

Postcommunist Literature in Macedonia: Combination of the Traditional and the Contemporary

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Abstract

This text explores the similarities and differences between postcolonial and postcommunist literature and criticism. While tracing certain approaches they have in common, it also reveals significant differences which are due both to historical circumstances and geographical location. Dealing more specifically with Macedonian literature and criticism, the text discusses their characteristics in the period after the fall of communism and disintegration of Yugoslavia, of which Macedonia used to be a part. What is most discernible about the development of literature in this period is its tendency to combine traditional topics, common for the Macedonian culture in the past, with modernist and postmodernist methods of writing, learned from the literary theoretical and critical practice of Western Europe and America.

Keywords: *postcommunist literature, postcolonial literature, tradition, culture, contemporary*

Introduction: Facing Postcommunist Contradictions

Many critics in Eastern Europe largely identify the postcommunist period, especially at the beginning of the 21st century, with postcolonialism. The most obvious reason for that is the notion of Otherness – just as the native populations in European colonies in Africa or Asia have been identified as the *Other* in terms of the West, so are the nations of the former communist countries in Europe seen as the *Other*, also in comparison to the economically and technologically more developed West. Another ground for comparison is that many of the postcommunist societies, and this is especially true of Macedonia, whose literature this essay will discuss, are so-called small nations and small cultures. At the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, Macedonia has faced, as the critic and cultural theorist Elizabeta Sheleva writes, “a traumatic and complex imperative for its own (recurrent and neo-colonial) readjustment to the demands of the new world order”¹.

The differences between postcolonial and postcommunist literature are, however, just as prominent as their mutual similarities. The postcommunist societies have historically and geographically been part of Europe and share its values much more than the more distant former colonies. On the other hand, because of the fact that they are less developed and have to cope with significant political and administrative problems, they are treated as inferior by their Western neighbors.

¹ Elizabeta Sheleva, *Kulturoloshki esei* (Skopje: Magor, 2000), 60.

As a result, such contradictions begin to appear in the Macedonian literature produced at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. The comparison between several postcolonial and Macedonian authors may provide interesting and fresh insight into the similarities and differences between these diverse, yet in some aspects analogous, systems of thought.

Contesting Western Culture Supremacy: The Contribution of Postcolonial Cultures

Postcolonial literature contests Western culture supremacy in various ways – many of its representatives violently reject in their literary and critical works the viewpoints of the imperial states, and this essay shall discuss Chinua Achebe's observations as one such example. Salman Rushdie, on the other hand, whose approaches will also be presented here, uses a different method to oppose Western values: both in his critical and in his literary works, he combines what he sees as the best characteristics of both identities.

Another method of fighting against imposed values utilized by writers who live in the former colonies is to emphasize their need to reinstate their "old" identity, springing from their historical roots. Thus, many authors search for their past, for the way their culture existed before the arrival of the colonizers, and for the stories told by their ancestors. The struggle against dominant colonizing countries can also take the shape of basing literary works on already existing Western books that are part of the canon, but then viewing them from a different and previously largely ignored perspective. *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, which exploits motives from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, or *A Tempest* by Aimé Césaire, based on *The Tempest*, are but two instances of this frequently used technique. Regardless of the methods it employs, postcolonial literature is always a firm reaction against literary works written in the Western tradition, for, in this context, literature is most often a reflection of the power relations in society.

At this point, I would like to briefly present some concepts from Chinua Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*", whose perspectives about the opposing relationship between his own tradition and the understanding imposed by the colonial powers are rather different from those in the postcommunist countries, and to ponder upon the possible answers about what caused these differences. In his essay, Achebe places great importance on the remark of a student studying Joseph Conrad. The remark is grounded upon the assumption that Africa is not the center of Conrad's criticism, but it is "merely a setting for the disintegration of the mind of Mr Kurtz"². In giving his remark, the student, of course, says he has good intentions, as his statement defends both Conrad and Africa – Conrad (in the student's opinion) is not a racist, and Africa is not the object of his criticism, on the contrary, the point of the novel is "to ridicule Europe's civilizing mission in Africa"³, the student surmises. As Achebe notices, precisely this is the strongest evidence of racism – not only of Conrad (as Conrad is merely a representative of his

²Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 8th ed. Vol. 2, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2006), 2713.

