

AMBIGUOUS POSITION TOWARDS THE SOCIALIST PAST IN FILIPOVSKA'S NOVEL *IDOL ON THE WALL*

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The form of socialism introduced in Yugoslavia after the Second World War under Josip Broz Tito is still being discussed from many contrasting viewpoints in the territory of former Yugoslavia. In the context of such discussions, Elena Filipovska published the novel *Идол на ѕидот* (*Idol on the Wall*, 2020). The story is set in modern-day Skopje, but in an alternative history in which Yugoslavia did not disintegrate. Instead, a third marshal leads the country, continuing and transforming the socialist rule into an increasingly dehumanized variant. This article explores how the novel constructs a dystopia, which both resembles life in the past, specifically in the 1970s and 1980s, and is based on familiar tropes in dystopian fiction: removal of children from their parents' care to be raised by the state, fear of being followed by the government intelligence service, and nationalization of private property. The novel has mainly been discussed as criticism of the socialist system. I argue, however, that the ideas expressed through the narrative are much more ambiguous, and that rather than being critical, the novel assumes a more complex position toward socialist legacy.

Keywords: dystopia, Yugoslavia, Eastern European bloc, Central European bloc.

АМБИВАЛЕНТЕН ОДНОС КОН СОЦИЈАЛИСТИЧКОТО МИНАТО ВО РОМАНОТ *ИДОЛ НА СИДОТ* ОД ЕЛЕНА ФИЛИПОВСКА

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Видот социјалистичко уредување, што се вовеле во Југославија по Втората светска војна, под раководство на Јосип Броз-Тито, сè уште се дискутира од голем број различни гледни точки на територијата на поранешна Југославија. Во контекст на таквите дискусии, беше објавен романот *Идол на сидот* (2020) од Елена Филиповска. Приказната се одвива во современо Скопје, низ алтернативна историја во која Југославија не се распаднала. Со земјата раководи трет маршал, по Тито, кој го продолжува, но и го трансформира социјалистичкото управување, во сè подехуманизирана варијанта. Оваа статија истражува како романот конструира дистопија, која потсетува на минатото, а истовремено е заснована врз познатите тропи на дистописката литература: отстранување на деца од родителска грижа за да бидат воспитувани од државата, страв од следење од страна на разузнавачките служби и национализација на приватниот имот. Романот навидум изразува критика кон социјалистичкиот систем. Но, мојата теза во оваа статија е дека идеите што се изразуваат преку наративната структура се многу поамбивалентни и дека романот не е само критички, туку дека зазема посложена позиција кон социјалистичкото минато.

Клучни зборови: дистопија, Југославија, Источноевропски Блок, Централноевропски Блок.

1 Introduction

The form of socialism introduced in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) after the Second World War under Josip Broz Tito, who ruled until his death in 1980, is still being discussed from many contrasting viewpoints in the territory of former Yugoslavia, which disintegrated a decade after Tito's death. Every year for the past three decades, 25 May, the birthday of Tito, has typically been an occasion for disputes in Macedonia, formerly one of the Yugoslav republics, about the role and meaning of Tito and socialism for the territory and beyond. The socialist past is sometimes presented idealistically as a time of greater economic equality, better safety, and less crime. There have also been numerous media articles that focus on its negative aspects, such as authoritarianism, imprisonment in labor camps for political and ideological reasons in the early years following the Second World War, and lack of freedom of speech. In-depth research of twentieth-century history of Yugoslavia is usually more balanced and analyzes the cult of personality raised around Tito, the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, the role of Yugoslavia in the Non-Aligned movement, as well as the various internal conflicts that led to changes throughout the almost four decades of his rule (Udovički and Ridgeway 2001, Benson 2001, Tepavac 2001, Dedijer 1975, Lilly 2001).

This is the context in which *Идол на сугоуи (Idol on the Wall)* by Elena Filipovska appeared in 2020. The novel was written as speculative fiction discussing a possible alternative reality, or an "extrapolated recreation of history" (Palmer 2003: 111). Taking Yugoslav socialism as point of departure, the novel demonstrates the process of gradual decline of a totalitarian dictatorship, and its replacement with an ostensibly more democratic, yet in many ways intolerant and destructive, system of governance. The story is set in modern-day Skopje, but in an alternative history in which Yugoslavia did not disintegrate. Instead, a third marshal (the second after Tito) leads the country, continuing and transforming the socialist rule into an increasingly dehumanized variant.

The main starting thesis of the article is that, despite positioning itself critically towards the socialist past, the novel actually reveals ambiguity in the functioning of the socialist system. Some of the research questions that aim to prove the thesis are: Do the contradictions present in the novel suggest an ambiguous rather than solely critical interpretation of the socialist system? Is the fall of the system a result of striving for a more just society or other less altruistic reasons? How much and in what ways does the dystopian genre contribute to better understanding of socialist ideas? Does the novel explore the past, or does it metaphorically refer to the present political developments?

In the article, I draw on historical accounts of postwar Yugoslavia, and the role of Tito and the one-party system in it. I also refer to studies of dystopian fiction in general and in particular Erika Gottlieb's study of dystopias from the West and from Eastern and Central Europe in order to put *Idol on the Wall* in the context of the genre. I then discuss the specific characteristics of the novel that foreground the ambiguities of the ideological positioning of the narrative. The article explores how the novel constructs a dystopia, which both resembles life in the past, specifically in the 1970s and 1980s, and is based on familiar tropes in dystopian fiction: removal of children from their parents' care to be raised by the state, fear of being followed by the government intelligence service, and nationalization of private property. I argue that a careful examination of the events that take place at the end of the novel displays that the seemingly more democratic system which replaces the socialist one is equally dehumanizing. That system is characterized by nightmarish, speedy executions, and the elite conspiring against its own people. They indicate

the novel's position towards the contemporary post-socialist developments on the territory of former Yugoslavia, especially the rise of nationalism. While the novel criticizes certain socialist aspects, such as strict government control and surveillance or the spread of propaganda, I argue that it also presents certain tendencies, such as promoting equality or embracing national differences, in a more positive light.

2 Contextualizing the novel in relation to Yugoslav socialism

Following World War II, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was firmly established in the six republics that formed Yugoslavia. After Tito's break with Stalin in 1948 thousands of party members were expelled or imprisoned on the notorious Goli Otok (barren island) on charges of allegedly supporting Moscow. "Tito won his battle against Stalin, but it took a Stalinist purge to do it, and the struggle left its repressive mark on Yugoslav society for decades" (Benson 2001: 95). This repressive mark was then visible in other practices undertaken in the following years, such as confiscation of private property or the ambitious collectivization of agriculture, which in time collapsed, and led to the need to ration in order to provide "adequate distribution of food to the population" (Benson 2001: 95).

Another practice by which the state exercised control was by means of the media and various types of publications. A combination of approaches was used to achieve this, such as confiscating publishing agencies, introducing laws that allowed censorship in the media or denying entrance of foreign journals and newspapers. Carol S. Lilly points out that the government provided financial support to newspapers and publishing houses, thus making them dependent. "Therefore, it could and did prevent the publication of many 'undesirable' items through denial of paper or printing press, or by various bureaucratic and delaying actions" (Lilly 2001: 45). Additionally, the class of people called "The Grand-patriots" in the novel, whose decisions disturb the private lives of the protagonists belong to the so-called "new class" as discussed at length by Milovan Djilas (1957), whose position of leadership "carries privileges" (46). "The emergence of the new class has been concealed under socialist phraseology and, more important, under the new collective forms of property ownership" (Djilas 1957: 47).

The above-mentioned aspects are present in the novel: the confiscation of private property to distribute housing more equally among the people, collectivization, rationing of food, state propaganda emitted through the media, the use of repressive means in order to ensure obedience, and stigmatization of religion. Thus, in contrast to early Macedonian dystopian fiction, *Idol on the Wall* is more authentically based on local events existing in the recent past.

Idol on the Wall tells the story of the architect Zoran, who lives with his three-year-old daughter Mira in a flat he shares with another man – a recognizable practice in former Yugoslavia immediately after the Second World War, when two or three families were sometimes accommodated together in houses and apartments confiscated by the state. In the novel, all companies belong to the state, a one-party system is in place, and political freedom is limited. "Private enterprise and property were reduced to a minimum. Political freedom and civil rights were restricted, and the media placed under total state control" (Tepavac 2000: 67) Tepavac states, describing the history of Yugoslavia.

