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THE VOICES OF RESISTANCE: THE SEARCH FOR PERSONAL AND SOCIAL AUTHENTICITY AND FREEDOM IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN LITERATURE

I bow my head before the low sky
An apparition of freedom from the Balkan woods
At the gates of Heaven I fold my wings
A god and a beggar from war to war¹.

Goran Milisavljević

Abstract: This paper explores the theme of personal and social authenticity and freedom in contemporary Serbian literature, focusing on the persistent struggle against both external and internal constraints. Through various literary works, Serbian authors depict societies and individuals trapped by poverty, authoritarian regimes, global pressures, and consequent personal and collective trauma. These works serve as a reflection on the limitations that bind human expression, while also offering pathways to liberation through introspection, memory, and imagination. The narratives analyzed range from confessional, introspective stories that evoke deep personal reflections to satirical and ironic critiques of the past and

¹ Verse 2 of the song *Traces of the Past* which was, with appropriate musical backing, released as part of the first studio album of the Belgrade rock group Van Gogh, under the Belgrade-based label PGP-RTB.

future. By delving into these complex worlds, literature becomes a catalyst for change, inviting readers to question the status quo and pursue authenticity in both personal and collective spheres. This paper highlights how Serbian literature serves as both a mirror and a response to the challenges of maintaining cultural identity, autonomy, and self-expression in an increasingly changing world.

Keywords: Authenticity, Freedom, Serbian literature, Resistance, Globalization

Freedom, as an essential human aspiration, includes the possibility of fulfilling our needs, motives, and desires, while self-determination represents the ability to choose our own paths in accordance with our values and inner being. The authentic personality, one that acts in alignment with its own values and inner tendencies, is a concept that has been explored by many psychologists, particularly those in the field of humanistic psychology. Allport, Maslow, and Rogers, pioneers of the “third force in psychology,” as well as Bojanović (1989) and others in Serbia, were of the view that authenticity is key to a fulfilling and meaningful life. Maslow (1987) particularly discussed self-actualization, a state in which an individual achieves their full potential, while Rogers (1961) emphasizes the importance of congruence—the harmony between internal feelings and external actions. Allport (1955, 1961) highlighted that true freedom and authenticity occur through the realization of a mature personality, one capable of dealing with both internal and external conflicts. Horney (1950) ties authenticity to the individual’s ability to develop the true self through the free expression of their feelings, needs, and desires, despite societal expectations and inner fears.

Fiske (2010) examines how social contexts shape our opportunities for authenticity, asking to what extent our aspirations for freedom are inherently tied to interpersonal relationships and societal expectations. Positive psychologists, such as Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), emphasize that achieving authentic freedom requires not only inner strength but also appropriate external conditions: emotional support, as well as social, material, and developmental resources that together create a favorable environment in which an individual can realize their full potential and develop an authentic way of life.

It is immediately apparent that the opportunities for achieving authenticity are not always easily accessible. This entails understanding the obstacles and limitations—the limestone pavements and sinkholes, torrents and canyons of history and daily life—both internal and external—that must be overcome, as well as the potential for overcoming them by crossing the mountains and bridging the depths of challenges, in other words, by refusing to succumb to fate, fatalism, or determinism.

In contemporary Serbian literature, the theme of striving for freedom occupies a significant place and is most often manifested through highlighting a lack of it. Writers depict worlds in which human needs are unmet—from the existential, through the experience of personal and collective respect, to self-actualization—while individuals and entire nations live under various constraints: poverty, repressive regimes, and occupation by or pressures from foreign powers. The depiction of such circumstances plays an important role: through them, readers are encouraged to recognize and question the existing state of affairs and to fight for a greater degree of their own freedom, both for themselves and for the community they belong to. Literature thus becomes a catalyst for reflection on the real and symbolic constraints that stifle the human spirit and creates space for the discovery of people's inner potential and collective aspirations for self-actualization. In this way, literature does not remain merely in the realm of describing a state of affairs but is an implicit impetus toward a better and freer world.

In contemporary Serbian literature, the theme of a struggle for freedom can be linked to several theoretical approaches, including liberation psychology (Montero 2015; Montero and Sonn 2009), decolonization theories (e.g., Ferraro 2008), and social theories on human needs (Maslow 1987; Doyal and Gough 1991). Montero, in her work, emphasizes the importance of liberation from social, political, and cultural structures that marginalize and subjugate individuals or entire communities, primarily in her own, Latin American, context. Serbian authors often write about similar experiences—about life under authoritarian regimes, economic inequalities, and pressures from external powers. In the context of decolonization theories, these literary works recognize specific forms of neo-colonialism that permeate the daily life and cultural identity of smaller nations like the Serbs, highlighting the need to achieve autonomy and authenticity. Literature becomes a means of resistance—not only political

but also cultural—where writers and their characters fight for the affirmation of their own values in a world full of external assaults and obstacles (Bou Zeineddine and Vollhardt 2024).

From a psychological standpoint, theories on human needs, such as the one developed by Fiske (2010), emphasize that basic human needs—such as the need for belonging, autonomy, and control over one's own life—must be met for a person to achieve their full potential. These theories are easily recognizable in contemporary Serbian literature. Through great life difficulties, people have always sought something better, something mostly unattainable to them, dreaming of liberation and freedom, striving to reach the “endless blue circle and within it a star,” as one of the most recognizable phrases in Serbian literature (Crnjanski) describes.

In Serbian literature, there have long been attempts to explore the possibilities and limits of achieving freedom, or at least liberation from the most severe constraints. This theme appears as early as in folk epic poems and continues through the 19th century in the realistic stories of Milovan Glišić, the epic works of P. P. Njegoš (“But to put a foot on tyranny's neck...,” “Let there be what cannot be”), and in the 20th century, in the works of Borislav Pekić and numerous other authors. The limitations placed on individuals, as well as on their social and political communities, were numerous and present on various levels; there was no area in which freedom was not restrained, from existential conditions and the daily struggle for survival to all other obstacles imaginable. In his pursuit of freedom, Branko Miljković wondered, “Will freedom know how to sing as the prisoners sang of it?”

Especially frustrating was the collective feeling of being unable to fully realize ourselves as a society, a discomfort that persists to this day, as Serbia is one of the few countries that are not members of the EU. Public opinion surveys reveal widespread distrust in the good intentions and principles of the international community, in their justice, and similar matters. Social and political theories explain these phenomena (Milanović 2016; Bou Zeineddine and Vollhardt 2024), but Serbian writers have likewise endeavored to offer their own assessment. Their views are not, nor should they be, methodologically strict or entirely objective, nor should they strive for a consensus. Instead, they can and should be subjective, allowing for different reactions and, most importantly, leaving room for and inspiring the thoughts of others.

Freedom and authenticity stand in sharp contrast to the repression, limitations, restraint, and determinism imposed by external forces, whether in the form of colonization, political domination, or cultural assimilation. While repression stifles the individual spirit and independence, freedom encourages the struggle for the right to self-determination and authenticity in preserving one's own identity, independently of external pressures. This is the essence of resistance to any form of enslavement, as true freedom and authenticity enable individuals and communities to remain true to themselves, preserving their personal, cultural, and moral values despite all attempts by others to undermine them.

The year 2009 saw the publication of the anthology *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which explores the ideals of freedom and dignity through short stories by over thirty authors from around the world, addressing the questions of personal and social authenticity in the context of the struggle for human rights. This anthology is a literary tribute to the aspiration toward freedom, universally examining the limitations imposed upon the human spirit and the possibilities for overcoming these limitations. We will now present a multifaceted depiction of the struggle for freedom and the search for authenticity over the past thirty or so years in Serbia, where literature is becoming a space in which individuals and communities face their own limitations and seek ways to overcome them, keeping to Šantić's message from more than one hundred years ago: "Our strength is a mountain river, / no one will ever stop it." Although the works we will analyze are rooted in the Serbian cultural and historical context, their messages often transcend the local borders. Many of these books have been translated into various languages and have found their way to readers around the world—from Argentina, across Europe and America, to Turkey and Russia, and even further. Such broad reception speaks to the universality of the themes they address. The struggle for freedom, authenticity, and overcoming limitations are not specific to one people or one culture; these are universal human aspirations, recognized and understood by people from all across the globe. In this way, Serbian literature becomes part of the global dialogue on freedom and human dignity, showing that, regardless of geographical or cultural differences, humanity's aspiration for truth, justice, and authentic existence holds universal significance.

I Existence and Poverty: Bread and Fear

In Serbian literature, the theme of the struggle for freedom often starts with basic existential constraints, from the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, such as poverty and the fear for one's life, which shape the destinies of individuals and entire communities. These constraints not only limit material well-being but also deeply affect the spirit and identity of people while they strive to win their freedom and dignity.

One of the clearest examples of such themes in Serbian literature is *The Balad on Poverty* [*Balada o siromaštvu*]. In it, Milovan Danajlić describes extreme poverty in the rural areas of Serbia, manifested not only through material want but also as an all-encompassing doom via social isolation and cultural marginalization. The characters are often portrayed as prisoners of social circumstances, where material poverty, cultural impoverishment, and social norms prevent personal development and the freedom to establish one's identity. The children in this book make their own ink to write with because store-bought ink is too expensive; they are ashamed of not having underwear and hide their poverty, while a boy who wears his mother's coat on a school trip is ridiculed and deeply traumatized.

Danajlić shows the effect of poverty not only on material conditions but also on the human spirit. Poverty is not just a material misfortune but also a state of mind that hinders personal development and can have a devastating effect on an individual's ability to develop their own style, values, and sense of meaning. This novel is not only about scarcity but also about a system that promoted equality but often failed many—in this particular case, the rural population—which is Danajlić's direct criticism of the Yugoslav regime after World War II.

Milisav Savić, in his novel *Bread and Fear* [*Hleb i strah*], explores similar motifs of poverty and fear through stories of characters struggling with economic insecurity and social injustices in the same period. The characters are sometimes passive due to the enormous obstacles they face but never stop daydreaming about a better life. Some even make active attempts to change something (e.g., planning to escape to America); thus, they are not merely passive sufferers, but demonstrate agency in the same way it is interpreted in the literature of Nobel laureate Abdul-rayak Gurnah (Bosman 2021: 37). However, in reality, this almost never

works, and for most, it ends in the social pathologies described in the author's earlier story collections, such as can be seen in *The Bulgarian Barracks* [*Bugarška baraka*]. In Savić's work, poverty is likewise not viewed as merely a material condition but as a constraint on the human spirit and aspirations.

