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HOW TO SPEAK OF THE UNSPEAKABLE: WAR TRAUMA AND IDENTITY OF THE CHILD IN NOVELS BY VESNA ALEKSIĆ

Happy those early days! when I
Shined in my angel infancy.
Before I understood this place

Henry Vaughan, "The Retreat"

Abstract: At the heart of every conversation and thought about trauma lies an intrinsic wonder of the possibility of its linguistic incarnation, its true translation to the level of communication, introduction into the space of conversation about particular or shared experiences. The issue of communicating trauma stands as a double-edged sword or Gordian knot, equally in psychology, sociology, or literature and the study of it, if those things are even arbitrarily distinguishable. There is probably no need to even highlight that literature, in its own way, has always applied a particular verbalizing method—the shaping of traumatic, personal, as well as collective experiences in literature stands as one of the main bases on which the art of the word relies. The outlined hermeneutical problems gain a new dimension when it comes to children's literature. In a specific cross-section with the matter of trauma in literature as a whole lies a special place of a very important field of study, for both the study of literature and beyond; for sociology, pedagogy, anthropology, cultural studies—the question of how children's literature shapes and treats trauma. This paper will raise those questions while relating them to the novels of contemporary Serbian children's literature author, Vesna Aleksić.

Keywords: children's literature, trauma, identity, language shaping

Introduction. Trauma and the ability to speak of it

In the heart of every conversation and thought about trauma lies an intrinsic wonder of the possibility of its linguistic incarnation, its true translation to the level of communication, the introduction into the space of conversation about particular or shared experiences. The issue of communicating trauma stands as a double-edged sword or Gordian knot, equally in psychology, sociology or literature and the study of it, if those things are even arbitrarily distinguishable. One of today's leading theorists of trauma,[1] Bessel van der Kolk, questions the process of narrativization of traumatic experiences itself, in the sense of the temporal, spatial and causal sequence of events and how they resonate in our conscience, considering that trauma, in his interpretation, cancels its own temporal dimension and fundamental divisibility, and becomes a type of eternal present: "Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then, but the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside the individual" (Van der Kolk 2014: 53). Unresolved and uncured trauma—as if the convincing thesis of its eternal presentness is not enough—creates its own future by itself, both its own and the one of the subject which carries it. Cathy Caruth simply announces that "the traumatic event *is* its future" (Caruth 2014: 28), considering the power of its pattern and repetition.

[1] The basic modern definition of trauma is already 100 years old, considering it was created by Freud in the beginning of the 1920s (Freud 1994). For the father of psychoanalysis, trauma is the consequence of a serious breach of the protective shield against external stimuli. The American society of the 1980s recognized the scope of the effect of trauma, proposing a new name for the disorder caused by its direct impact—*post-traumatic stress disorder*, which is defined as the response to an event "outside the range of actual human experience" and involves serious somatic and psychosomatic disorders. The "capacity" for the comprehension of the traumatic remained **only** in the domain of psychology for a very short time. "Although at first trauma was mainly associated with extremely unusual events, it has now become a powerful and complex paradigm that infiltrates contemporary history, literature, culture and critical theory. Thus, trauma theory developed in the 1990s in connection with the ethical turn that emerged in the previous decade and which affected literary theory and philosophy. In different manners, the increasing interest in trauma was a response to concerns about memory, politics, representation and ethics that became prominent at the turn of the 20th century, and which have mainly focused on the extreme forms of violence and victimization that came to light after World War II" (Nadal, Calvo 2014: 1, 2).

Van der Kolk, of course, is not the first or only author who, on this distinct line of traumatic experiences, insists on the nature of a critical experience of which the totality transcends words or, paradoxically, does not belong to them—from the early explorations of trauma as a universal human phenomenon, there is noticeable persistence to describe trauma as something hard to communicate, or, ultimately, as something unspeakable. Therefore, the earliest psychotherapeutic attempts at curing and overcoming trauma were tied right to the breaking of verbal, cognitive blocks which the consciousness raises around traumatic events, seeing as it identifies them as too fearsome, threatening to the being as a whole, while they view the embodiment of trauma verbally as a kind of prophylactic, but also cathartic act.