³Achebe, 2713.

time) – but of the white man in the beginning of the twentieth century. This view eliminates the African altogether as a human factor, “reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty European mind”⁴. Such reactions of the authors from the former colonies in Africa, India or the Caribbean are adequate to their struggle for the release from the imposed hegemony; they are a direct expression of the fight against the colonial forces. The quotes from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in the context of Achebe’s essay reveal the prejudices of the imperial powers towards the individuals and the way of life in technologically less advanced societies. Achebe’s text is one instance of the strong criticism and definite rejection of a foreign culture, both of which are often found in postcolonial literature in general, some additional examples of which may be seen in the writing of Ngũgĩ or Frantz Fanon.

As mentioned before, the method that Rushdie uses to dispute the dominance of the imperial culture is very different from Achebe’s. Rushdie’s essay “English Is an Indian Literary Language” does not express hostility towards the foreign influence. The symbiosis between various perspectives that Rushdie talks about is very similar to the coexistence between the old (traditional) and contemporary (foreign) values and aspects in the Macedonian history and culture. According to Rushdie, it is absurd to try to escape from this symbiosis and look for a national authenticity – “it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw.”⁵ The basis of Indian culture is “a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American.”⁶ This mixture of elements simultaneously enriches both the Indian and the English literature.

Rushdie employs another interesting approach to contest Western supremacy in writing. He does so not only at the level of the content of his critical and literary works, but also on the level of the narrative structure. The way the narrator tells the story in his novel *Midnight’s Children* contributes to the introduction of Rushdie’s own native cultures (those of India and Pakistan) into English literature. The narration, for example, is frequently interrupted by the narrator himself who expresses his thoughts about the nature of writing or the relevance of the passages he has just written for the general story. The discourse contains words in brackets that are not directly relevant to the story, occasionally uses no commas between listed items (contrary to proper English grammar), and uses Hindi words, for whose meaning there is no explanation. The way the narrator is employed is also contrary to the English standard for literary writing: the narrator tells the story in first person singular recounting events that can only be known by an omniscient narrator. The beginning of the chapter entitled “Revelations” even contains words that are deliberately misspelled; there are no punctuation marks, and the writing is italicized from time to time without any visible motivation – this whole chapter appears chaotic, which undoubtedly marks an opposition to the usually accepted norms of writing in the developed countries. This lack of unified discourse of the novel has the power to deviate from the traditional representation of a text, thereby achieving a literary victory over the previously more powerful and more firmly established Western narrative style.

In general, postcolonial literature is focused on undermining, challenging, subverting and weakening the supremacy of the colonialists. Postcolonial authors do not

⁴ Achebe, 2714.

⁵ Salman Rushdie, “English Is an Indian Literary Language,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 8th ed. Vol. 2, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2006), 2541.

⁶ Rushdie, 2541.

deny the fact that the Western countries are more powerful, have imposed their authority and have attempted to suppress their culture. What postcolonial literature does is to raise its voice against the conquerors, to put an end to the silence and give its own view on the events in which the colonized countries have been involved.

Macedonian Literature Challenging Western Conventions

The parallels between postcolonial literature and Macedonian literature from the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, which shares many of the issues and dilemmas of postcommunist literature in general, are visible in numerous works. Just like postcolonial authors, Macedonian authors are also making attempts to find their own ways of rejecting and contesting Western cultural supremacy. Here, similarities mostly exist from the point of view that both the content and the form of literary works in Macedonia undermine the generally accepted rules of writing and composition of literary texts hailing from other parts of Europe and the US.

As in the case of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the narrative structure of Dragi Mihajlovski's novel *My Skenderbei* presents an attack against conventional writing largely accepted in the West. In *My Skenderbei*, the central motive is based on the roots of the writer's own history (the historical personality of Skenderbeg who ruled parts of the territories of present day Macedonia and Albania in the first half of the 15th century), while the narrative formula applied is far from traditional. As Terry Eagleton suggests, anyone who wants to be accepted by the institutions of the system has to follow them: "Becoming certified by the state as proficient in literary studies is a matter of being able to talk and write in certain ways. It is this which is being taught, examined and certificated, not what you personally think or believe"⁷. Mihajlovski – also aware that the authorities are conscious that their dominance may be sustained by imposing a desired discourse – undermines, challenges and subverts this imposed discourse, as one of the ways to contest Western culture supremacy used in his novel.

From the very beginning, the novel challenges the convention of putting titles to literary works – the title normally designates the topic of the work. In the case of *My Skenderbei*, the title, however, does not coincide with the focus of the novel, as Skenderbeg is not its protagonist; in fact, he is not even a minor character, but a kind of a motivating, almost invisible force that shapes both the major and the minor characters. The novel consists of something halfway between independent stories and chapters of a novel in that they are all connected through the motif of Skenderbeg, who appears sometimes only as the reference of research or as a character in a play written about him, sometimes as part of a short anecdote, and sometimes is the central figure of the story/chapter. The stories/chapters, however, do not stand in a cause-and-effect relationship. While the narration follows the conventions of realism, it is frequently interrupted by the appearance of supernatural or absurd situations, which are not normally found in realist narratives.

Additionally, another specific element about the title is that it uses "i" (in Macedonian "j") at the end of the name – Skenderbei – instead of the usual "g" – Skenderbeg. The title is an indicator for the position of the author that there is no single truth, and this position is a reaction both against the promotion of only one acceptable

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 175.

truth during the age of socialism in Yugoslavia, and against the promotion of the viewpoint of the Western tradition, according to which there is one political truth about the countries in the world: that they may be divided into advanced, punctual and dedicated to progress, on the one hand, and underdeveloped, lazy and regressive, on the other hand. In fact, that is why the title also includes the term “my”, which points to the belief that everyone has their own “truth” about Skenderbeg, everyone has their own Skenderbeg, which marks something slightly different from what this person means to anyone else. It is a challenge to the generally accepted discourse with which things are named the way they have traditionally been named, without reviewing or questioning if such a designation or interpretation is in accordance with the historical or any other truth.

The character of Metodija Bogoev in the chapter entitled “An Underground Theatre”, for example, who goes to Australia as a child and comes back to Macedonia as a student, represents the internal struggle of this post-communist society between the advantages of the Western modern achievements and the values offered by the tradition of one’s own culture.

Until the age of eighteen, nobody asks Metodija what he wants, and he does not manage to fulfil any of his wishes. He first faces the parental institution, against whose decisions he cannot fight. His parents “took him” from his home in Cair and, while he was “confused and tangled”, they “pushed him” into a house in Melbourne “against his own will”⁸. Metodija “cannot accept the change”, and when he tries to have it his own way uttering the words “I want home!” he faces power much bigger than his own – he does not even get the reply that he cannot go home, which would at least mean that his parents and he use the same term to refer to the same referent. Instead, he receives the answer “you *are* home”⁹, which means that he and his parents use the same term to refer to different referents – for him, “home” is Skopje; for them, “home” is Melbourne – thus the institution *parents* shows its supremacy over the young individual. Metodija’s powerlessness is expressed through crying, locking himself in his room and refusing to leave.

Life in Australia is decent and the living standard is high; contrary to that, life in Macedonia is miserable, people work hard for small salaries that barely make their ends meet. Yet, life in Macedonia seems closer to his identity and personality. His own individual acts, however, his efforts, his life have no effects on what is happening around him either in Australia or in Macedonia, so the only thing left for him to do is to feel displaced, as if he does not belong anywhere. This is an excellent metaphor for the confused feelings of the writers in Macedonia in the 21st century, who are torn apart between two opposing tendencies – to lean on their own legacy, or to get into the modern flows of life and literature spread by Western cultures. Broadly speaking, during communism, there were values that were imposed by the state in the area of art, regardless of the fact that, perhaps, not all writers followed them closely. After the fall of communism, and the disintegration of Yugoslavia, no solid values existed upon which authors were to make a critical judgment. The chaotic situation in the political sphere was reflected in the field of culture as well, and this chaos left many authors in a state of confusion. This fact may be seen very clearly in the confusion that Metodija feels. He knows that the power lies in the secure feeling of belonging, and that those who have that feeling may, perhaps, manage to fulfil their desires.

⁸ Dragi Mihajlovski, *My Skenderbei* (Skopje: Kaprikornus, 2007), 117.

⁹ Mihajlovski, 118.

It is precisely this feeling of “belonging” that Metodija misses. In Australia, he is discontent, unhappy, withdrawn, with no social life. In Macedonia, he makes many friends, he laughs, feels happier, yet sometimes he sits by the window for hours, thinking of his parents and sister, at the point of breaking down into tears. Metodija is aware that his inability to settle down either in Australia or in Macedonia is due to his “sick propensity to crazily jump from one meridian to the other”¹⁰. Metodija occasionally suppresses the feeling of not belonging anywhere with passionate study of the old Slavic language and the Macedonian literature; yet the death of his grandparents, his greatest support, undermines his stability again.

It is eighteen years after this, eighteen years during which no one knows what Metodija has been doing, that he comes back to Macedonia and manages to create an alternative world. This alternative world, on a symbolical level, is the world which postcommunist writers in Macedonia are in search of, the world in which it is possible to create at least an ostensible stability, where it is possible for the historical legacy of their own countries to coincide in harmony with the modern way of life typical for the powerful Western countries, where literature is created out of chaos and outlives that chaos which it was formerly nourished by. This world appeases the two contrasting tendencies that have been a source of great confusion among postcommunist literary authors. In the case of Metodija, the alternative world that he creates cures the pain of being torn apart, not “along the horizontal line, in space, but along the vertical line, in time”¹¹.

This alternative world for Metodija is the imaginary underground theatre at the bottom of the stairs between the students’ administration office and the elevator in the building of the Faculty of Philology in Skopje. In that utterly surrealistic world, hundreds of men in suits and ladies in dresses take their seats in the underground theatre in order to watch a play which is being performed, as the actor announces in English, in the Drury Lane theatre. Thus, the small dark cellar of the Faculty of Philology is transformed into an English theatre of about three hundred years ago, and in it is Metodija, happy, not displaced, content, fulfilled, no longer torn apart or broken into pieces, undivided, whole, in harmony with this place, as though he has always belonged there. The dramatic text *The Christian Hero* by George Lillo about Skenderbeg is the world in which Metodija has been placed, which has almost nothing in common with the atmosphere either in Australia or in Macedonia, where he used to study, work, live, but never by his own rules, always in pursuit of something else, of the impossible unification of the two toponyms into one. Impossible, but only outside the underground theatre. Inside it, Metodija and his girlfriend Jill watch with great pleasure the beautiful performance, hug each other’s bodies and souls, talk about Samuel Beckett. Jill ultimately returns to her “horizontal line”, but in order to gain the power to fulfil his dream, Metodija leaves that horizontal line, that real but alien world and plunges forever into his vertical line, where “I may once prove that Marko Krale¹² and Gjorgji Kastrioti Skenderbei have always been one – have always been me!”¹³.

Mihajlovski’s characters do not fight; they withdraw into their own private world, a dimension parallel to reality. This is a specific characteristic of Macedonia’s reaction to the fall of communism, perhaps an inseparable part of the state of mind and nature of

¹⁰ Mihajlovski, 121.

¹¹ Mihajlovski, 128.

¹² Macedonian folk hero.

¹³ Mihajlovski, 136.

its people. Macedonia has achieved its independence by peaceful means, and its people are known to be relatively tolerant in comparison to the neighboring nations. Whether this is a positive or a negative trait is something that has been disputed differently by different political analysts. One thing is less ambiguous, though – and that is the fact that tolerance and withdrawal, quiet resistance rather than active attacks, are much more typical traits of the characters created in Macedonian literature in general, and Mihajlovski is one example of that. They have been facing the chaotic experience immediately following the fall of communism, as well as the gradual construction of new societies cherishing more Western-oriented values, with intellectual dilemmas and hesitations rather than with certainty in what the right course of action is.

Differences between Postcolonial and Macedonian Literature

We have seen that postcolonial and postcommunist literatures have certain characteristics in common. There are, on the other hand, significant differences between them as well. One of the differences certainly stems from the geographical locations – whereas the postcolonial countries in general are situated further away from the Western countries, on continents other than Europe and North America, the postcommunist countries are direct neighbours of the developed nations of the West. Therefore, Macedonians feel more as part of Europe. The geographical locations have certainly contributed to different historical contexts, for example the fact that Eastern Europe has never been colonized by the more developed Western states.

In her thorough research on the civilized world's views of the Balkans, the Bulgarian historian and philosopher Marija Todorova considers that the inhabitants of the Balkans do not strive to achieve the standards that the civilized world has established as normative¹⁴. This view of the Balkans is very similar to what Achebe or Said talk about: that the Western world sees the colonized people as people who are incapable of achieving the standards of a developed civilization. There is, however, a significant difference. Achebe or Said discuss the fact that Western representatives misrepresent the native cultures. In the case of Macedonia, on the other hand, as Sheleva indicates, it is not only the Westerners who criticize the Macedonians, but it is also the Macedonians themselves who disapprove of their own lack of punctuality, apparent laziness and lack of precision. Sheleva warns of the negative effects that this type of self-criticism has on the mentality of the nation, but also emphasizes that it is at the same time a result of that mentality, a kind of curse from which it seems impossible to escape.

In the course of *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova clearly emphasizes that regardless of whether the Western countries had good or bad intentions towards the Balkans, their representation of the Balkans, during the international conferences after the Balkan Wars and World War I, was always full of prejudices because it did not include the views of the Balkan people themselves. Despite that, Todorova points to the existence of certain encouraging indicators of resistance against the stereotype that has been created by the West.

Such encouraging indicators of resistance do appear in the literature produced in Macedonia in the period after the fall of communism: these indicators include attempts

¹⁴ Marija Todorova, *Zamislujajki go Balkanot* (Skopje: Magor 2001), 3.

by the authors to create their own recognizable identity. After Macedonia's independence, what is noticeable about its literature, especially the literature produced by writers who speak English, French, German or other Western European languages, is a tacit acceptance of a literary expression which is a combination of Macedonia's own culture and the culture of the Western world. This relation is very different from that which exists between the postcolonial nations and their colonizers.

In this context, it is significant to emphasize that Macedonia has never been a formal colony in the sense in which India, Kenya or Nigeria have been. Consequently, the response of Macedonian postcommunist literary theory and practice is somewhat different from the response of postcolonialism. There is no strong criticism and definite rejection of foreign culture in Macedonian literature or literary criticism, although there may be some exceptions. It can be said that, in general, there are more similarities with Rushdie's procedures than with the more stringent approach of Achebe.

Although Macedonia does not display such strong hostility towards foreign domination, it does face certain dilemmas in trying to find its own identity. Those dilemmas are: to what extent can the foreign influence be a creative stimulus, and when does it begin to represent an obstacle for the growth of one's own literature? How much does the cultural variety from abroad enrich and how much does it deny one's own culture? Should authors create their works following a theoretical and critical Western framework or should they find their own individual expression?