In addition to existential limitations, social norms and historical contexts also present obstacles that further complicate the search for freedom. Danojlić's works, such as *Liberators and Traitors* [*Oslobodioci i izdajnici*] and *The Story of the Storyteller* [*Priča o pripovedaču*], address social and political limitations in post-war Yugoslavia, where the people from his village, being the ideologically losing side in the war, lived in an environment that leaned toward fatalism and social pathology. Fatalism and a sense of helplessness become obstacles that prevent the achievement of personal freedom and authenticity, while poverty and repressive norms keep individuals trapped in an environment that offers no way out.

A parallel between the Serbian experience and the experiences of other cultures in their struggle with poverty and social pressures can also be seen in a comparison with the novel *Hillbilly Elegy*. JD Vance (2017), writing about rural America, speaks of the dysfunctionality of poor communities driven by spirals of poor education, addiction, violence, and the inability to escape from this vicious cycle. Similarly, Danojlić, through *The Balad on Poverty*, sheds light on how poverty and marginalization affected the spirit of rural Serbia, where poverty was not just a material condition but a social phenomenon that shaped the destinies of generations. This issue also appeared in other environments—sometimes, a harsh life was a permanent state, as described by Bratić in *Winter in Herzegovina* [*Zima u Hercegovini*]. *The Blossom of Linden in the Balkans* [*Cvat lipe na Balkanu*] by Gordana Kuić depicts the post-war suffering of an urban family, while in remote villages, totalitarian regimes even declared war on goats, as Mao did with sparrows. Through the drama *Goatocide* [*Kozocid*], Vida Ognjenović illuminates the repressions of a totalitarian system accompanied by moral corruption and the spiritual impoverishment of society, where restrictions prevent personal development and the freedom to build one's own identity. Long-lasting subjugation and marginalization can significantly affect the self through a sense of inferiority, loss of identity, reduced self-confidence, as well as through feelings of helplessness and alienation (Sapiro & Ward 2020: 343–344).

Although cruelly constrained by external circumstances, as shown by Danojlić, Savić, and other authors, some characters do not surrender but continue to fight, even if only through dreams and hopes, ultimately managing to win a piece of freedom for themselves. Thus, they prove that resistance and struggle make for an uncertain path, but one without which we are decidedly at a loss. At least some on this path can break through, demonstrating that refusal to surrender, in itself, is a form of freedom.

II The Threads of the Past Through Retrospection: The Inspector

In the works of a range of authors, the theme of personal liberation via retrospective, confessional narratives takes central place, often resembling the processes of psychotherapy, where traumas and unresolved conflicts are addressed through deeper reflection on the past. Through these narratives, authors create characters who confront their emotional burdens, searching for ways to integrate the past and present, with liberation occurring through the process of understanding and self-awareness.

Dragan Velikić, particularly in the novels *The Inspector* [*Islednik*] and *The Russian Window* [*Ruski prozor*], uses a narrative framework in which his characters undergo an internal exploration of family losses and personal traumas. In *The Inspector*, the protagonist examines his mother's death and their relationship, where every detail of the past becomes crucial for understanding the present. This reconsideration resembles a psychoanalytic process in which retrospective analysis allows for the liberation of repressed feelings. Velikić, with his detailed storytelling style, evokes feelings of loss, loneliness, and the impossibility of easily forgetting the past; instead, it must be gradually integrated in order for the character to achieve inner peace.

In *The Russian Window*, the retrospective tone and detailed narration reflect the deep internal struggle of a protagonist burdened by personal grief and existential questions, who reexamines his memories and relationships, attempting to find clarity and closure. Similar to a therapeutic session, the character must confront unresolved emotions and doubts that weigh on him in order to achieve personal liberation or emotional relief.

Vida Ognjenović likewise utilizes introspective narratives in her works, through which the characters reveal deep internal struggles, while Jelena Lengold, via her minimalist style and emotional frankness, explores the feelings tied to the past, traumas, and existential dilemmas. Her direct and simple manner of storytelling is reminiscent of gestalt therapy, in which the focus is on the awareness of current feelings and behavior patterns, which enables achieving emotional liberation.

Filip David, in novels such as *The House of Memory and Oblivion* [*Kuća sećanja i zaborava*] and *The Pilgrims of Heaven and Earth* [*Hodočasnici neba i zemlje*], explores the theme of personal liberation through confronting the traumas of the Holocaust and the legacy of evil in human society. Through narratives interwoven with memories and dreams, David opens the door to retrospective journeys of his characters who, by reevaluating past tragedies, attempt to find a deeper meaning in life and achieve inner peace. In *The House of Memory and Oblivion*, David addresses the impact of memory, and how both memory and forgetfulness function as mechanisms that influence the processes of self-understanding, primarily of the protagonist A. Vajs, and his struggle with his painful history as he seeks some form of personal freedom and meaning.

In all of these works, retrospective narratives serve as a form of literary therapy, where the characters and, by extension, the readers, undergo a process of catharsis. Through reflection on the past and personal trauma, literature becomes a means of emotional and psychological liberation, allowing the characters to find inner peace and build an authentic identity, free from the pressures of past events. The bibliotherapeutic potential of these works lies in their ability to encourage readers to recognize their own traumas and conflicts, providing them with a way to free themselves from emotional burdens and achieve deeper self-understanding (Hynes 2019).

III Rage Against the Machine: In the Hold

Anti-war voices in contemporary Serbian literature represent deep and complex desires for freedom and authenticity in a world corroded by violence, nationalism, and political manipulation. From the novels of Vladimir Arsenijević, plays by Biljana Srbljanović, to Mirko Kovač, who

moved from Belgrade to Rovinj at the beginning of the war, began writing in the Croatian language variant, and identified as a Croat, Bora Ćosić, who went into exile to Berlin, to Marko Vešović, who survived the state of affairs in wartime Sarajevo, along with Saša Ilić and many others, the voices against war and, after the war, against the focus on national identities, have been and remain powerful. These authors speak out against the dehumanization and destruction caused by the wars over Yugoslavia's legacy, mostly blaming it on the Serbian side.

In the novel *In the Hold* [*U potpalublju*], Vladimir Arsenijević guides readers through a world of shattered hopes, societal fractures, and the chaos of war, where his characters struggle to find personal meaning and autonomy in a world beyond their control. War, shown through the eyes of ordinary people, becomes a symbol of the force that crushes any attempt at authentic existence. The characters face internal and external obstacles, as their sense of freedom is continually undermined by the pressures of war and dehumanization. Through their internal struggles, Arsenijević reflects the experience of individuals who strive to preserve the freedom of thought and feeling in a time when established collective norms and social order are crumbling, while individuality is simultaneously not allowed. The works *You and I*, *Angela* [*Ti i ja, Anđela*], and *In the Hold* depict a world of ordinary people caught in the trap of major political and social upheavals, but the focus is on their inner struggles and relationships, which further emphasizes the theme of the fight for authenticity and freedom. Angela's fate can be linked to the effort of finding possibilities for individual liberation and authentic selfhood in a world full of violence and destruction through confronting personal demons, such as addiction.

Mirko Kovač, in *The City in the Mirror* [*Grad u zrcalu*], offers a more subtle approach to the struggle for freedom, where, through introspective narratives and looking into the past, characters confront their traumas, attempting to free themselves from the constraints that war and politics impose upon their unique personalities. Kovač's search for freedom is primarily internal—looking backward, he seeks peace and reconciliation with one's own feelings, trying to break free from the restraint of collective traumas in order to round out "the portrait of one's life."

Bora Ćosić, through his essays and memoirs, which he continues to write at the age of 90, establishes a sharp critical framework for

understanding destructive nationalist narratives. Ćosić's struggle for freedom is reflected in his persistent search for an authentic voice, one that refuses to conform to the collective narratives of nationalism and politics. His works become a literary form of resistance, where freedom is not just political, but also a cultural and artistic value, which Ćosić defends through his sharp intellectual approach.

An even sharper example of criticism of nationalist narratives can be found in Biljana Srbljanović's dramatic play *The Fall* [*Pad*], through grotesque characters that confront the reader with the consequences of war, nationalism, and the betrayal of ideological promises. The characters in *The Fall* represent the dehumanized citizens of a crumbling system, and personal authenticity is often suffocated by the weight of nationally imposed narratives. Srbljanović uses dark humor to show how even those who desire change often become accomplices in maintaining repressive systems.

These works not only speak out against violence and destruction but also provide space for artistic and intellectual reflection on the nature of freedom. The literature of these authors becomes a means of encouraging readers to reflect on their own identity and freedom, to recognize the present constraints—whether political, social, or personal—and to oppose the collective norms that attempt to stifle their authentic expression.

IV The Abyss of Collective Historical Fate

In works that address the nation's struggle for sovereignty and authenticity, authors intertwine personal and collective aspirations for freedom with the historical upheavals that have shaped Serbian identity over the centuries. Their works explore the question of sovereignty not only as a political goal but also as a deeper struggle to preserve the authenticity of a nation in a world that constantly pressures and limits it.

We shall begin with the novel *The Abyss* [*Bezdn*], in which Svetlana Velmar-Janković, alongside the political dilemmas of Prince Mihailo Obrenović, also focuses on his personal and emotional world, especially his love affairs and inner conflicts. Prince Mihailo is portrayed as a tragic figure torn between the desire to modernize Serbia and preserving its independence, as well as his personal emotions and political ambitions.

His dilemma is not merely political but deeply personal—between his love for a distant relative and his duty to the state, which causes *his thoughts to battle*, as expressed in a poem he personally wrote, which remains popular to this day. Through this story, Svetlana Velmar-Janković explores the question of how an individual's inner struggle, particularly that of a leader, reflects upon the fate of a nation. *The Abyss* largely addresses how personal weakness and internal conflicts affect broader political events and national destiny, a theme also widely empirically discussed in political psychology (Houghton 2014).

The central motif of the novel *The Scar of Cain* [*Kainov ožiljak*] by Dejan Stojiljković and Vladimir Kecmanović is the delicate diplomatic maneuvering under the pressure of Nazi Germany to have Yugoslavia join the Tripartite Pact in 1941. Through the character of Ambassador Ivo Andrić and his dilemmas, the authors highlight the fundamental issues faced by Yugoslav leaders at the time: balancing loyalty to the people, preserving national sovereignty, and attempting to avoid a catastrophic conflict with more powerful forces. This dynamic emphasizes the struggle for authenticity and moral purity in a world where political compromises are often necessary but seemingly fatal. In addition to external pressures, the authors also point out the internal fragmentation of Yugoslavia, where different political interests and alliances create further tension. Through deeper considerations of betrayal, divisions, and conflicts, *The Scar of Cain* poses the question of whether the true fight for freedom lies only in resisting external enemies or in overcoming internal divisions and conflicts.

The other works we will mention take us far back into the past, to a period of six centuries or more, but at the same time, they shed light on contemporary dilemmas and reflect today's challenges regarding the maintenance of a country's international standing and sovereignty. In the novel *The Despot and the Sacrifice* [*Despot i žrtva*], Dobrilo Nenadić leads us through the time of Đorđe and Jerina and the building of Smederevo, which serves as a setting for depicting similar efforts—preserving national sovereignty and identity in the face of external challenges, even in much later times. Nenadić's portrayal of the fight for sovereignty focuses on historical figures who are forced to make painful choices, balancing between the preservation of national identity and survival under the constant threat of external forces. This story highlights the efforts

of individuals and nations to achieve freedom in a world where they are continually endangered. Almost identical ideas are found in the works of Nikola Moravčević, a professor of history himself, who in his novels *The Last Despot* [*Poslednji despot*] and *Knight in the Time of Evil* [*Vitez u doba zla*] offers a detailed account of the dynamic 15th century, when Serbia was pressed between two great empires, the Ottoman and the Hungarian. Moravčević depicts the struggle of two despots, Stefan and Đorđe, primarily for the preservation of their nation's identity and autonomy, while under constant pressure to make difficult compromises in order to retain some degree of autonomy and sovereignty, and even the very existence of the Serbian political community.

Goran Petrović's novel *The Siege of the Church of Holy Salvation* [*Op-sada crkve svetog Spasa*], with its rich narrative, immerses the reader in a world where the physical fight for freedom intertwines with the metaphysical dimension of preserving cultural heritage and spiritual identity. Petrović uses the siege of the church as a symbol of the internal struggle to preserve identity. His characters are not only confronted with external threats but also with forces that threaten to erase the past, cultural traces, and values that define the community. By defending the church—along with the windows that bring in much of the world, and were installed by Saint Sava himself—the characters resist oblivion and the imposition of foreign values, striving to preserve authenticity and sovereignty. Instead of focusing solely on territorial boundaries, Petrović emphasizes the fight for the soul, where the preservation of cultural and spiritual heritage is equated with the struggle for freedom of thought and existence.

V Irony and Satire: Counter-endorphin

In Serbian literature, satire and irony often serve as powerful tools for shedding light on social, political, and historical absurdities, providing authors with the opportunity to address issues of repression, historical manipulation, and human alienation in a humorous yet critical manner. These works often represent a subtle form of resistance, and through satirical depictions, ironic twists, and pronounced cynicism, writers such as Svetislav Basara and Matija Bećković examine the past and future, offering a chance for deeper reflection on freedom and authenticity.

Svetislav Basara, in works like *Counter-endorphin* [*Kontraendorfin*], *Andrić's Ladder of Horror* [*Andrićeva lestvica užasa*], *Rise and Fall of Parkinson's Disease* [*Uspon i pad Parkinsonove bolesti*], and *Angel of Assassination* [*Anđeo atentata*] uses satire and the grotesque to deconstruct myths about the past and expose the absurdity of primarily historical narratives, but also contemporary values. In *Counter-endorphin*, he employs the grotesque and absurd to dismantle historical narratives and cultural icons that have shaped Serbia's past. Through this novel, Basara questions how the past and its so-called heroes are constructs of collective memory, where historical truths are adjusted to meet the needs of specific political and ideological structures. In *Andrić's Ladder of Horror* Basara goes even deeper into deconstruction, using the character of Nobel laureate Ivo Andrić as a symbol of how cultural giants are exploited in the service of national myths. His sharp critique of the past, most notably driven by the memoirs of Nićifor, the barber, doctor, and scribe to the Serbian prince Miloš, calls for liberation from false idols and urges readers to reassess ingrained views of national heroes. Basara's fight for authenticity comes through pointing out the exaggerations in collective narratives (often his own exaggerations) and calling for critical thinking and individual reflection on the past.

In *The Poem of Velja* [*Poemat o Velju*] Matija Bećković, through the character of Velja, provides a satirical look at the cult of personality and socio-political deformities, sharply critiquing the regime of Josip Broz Tito through humor. But recently, Bećković has predominantly used irony and satire to highlight the dangers of the modern world and mock societal innovations. His poetry collections *When I am Reborn* [*Kad se ponovo rodim*] and *When I Am Even Younger* [*Kad budem još mlađi*] deal with the ironic illumination, and at times open ridicule, of modern trends and their likely role in forming a dystopian society. Through these poems, Bećković frequently mocks blind faith in technological progress, modern ideologies, and new political and social norms, pointing out how such changes lead to dehumanization and alienation. His tone is humorous but also highly critical, urging readers to reflect on a future that brings alienation, dehumanization, and a loss of human authenticity.

Unlike Basara, who engages in the destruction of myths about the past, Bećković focuses on a future world in which basic human values seem increasingly to fade. While Basara demystifies the past, Bećković

uses humor and satire to depict a dystopian future in which traditional values and foundations collapse under the pressure of modernization and ideological experiments. Both writers express deep concern for authenticity through irony and humor, but from different perspectives—Basara is concerned with liberation from the false idols of the past, while Bečković calls for the preservation of traditional values and warns of the dangers posed by a future without them.

Vidosav Stevanović, in the novella *If I Ever Die* [*Ako ikada umrem*], uses a cynical tone to deconstruct the myth of Josip Broz Tito and expose the absurdity of the personality cult that dominated Yugoslav political and cultural life for decades, even (perhaps more strongly) after the death of the autocratic leader. By portraying Tito as a figure whose power, charisma, and absurd elevation led to near-divine status, the novel provokes the reader to reconsider the historical narratives carefully constructed by the regime. The cynicism in the depiction of Tito and his surroundings reveals the hypocrisy of a society that believed in an ideology, while behind the scenes authoritarian rule and control reigned. *If I Ever Die* thus becomes more than just a political critique—it is also a call to awaken and liberate individual consciousness, to question the past, and to find authentic freedom within oneself, a central idea in the work of humanistic psychologists like Fromm and Rogers.

VI. Our Beloved Boka: The Sail of Hope

Books such as *The Sail of Hope* [*Jedro nade*] and *The Wandering Man from the Bay of Kotor* [*Lutajući Bokelj*] by Nikola Malović, *A Song of Three Worlds* [*Pesma o tri sveta*] by Vladimir Pištalo, as well as a series of plays by Vida Ognjenović, the latest of which is *Archpriest Kojović* [*Nadpop Kojović*], all set in the coastal landscape of Boka Kotorska and the neighboring Paštovići, share a common thread of preserving the authenticity of cultural heritage and the uniqueness of identity, as well as the moral foundations of local communities in a world undergoing changes under the pressures of globalization and modern social and political challenges.

Through the novels *The Wandering Man from the Bay of Kotor* and *The Sail of Hope*, Malović emphasizes the cultural and historical authenticity of Boka Kotorska, pointing out how nature, tradition, and local

stories shape the identity of this region. Through various encounters and events, the stories highlight efforts to preserve local cultural values in a world rapidly changing under the pressures of modernization and globalization. The novels breathe life into the ancient spirit of the Mediterranean through contemporary tales, in which the history and tradition of Boka Kotorska are not only recorded but also reinterpreted in light of the present day. Malović succeeds in portraying Boka not just as a geographical space but as a place with a deeply rooted culture and identity (also historically shaped by a mix of cultural influences), which must be preserved from homogenization and being submerged into global trends. Through a melancholic atmosphere of travel and sailing, Malović explores universal themes of belonging, identity, and connection with the past. By using Boka, the sea, and seafaring as metaphors for a deeper search for individual and collective identity, he writes odes to the aspiration of preserving the cultural heritage and authenticity of Boka Kotorska. Through characters and their interactions with local tradition, the novel reveals a striving for freedom through the preservation of one's cultural roots in a world of general leveling.

Vladimir Pištalo, in his novel *A Song of Three Worlds*, creates a complex, multi-layered narrative that intertwines history, adventure, and an introspective search for meaning, shedding light on the struggle for freedom and authenticity through the character of Ozana Bolica. The novel follows her journey across different meridians as she faces slavery, betrayal, and the loss of identity. This story emphasizes how an individual, even in the most difficult circumstances, can preserve inner freedom and strength through the richness of their inner world and memories.

Pištalo uses the character of Ozana to show how a person, in this case a woman—which sends an additional message—can remain true to themselves despite external pressures and violence. Ozana, although physically imprisoned and at the mercy of others, maintains a sense of freedom and identity through her memories and inner richness. This is a struggle for authenticity, not only in the physical sense but also spiritually, where art and memory stand in contrast to brutal reality. In *A Song of Three Worlds*, Vladimir Pištalo uses Perast and the Bay of Kotor as starting points for the main heroine, whose journey, though full of hardships, symbolizes a deeper search for identity and freedom. Perast, with its rich maritime history, represents a symbol of cultural and historical

authenticity, a support for inner strength and persistence, which Ozana carries with her as she faces the challenges of slavery and colonialism.

Vida Ognjenović has a series of plays set in a Mediterranean context, starting with *Kanjoš Macedonović* [*Kanjoš Macedonović*] and up to *Archpriest Kojović*. In these plays, Ognjenović uses characters from local history and legends to depict the struggle for the preservation of cultural and political autonomy. The Paštrovići, as a small but proud tribe, become a symbol of the universal striving for freedom and authenticity, opposing external pressures that threaten their identity. Ognjenović emphasizes the importance of local tradition, moral courage, and community in preserving authentic values, which is especially relevant in the context of contemporary challenges posed by globalization.

Antun Kojović, educated at the best universities of his time and inspired by Enlightenment ideas, returns to Budva. From the perspective of a local priest, yet also a citizen of the world, he tries to preserve the integrity of his community in a time of political and social upheaval. The character of archpriest Kojović symbolizes the moral pillar of the community, who fights against internal corruption and external pressures. This play explores the complexities of sovereignty and identity in the light of modernization, showing how local leaders can play a crucial role in preserving the community and its values.

These works unite the authors around a common theme: how to preserve authenticity and freedom in a world full of pressures and changes. Through stories of the struggle for cultural identity, they examine not only the past but also the present and the future, in the spirit of theories on preserving uniqueness and identity. Their works send a clear message about the necessity of protecting cultural heritage as the foundation of collective freedom and authenticity, urging readers to recognize the value of their roots and to be ready to defend them against the pervasive influences of global powers (Bhabha, 1994; Tomlinson, 1999).

VII Freedom Traced by the Sky: Deliverance Through Imagination

The works of Goran Petrović, such as *Atlas Traced by the Sky* [*Atlas opisan nebom*], *The Pawnbroker's "At The Lucky Hand"* [*Sitničarnica*]

“*Kod srećne ruke*”), and *Beneath the Peeling Ceiling* [*Ispod tavanice koja se ljušpa*] offer a distinctive literary space in which freedom is not sought through victory over material obstacles but through overcoming them via imagination, dreams, and fantasy. In his novels, Petrović creates worlds that operate by their own rules, liberating characters—and by extension, readers—from the limitations of everyday reality.

In *Atlas Traced by the Sky*, Petrović constructs a symbolic world where the boundaries between the real and the imaginary become porous. Through characters who seek their freedom beyond what is evident and material, the author portrays imagination as the key means of liberation. In this context, liberation does not come through political or social rebellion, but through an inner revolution—by venturing into worlds where imagination becomes the only truth. This concept can be linked to humanistic psychological theories, such as those of Carl Rogers, where authenticity and self-actualization are achieved when an individual frees themselves from the constraints of reality and allows themselves to create and explore new worlds.

The Pawnbroker’s “At The Lucky Hand” goes even further, immersing readers in a world where books and literature become spaces for liberation. Petrović uses literary fantasy to show that the world of books is not just an escape, but a way to expand consciousness and discover new possibilities of existence. The characters in the novel reveal to us that the boundaries of the world are defined only by our perception and that true freedom lies in transcending those boundaries through creativity and imagination. This search for liberation through fantasy recalls Fromm’s concept of positive freedom—the freedom to be creative, to dream, and to create, as an essential part of an authentic life.

Through these works, Petrović affirms the idea that true freedom is not necessarily political or societal, but one that comes from within, through the liberation of the imagination and the search for meaning in a world beyond what is visible at first glance, seeking freedom in that which is invisible and subtle, often deeper and more authentic than material reality itself. His novels invite liberation from the constraints of everyday reality and provide a space where authenticity becomes possible through boundless creativity and fantasy.

Here, we can also include the poetry collection *Crosswords* [*Ukrštene reči*] by Zoran Kostić Cane, the frontman of the rock band Partibrejkers.

Cane uses the specific energy and rebellious spirit of rock'n'roll culture to express personal and societal frustrations, but also the search for inner freedom. His poetry, like his musical works, is imbued with raw, yet sincere tones, where everyday reality is perceived through personal reflections, irony, and a touch of bitterness. Cane's poetry carries the same raw rebellious energy found in his music, and almost every verse radiates a desire for freedom and authenticity, liberation from the pressures of the system, social norms, and personal limitations. In this context, Cane's *Crosswords* can also be compared to the work of Nobel laureate Bob Dylan. Both use rock'n'roll as the foundation for raising existential and societal questions, with their poetry transcending traditional musical forms and entering the realm of literature, maintaining the rebellious spirit. Like Dylan, Cane explores themes of identity, alienation, freedom, and justice in his poetry, using a style that merges the rawness of everyday life with deep philosophical contemplation.

Cane's poetry, like Dylan's, raises the question of what it means to be free in a world full of limitations and injustices. His verses convey the message of the necessity of personal struggle for authenticity, liberation from everything that stifles the creative spirit, but also a call to reflect on broader societal frameworks. His poetry carries the energy of rock'n'roll, but the focus is not solely on rebellion against external authorities; it also centers on introspective confrontation with personal weaknesses, the daily sense of meaninglessness, and the need for inner liberation. In *Crosswords*, poetry becomes a weapon against the triviality, superficiality, and lack of freedom in the modern world. It does not encourage grand revolutions or world-changing efforts, but calls for personal awakening and the courage to face the world as it is, with an awareness of the value of authentic existence.

VIII Anticolonialism: The Sun Over the Heart of Darkness

In the book *The Sun of This Day: A Letter to Andrić* [*Sunce ovog dana: Pismo Andriću*] Vladimir Pištalo expresses a deep respect for the struggle for freedom and authenticity, particularly in light of the historical and cultural pressures on the Balkans. Through a dialogue with

Andrić, a symbol of the local subject who overcame colonial status and gained universal recognition, Pištalo shows that the past is both an inspiration and an obstacle to freedom. He emphasizes that liberation comes not only through political acts but also through art and the re-examination of cultural heritage. In Pištalo's work, art and culture play a key role in liberating oneself from dominant narratives, similar to anticolonial approaches that emphasize a return to indigenous identity (Montero & Sonn, 2009). Pištalo uses the legacy of the Young Bosnia organization, to which Andrić was closely linked, as a metaphor for resistance, drawing parallels with similar movements, such as Young Italy, and highlighting the inconsistencies in historical interpretations, where one is viewed as a terrorist organization and the other as a liberation movement.

The Sun of This Day can be interpreted as a work that affirms freedom and authenticity through the revival of one's own past and memories, in accordance with the theories of psychological authenticity, as seen in humanistic psychologists like Maslow (1987) and Rogers (1961), where self-actualization occurs through the integration of one's identity despite external pressures. As Pištalo depicts it, liberation happens through rejecting imposed narratives and reclaiming one's own stories and traditions, which aligns with decolonization theories (Montero, 2015).

Pištalo's work can be analyzed through the *Theory of Social Dominance* (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which explains how hegemony is maintained through historical and cultural narratives, legitimized myths, such as the different treatments of Young Bosnia and Young Italy. *System Justification Theory* (Jost & Banaji, 1994) is also useful in analyzing how some narratives rationalized unjust systems and legitimized colonial powers: "There was no sun if they said there was none... We had to adapt our knowledge to the foreign ignorance of ourselves" (Pištalo, *Pesma o tri sveta*, p. 290). Through ironic anecdotes, like the one about Prince Miloš and Metternich, Pištalo further critiques the established narratives.

Gavrilo Princip, in the collection of short stories by various authors titled *Gavrilo's Principle* [*Gavrilov princip*], in the novel *Das ist Princip* by Vladimir Kecmanović, and even in the play *This Grave is Too Small for Me* [*Mali mi je ovaj grob*] by Biljana Srbljanović, becomes a symbol of the struggle for freedom and against the hegemony of great powers. Through a focus on defiance, resistance, and the aspiration for freedom, this can be linked to key ideas of decolonization, which deal with resistance to

domination and the pursuit of political, cultural, and economic freedom. In decolonization theory, nations and individuals who were under colonial or imperial yokes struggle to reaffirm their identity and their right to self-determination, which is directly reflected in the ways in which Princip and his assassination act have been re-examined in contemporary Serbian literature.

A much more explicit form of resistance can be found in the poems of Dobrica Erić, especially in *The Song of Defiance* [*Prkosna pesma*], which at times uses a sharply patriotic tone and a feeling of anger, such as when describing “the mob of former men... packs of robots and other monsters” (Erić 1994) to express dissatisfaction with foreign powers interfering in Serbia’s internal affairs, presenting the West as an unjust and hypocritical actor enforcing double standards in international politics. This, along with *The Proud Poem* [*Ponosna pesma*] and *All My Ancestors* [*Svi moji preci*], carries Erić’s message about the need to preserve sovereignty and dignity in a world where the international community uses its power to suppress small nations.

Milovan Danajlić, who lived and worked in the West, in France, writes in *Forced Confessions* [*Iznuđene ispovesti*] and *Unaddressed Letters* [*Pisma bez adrese*] with a deep sense of frustration toward what he perceives as the hegemony of Western political forces, reflected in political domination and cultural imposition. These works, more essays than novels, largely reflect the sense of isolation and injustice that many in Serbia feel, especially after the bombing of 1999.

Through all these examples, the aspiration for cultural and political liberation is recognized, with Serbian authors contributing to and joining the broader discourse on resistance to global inequalities, lack of principles, and the desire to preserve authentic cultural identity.

Conclusion

Contemporary Serbian literature, viewed through the lens of the struggle for personal and collective freedom and authenticity, represents a dynamic field where social, political, and existential themes intertwine. Writers, through their works, show how individuals and nations are often confronted with external limitations, such as repressive regimes, poverty,

wars, or the influence of globalization and neocolonialism, as well as with internal barriers stemming from social norms, historical traumas, and personal conflicts. Through introspective narratives, historical descriptions, and satirical reflections, authors explore the boundaries of freedom and authenticity, posing key questions about how individuals and communities can find their authentic voice in a world that continuously pressures them and attempts to shape their values.

The central theme of authenticity, which runs through many works, emphasizes the need to preserve inner truth and integrity, regardless of external pressures. However, this quest for authenticity is not merely an internal process of personal self-actualization but is rooted in collective experience and historical contexts, making literature a powerful tool for questioning and recognizing the social and political constraints that limit human freedom. Through diverse perspectives, Serbian literature becomes a platform for resistance—not only political but also cultural and spiritual—where writers and their characters search for a space in which they can preserve and affirm their values and identity.

Through an analysis of the struggle for freedom, authors raise the question of how much our understanding of freedom and authenticity is shaped by external forces, and how much it is the result of an internal struggle for self-awareness. In this sense, literature becomes a guide for individuals and communities toward the active pursuit of freedom and authentic existence, even when it seems that the boundaries of freedom are narrow or nonexistent.

Serbian literature also demonstrates that the fight for freedom and authenticity is a universal human aspiration, transcending local and historical boundaries, thus becoming part of the broader global dialogue on human rights, dignity, and self-awareness. Through numerous literary narratives mentioned, space is opened for a deeper understanding of not only individual but also collective freedom, making literature a means of transformation for both personal consciousness and the social structures that limit that freedom.

Translated by Doroteja Balaban

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