There is probably no need to even highlight that literature, in its own way, has always applied a particular verbalizing method—the shaping of traumatic, personal as well as collective experiences in literature stands as one of the main bases on which the art of the word relies. "The history of the relationship between trauma and narrative is almost as long as the history of trauma itself", writes J. Pederson (Pederson 2018: 97), diving, with this seemingly simple statement, into the core of the issue literature has with trauma: namely, how does it verbally present it if it is essentially unspeakable; how does it systematize it in a specific type of occurrence, chronotypicality, if it resides in the eternal present of the traumatized subject. Considering that, strictly speaking, literary fiction does not operate with hard facts, nor does it attempt (at least not always) to ascertain an indisputable causal course of events, it finds its ways in identifying the kind of absence (description of events or talking about them, in what is covered up by that absence). It does so in what is indirect: through indications, allusions or perhaps repetition—the actions of the heroes, their tales of the awful and terrifying. Consequently, speaking of trauma, writing about it and studying it in literature thus also entails dealing with a riddle of sorts, determining its limits, evaluating its implications, assessing, announcing and eventually resolving, or at least alleviating its consequences. This applies to life as much as it does to literature.[2]

[2] Though literature is, often, literally put into the role of improving the quality of that life. By that, we primarily mean the various types of bibliotherapy, as well as the therapeutic practices of overcoming trauma through different models of narrativization.

Although authors such as J. Hart claim (probably, at least partly, with some basis and rightfully) that Freud on one side and the experience of the Holocaust[3] on the other, not just ultimately changed, but in a certain way also established the way in which we observe trauma today (Hart 2015); almost everything we tend to look at as big, core traumatic narratives, we can find in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Greek myths, in Homer's works, in ancient tragedy, the Bible, as well as in the contemporary novel or poetry.[4] For that reason, it is not a surprising fact that cultural studies of trauma, and literary studies are definitely at the forefront, and they record a significant rise in the second half of the 20th century, reaching full bloom in the first decades of the 21st century. "A key term in psychoanalytic approaches to literary study, trauma theory, represents a critical approach that enables new modes of reading and of listening. It is a leading concept of our time, applicable to individuals, cultures, and nations", notes Roger Kurtz in his editorial note for the Cambridge publication *Trauma and Literature* (Kurtz 2018: 2).

Let us go back for a moment to the previously expressed attitude that *writing down trauma*, speaking of it in a literary text and, accordingly, studying trauma from the perspective of a literary critic, theorist or historian, means, in a large number of cases, handling hypotheses, indications, allusions, additional reports and it also means examining the lapses in the memories of the narrator and characters, dealing with their inability to express themselves, verbally and sometimes even in other (or all) ways. One thing to keep in mind is that trauma is something we tend to view as a posterior process, the condition that occurred after the catastrophe already happened, as opposed to the more narrow, traumatic

[3] Anna Hunter calls the experience of the Holocaust *the ultimate trauma narrative* (Hunter 2018: 66).

[4] Excluding, perhaps, the newest, completely modern fears, the fear of complete isolation and alienation, the chill of the hypertrophied individualization of current society, which is also sensed in literature: "*Old*, we are tempted to say, classic fears in stories count on facing basic disturbances, the fear of injury and death, or at least metaphysical doom. *New* fears refer to the fear of life, of the duration of the existence of a person over the limit of bearable, the dread of contact, even of language. The purposefully hindered communicativeness between character–character or character–reader, or narrator–reader can be undoubtedly terrifying (as with M. Bulatović, R. Petrović, W. Faulkner, etc.)" (Бјелановић 2022: 144).

event that triggered it. While the event as an event is relatively simple to present in a specific narrative, of course with the adequate narrator,[5] through a simple account in a few sentences or an evolved dramatic scene, the permanent presence of the pain of trauma as a process, as an internal state, constantly evades precise description and presents itself as an unspeakable experience. In the end of the effort to determine the phenomena of literature speaking on trauma at least somewhat analytically, this unspeakability, or bare speakability, is presented as one of the fundamental features of reflection on it.

Perhaps it is totally redundant to emphasize that here, only concretely determined problems gain a new dimension when it comes to children's literature. As a separate part of a full literary production, it comes under question itself once it needs to be precisely defined—some questions remain open: what exactly children's literature is, what its characteristics that separate it from the rest of the literary fund are, whether it uses a unique language[6] and what its nature is, whether there is, on one hand,

[5] Common are, of course, the cases, especially those in first person point of view, when the narrator is not adequate, so whole books, and especially more contemporary ones are dedicated to the inability to end the cycle of trauma. One of the most representative examples is *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, or the novel *Death and the Dervish* [*Derviš i smrt*] by Meša Selimović. The latter ends in a famous line by commentator Hasan, friend of Nurudin, who testifies of the inability for trauma in and of itself to be transferred to another human being and be broken or at least somewhat soothed: "I did not know he was so unhappy. Peace to his tormented soul!" (Selimović 2024: 368).

[6] The question of a kind of "language measure" is old and the issue of children's literature as an aesthetic entity still seems essentially unsolved (and in some way unsolvable). McDowell says that "books for children are usually shorter, call for a more active than passive attitude, are filled with dialogues and events rather than descriptions and introspection; by rule, children are the protagonists; conventions are widely represented; the action happens within a frame of a clear moral schematic that a large part of adult literature ignores; books for children aim to be optimistic, not depressing; language is familiar to the child" (McDowell 1973: 51, according to Lesnik-Oberstein 2013: 39). Opposite to him, N. Babbitt claims that books for children are no less serious than books for adults, nor is their emotional horizon qualitatively or quantitatively different than adult books: "in fact, there is no such thing as an emotion inherent only to adults, children's literature also deals with all of them" (Babbitt 1973: 157, according to Lesnik-Oberstein: 40). Also, according to Babbitt, "there is not much difference in content between adult and children's literature: 'war, powerlessness, poverty, cruelty, all the toughest aspects of life also exist in children's literature'" (Babbitt 1973: 157, according to Lesnik-Oberstein 2013: 41). Babbitt aims to debunk the generally accepted hypothesis that language generally

a thematic framework that is characteristic of it and, on the other hand, a thematic spectrum that is out of its reach, etc. Even though they are relevant, those questions are quite old, classic, and our goal in this place is not to answer them. Regardless, it is important to note them as, in a specific cross-section with the matter of trauma in literature as a whole, lies a special place of a very important field of study, for both literature scholarship and beyond, for sociology, pedagogy, anthropology, cultural studies: it is the question of how children's literature shapes and treats trauma. In addition to that, a question arises that is not as important with adult readers as with those others: what the pedagogical and psychological implications of that type of content are on the target group, the youngest readers. The fact is that even though children's literature does not actively avoid traumatic experiences, events and processes (they represent

divides these two areas of literature, comparing Kipling and Hemingway. One of the arguments in favor of her claim could be that children's books are often not written with that intention, however, they become so through the history of reading and the passing of time (e.g., *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*, and in our case, Andrić's collection *Children* [*Deca*], that Andrić himself stressed was not written for children nor was it intended for them, but is part of mandatory school reading now). Still, it seems that there remains a principle, almost intuitive, hard to strictly define judgment that children's literature language at least somewhat differs from the general linguistic and stylistic base of literature as a whole. It is distinguished by more frequent passages of humor and a general humorous predisposition, a somewhat simpler sentence structure—this feature is more prominent the younger the work's target audience is; a more present restraint when it comes to the author directly naming some hard experiential and existential topics, as well as far less frequent curse words, lewdness and other lexemes on the margins of polite and socially acceptable language. The final conclusion could be that "there are many suppositions about language in books for children—even among authors, who sometimes almost feel a duty to use a specific style, structure and word choice. John Stevens believes that, even when it happens, form allows access to textual strategies that have the potential to weaken such limitations" (Peter Hunt, according to Stevens 2013: 87).

Jovan Ljuštanović notes that childhood, supposedly, is a "*social construct* (Prout, James 1990: 52) and, consequently, conceptualized in different manners in different social and historical circumstances. That discovery also concerns children's literature in an important way. Not only has children's literature been sequestered as a specific area of literature thanks to the fact children got their own social and anthropological status in modern civil society (Aries 1989), but different understandings of childhood have left their mark on the structure and reception of children's literature: its themes and genres, lyrical and prose relaying subjects, characters, versification, methods of reading" (Љуштановић 2012: 137). The phrase *methods of reading* is especially important for decoding the specific issue we are dealing with in this paper.

one of its most serious groundworks for building its fictional worlds), due to the aforementioned specifics of its audience and certain undeniable expectations, it faces a limited range of literary devices and an assorted lexicon, as well as a different use of syntax and an undeniably restricted choice from the spectrum of traumatic themes and motives, which is sadly rich. Children's literature therefore, other than having to deal with the previously established paradox—that it is the art of the word, yet has to speak of the unspeakable—also has to deal with its own personal paradox: it is reflected in the fact that a child can, unfortunately, go through almost every horrible experience that can happen to a grown adult, but literature intended for children still cannot shape trauma in the way the so-called adult literature can in every opportunity and for every such experience. There, we come to an important question of ethical imperative when it comes to representing sensitive topics and content for underage readers, to the issues of representation which can, in a myriad of ways, pedagogically, cognitively and emotionally, affect the younger audience it is intended for, and the specific tensions they create when they "conflate models of individual trauma with models of collective trauma, using similar approaches to describe these inherently differing experiences." (Rodi-Risberg 2018: 111)

The key question is how children's literature manages that double paradox. In our view of things—which is, broadly, that children's literature is only partly different from the rest of literature in a certain poetic way and that, therefore, its arbitrary separation is conditioned more by practical reasons and not differences in essence, aesthetics and quality—it manages with it fairly well. It leans, mainly, exactly on the ways of directly showing what was previously mentioned in the text: on allusion, suggestiveness of the atmosphere, hints, carefully structured reports, or perhaps exhibiting it through different effects in the text, such as the distinct void, lack of speaking of something which has an undeniably strong but not directly mentioned presence in a text or, on the opposite side of things, constant repetition—for the actions of heroes and their speech. Children's literature counts on the advantage a young reader has in spades—the power of their imagination and imaginative co-operation with the text.

This paper will, therefore, closely deal with child trauma, the way the trauma of the collective transfers to its youngest members and thematizes indicated traumas in the children's and young adult novels by Vesna

Aleksić.[7] The chosen material is interesting for this topic because, among other things, the two chosen novels are narrated in the first person point of view, from the perspective of a child,[8] and other than that, they thematize a very turbulent and generally traumatic time of a community, a collective, namely, Serbia (and circumstantially, its bordering surroundings) in the 1990s.

"I am interested in the WORLD". Signs and signposts of the traumatic in novel *My Name is Jelena Šuman*

Before we come to the novel that is the focus of our analysis, *A Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*] (2018), in this study we will firstly quickly touch upon the novel *My Name is Jelena Šuman* [*Ja se zovem Jelena*

[7] Vesna Aleksić (1958) is an award-winning Serbian children's literature author, some of whose works have become mandatory school reading. Other than famous novels (some of the stand outs being *My Name is Jelena Šuman* [*Ja se zovem Jelena Šuman*], *Ticket to Fly* [*Karta za letenje*], *It is the Wind* [*Vetar je*], *Auction of the Wind* [*Licitacija vetra*], *A Constellation of Violins* [*Sazvežđe violina*]), she is also the author of storybooks, radio dramas and children's monodramas. This paper focuses primarily on the novels *My Name is Jelena Šuman* and *A Constellation of Violins*. *Auction of the Wind* is a novel whose theme also deals with the trauma of war and identity of the child, with the key time it is set in being March 24, 1999, the day when the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia began.

[8] Although the monograph *Children's literature mirrored in culture* [*Književnost za decu u ogledalu culture*] was published before the novel *A Constellation of Violins*, in it, Jovan Ljuštanović correctly and somewhat prophetically describes poetic assumptions of Aleksić's narrative world as a whole: "Most of the stories of Vesna Aleksić are told by children. In a part of those stories, there is an inkling of an autobiographical manner of narration, but the adult's position is given sporadically and in fragments—the Me of the child is more important than the point of view of an adult nostalgically travelling to the past" (Љуштановић 2012: 142). This observation is particularly interesting when one takes into account the auto-critical review of the author herself, from an interview regarding *A Constellation of Violins*: "The book is intended primarily for children that grew up in the 90s (those are already grown adults) but also to the current youth, the ones that grew up after the 2000s and who would be interested in feeling the atmosphere of turbulent and very interesting times that were hard but loaded with emotion, fight, hope" (Алексић 2018). It is almost as if the author herself purposefully underlined the principal inseparability of the literatures "for children" and "for adults".

Šuman] (Rad, Belgrade, 1998). We find the ten-year-old narrator in the following chronotope: the year is 1994 and she lives on Vuk Karadžić Street in Belgrade, in a completely *generic* four-story building. We figure out the year by doing the math: the girl is, as she says, in the fourth grade, so she is about ten years old, and she and her peer Đole were born in 1984, which is, according to her judgment "a complete mistake", or a clear anachronism of fate. They belong to a better, more exciting and joyful time.

In the novel *My Name is Jelena Šuman*, we find everything about the potential traumatization by the events and symbolism of the 1990s in distant, even humorously expressed hints, hunches and half-indications. In 1994, Serbia is under sanctions and war is raging on its borders, in Bosnia and Croatia. In spite of that, the world that the ten-year-old girl presents is relatively unshaken and stable, at least on the macro, social level. The big, serious trauma—the trauma of growing up, death and the way of speaking (and silence) about it—is represented by the death of the shared pet of three introduced children: Jelena, Đole and the youngest Alja, but that detail, usually narratively and aesthetically very successfully conducted,[9] is not in our focus of analysis in this thematic context of collective trauma.

So, in that microcosmos, made up of one street, one four-story building within it, "regular stairs" and the area outside of the building, under *regular stars*, Jelena Šuman who "does not know how to think" presents her average day to the reader. The girl narrator speaks of the

[9] It is interesting that the small, six-year-old Alja, who was lied to that their pet did not die but was taken to a "show in Germany" tries to realize, fixate and solve trauma by talking about it, looking for details and explanations: "She wanted what we keep being quiet about to be talked about for once, as if she had her doubts about it already" (Алексић 1996: 68). The two older children try to protect her with a made-up story and the constant effort to not speak of the horrible event. Alja finally begins to grow up, as judged by her friends, when she realizes the most terrifying things are unspeakable, when she leaves the topic of the poor dog in front of the globe that spins "like a lit-up Ferris wheel before her unclear sadness" (1996-44). When the younger girl finally believes the made-up story, stops asking around and continues to laugh and mess around with the two older ones, Jelena concludes: "Finally! Finally, I think. She's grown up and she won't even need a teddy bear anymore! She really grew up!" (1996: 69). This motive, of signs of maturity and adulthood through the decision to stay quiet or make peace with the quiet, is a motive Vesna Aleksić comes back to in her other novels.

aforementioned, very tamely, and only gives glimpses of collective traumatization, in a social context, in the realm of poverty and helplessness which belong to the aspects of the so-called *developmental traumas*. Those, depending on the person, can leave bigger or smaller consequences on an individual. She notes that, for example, the trips she and her best friend Đole desire are only in the realm of fantasy—imaginary journeys,[10] thanks to a globe one of the children has; those are trips akin to Bastian's in *The NeverEnding Story*, across the fields of shared imagination. "Ah, seriously, that trip thing really annoys me sometimes", says Jelena once. "Everyone travels somewhere and everyone went somewhere, except for Đole and me (…) Only the two of us didn't move an inch" (Алексић 1996: 47). "I am interested in the WORLD", adds her friend Đole mischievously. "Any self-respecting person has at least been to Hungary… even Mrs. Žana, the smuggler… And we—nowhere!" (Ibid.).[11]

Other than the topic of social stratification based on economic status,[12] with such presence in children's literature (already occurring occasionally in Dickens, for example, and then in the unparalleled *The Little Match Girl* by Andersen), an echo of current events from this region in the 1990s emerges here: in addition to being poor, Serbia is also closed off, isolated, and being a smuggler is a common profession in it. Trips are, therefore, impossible not just because of destitution, inflation or, at the end of the day, the modest economic state of Jelena's parents considering

[10] A credible evidence of this is the author's auto-poetic afterword in the novel, which can partly be viewed as the final chapter of the whole book, firstly, because she only has distant connections to her inner world, and secondly, as it is obvious that it is metacritically structured: "Today, after many summers and many real trips, seen cities, rivers and seas, after many vacations, still, I think that those trips in the attic were more beautiful, were real, and that the world from the well-used atlases was somehow ours" (1966: 77). It is more than clear that it ontically favors the imaginative, children's world over the world of adulthood and facticity: the former is *true*, while the latter is simply—*real*.

[11] It is as if she tries to convince herself and mask what is hard to accept as the factual state of things for a child's brain—the difficulty of poverty and its power of limitation—Jelena Šuman defiantly says: "Sometimes a person travels better in their own bed or around their own room!" (Алексић 1998: 49).

[12] "Do you know how much laundry detergent costs, huh?! You don't, do you?", yells grandma Gina in a section of the novel: laundry detergent in the 1990s was something precious, not just because of how expensive it was, but also because it was in short supply at the time.

their professions (both are schoolteachers), but because it is hard to leave the country in any way; visas and border crossings are a hard and torturous undertaking.

In this novel, the cores of the narrative are not formed around those signs of trauma, given only from afar, experiences focalized through them are not crucial for narration nor formative for its protagonists. The three children who are the main characters almost live in their own, resistant bubble and, despite the temptations of the traumatic, in this short novel, the world does not change in essence, let alone disintegrate. One of the reasons for that is definitely that its heroes are younger than in the novel we will cover later in this paper. The second reason is that its chronotope is still, in the most narrow and strict sense, outside of the events of the war, which is not the case in *A Constellation of Violins*.

"Something big was not right". How children recognize fear, hatred and suffering—during war

Over the last decade, writes Helen Berman at the very beginning of the 2000s, there has been a drastic increase in the number of children whose lives have been changed, or even destroyed by war, oppression, terror, exile and other consequences of collective conflicts.

> When the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was first established during the 1950s to provide international protection to refugees following World War II, it was estimated that there were 1.5 million refugees and displaced persons. Today there are approximately 14 million, about three-fourths of whom are women and children. Although the experiences of refugee children and adolescents vary considerably, many have witnessed or experienced the death or murder of loved ones. Upon resettlement, they face numerous challenges. Research with this population is a relatively new area of investigation, but there is evidence that many of these young people experience long-term physical and emotional health problems. (Berman 2001: 243).

In this tragic score of world conflicts at the end of the 20th century, a large number is taken up by the names of people, including children, from our region, ex-Yugoslavia. Long-term physical and emotional issues in the biggest number of cases are tied to the most immediate war trauma.

In the novel *A Constellation of Violins*, Vesna Aleksić covered precisely those themes, which are perhaps the heaviest for a successful literary transposition in children's literature. Thereby, she joined the club of children's authors who took the brave step of attempting to speak of the unspeakable related to our most recent history, which does not happen very often in our recently published children's literature, as opposed to that which emerged after World War II, when the war was constantly used as a topic. The lack of that type of volume of production with war themes and dynamics perhaps signals unresolved social, ethical and generally historical dilemmas which, apparently, the society has not appropriately dealt with to this day.

The novel traces a girl, Tijana, growing up in an unnamed small town by the Morava river, on the eve, and then through the full extent, of the civil strife and wars which would lead to the final collapse of the old country and the idealistic idea of brotherhood and unity of all its peoples. At first, the girl has a carefree, almost idyllic childhood, though somewhat overshadowed by three older boys whom she spends time with, one of them being her brother. She is very talented for music, plays the violin and around her ninth birthday gets admitted into a music school and leaves to live in a boarding school out of town (this could be added to the realm of the so called microtrauma, the trauma of growing up). In that boarding school, she meets her long-term roommate and best friend Ana, who appears as a contrast and complement to her own personality and identity. The two girls form a dynamic, talented, promising duo, *sazvežđe violina—a constellation of violins*, as aptly named by Ana from Niš. By the introspective first-person point of view, Tijana is also revealed as an introvert, a sensitive child, which is evident from her strong physiological reactions to stress (she throws up in any emotionally heightened situation). On a wider social and geographical mise-en-scène (which the reader finds out about through unavoidable news on the television and *Dnevnik*, the main Serbian news show, which can be heard throughout the novel like a leitmotif), the intensifying of the action is set at the very end of the 1980s, at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As usual,

children both do and do not understand things at the same time or, more precisely, they intuitively, i.e., not so much cognitively but emotionally, reflect the moods and impressions of the adults around them.

> And then it happened again to me, what I noticed with the adults, especially grandpa Drakče and grandpa Aćim. I was in the middle of a story I was not familiar with, which they were handling and talking about amongst each other, stingy with their words and sharing special looks, building upon it with an unspoken understanding and living it, leaving me aside like a child that needs to be protected from it. (Алексић 2018: 68)

It only took a year or two from that famous, optimistic moment at the end of the 1980s in Berlin for new conflicts to arise in the Balkans. Tijana enters her prepubescence and then puberty right at the time of the wars of the 1990s, of which she indirectly learns and then reports on ("everything grows and overgrows, the wheat, fruit, clovers… damn it, there will be a war", says worriedly the narrator's mother, and elsewhere, at the peak of the conflicts, her friend Đole yells: "In Sarajevo right now there isn't even a window, what kind of damn tail"!).[13]

From the realm of family, neighborhood and trauma (the early death of the mother of a boy, Mihajlo, who is the narrator's first love, the illness of a beloved animal, the heart attack of grandpa Drakče, etc.), traumatization transitions to a national and global scale. Scarcity, isolation, even more uncertain news, the frustration about the (in)ability to fulfill dreams (the girls are constantly waiting for their visas to go to any musical competition or parade outside of the country), the separation of families (Mihajlo's father is with his second wife in Berlin) lead to a dark crescendo of the climax of bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, in 1999, when the two main protagonists are about 17 or 18 years old. The horror from the movies, from the news, dark characters from novels and

[13] In this novel the places which present dialogue and indirect hints are, in our judgment, far more successful than those where the true reality of war is directly referred to, such as this paragraph: "In those days, the Balkan peninsula just started peeking behind the dark curtain of news; on the world's stage, it became a continuous, unchangeably bad story." (Алексић 2018: 76)

beloved comic books[14] overflow into the present, and the privileged European countries (Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Hungary, Austria, etc.)[15] from which the things they love originate from—classical and modern music, literature and comics—become the enemy. The girls, of course, do not internalize it in this way, they still get excited about each of their hard earned trips, but they cannot turn a blind eye to the *bloody alteration of the geographical maps* and *the story of a world that is currently boiling like a stinky broth in a cauldron*.

The crescendo of pointless destruction in the narrator's life and in the novel itself was represented by a special, detached demise, a death above deaths. All large sufferings, in the end, consist of a sequence of names whose loss hurts some people more than anything else, as is the case in this exceptional, sad novel, which culminates in Ana's death in the bombing in 1999.

Although those lines are undoubtedly the most upsetting and hardest to read (even for adult readers!), they represent not just the best part of this novel and the entire work of Vesna Aleksić, but arguably Serbian literature as a whole in as much as the topic of those conflicts is concerned. At first glance, the narrator's retelling of the event is slightly concise and dry, entwined with the intricate details of a regular daily routine and

[14] "Vesna Aleksić paints the dissolution of Yugoslavia through the fact that 'new issues of Zagor did not drop anymore. Stripoteka is done for…' (Алексић 2018: 99). So, the fate of Stripoteka—whose comics generations have grown up on—becomes the fate of a country which, in slang terms, 'is done for'. It is exactly through that symbolism—the loss of the bastion of comics through which we, as kids, built our beliefs in the power of good, and the need to find a new idol—that the fate of a nation was shown in a grotesque way." (Игњатов 2020: 101)

[15] An interesting twist in the main character's consciousness happens around the middle of the novel, it is onomastic-narrative in nature and illustrates the imposed auto-chauvinistic relationship of two very young girls towards their own ancestry: "'We must think of the future', said Ana, throwing back her shiny black hair. 'Look at this, the famous violin maestra Ana D. Teodosijević. How does that sound to you?' 'Well, not very global… the Teodosijević part', I said and laughed. Ana rolled her eyes, as if she was sulking, and then she burst into laughter. 'Really, puh-lease, how will the world twist their tongue with the last name Teodosijević? And how does a person become famous with some random great-great-grandpa Teodosije?' 'So, what can you do when you are just Ana from Niš', I said." (2018: 84)". Trauma, as unpretentiously shown in *A Constellation of Violins*, deeply affects the understanding of one's identity, both individual and of a group.

represents a short introduction into the bigger picture that the trauma leaves in her being and, at the point in time when she recounts, as an adult, young woman:

> Ana headed home carrying a small, white sports bag in her hand. Then she looked back one more time and waved at me. I heard her calling out to me: - I'll be there on Monday, Tićo!
>
> And then she disappeared behind the cluster of kiosks in front of the station entrance.
>
> We never met in reality again. (Алексић 2018:108)

At that moment, which is not quite the end of the novel as it is followed by a few pages and the final chapter, the reader is suddenly faced with the meaning of Tijana's opening sentences brought to life in the finale, in a full force of the eternal present and presence of trauma, a traumatic experience which gets carried for an entire lifetime. In the introduction, finding herself in Belgium in 2016, Tijana is in a train which was stopped for safety checks due to the threat of a terrorist attack. "'The goal of the people doing this is inciting pure fear—I say with a touch of eminence and darkness in my voice. The darkness which I'm only in a truce with'. […] That image disappears in a split second, which worsens the feeling in the pit of my stomach. I'm not letting it fester there. Anger is also fear, I know. I'm not letting fear in. Not letting fear in even for a second… because I know very well who arrives after it" (Алексић 2008: 7).

And so, finally, this is how the eternal recurrence of a traumatic experience is reflected, as something that cannot just pass for good, as something that can be activated at any given time as recent all over again. The girl is still unable to face her own memories, seeing as she never again set foot in the apartment she shared with her late friend; she cries during her own, very well visited and successful concerts, feeling a certain presence missing, like a rupture in her own being burned through by a blaze. On the last pages of the novel, we find the girl on a plane, sipping on wine that "finally melts the stony pain", while there is a slowly incoming "Grief. Grief that does not get old, nor becomes forgiving". The forever vigilant grief as an inseparable companion of a traumatized, (not) grown-up child.

Closing remarks

Analyzing *A Constellation of Violins*, Ivana Ignjatov notes:

> When it comes to contemporary children's literature, literary theorists agree that war raises many complex questions. Some of them include potential glorification of violence or displays of human cruelty through disturbing images, which, for a young reader, unprepared for all of it, can be traumatic. Authors who deal with themes of war in their works (provided that their works are not ideologically colored) often have similar goals—to demonstrate the futility of war and the need for alternative methods of resolving issues. (Игњатов 2020: 98)

However, on the other side, there is a principle, a relatively easily defensible judgment that there is no literature without ideology, considering pacifism itself is also an ideology. Therefore, renouncing on one's own attitudes and judgments, backing down on them even when they are centered around war, can be considered a particular ideological act. According to Voloshinov, there is no *pure* linguistic act which merely indicates itself through its content, as "the realm of ideology coincides with the realm of symbols" (Voloshinov 1986: 10). From this perspective, it follows that anything ever written is of an ideological character, as all writing either carries some value assumptions, at least in a hidden form, or otherwise it is created, i.e., read, in social and cultural molds that are in and of themselves inevitably permeated with value judgments, i.e., with ideology (Sarland 2013: 64).

That is precisely how the novels by Vesna Aleksić have been discussed: although bordering apolitical, pacifistically projected narratives, they are ultimately ideological (in our reading at least) in the widest sense, provided we remove the inherently negative notion which is nowadays associated with the term ideology. As aesthetically successful literary acts in the first place, they bring their own ideology of celebrating life, love, peace and tolerance in an unobtrusive, internal way, which is innate to true literature only.

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