

**Vladislava Gordić Petković\***

University of Novi Sad  
English Department  
Novi Sad, Serbia

## **HISTORY, IDENTITY AND MASCULINITY IN DAVID ALBAHARI'S *BAIT***

### **Abstract**

David Albahari belongs to the most prominent voices of Serbian literature, and his reputation of a writer immersed in postmodern experiment has not been shaken by his subsequent decision to start a search for self-identity within the frame of national history and the traumas of non-belonging. After having moved to Canada in 1993, Albahari's fiction reveals a deep concern with the interplay of history and identity, which relates to Margaret Atwood's intention to explore the processes of creating history within fictional texts. Albahari investigates the feeling of otherness, imposed by so called "historical overdosing" and a collective neurosis of uprootedness, thus contributing to the "international theme" in Serbian literature. The paper will focus upon *Bait*, one of his four novels translated into English, and the constructions of identity and masculine gender roles.

In her book of literary criticism, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood posits survival as both a metaphor for Canadian literature and the cause of the "collective neurosis" of Canadian authors. She focuses on "victim positions" in Canadian literature, originating from the status of Canada as a victim of American domination. Such a position, according to Atwood, is only an expression of the Canadian unstable identity. Atwood questions Canada's national identity through symbolism and ambiguity, seeing the latter as a weakness and concentrating on

---

\* E-mail address: [vladyzg@yahoo.com](mailto:vladyzg@yahoo.com)

Canadians being mesmerized by Americans while lacking interest in their own country.

After having moved to Canada in 1993, Serbian writer David Albahari revealed in his fiction a deep concern with the interplay of history and identity, which relates to Atwood's intention to explore the processes of creating history within fictional texts. Preferring the "rootlessness" of Canadian exile to political instability in Serbia, Albahari investigates the feeling of otherness, imposed by "historical overdosing" (Coupland 1991: 9) and a collective neurosis of non-belonging, as this paper has an intention to show. Albahari's reputation of a writer immersed in postmodern experiment, has not been shaken by his subsequent decision to invest into a search for identity within the frame of national history and cultural traumas of non-belonging. The civil wars in Yugoslavia at the end of the twentieth century – which caused ethnic cleansing and migrations of the civilian population – provided new ground for the treatment of the "international theme", as well as new images of rootlessness, reflected in three "Canadian novels" (*Snow Man*, 1995, *Bait*, 1996, and *Darkness*, 1997); all years of publication refer to Serbian editions). Albahari's new émigré environment is duly reflected in his fiction.

The first of Albahari's so-called Canadian novels, *Snow Man*, was written while the author lived in Calgary on a grant from the Markin-Flanagan Program for Distinguished Writers, and introduces the reader to a non-heroic and disoriented narrator, who comes to a Canadian university as a visiting lecturer after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. He feels that his own life is falling apart, in concert with the history of his country, and seems to be unable to cope with the impasses of unbelonging and uprootedness. The clutch of uneasiness in the new world, the state of mind that is not unlike the cultural shock but far surpasses it, will become a recurring motif in Albahari's subsequent novels and serve as new ground for redefining identity, as well as for representations of masculinity.

The finest example of Albahari's use of the autobiographical emigrant experience, for artistic purposes, is the widely critically acclaimed novel *Bait*. The motives of communication and confession are elaborated with due concern in this painful reconstruction of exile, memory and inheritance. However, the dominant metaphor is that of a haunting voice from the past: the audio tapes, brought to Canada from the former Yugoslavia by the storyteller, contain his mother's personal history, which is unfolded and appreciated with the generous assistance of three different voices. The first is the voice

of the mother herself, recorded on tape, the second belongs to her son, the narrator, who relates the story of her restless life filled with danger and uncertainty, whereas the third voice is given to a friendly outsider, a Canadian acquaintance who comments on the mother's story both as an observer and as a writer who understands the narrative power of the testimony.

Albahari's hero, a Serbian-Jewish intellectual, imagines a story he could write if he succumbed to the influence of the magic and woeful voice coming from the past, largely due to his initiative. After his father passed away in his fifties, the hero persuaded his mother to record the recollections of her own youth, to tell of her experiences and observations, about the time of the Second World War when she lost her first husband and their two sons. Against the backdrop of atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia fifty years later, the narrator dwells on his inability to turn his mother's painful life story into words. He borrows an old tape recorder from his acquaintance Donald and listens to the voice of his mother, distant yet familiar, talking in his mother tongue, which has already started slipping from him, as have his homeland and its painful history he is so desperately trying to comprehend.

