, focusing poignantly on the impossible love story that haunts his father, the local Imam. Rich in symbolism, this broken union stems from the aftermath of war. The Imam's former fiancée, Fatushja, having lost her brother on the Ottoman front and her parents shortly after, becomes the sole inheritor of her family's home tower. In her grief, she vows to remain a virgin and never marry, a vow deeply rooted in the Albanian canon of honor. She spends the rest of her life living across from her former fiancé, Rema, the Imam, portraying the silent tragedy of unfulfilled love. Fatushja embodies the profound and inescapable burden of womanhood, becoming both the vessel and the voice for the collective pain of her people. The grief from countless lost lives is not just immense, it is relentless, crushing her spirit and weighing down her very existence. This unbearable sorrow converges within her, silencing her capacity for love and extinguishing any hope of bearing children, as if her personal fulfillment must be sacrificed to mourn the tragedies of the wars. Her mourning transcends individual loss,

encompassing the suffering of all humanity and every soul claimed by the relentless turmoil of these accursed lands.

Throughout the novel, the author interlaces family hardships with the historical realities of Albanian loyalty to the Ottomans, driven by fear of the advancing Slavic armies. This historical backdrop is enriched by mystical Balkan elements, such as the use of tortoise shells for healing and the superstitious interpretations of tortoise behavior. These details vividly evoke the unique blend of history, myth, and tradition that defines the Balkan identity, grounding the novel in the cultural essence of the region.

Characters are portrayed as individuals uprooted by war, poverty, or political turmoil, grappling with their sense of identity as they navigate the tension between the lands they leave behind and the uncertainty of their destinations. This pervasive sense of loss and longing mirrors the broader historical experiences of Balkan communities, where migration often comes at the cost of severing ties with one's roots. Women occupy a pivotal role in the narrative, serving as the custodians of cultural identity and familial continuity amidst societal upheaval. Through their strength and resilience, the novel sheds light on the often-overlooked contributions of women in preserving the moral and spiritual fabric of their communities during times of change.

Among other themes, the author skillfully portrays the Albanian community in North Macedonia and their complex struggle for identity, navigating the intertwined challenges of ethnicity and religion with remarkable elegance. As many Albanian communities in these territories exchanged their religion and loyalty with the Ottomans in exchange for protection, they could not foresee how the labels of "Ottoman" and "Muslim" would later come to stigmatize them. With the formation of Yugoslavia, Albanians under Belgrade's rule fought to preserve their national identity, all while being accused of being Ottoman Turks and portrayed as Muslims who, by extension, were considered outsiders in predominantly Christian Balkan lands. Following the 1938 *Friendship Treaty* between Yugoslavia and Turkey, large numbers of Albanians migrated to Turkey as part of an agreement between the two states. This strategically orchestrated migration aimed to reduce the Muslim population in Yugoslav territories, pushing for many Albanian families to leave their homeland and loved ones behind, as the only way for them to be able to practice Islam: "*Asokohë, ne shpesh shkonim në Stamboll. ... por që të vizitonim kushërinjtë tanë, ... të cilët kishin shpëtuar fenë, por kishin humbur gjuhën e etninë*" (en, my translation: "... Back then we would often visit Istanbul. ... but we would visit our cousins... who had preserved their religion, but lost our language and ethnicity") (Mehmeti, p.39).

Here, the author raises a profound question, one that the Albanian community may not yet be ready to confront: Was the ability to safely practice their religion worth the cost of abandoning their ethnic identity and homeland? Furthermore, does this question serve as a broader critique directed at those who chose to flee to Turkey for the sake of their faith? In the novel, Rema the Imam speaks against such migration to his other religious fellows, claiming that "*Ngaqë ata thonë se shpërngulen për ta shpëtuar fenë, le t'ua mbyllim rrugën duke u treguar se ai që rrënon parajsën që Zoti ia ka dhënë në këtë botë, e që duhet ta mirëmbajë me duart e veta - vendlindjen, nuk ka pse shpreson se do t'i hapen dyert e xhenetit!*" (En, my translation: "Since they claim to be uprooting as a way of preserving religion, we should prevent them from doing so, by telling them that those who destroy the heaven God gave them in this world, should not expect Heaven's gates to open for them!").

The political dimension of the novel extends far beyond the Albanian community, serving as a powerful reflection of the Balkan reality. It underscores the fragile and ever-shifting nature of territorial borders, often arbitrarily imposed, that have disrupted harmonious coexistence among

diverse ethnic groups. This is vividly exemplified in the histories of regions such as North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where political boundaries have sown division and discord.

Novels like this not only evoke the shared experiences of displacement, loss, and state-fueled animosities but also serve as a stark reminder that territories ultimately belong to the people who inhabit them, not the political agendas that seek to divide. Through their narratives, these works compel Balkan peoples to reflect on how politically motivated actions have shaped their histories, urging them to reclaim a sense of agency over their shared heritage and envision a future where identity is rooted in humanity rather than borders.

LANGUAGE: Albanian / Shqip

CENSORSHIP STATUS: