CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Olja Knežević

Strada fortunata

Presented by: Andrea Milanko

A Montenegrin writer, Olja Knežević, was awarded the Tportal Best Novel of the Year Award in Croatia for her novel *Strada fortunata* (*A Lucky Road*), a blend of road novel and autofiction. It is a story told in first-person by Megi. At the beginning of the novel, she is earning her living by translating for a foreign humanitarian agency for refugees. Her everyday life gets turned upside down when she falls in love with and marries a controversial journalist, whose dodgy life and threats from the criminal underground force them to emigrate. This is going to be her life's trademark: living in a gilded cage, but taking it with her from one homeland to a new one. She becomes increasingly disillusioned both with her husband and Western societies who look down on her. Caught between supporting her children and her personal existential doubts about her future and writing endeavours, she starts attending a school for creative writing in London, gets the attention of the publishing industry and makes first steps in emancipating herself from entanglement with her estranged husband. She divorces him and moves to Zagreb with her children, only to experience an earthquake and to have to start all over again in terms of her writing career. Of note, the novel's language is Croatian, while her former novels were written in Montenegrin, receiving wide acclaim.

The novel depicts a Balkan woman from her 20s to her 40s, which roughly corresponds to the painful transition from a socialist to a capitalist economic and political system in the states that were founded after Yugoslavia's collapse. The peculiarity of the novel is captured in the fact that Megi is not marginalised in her home country, since they are quite well off, but in the eyes of the British, they are non-immigrant citizens. Her new identity is shaped more by her immigrant experience rather than her ethnic background, which is quite unusual since ethnicity was extremely divisive at the time. Knežević's hero is reminiscent of her personal life. However, this is not a memoir but a sophisticated autofiction, which is highly stylised and polyphonic in that it is both observant and parodied. Since her writing mimics a conversational tone, it could easily and erroneously be mistaken for confessional and authentic.

The political aspect of the novel is this particular style of writing and its theme blended together. As opposed to autofictional narratives which rely on personal and confessional, Knežević's hero belongs to the picaresque tradition, opening her novel with the narrator's current life circumstances and going far back to the beginning. In a manner of a true picaro, her masters, the state of Montenegro, patriarchy and her husband, are to be freed from with wit, cunning and financial independence. What makes Knežević's novel refreshing and politically engaging is her ability to depict details, subtle changes in gestures and tone of voice, which paint a picture of a larger social transition from tribal, ethnic and traditional Montenegrin society to a more contemporary, diverse, technologically advanced and politically discordant society in which women's voices are louder and more outspoken.

LANGUAGE: Croatian / Hrvatski

CENSORSHIP STATUS: