

EXTRACTING STRENGTH FROM WAR: READING WAR AS A RELIGION IN “ZLATA’S DIARY”

Rini Reba Mathew
Research Scholar
Department of English
Pondicherry University

Abstract

The catastrophe of war has always been monstrous since the inception of mankind. It takes no time to transform the normal lives of innocent people into ashes. The 1991 Balkan war which led to the disintegration of former Yugoslavia made no difference from the other wars. Balkan literature thrives on the theme of war and hence it portrays the different nuances of war and its effects. A prominent war memoir of 1991 Balkan war, “Zlata’s Diary” (1993) by Zlata Filipovic presents the idea of how the war made a religion out of itself and united the people beyond their regional, ethnic, gender and religious differences. Zlata, who was a child during the wartime, narrates the incidents occurred each day through her diary in a very simple yet thought provoking language. The memoir pictures people despite of all their preferences coming together because of the ongoing war. This paper analyzes how war becomes a religion and source of strength for a nation and how it influences the culture.

Keywords: war, religion, memoir, Yugoslavia, Balkan literature

Higher Education &
Research Society

EXTRACTING STRENGTH FROM WAR: READING WAR AS A RELIGION IN “ZLATA’S DIARY”

- **Rini Reba Mathew**

The Balkan Peninsula is usually defined as the area of Southeast Europe surrounded by water on three sides. Yugoslavia was not a nation before the 1st World War as it was ruled by Byzantine and Ottoman empires from time to time. The prominent cultural heritage that the land possessed over the years influenced the area in many ways. The literature and other arts achieved a stature of dignity and supremacy. When Yugoslavia was formed after the 1st World War, it was the union of the Kingdoms of Serbs, Slovenes and Croats. But right during the 2nd World War, Yugoslavia was attacked by the axis powers and it led to the rising leadership of Josip Broz Tito. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) came to power but when Tito died, the constituent nations got into conflict with each other and it led to yet another series of wars during the 1990’s.

Balkan literature still remains unknown to most parts of the world including the European regions. Writers from the individual nations usually write in their native language which needs to be translated for the global audience in order to decipher the content, which makes it a tiresome task. Hence translation became the chance to get to know the rich tradition of Balkan literature. When writers like Orhan Pamuk and Julia Kristeva started writing in French language, their works became famous and got an international acceptance. This motivated the rest of the clan to follow their dreams and thus the Balkan works started publishing in numerous world languages which increased their reception and critical appraisal.

Zlata Filipovic was an eleven year old girl who happened to keep her own diary during the tumultuous Bosnian war of 1991. She belongs to a middle class family who enjoyed being with their family and friends. Zlata enjoyed living in her hometown of Sarajevo as it gives her utmost happiness and belongingness. Zlata named her diary, ‘Mimmy’, to which she talks and describes every minute detail of her life. When war was really destroying the lives of innocent people in Sarajevo, the diary that Zlata was writing pave way for an escape for the family to Paris where she and her continued to live for yet another year. Zlata’s diary is considered as similar to

Anne Frank's diary, the only difference being Anne Frank didn't get a chance to escape her fate.

Zlata begins her diary describing the happy times of her childhood life in Sarajevo with her parents. Zlata was a studious and ambitious teenager who enjoyed her studies. At times she recounts her feeling dizziness and lethargy due to the heavy schedule she keeps at school, but even when she is tired of studying, she enjoyed it. She felt really great when she gets a deserving good grade. Zlata talks about how she enjoys going on vacation at Crnotina. She says,

It was wonderful in Crnotina. I like our house and the surrounding countryside more and more every time we go. I don't notice and don't feel the beauty of nature when I am in town the way I do when I'm in Crnotina. In Crnotina it smells good, it caresses me, it calls me into its embrace. I had a really nice rest enjoying and feeling the beauty of nature. (5).

The life was perfect for her. She really loved her town and the people. She was not just any other girl who lives in the world of magic and dreams. Zlata was aware of what was happening in the world. She had knowledge about many things around her. She enjoyed the little things and never forgot to point it out in her dearest diary. At the same time, she was just another girl who enjoys food, fashion, friends and movies. She was the little angel of the house, the darling of daddy, the pet of her teachers.

I go twice a week for piano and solfeggio. I'm continuing my tennis lessons. (1) I feel great because I've just eaten a 'Four Seasons' pizza with ham, cheese, ketchup and mushrooms. It was yummy. Daddy bought it for me at Galija's. Maybe that's why I don't remember who too what place-I was too busy enjoying my pizza. (3)

Even when she hears the war that is going on in the nearby town called Dubrovnik, she wasn't sure about what is happening around her. She felt shocked hearing the lack of essential amenities like water, shelters and electricity in Dubrovnik. Zlata felt sad and helpless as she recalls how her mother describes Dubrovnik as the most beautiful town in the world. In between the war in Croatia and the unavoidable details shown in the television, Zlata spend her time wisely through her music lessons, recitals, and busy school schedule. Zlata's detailed descriptions about her birthday celebrations and her friendship with her dearest friends occupy most of the beginning part of the memoir while it is noted that even

when she writes about the usual days in Sarajevo, there seems to be a sense of fear present in her voice. The immanent presence of war in the life of Sarajevo was peeping out of Zlata's diary pages. At one point, Zlata realized that she cannot continue her diary without mentioning war. She writes,

I am not writing to you about me any more. I am writing to you about war, death, injuries, shells, sadness and sorrow. Almost all my friends have left. Even if they were here, who knows whether we'd be able to see each other. The phones aren't working, we couldn't talk to each other. (47)

Towards the middle of the diary, Zlata started to comment on every detail of the war that surrounds her life for quite a long time. She narrates how her mother's brother got wounded and ended up in a hospital. Also, she talks about the next day when her mother came home after visiting her hospitalized brother and yet another day when the Vaso Miskin Street was attacked by two shells at one time. She feels really upset about her grandparents who live a distance away from them and how they survive the wartime. She feels suffocated of living indoors and whipping the leftover food items. She realizes the times aren't so good for them to survive. Her only comfort was 'Mimmy'.

On Monday, 29th June 1992, Zlata's diary witnessed a powerful description about the childhood being vanished in the wartime. Zlata's poignant style of attack at the war and the powers behind it are quite impeccable. The language is simple, yet with the power of a nuclear bomb. She recounts the lost childhood and the gruesome memories of war that remains for children like her for the rest of their lives. She writes,

Dear Mimmy,

BOREDOM!! SHOOTING!! SHELLING!! PEOPLE BEING KILLED!! DESPAIR!! HUNGER!! MISERY!! FEAR!!

That's my life! The life of an innocent eleven year old schoolgirl!! A schoolgirl without a school, without the fun and excitement of school. A child without games, without friends, without the sun, without birds, without nature, without fruit, without chocolate or sweets, with just a powdered milk. In short, a child without childhood. A wartime child. I now realize that I am really living through a war. I am witnessing an

ugly, disgusting war. I and thousands of other children in this town that is being destroyed, that is crying, weeping, seeking help, but getting none. (60)

Zlata's diary was the window that took the entire world into the brutal scenes of Bosnian war during the 90's. The diary showed the world what exactly happened in the so-called beautiful, serene towns of Yugoslavia. Zlata, while giving a testimony to the world about the ill effects of war, also took time to convey the message of togetherness and optimism during war. The unexpected yet wonderfully narrated descriptions of birthday parties and get together parties grabs attention from the readers. Zlata recounts the few encounters and visits she did get during the wartime when she visited her grandparents and many other friends. Birthday parties are the most exciting and consoling part of Zlata's diary as she narrates more than ten celebrations of her friends' and family's birthdays over the two years. Zlata describes her 12th birthday which she celebrated during the war. It says,

Today is my birthday. My first wartime birthday. Twelve years old...the day started off with kisses and congratulations. ...the table was nicely laid with little rolls, fish and rice salad, cream cheese and of course, a birthday cake. Not how it's used to be, but there is a war going on. Luckily there was no shooting, so we could celebrate. It was nice, but something was missing. It's peace! (98-99)

Also, there are descriptions about the family and friends celebrating Christmas and New Year of 1993. Even when the people of Sarajevo got used to shellings and bombings, they find time to remember their special occasions and holidays. They tried to get together at one cellar or the other to make it something special even though moment of fear was always expected.

Bosnian war of 1991-95 was the most deadly and dirtiest of all the wars that took place in the Yugoslavia during the 90's. Zlata, even when she is 12 years old, wonders about the disparities and disputes among the different ethnic communities in her land and why they are fighting over the another's blood. She repeats her doubts over this 'trivial' matter which led to the most vicious experience she ever had in her life.

I keep wanting to explain these stupid politics to myself, because it seems to me that politics caused this war, making it our everyday reality. It looks to me as though these politics mean Serbs, Croats and Muslims. But they are all people. They are all the same. They all look like people, there's no difference. They all have arms, legs and

heads, they walk and talk, but now there's something that wants to make them different. (94) I've been thinking about politics again. No matter how stupid, ugly and unreasonable I think this division of people into Serbs, Croats and Muslims is, these stupid politics are making it happen.(133)

Even when everything was burning down into ashes, Zlata and her fellow people of Sarajevo were determined to keep their hope and strength together. They made the wartime less painful for everyone who survived. They stood together regardless of all the ethnic, religious differences they were accused of and proved to the world that even war can make people to come together as one unit. War can be considered as a religion according to Zlata's diary. Because she started writing diary to jot down her beautiful years ahead, instead she was destined to record the history of her people during the war.

Works Cited:

Filipovic, Zlata. *Zlata's Diary*. London: Puffin Books, 1994. Print.

Glenny, Misha. *The Fall of Yugoslavia*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. 1992. Print.

------. *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804-201*. London: Penguin Books Ltd. 2012. Print.

Higher Education &
Research Society