Goran Vojnović

The Fig Tree

Figa

Presented by: Krystyna Pieniążek-Marković

Throughout his work, Goran Vojnović consistently addresses questions of post-Yugoslav identity, migration, and the social consequences of Yugoslavia's dissolution. His 2015 novel *Figa* (*The Fig Tree*) is widely regarded as less overtly political than his earlier novels *Čefurji raus* (*Southern Scum Go Home!*) and *Jugoslavija, moja dežela* (*Yugoslavia, My Fatherland*), as political concerns give way to a focus on the history of a single family. It is sometimes described as a family saga. The family's multinational makeup, shaped directly by historical and political forces, shows how profoundly politics can shape the lives of individuals and families.

The characters' stories span the period from the 1930s to the early 21st century and unfold across the former Yugoslavia: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Serbia. Jadran Dizdar, the narrator, reconstructs his family's history from what has been said and, to a considerable extent, from what has been left unsaid or can only be inferred. He is the son of Vesna Benedejčič, who is of Serbian, Jewish, and Slovenian ancestry, and Safet Dizdar, a Bosniak born in Kragujevac, Serbia, and raised in Split; the nephew of Maja Benedejčič, likewise of Serbian, Jewish, and Slovenian ancestry, and Dane, a Slovenian; the grandson of Aleksandar Đorđević, who is of mixed Jewish and Ukrainian ancestry, and Jana Benedejčić, a Slovenian; and the great-grandson of Ester Aljehin/Branislava Đorđević, a Jewish woman, and Aleksandar, who was probably Ukrainian. He is also the husband of Anja Černjak, a Slovenian, and the father of Marko.

Through subtle references, Vojnović deconstructs Yugoslav myths. He begins with the myth of "Brotherhood and Unity," the foundational slogan of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), formulated during the People's Liberation Struggle (NOB) in response to the occupying forces' policy of "divide and rule." Shortly after the war, Aleksandar is sent (or, more accurately, exiled) to work in Buje, Istria, where he is received by Risto, a Serbian representative of the communist authorities. Risto expects understanding, perhaps even friendship, from a "compatriot" bearing the familiar, Serbian-sounding surname Đorđević. Yet Aleksandar, born in Novi Sad, bears this Serbian surname because, as early as in the late 1930s, following the policies directed against Jews, his mother, Ester Aljehin, saw marriage to a Serb named Đorđević and relocation to Belgrade as a means of escaping the Holocaust. There, she presented herself as the widow Branislava Đorđević and attended an Orthodox church to lend credibility to her Serbian identity. In 1942, Ester/Branislava fled to Ljubljana to escape the Germans, who occupied Belgrade and had established a concentration camp for Jews - and subsequently Roma - on the Belgrade fairgrounds. She feared the Italian occupying forces less (pre-war Yugoslavia had been partitioned among the Third Reich, Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria). By shifting the setting to Ljubljana, Vojnović introduces the theme of Slovenian suspicion towards outsiders, which recurs throughout his novels and, in *The Fig Tree*, also encompasses the significant issue of the so-called "erased."

Much as Ester/Branislava felt herself an outsider in Ljubljana during the Second World War, the political commissar Risto experienced a similar sense of estrangement in the Croatian Slovenian borderland, which is also inhabited by Italians: “Risto had only just taken up the post as Commissioner in northern Istria, but already he longed for home, already he felt conscious that his dear Yugoslavia was home to foreign folk, folk who did, it was true, speak an almost intelligible language, but who nevertheless remained unintelligible to him. […] Something told him that Aleksandar would immediately understand what was wrong with the people of Buje, and that Risto would be able to say things that would not otherwise be permitted within the bounds of brotherhood and unity […] but he was more scared of these people, these Istrians, than he had ever been scared of the Germans.” (pp. 13–14). Vojnović does not specify if the incomprehensible language is the Chakavian dialect of Croatian characteristic of Istria (at the time officially designated Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian) or Slovenian. This borderland aptly embodies one of the novel’s central themes: life “between” nations, languages, identities, and political orders. Slovenian, Croatian, Italian, and Yugoslav influences converge here. Aleksandar is assigned a house vacated by an Italian family.

The reference to the phenomenon known as the Istrian-Dalmatian exodus introduces another political dimension of *The Fig Tree*. After the Second World War, these territories came under the control of communist Yugoslavia, and the peace treaties awarded most of Istria to Yugoslavia. Consequently, between 200,000 and 300,000 Italians had left the region by the mid-1950s. The history of these post-war departures is part of a broader narrative of shifting borders, migration, and ambiguous identities. Not everyone left, however. In Croatian Istria, Italian has semi-official status in many municipalities, and locations central to the novel bear bilingual names: Buje/Buie and Momjan/Momiano. Aleksandar refuses to occupy the house formerly owned by Italians and, “as punishment,” is allotted land in Momjan, directly on the border with the then Republic of Slovenia, where he builds a home for himself and his family. His refusal constitutes a significant ethical as well as political gesture. Aleksandar’s transfer from Ljubljana to Buje is itself politically charged, although virtually nothing is known about its causes. In Yugoslavia, many events associated with the Second World War, post-war reckonings, and the totalitarian exercise of power were silenced or rendered taboo. The silences surrounding the characters’ lives are most often closely connected to the taboos established by the policies of Yugoslavia and, subsequently, its successor states, particularly Slovenia.

These silenced histories also encompass Aleksandar’s experiences. His arrival in Istria was probably a form of punitive exile imposed on the young forester, presented as a considerably milder means of disciplining an individual than that experienced by those sentenced to confinement on Goli Otok (“the Naked Island”), Tito’s “re-education” camp, described in the literature as harsher than Stalinist labour camps: “I believed that Momjan was better than Goli Otok” (p. 146). Aleksandar’s character serves as a metaphor for the individual living under a communist state who seeks ways to survive and preserve an inner freedom, an endeavour facilitated by joining the Party. His portrayal brings into view a memory, pushed to the margins, of the repressive dimension of Yugoslav socialism: “Being part of something simply wasn’t in his DNA. He loathed cooperation. He didn’t get it. He was never “we”. He was always just himself. On his own. Aleksandar Đorđević. He couldn’t even belong to his own name. Because it wasn’t his. And now, just imagine Yugoslavia in the early fifties, the anti-Soviet paranoia, those dogged, vindictive communists. And him. […] He was probably actually very lucky to not get sent to Goli Otok. […] he said many a thing which others wouldn’t have dared […]” (pp. 182-183). Aleksandar’s individualism conflicts with the logic of communist collectivism, while his residence in Momjan represents a form of internal exile. His inability to identify with his own surname foreshadows the subsequent crisis of belonging that

characterises later generations of the novel's protagonists.

Another form of exile was Aleksandar's year-long work assignment in Egypt in the 1980s, which he accepted under threat of disclosure of his father-in-law Benedejčič's alleged history of collaboration. Although Aleksandar doubted the veracity of the account presented by his superior, his desire to spare his family possible reprisals led him neither to seek the truth nor to disclose the reason for his departure: "The persecution was all too familiar to Aleksandar for him not to be afraid of it. If the architects of coincidence were on the prowl for past sinners, hunting for forgotten sins to resurrect, then he'd need to go further than Egypt and Cairo" (p. 193). Repression takes the form of subtle, indirect violence, operating through blackmail, entanglement, and control exercised through family secrets. The family's silenced past remains unspoken, while its consequences extend to the post-memory of subsequent generations.

Vojnović illustrates the oppressive nature of everyday life in Yugoslavia through an episode involving a trip to Italy. Travel to a capitalist country is intended as an act of "revenge" by a citizen against a socialist state marked by the abuse of privileges associated with official positions and the assertion of informal hierarchies - mechanisms embedded in Yugoslav socialism. Aleksandar's family is denied the opportunity to stay at the company holiday resort because the director has decided to spend his holiday there. The situation reveals the gap between the official ideal of equality and the reality of a social hierarchy in which senior officials claim resources meant for everyone. The episode thus reveals both the everyday humiliation of the individual by the bureaucratic system and, in microcosm, the disintegration of the Yugoslav myth of egalitarianism.

The political dimension of *The Fig Tree* encompasses a reckoning not only with the Yugoslav past but also with post-Yugoslav reality. In the wake of the war of the 1990s and the prevailing policy of nation-state formation, the question of "outsiders" in Slovenia took the form of excluding those who did not fit the definition of the new national community. On 26 February 1992, the administrative authorities removed from the register of permanent residents more than 25,000 people living in Slovenia who held, in addition to Yugoslav citizenship, citizenship of other republics of the former Yugoslavia (the so-called "erased"). Vojnović illustrates this episode (one of the most serious legal and human rights controversies in the history of independent Slovenia) through the fate of Safet Dizdar, who is forced to return to Bosnia. Following Slovenia's declaration of independence on 25 June 1991, citizens of other Yugoslav republics could apply for Slovenian citizenship. Some did not apply, missed the deadline, were unaware of the requirement, or had their applications rejected. Some became in fact stateless, others were treated as undocumented immigrants, and some were deported. Safet suffers this fate as early as on 4 March 1992, just one day after Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence. By then, armed clashes had begun in parts of Bosnia, while the different national groups were organizing their own military forces. The protagonist is thus removed from a country with no hostilities to a country where war is just beginning. The fractured family never reunites. Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia, its members become residents of three independent states: Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Safet lives in his grandmother's house in Otoka; Croatia, where Aleksandar and Jana live in Momjan; and Slovenia, where the remaining family members reside.

In *The Fig Tree*, Vojnović repeatedly returns to Slovenian rejection of, suspicion towards, and a sense of superiority over other nationalities of the former Yugoslavia, particularly Bosniaks, most often through the relationship between Safet and Dane and through Jadran's dilemmas of identity. This theme acquires resonance, highlighting above all a mutual lack of understanding, in the "liminal" situation in which Jadran crosses the border into Bosnia and Herzegovina on his way to

visit his father: “I, the dimwit, didn’t get it; the dimwit who wasn’t from round here.” (p. 135. This is an excerpt from the published English translation. However, the Slovenian original says: “I did not understand, dimwit that I was, having come from elsewhere, from a place where their words are perhaps still known, even the strange Turkish ones, but where people never understood, and still do not understand, what those people are trying to say with them.”)

The family history narrated in *The Fig Tree* thus becomes a means of exploring the consequences of the political transformations and violence of the 20th century. The novel offers a study of the conflicts of identification characteristic of migrant and minority communities. Its characters inhabit a space marked by tensions between different ethnic, linguistic, and cultural affiliations. This is particularly evident among the male characters, who experience a sense of estrangement both from the majority society and from their own heritage. Identity emerges as a political construct shaped by social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. Vojnović examines the impact of large-scale political processes on the everyday lives of ordinary people, focusing on the consequences of life under a socialist state and of the formation of new national communities. The histories of states are inscribed in family histories, while politics leaves its imprint on the most intimate relationships. *The Fig Tree* remains one of the most penetrating literary reflections on the post-Yugoslav experience of the early 21st century.

LANGUAGE: Slovenian/Slovenščina

CENSORSHIP STATUS: