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“THERE WAS NO BACKGROUND MUSIC”: HOME AND ADJUSTMENT IN NADJA TESICH’S *TO DIE IN CHICAGO*

Written in the language of the host country as a way of self-translating and conveying multiple connections within transnational contexts of migration and diaspora, contemporary narratives by women authors from the former Yugoslavia, who have resided and published their works in the United States, have received insufficient critical and scholarly attention. In order to contribute to a new and developing field of research on migrant (autobiographical) literature that voices East European and (post-)Yugoslav women in diaspora, this paper offers a contextual reading of *To Die in Chicago*, a literary memoir by Nadja Tesich, a Serbian-American author whose works abound in references to the narrator’s mediating position between the homeland and hostland spaces of her “third geography”. Anchored in the narrator’s matrilineage and the primary mother-daughter bond, the memoir tackles the issue of persistent patriarchal values in a familial and wider immigrant community while problematizing the notion of home and adjustment to living in the 1950s America. Dealing with certain aspects of immigrant pain and otherness, the paper briefly examines the narrator’s trajectory from the narrow space of the port of entry to her inevitable internalization of hybrid spaces of in-betweenness.

Keywords: Nadja Tesich, *To Die in Chicago*, diasporic writing by women, post-Yugoslav writing, adjustment, in-betweenness as hybrid home

In her influential *Writing Outside the Nation*, a study on contemporary diasporic narratives written in Europe and North America by migrants and their descendants, Azade Seyhan recognizes a unique potential of literary autobiographies to create new links within transnational contexts. Viewed as the preferred mode of expression of many writers of diaspora, autobiography is loosely defined as “an out-of-bonds genre that captures the fluid character of memory, migration, and transition in an appropriately nuanced fashion” (Seyhan 2001: 96). Offering a perspective that is personal and confessional, but not less communal, autobiography often defies definition and impersonal generalizations, restoring certain aspects of the migrant author’s familial heritage and giving voice to “structures and experiences that resist naming” (96). Frequently written outside the nation and in the language of the host country, migrant and diasporic narratives, fictionalized (auto)biographies and

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literary memoirs seem to occupy an alternative space or a “third geography” (15), mediating between homelands and hostlands and bringing authentic accounts of personal and collective transnational experiences of migration. Contemporary migrant chroniclers of their own dislocation rarely present their transition to another country as a stereotypical journey from homeland to a promised land, where they are expected to work hard and achieve ultimate success. They inhabit their own “third geography” instead, navigating between experiences of departure and arrival with less rigidity and exclusivity, which ensures transnational blurring of boundaries and new perceptions of national and ethnic identities. Alternatively, the migrant narratives concentrate on specific aspects of (auto)biography, shedding light on particular events or timeframes that mark their authors’ diasporic identity. One such example that belongs to a growing body of post-Yugoslav diasporic writing is *To Die in Chicago* (2010), a literary memoir written by Nadja Tesich², a Serbian-born author and filmmaker who emigrated to the United States in the 1950s as a teenager. It was only decades later, and soon after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, that the author revisits her experiences of dislocation from Užice, her hometown, to faraway East Chicago, giving her fluid memories a literary shape. In this coming-of-age autobiographical narrative, written partly from a fifteen-year-old girl’s point of view, Tesich focuses on the first two years of her attempts to adjust to American lifestyle and values in the face of her overt disappointment with the new surroundings. The very first chapter points at the clash between the narrator’s idealistic expectations and the reality she encounters on her arrival in the heavily industrialized city with polluted air and lifeless trees:

In Hollywood films immigrants usually arrive in New York harbor wearing folk costumes, bundles in their hands, they cry from happiness and kiss the land. In real life, at least in our case, it didn’t happen like that, and there was no background music suggesting that the film will end soon and our wonderful new life will begin. (Tesich 2010: 1)

The initial descriptions of the other country’s unwelcoming landscape and the narrator’s port-of-entry experience compared to an atypical movie scenario without “background music” serves as a nutshell version of circumstances that continue to intensify the narrator’s struggle for adjustment in her new homeland. Envisioning future hardships, misunderstandings and disruptions in communication within larger immigrant, educational and peer communities, the absence of “background music” at the U.S. port of entry is primarily concerned with a scene of family reunion, in which expected emotions of happiness are insufficiently articulated. Namely, when the narrator, her mother and younger brother reach America in order to reunite with their immigrant husband and father after many years of separation, their encounter is far from cathartic. None of them expresses intense feelings

2 Nadja Tesich (1939-2014) also wrote the following three novels that tackle similar issues of growing up, migration and diaspora: *Shadow Partisan* (1996), *Native Land* (1998), and *Far from Vietnam* (2012).

of affection and “nobody wept” (Tesich 2). The mutual detachment between father and his newly arrived family anticipates both family disharmony and the young girl’s difficulties with assimilation into the society much different from the one in which she grew up.

Although the memoir, along with Tesich’s other works with a transnational flair, offers interesting insights into the narrator’s familial ties and her collective’s complex historical heritage, immigrant plight and the notion of the American dream revisited on several occasions, it has not attracted much critical and scholarly attention. This can probably be ascribed to Tesich’s specific diasporic position in the broad field of contemporary American literature, or the position she shares with many other post-Yugoslav women writers of diaspora who are understudied both in their homeland and abroad. The twofold marginality of women writers who originate from East Europe in general and former Yugoslavia in particular has been only recently considered by scholars of transnational literature by women. According to their fresh perspectives, diasporic writing published in the U.S. in the last fifty years has generally received ample critical attention, yet it is evident that migrant and pre-migrant narratives based on particular parts of the world are not equally represented in scholarly publications. Thus, while a considerable amount of research focuses on migrant experiences of women from East and South Asia, the Caribbean, Central and Latin America, and Africa, there is a substantial underrepresentation of East European migrant narratives despite increased flows of immigrants from East European to western countries (Nicolaescu 2014: 9).

Claiming the importance of post-Yugoslav literary voices in diaspora, and recognizing Nadja Tesich’s delineation of the third geography as a creative state of cultural in-betweenness, this paper discusses *To Die in Chicago* as an illustration of my suggestion that women’s literary memoirs, (semi) autobiographical prose and fictionalized autobiographies are often anchored in the authors’ matrilineal lineage, attempting to resist patriarchal disruptions of mother-daughter bonds and strengthen their own agency (Bijelić 2014: 35).

Although the literary and a variety of other representations of migrant and diasporic experiences have been widely discussed in the previous decades, it can be noticed that the notion of migrant has somehow resisted both gendering and positioning within particular geopolitical contexts. Thus, even though the notion of transnationalism stretches to “include a heterogeneous array of voices in building a global narrative, without losing the voice of local culture and specificity” (Parker and Young 2013: 4), it is marked by a significant imbalance in the representation of gendered identities and of a number of geographies within transnational contexts, including those of Eastern Europe and former Yugoslavia.

Gender considerations have been incorporated into migration theories relatively recently and the phrase “migrants and their families” in 1960s and 1970s still denoted “male migrants and their wives and children”, signifying the lack of women’s agency in the migration process (Boyd and Grieco 2003: 1). Despite women’s movements’ hard work on the visibility of female migrants and their subjectivities, it seems that women’s experiences of diaspora and

their literary representations still remain underrepresented in critical and theoretical discussions on a global level. In a number of studies published on women's world literature, Parker and Young rightly observe that "women's role in transnational literature remains a neglected domain of research" (Parker and Young 5), which consequently affects reception of migrant and diasporic writing, particularly if its authors' adoption of the hostland's language "is not the result of colonial experience but of migration, resettlement, and redefinition of identity" (Seyhan 2001: 12). Thus, along with the understudied perpetual marginalization of women's migrational experiences on both global and local levels, the absence of critical discussion around diasporic East European fiction and autobiographical narratives by women seems to be even more prominent in relation to the works written and published not in the migrant's mother tongue but in the language of their hostland.

In order to convey the complex position of East European diasporic female narrator in general, and post-Yugoslav narrating migrant in particular, women-authored literary representations of female migrants in contemporary fiction and memoir frequently draw upon the authors' matrilineal heritage as a source of diasporic women's empowerment in patriarchal and otherwise exploitive settings. Nadja Tesich's *To Die in Chicago* is one such example of foregrounding the narrator's rootedness in her immediate motherline. This can be seen in the amount and quality of attention paid to the figures of mother and grandmother in diasporic and pre-migrant settings. However, although the very first pages of Tesich's memoir acknowledge the narrator's grandmother as a generating force of her creative expression, depicting her as "a just God", an ideal image of what "perfect socialism would be," and a realistic strong woman who rescued the narrator from Germans during the Second World War (Tesich 5), social pressures of adjustment to the new culture eventually threaten to diminish her symbolic presence in the granddaughter's life.

The narrator's memories of a painful two-year transition from homeland to hostland are structured around her bond with mother and their respective positions in the immigrant community and a broader context of the 1950s American society. From the port-of-entry scenario to her own resolution to firmly believe in democratic America as the promised land for her children, the mother is presented as an unacknowledged victim of patriarchal power dynamics in her family and community. Not only is she ostensibly unwelcome during the family reunion, she also becomes utterly neglected by her husband and the narrator's father, who, disgusted by her aging and unkempt body, intentionally fails to recognize her efforts to raise their children in the turbulent post-war period in Yugoslavia.

Belonging to the category of stereotypical male migrants who emigrate from their country of origin well before the rest of his family, the father seems to be caught in his own double bind of having to live a hard immigrant life without family and craving for intimacy and closeness outside the family. Having already adopted some western ideas about the female body's needs for a constant cosmetic care, and not having to directly experience disastrous impacts of war in which the narrator is injured and their house bombed, the

father's perception of his sacrificing wife is not only superficial, but extremely degrading. Thus, instead of acknowledging the woman's difficult fight for survival back in the homeland, he projects his own unfaithfulness on her, while his pre-war memories and fantasies of the idyllic home remain intact (Tesich 74). From the father's perspective, there seems to be no "third geography". Although he is as "split" as any other immigrant Tesich encounters throughout her life (193), his homeland and hostland spaces are rather separate, which might explain the unease of having to share his now modernized daily life with the almost conserved, otherworldly figures of his wife and family. Yet, their bodies are alive and changing, which meddles with both his immigrant reality and the fixed image of his native land. The insignificance he ascribes to his wife is further reflected on the behavior of other men from their immigrant community. Although they seem rejoiced at the thought of their own families joining them one day, they likewise fail to recognize that those who stay in the homeland have their own struggles and traumas, which they manage to conquer thanks to strong proactive women of the family. However, in the 1950s America, the stories of strong migrant women were still irrelevant, and women similar to the narrator's mother were at a risk of having their personal histories completely erased before their actual deaths:

... she wanted Father to say in front of others how courageous she had been, to raise us well and with no help from anyone. Just her own hands. Kids didn't grow like weeds (...) The men did say what wonderful kids we were but none asked her about her suffering, what others at home knew. Her old stories had to be told, become known to give her a history, who she had been up to now. (12-13)

Unappreciated by her immigrant countrymen in general and her husband in particular, the mother has to find another way of preserving not only her history, but her core identity as well. In order to survive in a new culture with old patriarchal values, she has to adapt to the new surroundings faster than anyone else in the family. Her survival, though, is not directly linked to the preservation of her own individuality, but rather to her responsibility towards the children. Relating parts of her mother's biography, Tesich suggests that the mother's urge to place her "children before anything" is additionally forced by the patriarchal tradition in the old country that grants mothers "the most sacred position" (52), envisaging them almost as mythical figures traditionally appreciated only in relation to giving births to future warriors. Tesich here evokes the past of her immediate motherline as "the dark ages" before socialism, when "nobody cared or worried about female children" because their "warrior's tribe ... valued only the sons" (56). The deep-seated prejudice about female offspring is further illustrated by mentioning an old custom from the mother's mountain village, according to which the villagers "put a black flag on the house when a girl is born" (82). Aware of the long tradition of women's denigration in her native land and the ways it has affected generations of mothers, Tesich is able to recognize the remnants of this tradition in her own bond with mother. Portrayed as a very traditional woman who was raised in a strict patriarchal environment where women were expected to

be passive and obedient, the mother nevertheless shows a great potential for decision-making and reinvention. It is she, and not the husband, who initiates their family reunion for the sake of the children. Although devalued by her husband and the male immigrant community at the very beginning, and then challenged to succeed without much support, the narrator's mother manages to incorporate parts of her old, pre-migrant identity into the aspects of everyday life in the new country. Thus, the initial feeling of rejection becomes partly replaced by feelings of optimism and a drive to serve her children and increase their chances for success simply by altering her approach to life and "destroying an unpleasant past" (72). Here it seems that the mother, like many other immigrants, internalizes what Madelaine Hron calls the "myth of success" in order to "play down [her] suffering of immigration" and "conform to the image of the successful immigrant" (Hron 2009: 20). Exploring and contextualizing literary and cultural representations of immigrant pain and suffering, Hron observes that "in certain problematic instances, pain may even become the way in which immigrants define their identities" (xix). Here it may be interesting to note that *To Die in Chicago* accommodates only several descriptions of intense immigrant pain that threatens to define the immigrant identity. One of them appears in the first part of the memoir, and is certainly symptomatic of the family's extreme emotional pain felt during the very first days of in East Chicago:

Mother's [face] had gloom all over it, even Stojan so cheerful in general had a new expression that resembled grief. The new feeling around us was more dreadful than the memory of war, or the poverty after, worse than Grandma's death..." (Tesich 8)

Even though the narrator further describes "[her] own Slavic grief as pitch-black" (108), it seems that none of the family members is defined exclusively by immigrant pain. The wish to adjust and assimilate becomes a driving force for personal reinvention, which is particularly discernible in the mother's consciously chosen progressive attitude to life. In order to dispel and "alleviate pain", the mother shifts perspectives and creates an imaginary life (59) that, paradoxically, tends to be firmly rooted in her present American reality and not in the values of the old country. Witnessing her mother's staying power and storytelling inventiveness as part of her daily routine, the daughter perceives her mother's lifestyle as "artistic, without art" (68). The spontaneity with which the mother expresses and reinvents herself in front of the family represents her own manner of translating their changed circumstances and making herself visible. Her strategy of pain alleviation through shifting perspectives ultimately helps her express the immigrant pain and the pain of rejection, which confirms Hron's statement that "in order to express their pain, immigrants must learn to translate it" (Hron 32).

Whereas Mother manages to translate her pain through performing everyday activities, her daughter, the narrator of the memoir, detaches from the pain by writing about it from an historical distance. However, being a teenage girl during the first two years of adjustment in the host country, she

had no particular strategies for coping with the trauma of leaving her native land. Instead, she appears to be more radical than Mother, responding to her own pain by developing a strong wish to disappear and stop existing, which she later understands as a need to symbolically murder her old self for the sake of better assimilation (Tesich 132). Reflecting on the two-year period of her growing up in East Chicago, the narrator pictures herself as a double outsider, the one who is othered both as an immigrant and a "girl in between" (80). The split immigrant girl seems to be losing her previous identity first by conforming to certain beauty trends that are aggressively imposed on her peers through television and commercials, and then by becoming an enraged rebel in the U.S., although she was a "good pioneer at core" back in socialist Yugoslavia (190). Expected to make herself physically presentable, she succumbs to fashion requirements and artificial posing for photographs, yet she finds it difficult to grasp the lack of female individuality behind the cheerleader mentality of the local girls.

Contrasting Yugoslav and U.S. American ways of living, Tesich observes that "at home ... an individual was freer than were Americans in the fifties" (164), often pointing at many advantages of being a member of the society in which pioneers assist in building socialism and everything is shared. However, it is mostly because of her communist origin and ideas that she, "an alien from a Communist country" (188), is frequently bullied at school. Considered "evil and dangerous" (104), communism here also serves as a label attached to those who are disobedient within immigrant families and communities, which is, in the narrator's case, illustrated by her father's ridiculous decision to write to "the FBI and the immigration office to accuse Mother and [her] of Communism" (39) on the basis of disagreements and conflicts within the family.

Other illustrations of othering Tesich as an immigrant student coming "from behind the iron curtain" (128) are based on her active socializing with African American students. According to the narrator's 1950s experiences of racist Chicago, communism and racism were almost intertwined, and her befriending a black girl from school was condemned by her peers and considered an additional "proof of [her] Communism" (110). The teachers likewise supported racial segregation among students and openly disapproved of any joint "savage" and "indecent" activities that might compromise the school's traditional values. Thus, when the narrator's dancing performance rehearsals were stigmatized as "savage" and forbidden by the school officials, she initially had no idea why she was silenced and blackmailed into giving up on her and her team's artistic project. It is only when she revisits her first encounters with racism later in life that she is able to comprehend her being trapped within racial binaries:

I had believed they stopped us because they didn't like the way we moved. Some of our steps, suggested by the music, resembled African dances, like Dunham, which I saw and studied in New York later on. ... I was the only white dancer and the only white person in the dance we had invented... (191)

What alleviated the immigrant pain of the “girl-in-between” and her trauma of being excluded on the basis of origin and racial issues is her own inventiveness and involvement in artistic activities that were different from her mother’s. While mother embellishes and fabricates everyday events and stories from the past, the daughter expresses herself first through dancing and later through a more serious engagement with acting and writing. Even though their ways of communicating intentions and desires are not the same, there is a symbolic link that connects mother and daughter and their co-creation of the immigrant in-betweenness, and it initially materializes in the shape of an item of practical use. Namely, a colorful skirt that belongs to the mother serves as a gypsy costume in Nadja’s show performances (116), signifying the continuum of mother-daughter bond that is further supported by the two women’s position in the space between homeland and hostland. This space of in-betweenness, “a virtual existence between two worlds” (Hron 26), or a third geography between the former and the new home,³ denotes a hybrid home as a platform where women migrants revisit and reinvent their identities, achieving autonomy from a strictly national space and expressing their own agency through transnational mediation:

‘Home’ has often been associated with static immobility, uniformity, and essentialism, as well as narrow perceptions of nationalism and patriotism. ... [I]n the current era of globalization, ‘home’ can no longer be regarded as a stationary, homogenous point of view. Despite this, however, human beings still need a ‘home’ – a safe a secure living space. (Hron 23)

Evoking the safety of a primary bond with mother, and strongly anchored in the narrator’s matrilineal lineage, Tesich’s literary memoir revisits not only the space of the former home and a series of adjustments to the new living space, but it also creates a lasting hybrid home by relinquishing the pain produced by initial feelings of rejection, exclusion, and non-belonging. While Tesich symbolically compares the process of forced immigrant adjustment to the loss of one’s soul (Tesich 156), or the loss of a spiritual link with her grandmother and their East European heritage (123), she senses the inevitability of adjusting and performing in a space where differences are not mutually exclusive. The previous concern about the lack of “background music” at the U.S. port of entry, founded on the dream of America “stolen from the [TV] screen” (9), transforms into an awareness of the “background noise” as a sensation of hybrid surroundings, where assimilation often means emotional detachment of the narrator through masking and changing costumes (192). The eventual change in the clarity of background sound that is registered in the process of immigrant adjustment may signal the beginning of a new phase in the narrator’s perception of the space that encompasses and connects her home country and the target country. A specific personal wholeness that she links to the land of origin and evokes at the very end of the

3 For a similar concept of home in reading contemporary diasporic literature by women, see Anastasia Stefanidou’s “Creating a “Third Home” in Diaspora: Reading Meena Alexander and Miranda Panaretou Cambanis” (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 225-235).

memoir becomes part of a creative state of cultural in-betweenness in which the narrator internalizes multiple perspectives of the changing world and gives voice to the underrepresented and culturally specific motherlines within national and transnational contexts.

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**„NIJE BILO POZADINSKE MUZIKE”: DOM I PRILAGOĐAVANJE
U AUTOBIOGRAFSKOJ ISPOVIJESTI NAĐE TEŠIĆ *UMRIJETI U
ČIKAGU***

Rezime

Iako su napisani u dijaspori i na stranom jeziku kao sredstvu samoprevođenja i interpretacije mnogostrukih veza unutar transnacionalnih okvira migracije i dijaspore, savremenim narativima autorki koje potiču iz bivše Jugoslavije, a žive i objavljuju svoja djela u Sjedinjenim Državama, nije posvećeno mnogo pažnje u kritičkim i naučnim krugovima. U namjeri da se ukaže na razvoj jednog novog polja istraživanja na temu emigracijske (autobiografske) književnosti koja artikuliše istočnoevropske i postjugoslovenske ženske glasove u dijaspori, ovaj rad fokusira se na *Umrijeti u Čikagu*, autobiografsku ispovijest Nađe Tešić, srpsko-američke autorke čija djela sadrže mnoštvo smjernica koje upućuju na naratorkinu poziciju medijatorke između prostora zavičaja i zemlje domaćina u kontekstu pojma 'treće geografije'. Zasnovana na naratorkinoj matriliniji i primarnom odnosu majke i kćerke, ispovijest preispituje ustaljene patrijarhalne obrasce u porodičnoj i široj emigrantskoj zajednici, dok u isto vrijeme problematizuje pojam doma i prilagođavanja životu u Americi pedesetih godina dvadesetog vijeka. Osvrćući se na neke od aspekata emigracijske boli i drugosti, rad ukratko ispituje naratorkino kretanje od uskog prostora ulazne luke zemlje domaćina do neizbježne internalizacije hibridnih međuprostora.

Ključne riječi: Nađa Tešić, *Umrijeti u Čikagu*, književnost žena u dijaspori, postjugoslovenska književnost, prilagođavanje, hibridni međuprostor

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