

Magic elements from Kim Mehmeti's prose

Msc. Enida Godime

Lecturer in UAMD – Durres, Albania

Abstract

Kim Mehmeti is an Albanian writer born in Gercec, a small village near Skopje, Macedonia. He writes both in Macedonian and Albanian, which is impressive considering he never studied Albanian growing up. This broadened his audience to both his compatriots and the Macedonian people. Mehmeti has played a huge part in helping the Albanian population in Macedonia have their voice heard and their political rights matched.

Kim Mehmeti's prose, a result of a contemporary modernization of the prose, has its roots tightly connected to myths, legends, and superstitions of the Albanian folklore, while also having traits of the classical forms of prose, modernizations, and especially the magical realization. The main treat of the novel "Two storey tower" (Kulla dy katëshe) lies in the thematic features that show a creation, which takes the shape of a magical novel. This includes: the presence of the myth and the legend as phenomena, very crucial in the tower's creation and survival: superstitions, in how the tower manages to keep standing, and also how people who live in it generate 'life' from it; the presence of ethnic elements and the confrontation of other cultures that claim this as their own antipode; the anthropomorphism and metamorphosis described in a basic way; and also calling out social, ethnical, criminal, and political injustices. Having the main subject in a small village, is not about it being in a small community. In a metaphorical way, it represents the beginning of the making of a nation, it is where it all begins. The people of the village are always around the two story tower, however the happenings take place in different oases.

Keywords: Kim Mehmeti, prose, Albania.

Introduction

Modernization is in general a movement that used the urban life, urban cities especially, as a reflection of society at the time, but in this novel, everything takes place in the village that goes by the name of Sukë, and especially around the tower, which itself is turned into a character with surreal characteristics. Suka turns into a Makondo, (the village of the novel "One hundred years of loneliness" written by Marquez), which reveals 4 generations to the reader: the first builder from the Metaj family, a very dull and silent man, who found himself in a very difficult situation, in which his youngest son got raped; the second generation being Mr. Metaj's oldest son, Dema, who had to move to Istanbul after he could not live with the shame that he did not honor his friend. Moral norms win over the family history which has been preserved from the tower; the third generation includes Dema's successors, Sula, Bani, and Rexha, who have to deal with the fatality of a terrible curse, and not being able to undo it; and lastly, the fourth generation is represented by Dema's nephew. His name is never mentioned throughout the whole novel, he is rather referred to as "the newcomer", or just "Dema's nephew", which tends to emphasize the tight

relation with their ancestors' the motive of love crushes people.

The presence of the myth in the making of the tower by the Metaj family in 1837, and the destroying of the tower by the family's nephew, so that he could re build it in Istanbul, makes for the novel's main thesis. The nephew represents the point of view of an individual with a western vision, who does not acknowledge the tradition, looks at the tower only as an object, and not like a part of his people's identity, something that is a symbol of their past but also hope for the future. Can the tower really be relocated? Will he be able to fulfil his predecessors' will but just moving rocks from a place to another?

The woman's figure is present throughout the first two generations: she feels, scents, leads and stays silent. She can not save her descendants from the evil that pursues them. The pure love she has for her son is helpless to affect neither the man of the house, nor the generations that will follow. She is only a soft voice, unable to control anybody. Except for some symbols, the only signs of matriarchy come from the old lady Nefe, who connects the past to the present.

Kim Mehmeti amazingly inserts confession elements, which belong to the magic reality, the myth, and the legend, without being concerned about the protagonist's point of view. The wise and knowing narrator connects the soul of the old building to the devastating present.

Obviously, this is far from a magical realism fiction, but it includes magical motives, and elements, really similar to the magical realization prose. The return of the legend and the myth, along with their interference with the real world is not only a feature of the Latin novel, but also ours.

One of the mythological motives, is the motive of sacrifice. One could sacrifice an animal: sheep, lamb, rooster, goat or another cattle, while building the foundations of a building, which vary from a house, bridge, castle, to even a tower. The first woman of the family was feeling the butterflies in her stomach as the tower was being built. She could not stop touching her stomach, failing to realize what was wrong with her, and it had gotten to the point she had started bleeding.

"This tower will end up killing one of us, and when it happens, I want to be that person." - she said while laying on her husband's chest. "Get these dark thoughts out of my head! In between the tower's foundations, we will bury the head of our black horse, and his blood will be enough to make the foundations strong enough." - her husband tried to console her.

Sometimes people even planted gold objects or hair of women, when building new foundations. One could paint every corner of the foundations, but also just a small part of them. Where did the tradition of sacrificing really originate from? It is clear that after it is proven that the land is productive, good fortune bringing, and flourishing, they start building on it. But that apparently is not enough. Apparently, one needs to find a better land, make a sacrifice, and give gifts to the foundations, or else they will end up in ruins. Whereas planting the woman's hair, brings healthy fertility. This is a way to bring longevity to the building they say. The motive of this kind of sacrifice differs to the process of fortifying someone. Sacrificing a living creature in the foundations means they will bring good luck to the building, but fortifying somebody inside the walls, means they will forever live within the building. However, since along with the horse's head, skin, and blood, they decided to add the woman's hair

to the foundations, one could say sacrificing and fortification are somewhat similar. The motive of protecting the building is tightly related to the snake's figure. It could be any kind of snake, as snakes are known as totem animals, and leaders of the Illyrian tribes, and posses really good qualities. In the middle and the north of Albania, they mention the Aesculapian snake, which is big in size and is said to have divine features. After the habitants abandon the tower, the snake is put in the middle of the building, this way turning into its protector. It is Dema's wife who holds the snake, and this interaction is a way of symbolizing the cult of matriarchy, even though throughout the novel the figure of the male dominates. Males survive through the women's power. When Dema's nephew sees the snake, he says *"Leave this place now, or else you will be left with no place to live in"*, referring to the snake as it is another member of the family whom he would not want to have to argue with, in order to decide who inherits the tower. These words show that the young did not realize that the real worth of the tower was not just rocks and materialistic values, but a big part of that was the snake itself. With everyone else abandoning the tower, the snake had somehow turned into its only owner.

The same thing can be said about the two graves located in front of the tower. They also contained this mystical force, which implied that if anyone touched them, intentionally or not, a curse would be put on them. The Aesculapian is a divine creature on earth and also in the underground world, htonic animal.

The motive of metamorphosis, transportation of the soul from a being to another. The unreal metamorphosis is visualized like a real metamorphosis. The character of Bani in the sentence *"I want wings, soft leathers, not this black fur"* visualized the freedom idea. Bani is a character who is burned by longing for the mum's land, being a seagull helps him to stay in the seaside, on the bank of the river and to extinguish the missing of homeland. Being a seagull helps him to fly and to stand in the homeland.

The motive of the curse follows the Metaj family all along the way, ever since they decide to abandon their predecessors' land. "You made a good decision by not selling the land to someone else in Suke, so that the other villagers can take care of it, but you failed to save your own family from destruction. You failed to realize that every branch ends up fades, once it is separated from the stump." Dema's wife told her husband. It is a hidden curse, that follows the family ever since they abandoned their home land, and their ancestors' graves.

During the novel, one could also find mythological motives and symbols, which are used to help with the narrating. One of the main ones has been turned into a cult throughout all Balkan countries, and especially in Albania that cult, is the cult of the stone. Very special stones were used to build the tower, stones that were either washed in blood, milk, or the egg yolk. These rituals give stones mystical features, as it is as if the souls of those animals live within the stones. The stone inside the tower, and the two grave stones in front of it, gained magical features, because every couple that got married, had to pass near the tower. Perhaps the dead souls from the stones found a way to bless the mortals who needed blessings.

The tower and its rocks also play juridical functions, they are elements of identification of a village and is a border from the other villages, because is in the edge of village Suke. The tower is transformed in a cult, is adorable and is intangible from the

habitants. Its violation will be considered a sin, and consequently will bring distress, in the same way it brought distress its abandonment.

The tower's sanctity has gained such a powerful from all the rituals that helped build that, that it has turned into a very distinct object from all the villagers. That tower was not only a shelter to its residents, its shadow had also taken the shape of a scorpion that would always show the time, it would always notify everyone when it was time to pray, and it helped that whole society organize better. It would communicate with the villagers, it had created such a strong spiritual bond with them, that it would not accept any strangers. It somehow managed to make itself almost invisible to strangers, impossible to even be photographed "... he could never accept it, complaining that from that light, he would go blind, every time he had tried to snap his camera to take a picture, his eyes had started hurting. From that light, the photographer said, I would always get dizzy and my head would start aching."

The tower was dismantled into pieces, so they it could be rebuilt in the foreign land, but the stones were not delivered, because as it stated at the end of the novel, Dema's nephew, the person responsible for the relocation, lost his consciousness and went insane. From a cultural perspective, the tower's triumph over the 'newcomer', is a triumph of the myth over the real, a triumph of the identity of the home land, over the foreign land, a triumph of one's culture, over every other culture. The tower survived even the political systems that came in power after 1837, it was never used by the communists. Communism destroyed the soul of the Albanians, the soul of Dema. They managed to violate them physically, but they were never able to threaten their identity, led by the tower.

The second aspect of the novel that I would like to point out, which has to do with the magical realism, is attributed to the style. The "Two Story Tower" is kept alive from two main elements: the basic figure of making a building, and the technique the actual novel was built with.

The basic figure is the grotesque, not the funny kind, but the tragic grotesque: the relocation of a tower, with the same image, same stones, and same infrastructure, in a foreign land. While building it the focus is on a family who holds a lot of history, identity and the hope for continuation, where as when relocating it, the focus is on an individual with absolutely no identity whatsoever, whose only intention is using his inheritance to gain a possession. The tower symbolizes the life of the village, the way everyone lived, and the morals of the environment as a whole, which are all just as old as the stones the tower was built with. The grotesque comes from the folkloric tradition, and the author's creative imagination. It is on how a tower can be relocated along with its history, how the stones interact with the villagers, and how they come alive to and also give life to the villagers. The tower's communication and interaction with the people is a grotesque. There are reasons behind this use:

a) It recreates the history of the making of the tower, the making of the habitants' identity.

The process of building is explained through Albanian legendary rituals and ballads like human sacrifice, fortification, and ritual related to dead, or married people.

b) It shows the punishment moral consequences to Dema's family.

When Dema fails to protect the guest at his own house, he punishes himself by

leaving the village and abandoning the tower. As it says in the Kanun, he did not follow the hospitality principle, the man of the house has to protect his guests (in this case he failed to protect the teacher from the communists). If other members of the village found out about this, they would shame him, and call him a man who despises friends, life, honor, health, and dignity. Not being able to fight against the communists, he punished himself. Regarding to Lek Dukagjini's Kanun: "643. If anyone makes fun of, or talks down on your guest, you will protect your guest's honor with your own life. (2) 644. If your friend gets touched, you either kill or get killed. Moral values come before everything else." Dema abandoned his roots, as a way of self punishment.

c) It shows the moral and mental breakdown of Dema's nephew.

He comes with big plans on how he would relocate the tower and change everything.

What he fails to realize that every piece of stone, holds its own history and soul, and as long as they are in their mother land, Albanian history will never move away. His character takes the big hit at the end of the novel. He thought he would have trouble with the villagers, but his real opponent turned out to be the tower itself.

d) It shows the welcoming Albanian, very noble, a preserver of values and tradition, trustworthy and honorable.

During this little 'saga', we are presented with the manliness of Albanians in front of every risk they take, but also the softness of the Albanian woman, who will only bow to dignity. The old lady Nefe and the other women of the village, (used in plural to symbolize their unity), are shown as character who all show the same portrait, that of the Albanian woman, who is always under the man's shadow. She has two functions: keep the family together, and preserve the tradition as if it was vital for everyone's continuation of life.

e) It creates the portrait of anti-humanism, violence and anti-moral

This portrait is played by the foreigners and the communists. Harsh, violent, violators of the dignity and of honor. Sending a man away from his home land can be achieved through physical war, but also through killing his spirit. However, the wrong done on one family, only reminds the whole nation how strong they really are deep inside. They could destroy the walls of that tower, but they could never destroy the real foundations: blood, heart, and the nation's history. The foundations are existential metaphors of a nation's survival.

The technique of jumping through events that happened between long time interval is perceived in a natural way from the reader. Through anachronism, the reader easily goes from past events, to present events and vice versa. Meanwhile, through dreaming, the reader also touches the future. Dreams give more rhythm to the narration, helping the reader choose the faith of the characters. Even though there is a fast pace of narrating, going from one generation to the other, it is magical how the reader generates a feeling of suspense, reading about the fate of the tower and its habitants. With the coming of Dema's nephew, the love for the tower, and the pain that it is getting destroyed, generate the same weight to the reader's heart. Their dramatic curiosity goes up, as the number of deaths go up. Just like the other villagers, the reader is anxious about the fate of the towers, whereas Dema's nephew keeps thinking about the glory he thinks he will gain from this act.

Conclusions

In a way or another, the two main thesis of the novel are quite obvious throughout all of it: the love for the tower, and the pain caused from it. The love for the tower not only represents the protection of identity, but it is also a warning for the people, to prevent the bad occurrences from happening. The danger that the towers faces, represents the danger of extinction for the people. In a metonymy way the tower represents the villagers, the locals, Albanians, and its relocation in a forced way, amounts to taking their roots to a foreign land. Its resistance, not being able to move the tower, means life won over death, true identity can not be touched, branches can be cut, but the roots will always remain there. Even though the tower fell, the hope to believe never stops. It is hard to touch a nation.

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