Every day, the characters living in the alternative 2020 eat dinner at the so-called "people's kitchens," with large communal halls – resembling those in Thomas More's *Utopia* – where meals are primarily composed of potatoes or beans, cooked in large quantities. These communal meals reflect the community spirit that the society is trying to nurture and the rationing of food.

Zoran checks his daughter's tongue to see if she misses out on nutrients and fears that soon after the meal, she may be hungry again (Филиповска 2020: 11). The scarcity of various food products was also a reality for a period in former Yugoslavia.

Many of the ambiguities regarding the role of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) are addressed in the novel. When CPY came to power, "it had a vision for a new and better society – a society in which all humans would live together in peace and prosperity and in which their mutual exploitation would be eliminated" (Lilly 2001: 1). However, the practical accomplishment of that vision proved almost impossible. This was due to various reasons, such as the economic hardship, internal power struggles, the hostilities of the Cold War, and the rise of nationalistic sentiments. The government implemented undemocratic measures, many of which can be recognized in *Idol on the Wall*. The novel reaffirms the fear of constantly being followed, lack of freedom of speech, unexplained disappearances of people, and punitive measures for expressing even indirect opposition to the system.

The disappearance of Zoran's daughter Mira is the focal point. Receiving a call one day, Zoran is asked to visit his daughter's school because Mira "did something in the kindergarten today" (Филиповска 2020: 24)¹. Such lack of specific information and the effect of terror produced by the institutions are faithfully portrayed as typical methods of keeping people in the grip of fear and foregrounding the power of the institutions, which are not to be questioned. When Zoran wants to pick up his daughter a few days later from kindergarten, she is missing, and he is told that "Miroslava has been taken by officials" (Филиповска 2020: 39). Zoran's desperate search for Mira begins, placed in the context of the novel's political system, in which he must pretend to act normally, secretly asking for help over several long months.

The fear of surveillance is conveyed efficiently throughout the novel in many scenes. These occurrences parallel the reality of life in former Yugoslavia when it was dangerous to comment critically on the government, both in public and private spaces. Going to work by bus or tram every day, Zoran thinks: "The bus drivers were spies. It was a public secret. Their windshields were ornamented with rearview mirrors. They knew how we breathed" (Филиповска 2020: 13). These thoughts express Zoran's feeling of panic whenever he hears someone's loud comment on the political situation. It also makes him always refrain himself from sharing his thoughts with colleagues he meets on the bus.

Amid this atmosphere of apprehension and deliberate withholding of information about his daughter's whereabouts, Zoran is even blackmailed by the so-called "Grand-patriots" to spy for them: "Below the top – she pointed to the top of Vodno – there is a facility! You'll go, you'll listen, you'll observe, and you'll find out what is happening there!" (Филиповска 2020: 77) says Mrs. B. Mrs. B belongs to the "Grand-patriots", a term used in Filipovska's novel to signify a social group similar to the *red bourgeoisie*, often mentioned in the context of and after the 1968 students demonstrations in Belgrade. It used to refer to the ruling class of bureaucrats in the socialist system, which, while promoting equality, has contributed to the rise and empowerment of a privileged layer of functionaries of the Communist Party. It turns out that the Grand-patriots act only because the state officials have also taken some of their children as part of the newly planned reform. In a self-proclaimed "equal" society, an imbalance of power exists between the Grand-patriots and the common people such as Zoran.

As is later revealed, the kidnapping of Mira is due to a state-led reform to provide equal opportunities for all children. At first, the reform seems outrageous to Zoran, yet he grows accustomed to it over time, after receiving assurances from Vesna, one of the teachers involved in the reform, that the children would receive the same quality of education to all regardless of

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of quotations from Macedonian into English are the author's own.

social, political, religious or family background, and the parents would be allowed to spend time with them every day.

The buses echo with radio programs of Tito's words. This is a reference to the cult of Tito in former Yugoslavia, where his photograph was placed in the classrooms of all schools in the country, and TV and radio programs often broadcast exaggerated stories from his childhood and his later life. Biographers researched his childhood thoroughly and "took great care to investigate and document not only what might be termed Tito's social background, but also some other, seemingly unimportant details, such as Tito's pets and favorite sweets" (Brkljačić 2005: 58). In *Idol on the Wall*, while going to work, the people in buses hear stories like this:

A bomb shrieked towards the place where Tito lay [. . .]. Then his dog Luks jumped as fast as a lightning on Tito's head, and covered it with his body. The bomb fell on the trunk, a few meters further [. . .] "It certainly hit me", Tito thought. "It's over..." He plunged into darkness. When the smoke lifted, several bodies lay on the ground. Among them was the corpse of the personal companion of comrade Tito. Luks was torn to pieces. And Tito, whose life was saved by the dog, was wounded in his arm (Филиповска 2020: 32–33).

The constant broadcasting of propaganda speeches in which the system and the leaders are presented in exaggeratingly positive light shows "the monopoly on the media, which plays a crucial role in shaping people's consciousness and unifying society" (Bezrukov and Bohovyk 2022: 58). Not only stories about Tito's life but also his public addresses shape people's consciousness, since the media frequently emit them in the buses, offices, and public spaces in the city.

What makes *Idol on the Wall* dystopian is the context of the novel – the fact that it imagines what would have happened if a political system that existed in the past had continued existing. As Gottlieb notes, the reference to dystopias as worlds different from the author's reality does not cover works describing a realistic society. However, the presence of "a dystopian impetus" associates them more closely to the dystopian genre. Gottlieb gives examples of works from Eastern and Central Europe which center not on the future but on "the injustice rampant in the writer's own society during periods of dictatorship and terror," while being "clearly expressive of the dystopian impulse" (Gottlieb 2021: 5).

As Elizabeta Bakovska writes in the afterword of Filipovska's novel, the dystopian mode is clear through "the oppressive social control" which is seemingly "sustained by a distant and mystified power center (Belgrade), but the real power over the city (and over the Republic) is in the hands of the local (domestic) Grand-patriots, comfortably accommodated on Vodno, in their luxurious, parallel universe" (Бакoвска 2022: 235). Bakovska, thus, refers to the essential lack of equality that is so deceptively promoted on the surface. The Grand-patriots, through analogy, refer to Djilas's explanation of the New Class in the context of socialist Yugoslavia, as their ownership and political power are disproportionately greater than that of the other citizens despite claims to equality. "The so-called socialist ownership is a disguise for the real ownership by the political bureaucracy" (Djilas 1957: 47). Likewise, the privileges of wealth of the Grand-patriots in the novel, in fact, represent their political power and ability to restructure the system by taking away children from their parents to be raised in state institutions.

3 The ambiguities of *Idol on the Wall*

While the dystopian setting of the novel in an imagined continual socialist system makes it seem openly critical towards the socialist past, there are elements that disturb such views, thus offering ambiguous perspective on the political issues at the center of the novel. The readers are given insight into the system and its wrongs through the perspective of the protagonist Zoran, and on occasions his contradicting views on various developments are offered.

An obvious ambiguity refers to Zoran's role in questioning the totalitarian regime. Unlike many dystopian protagonists, he does not come into a dramatic encounter with the power-hungry rulers and is not a person who confronts the regime. Although not content with how society is organized, he does not consciously think or act to make a difference. Zoran is at ease with the everyday routines that make life bearable until his daughter's disappearance, when "life turned into a nightmare" (Филиповска 2020: 35). Yet, Zoran's relation to Dardhan and to his colleagues indicates that the system is not as repressive as in other totalitarian regimes.

Life in former Yugoslavia was not the same throughout the years. Peter Liotta, tracing historical developments of the Yugoslav socialist system, indicates that the "zeitgeist that existed among 'Yugoslav' peoples in the last days of the nation was quite unlike the zeitgeist that appeared when the nation came into being" (Liotta 2002). Liotta refers to the fact that after the Second World War, when Yugoslavia was being constituted as socialist and federative state, collectivization was forced and punishments for disagreeing with communist leaders were much harsher than in later years when more liberal ideas gradually took hold. *Idol on the Wall* has noted the changes, referring primarily to how life may have developed after the 1980s. Liotta points out that "rock 'n' roll in Yugoslavia, unlike many Eastern European nations during the Cold War (most particularly Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria), experienced degrees of freedom that might have been unthinkable in the 'West'" (Liotta 2002), although he also notes that there were certain restrictions in terms of the lyrics, and no criticism of the political leaders was allowed. Svetozar Stojanović (1997) also traces the various stages of the birth, rise and fall of Titoism throughout the years, through the examples of self-management and self-government socialism, to the 1968 student movement that advocated ideas of freedom and democracy (44), to the gradual rise of nationalism. Likewise, some degrees of tolerance and freedom seem to exist in the novel, as the atmosphere is not as bleak as in many dystopian works either of the Western or of the Eastern and Central European type. For example, Rodna, a colleague of Zoran's, is portrayed as a woman who is brave enough to often express her discontent with how things are organized in the society. Her comments about the authorities are often cynical ("they'll never build anything", she says referring to the incompetence of her superiors) or even directly defiant.

In another prominent example, the criticism of the socialist system turns – at the end of the novel – into criticism towards those who bring it down violently, as seen from Zoran's perspective. The ambiguous view on the socialist past, on the fall of socialism and on the political implications on the contemporary Macedonian society, thus, is foregrounded by destabilizing the previously stable perspective of the protagonist. The violence that takes place at the end of the *Idol on the Wall* during the replacement of one regime with another resembles the developments that took place during the disintegration of Yugoslavia. The fall of the socialist system led to the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, often referred to as the deadliest armed conflicts in Europe after World War II. Numerous political analysts have emphasized that the conflicts rose from the rise of nationalism, which is often seen as a reaction to the previous totalitarian regime which was suppressing nationalistic sentiments. Bošković has referred to the "brutality

of destruction and ethnic killing” (Bošković 2013: 54) after the collapse of socialism. Doyle explains the situation in the aftermath of the massacre in Srebrenica, Bosnia (Doyle 2002: 217). These and numerous other authors emphasize that intolerance based on ethnic and national background both caused the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia and intensified it further in the years of the armed conflict.

Idol on the Wall similarly refers to the replacement of the socialist government by a group composed of the elite class as a time of violence, in which the representatives of a new ideology bring down the totalitarian regime. The rebels that overthrow the socialist government are not explicitly labeled as nationalists, but the novel underlines how a sudden coup d'état is likely to cause violence, hatred and punishments against the representatives of the previous regime. In this sense, the novel aims to reexamine the recent past of the last two decades in Macedonia and on the whole territory of former Yugoslavia. Through the representations of violence that takes place when one system is replaced with another, the novel indicates the permanent danger of such developments. In this context, *Idol on the Wall* can be said to belong to the so-called critical dystopias. Among the characteristics of critical dystopias that Baccolini and Moylan identify is that they are “more self-reflexively critical as they retrieve the progressive possibilities inherent in dystopian narrative” in comparison to earlier works of the dystopian genre that “work along a contested continuum between utopian and anti-utopian position” (Baccolini and Moylan 2003: 8). The novel refuses to take a stand that would idealize or demonize either by presenting both the socialist system and the system that replaces it as changeable, flawed and containing potential for improvement.

Idol on the Wall is a rare example of a dystopian novel containing an ambiguous antagonist, Vesna, who is at the same time Zoran's enemy, partly responsible for Mira's disappearance, but also his comforting friend, as well as a victim eventually executed for her political beliefs. Vesna is the woman who brings Mira back to Zoran but also tells him firmly that she advocates the reform of sending children to live together in communal homes and providing the same quality of education. She is not the powerful figure who controls the system, such as Mustafa Mond in *Brave New World*, O'Brian in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Captain Beatty in *Fahrenheit 451*, the Commander in *The Handmaid's Tale*, or Torquemada in Andrzejewski's *The Inquisitors*. Vesna does not decide the fate of the protagonist and does not reveal to him the structure and motivation of the established system, but offers insight only into one aspect of it – the attempted educational reform. She neither intends to capture nor torture the protagonist. Instead, she tries to justify her motivation and shows sincere belief and care for what she does. As members of the elite manage to consolidate and overthrow the socialist government at the end of the novel, Vesna is executed by them as a political enemy because of her ideological positions and involvement in the reform.

Such ending shows the complexity and the paradox of the dystopian world constructed in the novel and its closeness to the world of reality that we and the author live in. The overthrow of the socialist system in the “transition to democracy,” a concept that Boris Buden refers to and explains that even a special discipline was developed “with the task of studying this process: ‘transitology’” (Buden, 2010: 18–9), brings to light the paradox and “cynical idea” that rather than capitalism being seen as a phase, it is postcommunism which “is understood above all as a phase of transition – that is, as a process of transformation of an ‘actually socialist’ (*realsozialistisch*) society into a capitalist democratic one” (Buden, 2010: 18). In Filipovska's novel, despite the extended period of socialism lasting for thirty more years than it did in reality on the territory of former Yugoslavia, its eventual decline is inevitable – it ends precisely in transition, which its agents call transition to democracy, but which in practice in the world of the novel does not truly represent democracy.

“The established unequal social systems of disproportionate differences in power are sustained as long as they fulfill the needs of the privileged class”, and “society transforms at the moment that position of the privileged class is jeopardized” (Баковска 2022: 237). Bakovska says this referring to the fact that Mira is given back to Zoran and the other children are given back to their parents only when the Grand-patriots decide to rebel against the reform. This issue is highly significant since it transfers the focus from the inequalities indicative of the system presented by Zoran's narrative to the fact that simply destroying an unjust system does not necessarily entail a more just one.

4 Conclusion

Idol on the Wall is a dystopian novel concerned with coming to terms with the socialist past rather than a cautionary tale to warn of an undesirable future. It refers to features specific to Yugoslavia and addresses its socialist legacy which is still a source of public disputes. Presenting elements of the Yugoslav context throughout, the article showcases the traits of the novel that directly refer to the socialist past, such as scarcity of food, lack of political freedoms or fear of being followed.

Placing the novel in the context of the utopian genre, the analysis also employed Gottlieb's distinction between the Western and Eastern and Central European models of dystopian works. Filipovska's novel, as the text has shown, shares characteristics with both models and although more closely related to the Eastern European type, it is also distinctively different in certain important ways. Written after the fall of communism, *Idol on the Wall* introduces new approaches to dealing with the theme of constructing imaginary worlds of an alternative political order. It presents a dynamic world with the prospect of transforming from a totalitarian state to a democracy. On the other hand, the transformation may not necessarily be positive, even if one type of authoritarian system is defeated. The novel represents a critical moment when the regime attempts a risky educational reform that fails and disintegrates the system. However, arguably signs of impending disintegration appeared earlier, and the reform was actually an attempt to salvage the system.

Those who bring about the protagonist's nightmare are shown to be people who may have acted out of altruistic motives, as was the case in Yugoslavia after the Second World War. At the same time, opponents of totalitarianism are shown at the moment of acting violently under the pretext of advocating freedom. In this context, the novel deliberately makes it difficult to posit the author's perspective on the events described. It is not clear or easy to determine where the novel stands regarding the events described, as many of them complicate a moral judgment.

The perspective is unstable, and the meaning is deferred. The deferral as a technique used in the novel aims to prolong and put in question a possible moral estimation of the portrayed world. It appears that the constructed socialist world is inhuman in all its aspects, but gradually it turns out that it is a system that enables change since the authoritarian regime is not as strong as it was in other countries in the Eastern Bloc in the decades following the Second World War. For example, in the beginning of the novel, a terrifying abduction of children is presented, which is then followed by the justification that it is part of a reform for communal raising of children that offers best education and teaches respect regardless of national, social or religious background. Parents at first seem to be deprived of their rights to take care of their children, while later it is revealed that they can be with their children every day. Children are taught to embrace national differences, even while separated from their families. Religion, which is perceived as a condemned practice, is recognized as a source of comfort. Grand-patriots are

transformed from the privileged class to the agents of change who bring down the system to authoritarian rules who execute their political opponent. Vesna begins as the epitome of evil and ends a victim of those that rebel against the totalitarian system. Hence, in *Idol on the Wall*, a world is depicted and then destabilized.

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