CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Ćamil Sijarić

Bihorians

Bihorci

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Sandžak is a geographical region located at the crossroads of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro, characterized by ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity that has also left its mark on literature. One of the literary representatives of Sandžak is certainly Ćamil Sijarić, a writer who, with his first novel *The People of Bihor* (*Bihorci*), introduced this very region into literature through a political novel centered on the inhabitants of the geographical and historical region of Bihor.

The novel, published in Sarajevo in 1956, is set in the interwar period in the Bihor village of Rašlje. One of its inhabitants, Halimač, decides to bring a hodža, an Islamic religious teacher, to the village out of fear that the villagers will completely abandon their faith and, in his words, become wild. After many had refused, Hadžija eventually agrees to come to Rašlje and serve as its hodža, taking care of the spirituality of the inhabitants of the small Bihor village. In Islam, the *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca undertaken to visit the Kaaba, is one of the pillars of the faith and signifies a devoted and committed believer. In the literary text, Hadžija is also a figure marked by travel and movement, which is why he is assigned the role of the hero, someone who, according to Lotman, crosses boundaries and enters the center of a community that resists accepting an external order. The novel will therefore focus on Hadžija's attempts to turn the Bihor people into pious peasants who conform to Islamic canon and tradition. At the same time, Hadžija himself becomes a victim of a process moving in the opposite direction. The Bihor people, intentionally or otherwise, attempt to make him resemble themselves, seriously calling into question his own beliefs and ways of thinking.

The novel thus becomes a story about the conflict between nature and culture: human nature, which, in an isolated and displaced environment, resists every order imposed from outside, and culture, which seeks to draw nature into its embrace and provide it with a standardized framework through which it can exist within the context of a broader community such as a city or a state.

Hadžija himself is also a man who is not averse to looking after his own interests, and he is constantly wondering how he can obtain as much money as possible from the villagers of Rašlje to finance another pilgrimage to Mecca. For this reason, he begins selling prayers that are supposed to ensure the health of the villagers and their livestock when anthrax breaks out in the village. This provokes the disapproval of one of the inhabitants, Kaplar, who is the most skilled of all the villagers in using the law, and who therefore becomes a persistent threat to Hadžija. The people of Rašlje also attempt to give Hadžija a place within their own social order. They arrange his marriage to Hatka, a simple-minded young woman who becomes pregnant by one of the young men of Rašlje, and they give him the responsibility of running the village shop.

Soon, *komite*, rebels against the state, begin appearing in the village. Their presence brings trouble

to Bihor because, following their arrival, the state authorities begin to monitor and search the area more intensively. Hadžija enters into conflict with the *komite*, who burn down his shop. Once he has nothing left to tie him to Rašlje, he sets out on the pilgrimage to Mecca, promising the villagers that he will return, even though his return seems highly unlikely to everyone.

Turkey also occupies a central role in the novel, appearing as an ideological center of the Bihor people's world. For the inhabitants, it is not so much a religious point of reference toward which they turn as a space of personal advancement and material security. This agenda is embodied in the character of Zemko, who, at the end of the novel, leaves together with Hadžija for Istanbul. He is a naive and good-natured man from Rašlje who wants to succeed in life and is constantly afraid of failure and of the misfortunes that might befall him along the way. In this way, the novel also incorporates the colonial dynamic of a center toward which the periphery aspires, while simultaneously recognizing that center as a place of insecurity, of cyclical birth and death, creation and decay—processes that can befall anyone who approaches it.

Bihor thus becomes a space that is neither outside nor inside the law, ideology, religion, and other systems imposed upon it. Together with its Bihor inhabitants, it emerges as a realm of what is genuinely human, almost carnal, reduced to basic needs and necessities.

LANGUAGE: Serbo-Croatian / Srpskohrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: