



War and the City, Fantasy and Fact: The Siege of Sarajevo in Karim Zaimović's Postmodern Short Fiction

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Abstract

This article analyses the posthumous short story collection *Tajna džema od malina* [The Secret of Raspberry Jam] (1997), written by Bosnian author Karim Zaimović (1971–1995) during the siege of his home city, Sarajevo. Zaimović, who died at the end of the conflict, depicted the reality of war by inserting clichés taken from genre fiction into a documentary-like description of life in the besieged city. This procedure may be likened to the features recognised by Linda Hutcheon as typical of postmodern literature, which often applies popular fiction devices to historical content to make the reader aware of historical narratives' socially constructed nature. Indeed, by mixing fantasy and fact, Zaimović aimed to deconstruct the besieging army's propaganda and rebuild Sarajevo's social tissue with the power of imagination. To better understand the author's work, we will consider the development of popular fiction in Yugoslavia and the presence of similar themes in the works of other contemporary Sarajevoan writers, such as Aleksandar Hemon.

Keywords: Karim Zaimović; postmodernism; historiographic metafiction; Sarajevo; war literature; Bosnia; popular fiction

The study was conducted at the author's own expense.

No competing interests have been declared.

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In the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine at the end of February 2022, Ukrainian writer and translator from the BCMS language¹ Andriy Lyubka recorded a video message for the online journal *Craft Magazine*, describing his reaction to the full-scale invasion in the following terms: "[...] it reminds me of the Apocalypse. It reminds me of a Hollywood horror film in which zombies crawl from all holes and from all sides, trying to destroy a normal life [...]" (*Craft Magazine*, 2022).² To depict the social changes suddenly caused by war, Lyubka employed images and characters typical of monster films, representing the conflict as a brutal transition to a previously almost unimaginable stage of reality; in this comparison, war seems to make tragically concrete all those emotions of fear and danger that people in peacetime are mostly used to feeling only while watching films or reading fiction.

As noted by Kate McLoughlin (2009, p. 15), it is often difficult for writers to find the "right words" to describe adequately the horrors of war, which may appear unbelievable to those who have not experienced them directly;³ therefore, referring to universally known elements from popular imagination may seem an acceptable strategy to convey the emotional burden of things that would normally appear nearly inconceivable. This particular choice, which may be associated with the link between a representative disclaimer and imaginative freedom, something that McLoughlin identifies as a key technique in the literary depictions of war, significantly characterises the narrative work of Bosnian critic, journalist and writer Karim Zaimović (1971–1995). Born in Sarajevo, Zaimović described the four-year siege of his home city in the Bosnian war⁴ by inserting fantastic clichés and tropes derived from genre fiction into a documentary-like account of everyday life during the conflict, while also provocatively reimagining the city's history.

The main outcome of his literary efforts was the short story collection *Tajna džema od malina* [The Secret of Raspberry Jam], which was published posthumously in 1997 (with an updated edition in 2022);⁵ the author died on 13 August 1995 as the result of injuries

1 Following the 1990s Yugoslav conflicts, the acronym BCMS (standing for Bosnian, Montenegrin, Croatian, Serbian) is commonly employed to describe the mutually intelligible regional variants of the polycentric South Slavic language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian (Greenberg, 2008).

2 The message was originally recorded in Ukrainian: "[...] мені це нагадує апокаліпсис, мені це нагадує фільм жахів голлівудський, в якому із усіх дір, із усіх сторін лізуть якісь зомбі, які намагаються знищити нормальне життя [...]" (transcription kindly provided by Prof. Alessandro Achilli, University of Cagliari).

3 McLoughlin opens her discussion of the challenges of portraying war in a convincing manner by quoting Shakespeare's Prologue to *Henry V* (1598–1599), in which the chorus, underlining the technical limitations of the theatre medium, asks audience members to picture the Battle of Agincourt on the stage by resorting to their "imaginary forces"; the same discourse may be extended to the artistic representation of traumas induced by war.

4 After Bosnia and Herzegovina's declaration of independence from the Yugoslav federation, the country's capital was besieged from 5 April 1992 to 29 February 1996, first by the Yugoslav People's Army and subsequently by the army of the secessionist Republika Srpska of Bosnia, supported by the Belgrade government; the estimated number of civilians killed during the siege is 5,434 (King, 2003).

5 According to the general catalogue of libraries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the book was initially published by Zid in 1997, then reissued by Šahinpašić at different times between 2005 and 2013; the 2022

he sustained in one of the last mortar attacks to the city. Given Zaimović's premature death and deep narrative originality, the collection (which currently remains the writer's only published literary work)⁶ is still considered today, both locally and internationally,⁷ to be one of the most representative examples of literature produced in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992–1995 conflict. By concisely describing its principal content and characteristics, together with the author's life and main inspirations, this article aims to focus on how Zaimović's works combine historical fact and narrative invention to represent war in an unprecedented manner, which could be compared to the stylistic features that Linda Hutcheon identifies as typical of postmodern literature in her 1988 book *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (Hutcheon, 1988).

The creative roots of Zaimović's fiction can be traced back to his lifelong interest in comics as an art form, which led him to become one of the most prolific and respected comic book critics from a young age, as evidenced by the large number of essays on the topic he published in local magazines and newspapers during the 1980s⁸ (Pašanović, 2008, p. 102). This fascination could be credited to the significant role that figurative arts played in the writer's family background, given the fact that he was the son of artist Mehmed Zaimović (1938–2011).⁹ However, it was comics' peculiar combination of figures and written words that had drawn his attention the most since early childhood (Lihčić et al., 2023, p. 14). This inclination was particularly encouraged by the widespread diffusion of comic books at the time in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the efforts of rights agent Ervin Rustemagić (1952),¹⁰ the founder of the Sarajevo-based publishing house Strip Art Features,¹¹

version released by Buybook features a previously unpublished story. See <https://plus.cobiss.net/cobiss/bh/bs/bib/search?q=karim+zaimovi%C4%87&db=cobib&mat=allmaterials> (*Rezultati pretraživanja – Karim Zaimović*, n.d.).

6 Currently, besides *Tajna džema od malina*, the author's only published book is a 2005 selection of wartime essays and reportages he originally wrote for the cultural magazine *Dani* [Days] (Zaimović, 2005).

7 Since 2008, English translations of Zaimović's short stories by Ellen Elias-Bursač and Fatima Mujčinović have appeared on the blogs of international world literature journals such as *Asymptote* and *Metamorphoses*; in 2015, *The Massachusetts Review* published a graphic novel adaptation of his story "Tajna Nikole Tesle" – "The Secret of Nikola Tesla" by Bosnian-born journalist Aleksandar Brezar and Marvel illustrator Enes Čišić (Elias-Bursač, 2014).

8 We can find examples of Zaimović's pre-war activity in a 1987 issue of the biweekly magazine *Naši dani* [Our Days] (the media outlet of the youth wing of the Yugoslav League of Communists in Bosnia and Herzegovina), where he had a column focused on comparing excerpts taken from Yugoslav and foreign comics (Zaimović, 1987, p. 8).

9 An accomplished painter, Mehmed Zaimović displayed his works both in Yugoslav and international exhibitions from the 1960s, and later became a member of the Academy of Sciences and Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina; during the war, he remained in besieged Sarajevo, where in 1993 he authored a pictorial cycle significantly titled *Bol* [Pain] (Abadžić Hodžić & Zaimović, 2008, p. 73).

10 The real-life experiences of Ervin Rustemagić during the siege of Sarajevo (such as the destruction of his company's offices and the killing of his mother) were depicted by Polish-born American comic book artist Joe Kubert (1926–2012) in his 1996 graphic novel *Fax from Sarajevo*, which is dedicated to Karim Zaimović, since many of the book's illustrations are based on photographs of the war-torn city provided by the writer before his death (in 't Veld, 2018, p. 5).

11 A brief history of Strip Art Features may be found on the company's website: <http://www.safcomics.com/about.html> (*About SAF*, n.d.).

which further popularised Western European and American comics¹² across socialist Yugoslavia, while also promoting the work of local artists.¹³

Zaimović soon became one of the leading actors of Sarajevo's 1980s vibrant cultural scene, thanks to his precocious activity as a columnist and his friendship with many of the local intellectuals, such as writers Miljenko Jergović (1966) and Semezdin Mehmedinović (1960), both of whom fondly remembered him after his death.¹⁴ In particular, his magazine columns may be interpreted as proof of Sarajevo's cosmopolitan atmosphere at the time (confirmed by the 1984 Winter Olympics held in the city), given his knowledge of the adventure strip *Corto Maltese* by Italian comics artist Hugo Pratt,¹⁵ or his interest in the influence of British writers such as Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore on contemporary American superhero comics.

Interestingly, an undocumented quotation that Zaimović attributed to Gaiman in a later review of the comic book series *Black Orchid* (1988–1989), significantly titled "Istinite laži" [Truthful Lies], could be employed to aptly introduce and explain the principal creative principles of his own literary work: "Mislim da su priče o mitovima i užasu vjerovatno najlakši i najefektivniji način da govorimo o stvarnom svijetu. To je kao da su to laži koje govore istinu o našim životima" (Zaimović, 1995, p. 17).¹⁶ Indeed, as Zaimović chose to stay in Sarajevo and continue his activity as a journalist and critic¹⁷ even after the siege

12 Yugoslav newspapers and publishing houses started issuing American-produced comics in the interwar period. After World War II and the 1948 Tito-Stalin split, the establishment of economic and cultural ties between the Yugoslav socialist regime and Western bloc countries led to a renewed massive importation of Disney strips, French *bandes dessinées* and Italian works, which later triggered the growth of comics-centred publications, such as the anthological magazine *Stripoteka*, while also re-invigorating domestic production (Vučetić, 2011, pp. 192–195).

13 The then Yugoslavia had well-established comics publishing traditions, dating back to pre-World War II times, as exemplified by the work of Croatian illustrator Andrija Maurović (1901–1981) or Serbian-Russian artist Đorđe Lobačev (1909–2002). Even socialist authorities, despite periodical campaigns against the supposedly low cultural content of such publications (Zupan, 2007, p. 74), capitalised on the long-lasting popularity of this medium for propaganda purposes, as proven by the Partisan-themed strip *Mirko i Slavko* [Mirko and Slavko], drawn by Serbian author Desimir Žižović Buin (1920–1996) from 1958 to 1976 (Vučetić, 2011, p. 197).

14 Jergović, a poet and prosaist who relocated to Zagreb in 1993, recalled his last meeting with Zaimović in his weekly column "Subotnja matineja" [Saturday Matinee], originally published in the Croatian newspaper *Jutarnji list* [Morning Paper] (Jergović, 2011). Mehmedinović, who lived for some time in the United States after surviving the entire siege of Sarajevo, described his friendship with Zaimović in a text simply titled "Karim", which was originally published in his 2020 essay collection *Ovo vrijeme sada* [The Current Time] (Mehmedinović, 2022, pp. 215–223) and included as a foreword to the 2022 edition of *Tajna džema od malina*.

15 In a recent article, journalist Senad Avdić writes how in 1984 he helped 13-year-old Zaimović write his first essay, dealing with *Corto Maltese* comics, and had it published in the cultural magazine *Lica* [Faces], which he edited at the time (Avdić, 2023).

16 It was not possible to establish the exact source of this quotation, which translates as follows: "I think that stories about myths and horror represent the simplest and most effective way to talk about the real world. It is as if these lies tell the truth about our lives." All translations from BCMS are my own – E.D.

17 As recalled by Zaimović's mother, in 1992 he was drafted into the Bosnian army but was later released from service, thanks to the intervention of Senad Pećanin, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *BH Dani* [BH Days]; while continuing to work as a reporter in the besieged Sarajevo (which he left only in 1994 to attend a conference organised in Vienna by Reuters), in 1995 he co-founded, with Semezdin Mehmedinović, the cultural magazine *Fantom slobode* [The Phantom of Liberty] (Lihic et al., 2023, pp. 20–21).

began, he simultaneously started his career as a writer by describing the surrounding reality of war in twelve short stories, which featured many of the speculative narrative tropes that characterised his beloved comics (Alispahić, 2005, p. 118). Some of these texts were read aloud by the author himself on the radio programme *Jozif i njegova braća*,¹⁸ which he hosted on Radio ZID Sarajevo, an independent station established in late 1992 by jurist Zdravko Grebo (1947–2019) in order to preserve the city's tradition of multi-ethnic coexistence and keep the international community aware of the citizens' situation during the siege.¹⁹

It might have been the peculiar aura of “mediatic authenticity” usually surrounding radiophonic verbal narration that gave Zaimović an idea to blend realism and fantasy in his stories, in a way not dissimilar from what Orson Welles had done in his 1938 radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, which, by simulating a live newscast of the novel's events, allegedly prompted some listeners to believe a Martian invasion was actually taking place (Bašović, 2022, p. 161). Indeed, by referring to his real-life experiences as a journalist while mostly presenting himself as the first-person narrator (Alispahić, 2005, p. 119), Zaimović ironically described to his listeners a series of paranormal or just absurd events happening mainly in the besieged city, which could be interpreted both as a caustic comment about war-related circumstances and as a way to celebrate Sarajevo's spirit of urban resistance through imagination. For the sake of clarity, I will shortly describe the stories' content by grouping them according to the narrative genre they seem to belong to, without following the usual order in which they appear in most editions of *Tajna džema od malina*.

One group of stories could be classified as belonging to the “alternative history” fiction subgenre (Alispahić, 2005, p. 124), since they all provide imaginary explanations or different outcomes, often farcical, of actual historical events. In the eponymous “Tajna džema od malina”, all the major events in human history are said to have been secretly planned by a sect of raspberry jam crafters, which counted among its members even Yugoslav communist dictator Josip Broz Tito. In turn, “A godine su prolazile” [And Years Passed By] focuses on the obsessions of a keen reader of sentimental novels, who describes the main political events of the twentieth century as consequences of her life-long unrequited love for a man oblivious of her existence. Another story that belongs to this subgenre is “Bosna – Pogled u svemir” [Bosnia: An Insight into Outer Space], which remained unpublished until 2022. It consists of a collection of fictional newspaper excerpts reconstructing the bizarre theories of an American archaeologist who believes that Bosnians must actually be an extraterrestrial population. The story thus ironically

18 The programme's title, which translates as “Joseph and His Brothers”, was intended to be a reference to Thomas Mann's same-titled novel (Mehmedinović, 2022, p. 219).

19 As suggested by the station's name (*zid* meaning “wall”), the main goal of its founders was to destroy the barrier of war-related hate by music and mass events, such as the 1995 concert “Rock under the Siege”. See *Radio Zid* (n.d.).

shows that people who have no experience of war find it difficult to understand those who endure it.

A larger group seems to be formed by those stories that we could describe as “fantasy-horror thrillers”, given the presence of supernatural and conspiracy-related themes. In “Čudo nevideno” [Unseen Wonder] the narrator learns from a half-burnt book rescued from the 1992 bombing of the Vijećnica National Library²⁰ that a vampire has been resting in the attic of the Kamerni teatar 55²¹ since 1914, and eventually finds out that shells falling on the city have awoken him. Other such stories, “Tajna Nikole Tesle” [The Secret of Nikola Tesla], “Sarajevski trag” [The Sarajevo Trace] and “Oni su među nama!” [They're Among Us!], all feature the narrator exploring an ancient subterranean labyrinth under Sarajevo, where members of an esoteric organisation have hidden a death ray invented by Nikola Tesla, art masterpieces stolen and replaced with copies by Nazi occupiers all around Europe during World War II, and a colony of giant mutant rats (generated by Nazi scientists). We could also put under this label another story, “Invazija krava” (“The Invasion of the Cows”), which chronicles a massive attack led by cruel, intelligent bovines against humans in Western Europe simultaneously with the Bosnian war.

We could identify a third group of stories as that of “imaginary biographies”, since they all reconstruct in detail the lives of non-existing individuals whose fates are mostly linked to Sarajevo's history. For example, “Čovjek sa Šiljinim licem” [The Man with the Goofy Face] sums up the life of Jakub Esalović, a physically deformed local artist who had the power to predict future events in his paintings (such as the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914) and was said to have met Walt Disney, his own abnormal appearance giving the animator inspiration for the cartoon character Goofy. In turn, “Sarajevski nevidljivi čovjek” [The Invisible Man from Sarajevo] focuses on the life of Amir Amrić, a local comic strip author and alchemist who turned invisible before World War II, while his twin brother became a powerful political figure under the communist regime. However, not all these “biographies” are explicitly linked to Bosnia: the eponymous protagonist of “Nigel Breen” is presented as “the greatest English-language writer that has ever lived” (even if no actual encyclopaedia mentions him) and is said to have met both real and unreal figures, such as Ernest Hemingway and the comics character Corto Maltese,²² before disappearing after having sailed for the legendary Fortunate Isles. The final story involves a comparison between Zaimović's real biography and the life of a fictional

20 On the night of 25/26 August 1992, the Army of Republika Srpska bombed the building known as Vijećnica, which had served as Sarajevo's town hall during the Habsburg period and had housed the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1949; in the ensuing fire, a significant part of its archival collection was lost (King, 2003, p. 265).

21 Kamerni teatar 55 is a theatre established in Sarajevo in 1955 for the staging of experimental plays; thanks to the efforts of director Gradimir Gojer (1951), it never closed during the siege and continued its activity as a form of cultural resistance. See *O nama* (n.d.).

22 The graphic novel series *Corto Maltese*, drawn from 1967 to 1992 by Italian artist Hugo Pratt (1927–1995), focuses on the adventures of the eponymous sailor in the first half of the twentieth century, combining highly poetic visuals with detailed historical research and metafictional connotations. See *Hugo Pratt* (n.d.).

character, Aleksandar Antonijević, who reaches the besieging army's posts and casually fires a mortar shell on the radio station where the writer is reading the very same story; this text bears no title (it is listed in the contents as "Priča bez naslova" [Untitled Story]) and was left unfinished because of Zaimović's actual death in 1995.

It is no easy task to comment on such heterogeneous material, since the stories exhibit the traits of different literary genres. Most of them belong to detective and horror fiction, while others – to spy fiction; meanwhile, still others may be linked to epistolary fiction (given the presence of excerpts from letters, diaries or supposed historical documents), or to Bildungsroman, as the "imagined biographies" – which also show the influence of J. L. Borges' works²³ on the author's production – depict the protagonists' coming of age amid absurd or uncanny circumstances.

However, Hutcheon's line of argument about what she identifies as "postmodern literature" may offer a deeper and more cohesive insight into Zaimović's narrative production. By focusing on the author's juxtaposition of fictional elements and the procedures typical of historical inquiry and reportage journalism, we could describe his stories as works of "historiographic metafiction", a term that Hutcheon applies to self-reflexive literary works that play with the claims of veracity of official historiographies in order to highlight their socially constructed nature and bring attention to marginalised categories and situations (Hutcheon, 1988, pp. 5–8). These narrative procedures, which Hutcheon presents as distinctive of "postmodernism" since they parodically challenge the cultural assumptions on which the main political institutions of modernity used to rely (Hutcheon, 1988, pp. 9–11), in Zaimović's case appear to be mainly employed to represent the reality of the Bosnian conflict, both in a darkly ironic and tragic way. As a matter of fact, these features can be interpreted as a direct emanation of the dire circumstances in which he was writing. While postmodern literature generally destabilises grand narratives to provide a more socially conscious and multifaceted insight into history, Zaimović's stories – which may be likened to the postmodern notion of "bricolage" (Krstić, 2016, p. 144), as the author reassembled very different genres and intertextual references – seem to convey that same destabilisation to portray the destruction brought by the siege and the overall implosion of the previous political system, therefore getting their full meaning in the ongoing war situation.

Indeed, by manipulating and spoofing local historical narratives, the author seemingly aimed to ironically depict the collapse of pre-war communist order and deconstruct the chauvinist ideologies that triggered the 1990s wars. For example, the break-up of Yugoslavia is explained as the result of an alleged power struggle between army officers and nationalist leaders over Tito's secret raspberry jam recipe: "Tito svoju tajnu nije dijelio sa svojim narodom, a kako je prekomjerno uživao u džemu, uskoro je zapustio državničke

²³ Interestingly, among the author's personal belongings currently preserved at the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a copy of translation of Borges' *Book of Imaginary Beings*.

poslove, razbolio se i umro. [...] U rasulu Titove Jugoslavije formula je kružila od republike do republike, a generali bivše JNA pokrenuli su vojnu mašineriju, želeći da dobiju recept" (Zaimović, 2022, p. 117).²⁴

The same kind of interpretation may also be applied to the description of fearful imaginary beings like vampires and monsters as real, by which the author implicitly underlined the concreteness of actual war horrors, such as resource scarcity, widespread damage, and death (Bašović, 2022, p. 147). The description of the burnt remains of the historical Hotel Evropa,²⁵ where the ghost of Jakob Esalović reportedly used to appear, may serve as an illustrative example: "Danas je hotel Evropa [...] zgarište. Nema više ničega. Zaboravljene su čak i one priče što pripovijedaju o hotelskom duhu čije se tiho brundanje često čulo, a ponekad i blijeda, tihom, gotovo sjetnom svjetlošću optočena silueta, s vremena na vrijeme [...] mogla vidjeti dok luta hotelskim hodnicima" (Zaimović, 2022, p. 36).²⁶ As we read it, despite the mention of the ghost, what really catches our attention is the description of the destroyed building.

In a similar manner, the conclusion of the short story about Tesla's death ray poignantly mentions the killing of the character who kept the inventor's notebook with the legendary weapon's secret formula, thus tragically re-establishing war as the principal theme of narration: "Amir Z. jedna je od mnogih žrtava ovog rata. Poginuo je još na početku. Njegova familija je ubrzo potom napustila Sarajevo" (Zaimović, 2022, p. 93).²⁷ The presence of the supernatural – which makes Zaimović's stories also close to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of "fantastic literature", as they superficially make the reader uncertain about the ongoing validity of reality's rules (Todorov, 1977, p. 28) – therefore aims to indirectly portray the extent of the conflict: war is described as an event that is so destructive that it seems to erase any distinct boundary between imagination and factuality. This is also reiterated in the "imaginary biographies" that feature fictional characters interacting with the real world and real historical figures.

Although such a procedure could be seen in relation with Zaimović's aforementioned deconstruction of chauvinist historical narratives, we may interpret it as a further consideration about the pervasiveness of war. For example, invented author Nigel Breen spends a great deal of his life looking for the Fortunate Isles, probably searching for

24 "Tito did not share his secret with his people, and as he enjoyed the jam too much, he soon abandoned his state duties, fell ill, and died. [...] As his Yugoslavia was falling apart, the formula circulated from republic to republic, and the generals of the former Yugoslav People's Army started their military machinery as they wanted to get the recipe."

25 The Hotel Evropa, originally owned by the Jeftanović merchant family, was designed by Czech-born architect Karlo Paržik (1857–1942) and first opened in 1882; in post-World War II times it was nationalised by Yugoslav communist authorities and officially reopened in 2008 after a lengthy restoration. See *Dobrodošli u Hotel Europe* (n.d.).

26 "Today, the Hotel Evropa is [...] a smouldering ruin. There is nothing left. Everyone forgot even those stories about the hotel ghost, whose quiet humming was often heard and whose silhouette, surrounded by a pale, quiet, almost dreamy light, could be seen from time to time [...] wandering the hotel corridors."

27 "Amir Z. is one of the many victims of this war. He died at the beginning. His family left Sarajevo soon after."

a paradisiacal world without war, as his youth was troubled by the Anglo-Irish conflict (he is said to be the adopted son of an executed IRA fighter); his eventual disappearance may be interpreted as evidence of the final success of his lifelong quest. However, as he is a product of literary imagination (despite the many proofs of his alleged existence provided by the narrator), he can do what real people are not able to, and this indirectly reminds us that the majority of Sarajevo's citizens could not escape the daily bombings carried out by the besieging troops. Therefore, fantasy cannot provide shelter or escape from the real dangers of the conflict.

This is more shockingly stated and emphasised in the untitled story closing the collection, in which the author pictures (and tragically foresees) his own death at the hands of a character invented by himself, a young man of his same age who leads a totally different life and eventually becomes his killer: "I upravo dok je [...] Karim Zaimović želio da završi emisiju tako što će Aleksandar ispaliti jednu nasumičnu granatu na grad, nasumični projektil kojeg je ispalio Aleksandar igrom slučaja našao je put do radijskog studija. Čudnovatom igrom sudbine, ne povrijedivši nikog drugog, uletio je u voditeljsku kabinu" (Zaimović, 2022, p. 196).²⁸ Significantly, by portraying the character as unwittingly following his orders, the writer apparently depicts the perpetrators of war crimes as individuals deprived of actual conscience. The story also seems to suggest that even imaginary lives are inevitably crossed by war's violence.

In a similar fashion, by re-employing clichés and narrative tropes taken from comics²⁹ and genre fiction, the author intended to further confirm the tragic inescapability of war's reality. As pointed out by John Cawelti in his pivotal study on escapist literature, the main goal of such publications is to entertain the reader with exotic, adventurous or horrific content, while simultaneously reassuring them by following repetitive structures (aptly referred to as "formulas") that usually restore an initial situation of normality (Cawelti, 1976, pp. 5–9). But in Zaimović's stories there is no return to the status quo, since most of them have an open ending, thus suggesting the perennial uncertainty of life during wartime and the impossibility of a full return to pre-war existence (Bašović, 2022, p. 160).

Besides this, the usage of certain motifs pertaining to genre fiction may be interpreted as a symbolic refiguration of real events that shaped the actual story of the siege. For example, recurring images of catacombs and subterranean worlds (which may remind us of Jules Verne's 1864 science fiction novel *A Journey to the Centre of the Earth*) may be seen in relation to the Sarajevo "Tunnel of Hope", an underground passage constructed in 1993 which connected the besieged city to the Butmir airport and enabled a number of citizens

28 "While [...] Karim Zaimović wanted to end the show with Aleksandar firing a random grenade at the city, a random projectile fired by Aleksandar accidentally found its way to the radio studio. By a strange twist of fate, without hurting anyone else, it flew into the presenter's booth."

29 Critic Fatmir Alispahić thinks that Zaimović's literary work was particularly influenced by the Italian horror comics *Martin Mystère* and *Dylan Dog* (issued since the early 1980s by Sergio Bonelli publishing house and widely popular in former Yugoslavia), which both employed refined narrative techniques to deal with supernatural themes while addressing an intellectual readership (Alispahić, 2005, p. 119).

to escape, while also facilitating the supply of food and humanitarian aid (King, 2003, p. 244): "[...] shvatio sám kako se zapravo radi o mapi podzemnog Sarajeva. [...] Ti podzemni tuneli i hodnici stari su više od čak dvadeset hiljada godina i nepoznato su, tajno svetište jedne od najranijih prethistorijskih religija [...]" (Zaimović, 2022, pp. 127–128).³⁰

Similarly, the frequent use of the "found manuscript" narrative device, which has been characteristic of Gothic and horror fiction from the beginning (Russett, 2009, p. 13), seems to be an excuse to actually depict the damage caused by war to the city's cultural heritage, as we can see in "Čudo neviđeno": "[...] vatra u Vijećnici imala je toliko snage da oprli nekoliko posljednjih stranica knjige, učinivši ih ne samo krajnje nečitljivim, već i takvim da se raspadaju pri svakom grubljem dodiru" (Zaimović, 2022, p. 69).³¹ In addition, the vampire character appearing in the same story may be read as an embodiment of war itself, since his presence in Sarajevo is recorded both on the eve of World War I and at the beginning of the siege, thus suggesting his role as a symbol of the conflicts that affected the city during the twentieth century (Rebihić, 2015, p. 439). Likewise, such creatures as mutant beasts and invisible people, which remind us of different sci-fi novels by H. G. Wells, like *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The Invisible Man* (1897), may be understood as metaphors about war freeing animal-like instincts and erasing any visible trace of humanity. By describing all these supernatural events taking place in the besieged city, the author also provided a new identity to Sarajevo's most iconic landmarks, such as the Vijećnica or the Holiday Inn hotel, the central Ferhadija Street or the ancient neighbourhoods of Bentbaša and Alifakovac, thus establishing a connection also with the New Primitivism (*Novi primitivizam*) subculture movement, which ironically projected pop culture fantasies on local urban reality during the 1980s.³²

This could be interpreted as a creative way to reinvent and reconstruct the city's damaged tissue, while also keeping alive its cultural traditions and paying homage to the locals' propensity for irony and storytelling, as suggested by the fact that the narrator often claims that his findings are corroborated by urban folklore. For example, in "Čudo neviđeno" it is stated that the first vampire sightings in 1914 were reported by people

30 "I understood that it was actually a map of underground Sarajevo. [...] Those subterranean tunnels and corridors were more than twenty thousand years old and were an unknown, secret sanctuary of one of the earliest prehistoric religions [...]"

31 "[...] the fire in the Vijećnica library was so intense that it scorched the last few pages of the book: they were not only utterly illegible but also fell apart at the slightest rough touch."

