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### Tatjana ALEKSIĆ, *The sacrificed body. Balkan community building and the fear of freedom*

Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013, 266 pages

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## REFERENCES

Tatjana ALEKSIĆ, *The sacrificed body. Balkan community building and the fear of freedom*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013, xii + 266 p.  
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- 1 Emigrated from Serbia in 2002, Tatjana Aleksić received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University in 2007 and has been teaching at the University of Michigan since 2007. She is the editor of *Mythistory and Narratives of the Nation in the Balkans* (2007) and the author of *The Sacrificed Body* (2013). This last book presents new inquiries mixing gender studies and theories on sacrificial communities, including Freud's and Girard's views – even if the concept of scapegoat is not mentioned.
- 2 The work is a very complete one, of a solid erudition in the field of gender studies and mythistory. From page to page, a plenty of authors and referential myths are evoked and analyzed. To the best of my knowledge, groundbreaking analyses are provided on some texts and films, especially from the former Yugoslav space. I was personally delighted to read that I was not alone to think of the scene of impalement in Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* as a particularly shocking one (p. 59).
- 3 After a first chapter where she sets as a gendered archetype, on the basis of a corpus of circa 800 pieces, the motive of female body immurement in Balkan epics and popular songs, the author enforces her conclusions on samples of classic literary texts (Andrić, Kadare, Kanatzakis), Yugoslav movies (Black wave productions) and contemporaneous artifacts (performances, texts...) of artists from the Balkans. The book focuses mainly

on Greek and (post-)Yugoslav cases, even if in the second chapter, a large place is dedicated to Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Romania are not at all represented. The bulk of the demonstration aims to fix the paradigmatic significance of *female* body as the absolute *feminine* victim (p. 37), that is to say all divergences are to be sacrificed in order to safeguard masculine symbolic order.

- 4 A first commentary would be that erudition and demonstration do not always fit perfectly. For instance, the subtitle is obviously a quotation of Erich Fromm's *Fear of Freedom* (even if no Fromm's work appears neither in the bibliography, nor in the text or in the footnotes). Fromm is famous for having stated that social patriarchy is reversible to matriarchy. But in a sense this does not have any relation with fear of freedom, that's to say Fromm's historical view on democracy, which for him engendered both freedom and fear of freedom (evoked p. 19) – so like an alienating double bind – because of the dissolution of patriarchal structures that limited and contained personality. In a certain extent, author's views seem quite at the opposite; in the conclusion, for instance, one can read that we are in times of “increasingly repressive political landscape” (p. 188), but actually this repression could be interpreted in Fromm's perspective as a demand of the individual himself for the preservation of his being, his *zoe* in Agamben's words. Thus, invoking From would lead us on the opposite interpretation that is given of *homo sacer*: this one cannot be a victim because he has no right on his own life, and by a way of consequence he cannot be feminine (p. 37-38).
- 5 A second question would concern the centrality of the motive of female immurement, both among the other myths of immurement, and among other sacrificial myths. Actually, to make an edifice stand up, South Slavic legends report for instance on immurement of nine brethren, and custom among South Slavic population was to finish a construction with the immurement of the shadow of a man who had to die in the following year, or with an aspersion of any blood. This has hardly any relation with female nor feminine body. On the other hand, one cannot deny the fact that the motive of female/feminine body immurement is not really preeminent when compared with the two main sacrificial motives in Serbia: the Kosovo myth and the Crucifixion of the Christ. The last is also a Balkan and Europe-wide motive, and on the two occasions it is quoted in the book, it appears as a symbol of “ordeal” in the first (p. 105), without any sacrificial significance, and rapidly evoked as a sacrifice in the second (p. 175-176). There is an overall assimilation of Christianity to “religion” when tied with nationalism and sacrifice, what demands further specification (p. 72). The Kosovo myth can be interpreted as a Christianized sacrificial myth of ancient times and bears also rich symbolism on archaic perceptions of the dichotomy individual/communal in Balkan psyche. These sacrifices do not give the female/feminine body any significance, and are on the contrary one foundation of what the feminist theory calls patriarchy.
- 6 The definition of civilization, quoted after Camille Paglia, as a process of male inconsistency *against* archetypal female sexuality (p. 33), enlightens the whole book. It seems that for the author, there is no reconciliation between the two sexes, especially in Yugoslav Balkans. Basically, this was my first idea on gender relations in the Balkans; at that time it was conveyed – once more – by linguistics. I remember my professor of Serbo-Croatian/bcs exemplifying imperfective verbs by the sentence *Marko tuče ženu (svaki dan)* – “Marko beats his wife every day,” or “he is beating her now.” This early prejudice was defeated by further readings, one of the most representative being a