Serbian history has gradually become an important issue in Albahari's writing, as has the motif of exile. Still, the author has never abandoned his early interest in dreams, secrets, revelations and surprises emerging from a seemingly dull and peaceful everyday life. Albahari's narrative concerns keep revolving around the family, as he has claimed that, if one understands what is going on inside the family, one will understand what is going on in the world since all patterns tend to repeat themselves on different scales. The reader approaches the historical reality through the protagonists' intimate impressions that are presented in the individual memories and life experiences, and this approach has not substantially changed over time, despite the changes in Albahari's themes and interests. Apart from the author's general inclination to represent stereotypes (both Balkan and Western ones) from a critical distance, the new thematic scope in Albahari's work covers the aftermath of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and all the phenomena which contribute to our understanding of the country's decline and fall. Albahari focuses his attention on transposing reality into narration and relieving the troubles of communication in (post)modern society which have reached an impasse.

Albahari's articulate but helpless and listless characters are usually sensitive recluses, positioned within an environment which is not

hostile, but rather irreparably indifferent to their emotional turmoil. The protagonists in Albahari's novels always seem to be too fragile and delicate to be approached and understood by their new homeland, which poses no threat to their identity or integrity, yet appears to be dangerously unable to tolerate the introspection and isolation of an expatriate who is trying to solve the puzzle of identity, history, and belonging. Such overtly sensitive characters perceive Canada as an estranged utopia, whose slowness and simplicity can sometimes seem soothing and appeasing, but also frightening and uncanny.

Both before the turbulent 1990s and after them, Albahari has persistently been writing about the transfigurations of identity, as if irresistibly driven towards the bottomless abyss this thematic interest unfolds. His early prose was free from the impact of reality and somewhat self-absorbed in its minimalist artistry, its only relationship with the big outside world being established through language as an independent, overpowering dominion. Albahari's early writing was fragmented, reduced in terms of characters and plot, heavily relying on poetic imagination and a succinct language, yet cryptic and unfathomable. The ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s affected his style by turning his prose into a less fragmentary continuum, and making his narrative devices seemingly more traditional. Still, it remains quite a paradox that Albahari actually did include realistic and historical elements into the realm of his literature, without abandoning the minimalism and self-consciousness of his literary style. The volatile identity of the narrator, which used to be shaped through language, came to depend on the historical present.

The narrator discusses various issues of his mother's life story with his Canadian fellow-writer Donald who, as a Canadian, "had no idea of history," but was very "keen" on "explaining it" (Albahari 2001: 72). When the narrator tells Donald that his mother claimed that Hitler's soldiers were welcomed with flowers and chocolate in Zagreb, Donald, who is obsessed with facts rather than their meaning, insists on verifying if there really was a shower of chocolates thrown at the parade and not just the regular flowers thrown to soldiers on this occasion. This obsession with factual accuracy helps the unnamed narrator understand the impossibility of presenting history through testimony; while the facts of history are filed away so as to represent a coherent system, the facts of memory make no sense, being random and chaotic like dreams or visions. The alleged chocolate shower is not the only illogical and unconvincing detail in the oral history of the

Serbian mother: forced by historical changes to redefine her ethnicity and change her name, the narrator's mother had to become a Serb again, although she had married a Jew and converted to Judaism. During the German occupation, in Hitler's Croatian puppet state, she had to persuade her children that they were not Jews: the family managed to escape to Belgrade, but her husband was soon shot in a German concentration camp and their children were killed in a railway accident. Sorrows in the mother's life come in battalions, they pile up in the way that would be least convincing and most absurd had her life story been a complete invention.

Although Albahari has gradually revealed a deep concern with the interplay of history and identity, the shift of focus in his writing came as a carefully controlled minimum. Language has imminently lost its privileged position since it cannot mark the turbulent changes in the efficient way in which history can. Where history rushes in, identities change slowly and unwillingly, but the change is deep and imminent, as the author loses the control he had over his fictional world during times of peace, when the randomness of time and space seemed less shocking and easier to deal with. Albahari's poetic creed seemed to enter what Canadian writer Douglas Coupland calls "historical overdosing", which is, by definition, a period of time when too much seems to happen and when the authentic events become more dramatic than any invented plots could have ever been. Albahari's shift of focus and his abrupt turn towards the topics of history, politics and ethnicity were probably unwanted, but also encouraged by his dislocated position. His Canadian trilogy discusses the continual misunderstanding between the New World and the Old World, representing the European fatal Otherness through the images of desolate space, loneliness and miscommunication attributed to the image of the New World, and the juxtaposed cinematic effects of Yugoslav history rushing in from the Old World. The image of the Balkans as semi-colonial and semi-civilized appears to be not only the result of a long misunderstanding, but also a more symbolical aftermath of the ethnicity-linked miscommunication. Thus it seems that the purely existential frustration in Albahari's fiction is imminent, and history reinforces the fact that alienation and misunderstanding cannot be avoided.

The narrator of *Bait* is both the alter ego of the author and his fictional persona which desperately tries to give voice to the voiceless identity struggle. Torn between the abandoned homeland and the still unaccepted new country, he finds refuge in the audio tapes with his mother's personal

history and the relics and heirlooms he brought to Canada from the former Yugoslavia. The narrator of *Bait* hears his mother speaking in his mother tongue “across time and outside of life” (Albahari 2001: 93) and likens her voice to an urn containing the ashes and a substitute to reality. Along with his mother’s story, the character narrates his own life to his Canadian friend Donald, also a writer, who tries to grasp the meaning of the unresolved ethnic and intimate conflicts. The three characters cherish memories that cannot be shared, their experiences differ because history and culture have given them irreconcilable differences, and thus they are unable to communicate the pain and the frustration of the ardent wish to be understood.

For the narrator’s mother, “history had been a fact, a mallet that with inexorable precision had come down on her” (Albahari 2001: 20). Born in a small Bosnian town, she moved to Zagreb and married a communist Jew from an Ashkenazi family; she converted to Judaism at the beginning of the Second World War. In order to escape the Holocaust that started in Zagreb, the family moved to Belgrade, but the father was sent to a concentration camp and killed. The narrator’s mother has to represent herself as an Orthodox Serb again, in order to save the lives of her children, and her manipulations with her identity continue. “I never stopped being a Serb, nor did I renounce the Jewish faith then. In war, life is a document. What was written on the paper, and on all my papers, still said that I was a Serb” (Albahari 2001: 28). At first forced to change her identity because she “did not exist” for her husband’s family, the narrator’s mother had to revert to the “old,” abandoned identity which suddenly provided her with an existence in the historical context. The Balkan identities thus seem to be absolutely inconvenient: they are subject to change, they must be adopted and renounced, lost and found.

The impossibility of self-identification in the Balkans seems to be as absurd as the postmodern transfigurations of identity, and the history recorded on tape suddenly becomes as intricate and fabricated as the literary genre of historiographic metafiction: the narrator’s mother was born shortly before the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and saw the birth of a new country, which first became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (1918), then The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929), only to – shortly after Second World War – turn into the National Federative Yugoslavia, and then the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia that fell apart in the 1990s. The changes of the name and the political

system denied the possibility of creating a stable identity. However, the disintegration of the private self is influenced by the socio-political discourse, and thus in the case of the identification of the Balkans the playfulness and experimental potential of the postmodern identities are irretrievably lost.

According to Linda Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction rejects projecting present beliefs onto the past, undermining the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. Both fiction and historiography draw their force from verisimilitude rather than objective truth, relying on self-reflexivity and intertextuality. Hutcheon insists on the self-conscious dimension of history, which is often reflected in fictional forms. Historiographic metafiction often refers to the loss of the feminine voice in history and therefore looks for a way to empower the characters of women. Thus, *Bait* might also be considered as a contribution to the genre Hutcheon has elaborated.

Albahari's hero tries to overcome death, loss and anxiety by writing a novel which consists of "apparently contradictory fragments, united by the same sense of loss" (Albahari 2001: 1). Bereaved over the loss of his mother and his homeland, he is worried that he might lose his mother tongue as well, and desperately struggles to reimburse his losses in life and history through literature, like one of Emily Dickinson's lyrical subjects who accused God of being burglar, banker and father, all in one, and pleads to be reimbursed. Albahari's narrator wrestles with his demons, hoping to overcome historical trauma and personal loss by creating a fictional frame for the void in his life. The book he writes (or hopes to write one day, we cannot tell for sure) is obviously an autobiography which mourns the losses in life, but also strives to be redemption in itself.

The Canadian character Donald brings a fresh outlook to the narrator's anxiety over remembrance, advising him to see language as a transparent glass between the man and his world, not as an obstacle or a hidden danger. Donald's unfavourable final judgment about the narrator's manuscript may only mean that the fictional text failed to fulfill his all too formalistic approach to the tenets of the novelistic genre: the novel which comes to life in front of our very eyes fails to be either a form of solace or a genuine work of art, but those were not the priorities of its author anyway. *Bait* discloses the inner emptiness of literature, its failure to provide definite answers and an indefinite consolation, its promise of redemption, and its inability to fulfill the promise: the darkness that rushes in through the

doorframe of the narrator's home at the end of the novel is a materialized metaphor of nothingness that cannot be escaped. Narration is possible only as an oscillation between the promise that the pain and glory will be successfully rendered and the impossibility of fulfilling it, the oscillation in which the promise and its failure are taken equally seriously.

Albahari's stories and novels seem to end in an interruption or silence, never complying with the logic of the narrative structure and composition. The characters usually frustrate the reader's expectations to learn the ultimate truth of the narrative. Stories redeem life and conceal the fact that when someone passes away, there are no words that can bring one back. Albahari's characters never find solace or relief in popular culture or any kind of instant gratification offered by mass media or pop psychology: they seem to shun all forms of indulgence in transitory joys of oblivion which are being offered by the contemporary culture of consumerism. Likewise, the heroes reject simplifications and stereotypical images, even in cases when simplified judgment might bridge the gap between them and the rest of the world.

Albahari's alter ego, who narrates his tales of loneliness and inability to adapt to the new environment, had not had time to recover from the initial shock of losing his apparently stable homeland to the feud of warring tribes. Albahari's characters suffer from what has been listed on the margins of Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* as "Option Paralysis": "the tendency, when given unlimited choice, to make none" (Coupland 1991: 161). The issue of choice reflects indifference and listlessness characteristic of both a generation and a social group. There is the sense that, viewed a certain way, all modern existence is just too absurd for words.

The construction of gender roles in Albahari's novel exemplify the crisis of masculinity which is often overshadowed by history and identity crises but is nevertheless easily observed. Social scientists Deborah David and Robert Brannon elaborated the four rules for establishing masculinity, which were widely referred to at the beginnings of sociological research of socially constructed masculine sexuality, and also seem to be appropriate for further reading into Albahari's representations of roles and stereotypes. The first rule David and Brannon establish calls for "no sissy stuff": this means that anything that even remotely hints of femininity is prohibited to the real man. Albahari's male characters, who hold exclusive rights to narrate the story, often admit fear, weakness and inability to face adversity, but their frailty is never disguised, nor do they try to use cowardice as a

weapon. The narrative of *Bait* largely depends on the powerful voice of a woman, while its narrator obsessively focuses on the feminine oral history as the primary source for his future book. Borrowing the plot for his novel from his mother's life, the protagonist also symbolically borrows her traits: her responsiveness to both pleasure and pain, and her refined sensitivity.

The second rule David and Brannon define, requiring the man to "be a big wheel", implies that masculinity is measured by success, power, and the admiration of others. Albahari constructs aloof and distanced male characters who regularly lack any ambition or aspiration, but rather seem to enjoy their splendid isolation. They are alone, but not lonely; they renounce earthly treasures; they seem disinterested in being accomplished or successful, and they rarely ever talk about mundane things like property or money. The world they inhabit resembles an existential vacuum, not in terms of setting a scene for a meaningless or purposeless life, but in the sense that the characters seek ultimate satisfaction in nothingness.

The third rule for establishing masculinity obliges a man to "be a sturdy oak": manliness requires rationality, toughness, and self-reliance, all of which Albahari's hero from *Bait* lacks, being quite aloof, insecure, self-conscious and totally non-heroic. According to the rules of the patriarchal culture, a proper man must remain calm in any situation, show no emotion, and admit no weakness, which is exactly what he fails to do every single time. His empathy for his mother's life story reveals his frailty, yet he was decisive enough to make her articulate her experience and record the attempt at creating an autobiography.

The last rule David and Brannon named, interestingly and ironically enough, demands the proper man to "give 'em hell": men must exude an aura of daring and aggression, and must be willing to take risks, to "go for it" even when reason and fear suggest otherwise (Levin 1998: 145). Albahari's hero is regularly incapable of giving hell to anyone and he usually harms only himself with endless contemplation and inability to abate sadness and melancholy. The important part of his characters is a particular kind of effeminacy; they seem to be the picture perfect "failed man", in terms of social stigma imposed upon the men who are "not man enough". In 1987, Richard Eisler and Jay Skidmore created the idea of masculine stress, defining several mechanisms of masculinity that accompany masculine roles, resulting in emotional stress. Such mechanisms become visible in situations when men are expected to prevail owing to their fitness and strength, or in situations when they are in danger of showing emotions

and thus become “feminine”. Other situations include matters of sexual relationships and work, where men are obliged to conquer, as well as the times when tender emotions are to be repressed, as is requested by traditional masculine customs. Albahari’s characters are subjected to continual emotional stress, which results in their displaying a soft, “feminine” side: they never repress their feelings, and regularly withdraw from challenges that include competition and conquering.

The categories of masculinity and femininity are discursive constructs and socially determined categories important for character analysis. Whether female is always associated with the submissive and the passive and male is characterized as dominant and assertive relates to the literature in the changing world, where roles of men and women constantly change. The growth of the character, which the traditional novel calls for, is somewhat impeded in the works of fiction which tend to be slowed by minute reflection or endless discussions in books which abound in static first-person narrative reports of immobile reality. In the same way he disputes the tenets of realism in literature, Albahari refuses to abide to the stereotypical portrayal of literary characters. Risking emotional turmoil, his protagonists bravely give in to a search for self-identity in the unstable world filled with ambiguity and inconsistencies, fighting against despair yet yielding to what Thomas Wyatt once called “a strange fashion of forsaking”: leaving the turbulent history of both the family and the homeland behind, yet returning to it with a renewed potential of both self-examination and suffering.

## References

- Albahari, D. (1996). *Mamac*. Beograd: Stubovi kulture.
- Albahari, D. (2001). *Bait*. Translated by Peter Agnone. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Atwood, M. (1972). *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi.
- Coupland, D. (1991). *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- David, D. S. and Robert Brannon (eds.). (1976). *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*. New York: Random House.

- Eisler, R. and Jay Skidmore (1987). Masculine Role Stress: Scale Development and Component Factors in the Appraisal of Stressful Situations. *Behavior Modification*, 11, 123-136.
- Ford, R. (2012). *Canada*. Toronto: Ecco/Harper Collins.
- Gordić Petković, V. (2011). Narrative Strategies in Contemporary Serbian Fiction. *Filolog*, 4 (2), 11-18.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.
- Hunt, K. (2005). Snow Man. *Quill and Quire*, [http://www.quillandquire.com/reviews/review.cfm?review\\_id=4380](http://www.quillandquire.com/reviews/review.cfm?review_id=4380), (10 April 2011).
- Kimmel, M. and A. Aronson (eds.). (2004). *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc.
- Koljević, S. (2011). The "International Theme" in Contemporary Serbian Literature. Ivana Đurić Paunović, Maja Marković (eds.). *English Studies Today: Views and Voices*. Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet, 199-213.
- Levine, M. P. (ed.). (1998). *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of The Homosexual Clone*. New York: New York University Press.
- McHale, B. (1987). *Postmodernist Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Milutinović, Z. (2005). The Demoniacism of History and Promise of Aesthetic Redemption in David Albahari's Bait. *Serbian Studies*, 1 (19), 15-25.
- Mraović, D. (2005). The Politics of Representations: Mamac by David Albahari. *Serbian Studies*, 1 (19), 35-53.

Received: 20 May, 2012

Accepted for publication: 15, June 2012

Владислава Гордић Петковић

ИСТОРИЈА, ИДЕНТИТЕТ И ПРЕДСТАВЕ О МАСКУЛИНИТЕТУ  
У РОМАНУ МАМАЦ ДАВИДА АЛБАХАРИЈА

**Сажетак**

Репутација Давида Албахарија као једног од најзначајнијих прозаиста у савременој српској књижевности који су се бавили постмодернистичким експериментом није се променила након пишевог заокрета према потрази за идентитетом у оквирима националне историје и мотиву трауматичног неприпадања. Албахаријева проза након пишевог пресељења у Канаду 1993. године отвара тематско питање прожимања историје и националног идентитета што овог писца доводи у везу са покушајем Маргарет Етвуд да истражује процес стварања историје у оквирима фикционалног текста. Албахари истражује осећај другости који намеће колективна траума искорењености, дајући тако особен допринос интенационалној теми у оквирима српске књижевности. Рад ће се позабавити романом *Мамац*, и конструкцијама идентитета и маскулinitета у њему.