

## HORRID GLIMPSES OF THE BOSNIAN WAR: THE PORTRAYAL OF ETHNIC CLEANSING IN SLAVENKA DRAKULIĆ'S S.: A NOVEL ABOUT THE BALKANS

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### Abstract

Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulić's *S.: A Novel about the Balkans* underscores the fact that the physical and psychological wounds that wars leave behind on human beings are often irredeemable. The action of the novel unfolds against the backdrop of the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Immediately after the declaration of Bosnia's independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Bosnian-Serbs, with the support of the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Military, contrived plans to create a "Greater Serbia". As a part of the plan, Bosnian Serb soldiers started ethnic cleansing. Bosnian Muslims and Croatian civilians were their major targets. Solely because of their ethnic difference, thousands of innocent Bosnian Muslims were killed during the war. Drakulić's novel portrays the harrowing experiences that Bosnian Muslims/Bosniaks have undergone during the war. The novel focuses on the experiences of the female victims of ethnic frenzy. The half-Serb, half-Muslim protagonist S. is a teacher in a rural Bosnian school. One day, when the war enters her apartment in the form of a young Serb soldier, the story of her losses starts. The war drives her through unforeseen paths of miseries and humiliations. She loses everything including the comforts of her apartment, her identity, dignity and even her right over her body. In a detention camp, along with some uneducated peasant non-Serb women, S. goes through starvation, gang rapes, tortures and humiliations of all kinds. The study is an attempt to analyse the horrifying and unspeakable female experiences that Slavenka Drakulić tries to convey through her fictionalized history of Bosnian ethnic warfare.

**Key words:** war, ethnic cleansing, Balkans, Bosnia, Bosniaks, Serb, rape, torture.

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**M**ulticultural/multiethnic Bosnia witnessed the outbreak of ethnic clashes soon after the declaration of its independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992. Muslims, Serbs and Croats were the major ethnic groups in Bosnia. After getting independence, the Serbs and the Croats made attempts to create a Greater Serbia and Greater Croatia respectively. Therefore, Bosnian war is an example of expansionist war. The desire to create a Greater Serbia/Croatia led to the practice of ethnic cleansing. In his text *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, Paul Mojzes says:

In its narrower sense ethnic cleansing . . . is an organized campaign to forcibly transfer a population out of an area. Ethnic cleansing may be planned and ordered by governing or military authorities, or it may be the result of spontaneous outbursts of fear and rage by neighbors of a different ethnic, religious, or cultural composition. Often it follows periods of relatively good intergroup relations that breakdown with the onset of crisis, usually during disintegrating or transitional periods. Ethnic cleansing consists of threats, individual killings, group violence, arrests, torture, rape, and arson—all leading to spontaneous flight, forced migration, or deportation. (6)

Slavenka Drakulić's *S: A Novel about the Balkans* portrays the atrocities perpetrated by the Serbs in Bosnia to ethnically cleanse a territory of non-Serbs to create a Greater Serbia. In the novel, Bosnian Muslims/Bosniaks are the major victims of Serbian ethnic frenzy.

The novel begins at a hospital in Stockholm, Sweden on 27th March 1993. The protagonist S. has given birth to a boy that afternoon. But the child is an unwanted one. Even though the child lies in his cot nearby her, she pays no attention. The narrator says:

This is supposed to be her son. . . . But to her this is simply a nameless little being who after nine months has come out of her body. Nothing connects them anymore. (1)

Then, slowly, the narrator unveils the reason behind the detachment. The child is the product of gang rapes. Earlier, she was in an internment camp and there she was repeatedly raped by several Serbian soldiers. When she recognized that she was pregnant, it was too late for an abortion. Therefore, S. decided to give the child up for adoption. Then, through a series of flashbacks, the narrator describes the events that turned S.'s life upside down. The events were started during the end of May 1992 at the village of B., Bosnia.

Until a group of young armed Serb soldiers invade, S., the daughter of a Muslim father and Serb mother does not expect war in the Mountain village of Bosnia, where she works as a teacher. The soldiers search every house. According to them, they are searching for weapons. But they grab everything precious from the villagers and S. feels that they are ordinary robbers in the guise of soldiers. After ransacking every house in the village, they assemble Bosniaks in a gym and separate men from women and children. Due to extreme fear, no one resists. Then they lead men away from there and shoot them to death. The distant muted sound of gunfire inflicts extreme pain on women and children. The armed men return alone and they lead the rest of them on to the buses. Finally, they torch the village.

The soldiers take the women and children to a windowless warehouse meant for machines. There is no toilet in the warehouse. Therefore, the women are forced to defecate in an open space. S. perceives that the aim of the captivators is to humiliate them:

Now the guards herd them into the field behind the fence. At the entrance to the camp the guards lets through a group of some twenty women. There is no shelter in the field, no bush to hide behind and protect them from staring eyes. They simply have to crouch and defecate in a group, in the middle of the field, in front of the guards, in front of everyone. (33)

Until the detainees build a toilet, the women in the camp silently suffer this humiliation. Due to the substandard living conditions, Death reigns supreme in the camp.

From her fellows, S. comes to know that there is a men's camp nearby and they are subjected to savagely violent tortures. S. confirms the existence of the men's camp by enquiring

about it to D., their cook. D. used to cook in the men's camp. D. says that the Serb captors kill non-Serb male captives brutally and bury them at the edge of the woods and then level out the earth with bulldozers. In the following days S. hears more threatening stories about the tortures of men's camp:

Stories spread through the camp about the thousands of people killed in the men's camp. The women say they have heard that prisoners over there have their eyes gouged out, pieces of flesh sliced from their living bodies, their bones broken. (42)

All these stories evoke panic in the warehouse.

One day E., S.'s close friend in the camp says about a 'women's room'. It is a room in the administration building where the youngest and prettiest women are kept. Soldiers from all around come there at night to ill-treat the pretty women in the 'women's room'. The women in the 'women's room' have no right over their bodies. The soldiers use the bodies of the captives according to their whims. The stories about the 'women's room' erupts trauma in the camp. Guards observe the internees at day time and find out the cutest to take them at night to the 'women's room'. Those chosen women never come back to the warehouse and that increases the panic. Many of the internees have already suffered the atrocities of the Serb-soldiers. The soldiers have raped and even killed wives in front of husbands, daughters in front of parents, sisters in front of brothers. Many captives share their experiences with their fellows in the camp.

One day a soldier calls S. to the administrative building. She immediately guesses the reason and panic seizes her body and mind. Then, some soldiers gang rape her and subject her to all kinds of humiliation.

Then there is a boot on her chest. . . . Open your mouth! S. opens her mouth. There is a long stream of urine. Swallow, he orders, I'll teach you obedience. She tries to swallow. The urine is warm and salty and makes her want to vomit. She coughs and throws up at the same time. He slaps her. Now she swallows it as obediently as a child but he keeps on hitting her as if this gives him particular pleasure. (62)

After the gang rape, in the 'women's room' S. remains in a feverish state for several days. S. has never thought that a man's body could inflict such damage to a woman. S. feels that the 'women's room' is a storehouse where female bodies are stored for the use of men. There are nine girls in the room and every night one of them is forced to "entertain" the soldiers. Most of the time, the soldiers are drunk and when they are drunk, they can be more dangerous. They burn the breasts of women with cigarettes and shower abuses on them. Once the soldiers try to kill S. for a reflex protest from her side. She kicks one of the soldiers in his stomach because of extreme pain. That act is an automatic declaration of her right over her body. The soldiers take it offensive and try to kill S. One of the guards enters into the scene and saves her life.

A. is the youngest girl in the 'women's room'. She is barely thirteen. Soldiers have killed her mother in front of her house and she does not know about the plight of her father and brother. One day a soldier enters the 'women's room,' calls A. by her name and introduces himself a friend of her brother. He says that her brother is alive and takes her with him. When she returns to the room in the next evening, she is no longer the same girl. The narrator says: 'A.'s body is still alive, but A. is dead' (81). With a knife the soldiers have made several marks on her chest, forehead and back. A. dies after three days.

Of course, one of the most horrifying aspects of the Bosnian war was the unchecked abuse of thousands of innocent women. In her article entitled "The Rapes in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Alexandra Stiglmayer tries to figure out the various motives that may spark off an urge in soldiers to rape:

A rape is an aggressive and humiliating act, as even a soldier knows, or at least suspects. He rapes because he wants to engage in violence. He rapes because he wants to demonstrate his power. He rapes because he is the victor. He rapes because she is the enemy's woman, and he wants to humiliate and annihilate the enemy. He rapes because the woman is herself the enemy whom he wishes to humiliate and annihilate. He rapes because he despises women. He rapes to prove his virility. He rapes because the acquisition of the female body means a piece of territory conquered. He rapes to take out on someone else the humiliation he has suffered in the war. He rapes to work off his fears. He rapes because it's really only some "fun" with the guys. He rapes because war,

a man's business, has awakened his aggressiveness, and he directs it at those who play a subordinate role in the world of war. (84)

Thus, during war, rape is not just a manifestation of unbridled sexual desire.

One early morning, the captives in the 'women's room' wake up coughing and find themselves in heavy smoke. The room is full of smoke and a strange stench pervades the room. The smoke and the unfamiliar smell suffocate them all. Then, through their bathroom window, the women find out the source of the smoke. Thick black smoke is streaming out of a wheelie. Then, one of the women in the 'women's room,' H. comes back after "entertaining" the soldiers. She informs the women that the soldiers are burning the corpses of male detainees. The Serb soldiers consider non-Serb captives not human beings but human garbage. That's why they burn the corpses of the detainees in a garbage bin. The choking stench pervades the room for days after the event. Then, another tragic event happens. S.'s friend E. commits suicide because soldiers have raped her daughter and killed her. E.'s daughter was just a child. This event weakens S. considerably.

After more than five months, in November the Serb soldiers transport the detainees to a refugee camp in Zagreb, Croatia. The transit camp situated at the edge of the city is nothing more than a collection of shacks. But there are no guards and barbed wire fence. From the camp S. hears several more sad stories that illustrate how ethnic frenzy could destroy human beings. Being in a transit camp is terrible. Refugees there are not living but waiting for something.

During her stay at the transit camp in Zagreb, S. recognizes that she is pregnant. That revelation is quite unbearable for S.

Nothing has changed with her departure from the camp. Her body is still in their power, even more so now. Only now does S. understand that a woman's body never really belongs to the woman. It belongs to others—to the man, the children, the family. And in wartime to soldiers. Five months. . . . She has been betrayed. This is war, inside her, in her own womb. And they are winning. (143)

The doctor tells her that it is too late for an abortion. However, the child can be given up for adoption. The doctor adds that there are numerous women in the camps who share her situation. S. takes the advice and decides to give the child up for adoption.

At the camp in Zagreb, S. unexpectedly meets F., a neighbor from her apartment building in Sarajevo. She is limping as she still carries a tiny piece of shrapnel in her leg that doctors have failed to remove. From F., S. learns that her hometown Sarajevo does not look like a city anymore. It has turned into a cemetery. Finally, F. tells that S.'s parents are no more. S. loses her only hope and becomes sick. She remains in bed for days.

In December, as per S.'s request, Red Cross volunteers help her to move to Sweden. They inform her that she will be transported to the Flen refugee camp outside of Stockholm. This news depresses her because she is tired of camp life. But in the airport luck gives her a kind stroke. Two women receive the refugees in the airport. One of them is S.'s schoolmate G. Against the rules, G. takes S. to her own home and with her influence arranges an apartment in a suburb of Stockholm. The state gives enough money to furnish the apartment. Later, S. delivers a boy. Initially, she neglects the baby and sticks on to her decision to give the child up for adoption. However, the proximity of the child and his resemblance to her sister force S. to change her decision. The narrator says:

Only his mother could show him that the hate from which his life emerged can be transformed into love. One day she will tell him that he is her child, hers alone. (199)

A critical reflection on this seemingly happy ending will force the implied readers to doubt the future of this happiness. By accepting the child, S. has shouldered an enormous responsibility. When the child grows up, he will ask several questions about his identity, about his father and so on. Moreover, his presence and his questions will constantly remind S. of her horrible days in the 'women's room'. Thus, the ending of the novel is not that optimistic.

In her text *Ethnic Cleansing in the Balkans: Nationalism and the Destruction of Tradition*, Cathie Carmichael says:

Physical destruction of the Islamic communities of the Balkans is a process that has taken place over the last two hundred years or so as the Ottoman Empire began to fragment. During the period from 1821 to 1922 alone, Justin McCarthy estimates that

the ethnic cleansing of Ottoman Muslims led to the death of several million individuals and the expulsion of a similar number. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims were also killed, primarily on the grounds of ethnicity, during the Second World War and the Yugoslavian Wars of Dissolution. (21)

Thus, the Islamic communities of the Balkans have suffered persistent attacks due to their ethnicity. Most of the time, Western diplomats and media remained passive against this injustice. During the Bosnian war (1992-1995) the situation wasn't different. Western diplomats and even the UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali treated the Serb army's open invasion into Bosnia as an internal Bosnian affair. Slavenka Drakulić's *S: A Novel about the Balkans* wipes off all such misconceptions and explicitly portrays some of the horrid glimpses of the Bosnian war. The novel focuses on the horrifying and unspeakable experiences of the female victims of ethnic frenzy. During the war, thousands of innocent Bosnian Muslim women have gone through starvation, mass rapes, tortures and humiliations of all kinds. By depicting the ravages of ethnic cleansing, the novel underscores the fact that the physical and psychological wounds that wars leave behind on human beings are often irredeemable.

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