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## Testimonies To The Genocide

When I was offered to read and comment on the latest undertaking of MELIKA SALIHBEĞ BOSNAWI, *The War Rhymes*, I must confess I was primarily attracted to it by intellectual curiosity. On the other hand, I suppose that is what always draws us towards an artistic creation. I should also admit that my curiosity was heightened by what I knew about the author: We had met only once, formally, but of course I was acquainted with her work. Her poetry was perhaps too hermetic for me, but some of her later essays I greatly appreciated, and I specially admired her personality: At the times when most of us chose silence or compromise in order to "be left alone", she courageously opted for personal firmness and integrity, with few individuals and no institution to back her up except her faith. But I set out to read this book as objectively as I could, trying not to let my previous judgements influence my present ones.

However, *The War Rhymes* were not as contemplative as I expected them to be, nor were they a chronicle of "settling accounts". This long poetic narrative is the essence of a tortured experience, of hopes betrayed and dreams shattered, of the author's bearing witness to a monstrous crime and staying sane to testify about it in the only manner a poet is endowed with: with words.

To the rhetoric question whether poetry can be written after Auschwitz the answer is, needless to say, yes, provided the victims write it. It has been pointed out that the Sarajevo torment gave birth to many literary works: the Muses simply refused to keep silent while cannons fired. Some of these works were more than just talented, others were just an escape from daily reality, and only historical distance will judge them. But

*The War Rhymes* were neither. They stand alone, unique and separate, and that is perhaps their foremost quality. As with most writers, life can rarely be detached from their work. And with *The War Rhymes* it has been proved again: Melika Salihbeg Bosnawi has made a remarkable contribution to poetry as such and, consequently, her work defies classification into genres. In an astonishing amalgam of erudition, technique and talent, with mastery of images and occasional inventive plays on words, this fragile witness from the slaughterhouse has produced a volume of about 8.500 lines that tell the saga about a city, about its both heroic and tragic, forlorn populace, but above all about a woman: a lonely "zoon politikon", whose faith helps her not only survive but also discover tender characters in the "House Of Urchins", the children abandoned within total abandonment, as well as miserable political games of professional patriots. "Sarajevo Kids War-Chorus" is a horrifying reading experience, lived over and over again every time we read it - and in fact it is a simple rendering of everyday reality, therefore even more horrid. Names, statistic data, facts and figures given in an off-hand manner only reinforce the horror, while the paradox of twisted delicate imagery, so normal for ordinary lyrical poetry, makes us shudder with awe.

A poet once commented on the futility of arguments about the form and contents in poetry. "They are the same", he claimed. "By changing the subject-matter we necessarily change the form." And this is not to poet's disadvantage. The contents in which regular events (be they episodes from personal recollections or information from the city mortuary) get entwined with historical data, characters and quotations from the Holy Book, could only be rendered in the present form. And with this we come to the question of the language.

Less a means of mutual communication with the reader here, but rather an instrument of transmission of messages,

cries for help and understanding, *de profundis*, it is a stern, desolate tool with which the poetess tries to reach out to her audience. At times archaic, with broken structure, it exhibits the chaos in the world, while occasional enumeration of images, their gradation until they finally arrive at their climax and explode, serve to remind us that it is us who have to take the responsibility: whether we opt for building of bridges, like mimar Sinan, or for their destruction, whether we stick to the laws, God's and human, written and unwritten, it is our decision. But if our personal morality compels us to side with the victim, with the oppressed, with the wounded, then we have no right to remain silent, to pretend not to see.

I have to say that I did not keep my initial promise to myself - to stay cold and objective when reading this book. At times deeply moved, then upset, but never uninvolved, I was at most times overwhelmed by the feeling of powerless fury, compassion and anxiety, so I probably did not pay enough attention to other dimensions of *The War Rhymes*. But I was constantly and clearly aware of them. Of their satirical note, among other things. And if one wonders whether satire is possible when writing about the things analogous to the Bosnian war, one just has to remember Swift's "Modest Proposal" and similar works of art. Even Lady-Hate, whose *dance macabre* is presented as an artistic performance, in a different context would probably seem an enchanting figure. And here is where *The War Rhymes* actually show their primal power.

In a way I am sad that most of Bosnian readers will be deprived of the vigour and beauty of *The War Rhymes*. I pondered on the author's choice of the language: is it not for a poet the most sacred thing, the tool in which he/she is the master? Why did Melika choose this most difficult path - to express herself in the language other than the one in which she

is already an authority? But that would bring us to questioning the opus of Joseph Conrad, Lafcadio Hearn, even Chinua Achebe, who mastered the conqueror's language only to prove the slave can outwit the slave-owner.

In the finally analysis, there is no optimism in *The War Rhymes*<sup>1</sup>. For how could there be? But if there is something we can learn from them - as indeed we do from most masterpieces, even when their intention is not educational - it is to be humble, to respect all creation, small human destinies as well as magnificent animals and simple plants. When we leave this book we ask ourselves how was it possible to squeeze so many so diverse, noble feelings into these pages. We feel we have become more compassionate. The monstrous project of dividing the indivisible, of trying to exterminate an entire nation, is here confronted with the most powerful voice.

*Zoran Mutić, Sarajevo, April 2000*

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<sup>1</sup> Text was published in daily "Oslobodjenje", following the book's public promotion in "Gallery Switzerland", The Fine Arts Gallery of Bosnia & Herzegovina", on 25 September 2000. As one of the promoters, Mutić corrected this view of absence of optimism in the book SARAJEVO ROSE / WAR RHYMES.