The answers to these questions remain largely ambiguous. In the colonial countries, there seems to be a much stronger rejection of the Western European (formerly imperial) states than in Macedonia. In the Balkan context, Macedonia is aware of the discrepancy between itself and the Western European countries, which view the Balkans as a less civilized and wilder place. Thus, on the one hand, Macedonia may and partly does identify itself with the colonized states, while, on the other hand, it advocates the Western values, as it has always geographically been part of Europe. Besides, it is a fact, proven by many surveys, that its citizens in the beginning of the twenty-first century tend to be a part of the EU, and the Macedonian writers certainly feel as Europeans, which is very different from the case of the postcolonial writers.

The ambiguous relationship between one's own tradition and the traditions of other nations is noted by Zoran Anchevski in his work of criticism entitled *On tradition*. This work emphasizes the relation that T. S. Eliot and the Macedonian poet Blaze Koneski have towards tradition:

The critical effort of Koneski is permanently directed towards the idea that to write about history does not mean to write history, but to write about its consequences and results, and most of all, about culture.¹⁵

Faced with the dilemmas about the value of his own culture, especially at a time of national awakening of the awareness of its existence, Koneski concludes that culture "is not inherited automatically, but is earned with great labour and effort."¹⁶

Under the influence of socialism, the 'old' generation of Macedonian writers turned exclusively towards their own native tradition. Later, however, after the fall of communism, foreign critical and theoretical texts are valued by writers such as Sheleva, Anchevski, Katica Kulavkova, Venko Andonovski. Anchevski compares Koneski's

¹⁵ Zoran Anchevski, *Za tradicijata* (Skopje: Magor, 2007), 182.

¹⁶ Anchevski, 184.

views with those of prominent world theoreticians (the Russian formalists, Derrida, T. S. Eliot). Sheleva contrasts the positions of Hans-Georg Gadamer, George Bataille or Jean Baudrillard with the positions expressed in literary works in Macedonia. Andonovski discusses Macedonian literary works in the context of postmodernism.

Postcommunist Literature. Towards “Another” Europe

Postcolonial and postcommunist literatures both make attempts to re-examine their tradition and to ascertain their place in the world. For postcolonial writers, this is a way to defy the long-lasting dominance of the imperial powers. Achebe's struggle is fought with direct criticism, Rushdie's – through subverting the conventional norms of writing.

In the last two decades, postcommunist writers have also struggled to evade the dominance of communist legacy and establish their own recognizable identity on the new world literary stage. The previous examples of Mihajlovski's novel and the critical works of Anchevski, Kulavkova, Sheleva and Andonovski do not hold a singular position. Other novels, critical works, as well as poetry, also feature hybridization between the native tradition and the foreign influence, between the historical and the modern. There are, of course, exceptions, coming from the general tendency to balance between contradicting literary methods. Thus, Mihajlovski occasionally employs vocabulary recorded by collectors of nineteenth century's folk stories; one of his characters is a historical person who lived in the Balkans. At the same time he uses postmodern techniques of assembling stories resembling popular crime fiction, or cartoons and turning them into novel chapters, or inserts references to plays and poetic works written in England in the past centuries. Although younger in age, the Macedonian literature enriches the European narrative tradition with its own folk stories and traditional culture and its recent postmodern take on them.

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Literatura postcomunistă în Macedonia: combinație dintre tradiție și actualitate

Acest articol explorează similaritățile și diferențele dintre literatura și critica postcolonială și postcomunistă. Câteva dintre abordările comune sunt trecute în revistă și totodată sunt relevate principalele diferențe care se datorează atât condițiilor geografice, cât și celor istorice. Ocupându-se mai mult de literatura și critica din Macedonia, articolul discută caracteristicile acestora în perioada de după căderea comunismului și dezintegrarea Iugoslaviei, din care Macedonia făcea parte. Literatura din această perioadă a combinat tradiția și moștenirea culturală a culturii macedonene cu metode moderniste și postmoderniste întâlnite la scriitorii și criticii din Vestul Europei și America.