relation of a travel through Ottoman Bosnia by a Croatian published in 1842. Going through Romanija Planina, East from Sarajevo, well known for its wolves and patriarchal customs of its inhabitants, he lost consciousness, “when a man (of Eastern faith) arrived, who together with his wife had taken three horses laden with wheat to sell in Sarajevo market; they were now riding back home and leading a third horse. When they caught sight of me, and saw that I was what they call a *švaba*, they asked me where I had been and whither I was going. I told them that I had been in the pasha’s service, and wished greatly to return home, but could not manage it.

- 7 They looked at one another. The man said: ‘Wife, what shall we do?’ ‘Well,’ she said, ‘let him ride the horse to the other side of Romanija, after which it will be easier for him.’ The man jumped from the horse, raised me a little, brushed the snow from me, and said to his wife: ‘Give me the bottle from the saddle bag, Milica, so that the man may fortify himself a little.’<sup>17</sup>”
- 8 Apart of this quite civil conversation between a husband and his wife, what was questioning me was also the traveler’s complete absence of reaction: it was absolutely usual for him to hear how this man addressed his wife. I should thus underline that gender relations in the Balkans are to be understood not only under the Montenegrin pattern, and that patriarchy does not signify only woman submission, as one can read in Latinka Perović’s works, for example, and generally in the production of intellectuals belonging to *Druga Srbija*. On the other hand, it would be interesting to discuss the Montenegrin pattern, too, because the population of Romanija planina in the 1840’s was probably mostly of Montenegrin provenience.
- 9 The definition of the female/feminine body as the absolute victim as put in the first chapter and several times elsewhere in the book raises my scientific curiosity. Quotations of Judith Butler claiming preeminence of gender on sex (p. 92-3) are no more than repetition of non-scientific hypothesis. As far as it looks for female victimization, the book does not escape such a problematic and painful issue as rape, and even male rape (p. 168-172 and *passim*). Here, rape has to be understood in a symbolic dimension, but always exists on a physical experience. I do believe that there are rapes which have only a symbolic dimension, and no physical one, the victims of which are mostly children. This could be the next step of a reflection on repression and sacrifice of innocent bodies. Actually, children sacrifice in the myths corpus appears like a taboo (p. 3) and represents a socially unbearable transgression. There are no examples of child-directed violence in the corpus. I conclude that the ultimate victim may not be the female/feminine body. If taken that female body offers a metaphor for any kind of difference and vulnerability and subsume them in the so-called *feminine* category, perhaps would it be more exact to separate the feminine as *different*, and infant as *vulnerable*. The vulnerability of the one who is not able to speak, the *in-ant*, could find an echo in postcolonial subaltern studies, for example when Gayatri Spivak describes the impossibility for colonized to speak, what makes them powerless. Indeed, this would be in accordance with traces of postcolonial readings by the author like the systematic presentation of ottoman rule in the Balkans as colonization.
- 10 Conclusion. Although a lot of theoretical questions are raised by T. Aleksić – I did not mention all of them –, the analytic part is mostly impeccable and gives the book a real interest. I will conclude by subverting one of the author’s last sentence: “There are multiple causes for the revitalization of negative communalisms, a growing tendency both in the Balkans and globally. One is a direct link between poverty and adherence to

communalist ideologies” (p.194). I am not sure that communalist ideologies, namely here nationalisms, are a consequence of poverty; the role of craft guilds and craftsmen in nationalism as well as in the birth of individualism is well documented. In any case, this idea seemingly equals to the following one (mine): “individualism is only for the rich.” I will finish here my discussion, musing over the possibility of such an inversion.

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## NOTES

1. Matija Mažuranić, *A Glance into Ottoman Bosnia, or A Short Journey into that Land by a Native in 1839-40*, translated by Branka Magaš, London, SAQI/The Bosnian Institute, 2007, p. 65-66.
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