32 As an example of this attitude, we could mention the lyrics of the song "Čejeni dolaze" [The Cheyenne are Coming] from the 1984 album *Das ist Walter* [That's Walter] by punk-rock band Zabranjeno pušenje [No Smoking]. The song appears to depict skirmishes between Sarajevo street gangs as battles between "cowboys and Indians", thus ironically referring also to the propagandistic genre of "Partisan films" – such as Hajrudin Krvavac's *Valter brani Sarajevo* (*Walter Defends Sarajevo*), which adopted the stylistic conventions of American Westerns to glorify the wartime actions of Yugoslav Partisans (Vučetić, 2010, pp. 143–144). A similar attitude is found in the sketches featured in the satirical radio and TV show *Top Lista Nadrealista* [Surrealist's Top List] (1984–1991), which presented a "Bosnian version" of the sci-fi serial *Star Trek* (Anikó, 2009, p. 191).

chatting in the *čaršija*:³³ “[...] čitava bi čaršija naveliko brujala o tome, dodajući svako pri tome malo od svoje verzije i vlastitog mišljenja, pa nije ni čudo da [...] istina osta zaguubljenom” (Zaimović, 2022, p. 63).³⁴ This could also lead us to interpret Zaimović's stories as a sort of fantastic continuation of the *Ljetopis o Sarajevu* [Chronicle of Sarajevo], written by diarist Mula Mustafa Bašeskija (1731–1809), who recorded the main events in the city from 1746 to 1804, during the Ottoman period; significantly, Bašeskija also recorded strange and curious episodes, such as the 1751 visit of a woman born without arms who was being led to the sultan in Istanbul (Bašeskija, 1987, p. 29).

This connection to the literary traditions of his city suggests, therefore, a further link between Zaimović and other Sarajevo authors who employed similar narrative devices in their representations of the Bosnian war. For example, Nedžad Ibrišimović (1940–2011) also depicted the siege as an event deleting the distinction between reality and literary imagination in his 2000 play *Woland u Sarajevu* [Woland in Sarajevo], which features the devilish character from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* appearing in the underground tunnel leading to the besieged city (Bašović, 2006). It is also interesting to note a particular affinity between Zaimović's stories and the earlier works by Sarajevo-born writer Aleksandar Hemon (1964), who did not directly experience the siege: he was left stranded in Chicago as a visiting student when the war in Bosnia began in 1992, later deciding to stay permanently in the United States and starting to write almost exclusively in English. Hemon, who also had a stint as a radio host in Sarajevo³⁵ and even wrote for the same magazines as Zaimović, initially employed the same postmodern techniques as those of *Tajna džema od malina*. Indeed, his 2000 short story collection *The Question of Bruno* (his first book, published in America) features “imaginary biographies”, such as “The Life and Works of Alphonse Kauders” (Softić-Gasal, 2014, p. 90). In the following novel *Nowhere Man* (2002) and in the family-themed memoir *My Parents* (2018), Hemon also represents the psychological fragmentation caused by the experience of emigration by referring to the Yugoslav popular fiction character Lun, *kralj ponoći* (Lun, the King of Midnight),³⁶ the namesake of the popular anthological comic magazine *Lunov Magnus Strip*, which, between 1968 and 1993, published many of the comic series that Zaimović later analysed as a critic (Vučetić, 2011, p. 195).

33 The word *čaršija*, which has Turkish and Persian origins, designates the economic centre of Ottoman towns; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the Balkans in general, it is often colloquially used to refer to a town's society.

34 “[...] the whole *čaršija* would be buzzing about it, everyone adding a bit of their version and their own opinion, so it's no wonder that [...] the truth remained lost.”

35 Hemon reconstructed his tenure at Radio Sarajevo's *Omladinski Program* [Youth Programme] (a youth-focused programme led by journalist Boro Kontić) in the short story “The Kauders Case”, which was later included in the 2013 autobiographical collection *The Book of My Lives* (Hemon, 2014, pp. 57–60).

36 Lun, *kralj ponoći* was the protagonist of a series of spy-related dime novels written by former Partisan officer Mitar Milošević (1924–1995) under the anglicised-style pen name of Frederik Ešton (pronounced as “Frederic Ashton”); it enjoyed widespread popularity in Yugoslavia and in the late 1980s was adapted as a comic strip (Zupan, 2007, p. 85).

We may interpret this kind of similarity as evidence of Zaimović's enduring legacy in Sarajevo's post-war cultural scene, which has even grown stronger in the years following his premature demise. In 1996, the author's family established the Karim Zaimović Foundation, with the aim of preserving his memory by awarding annual scholarships for emerging Bosnian artists (*Dodijeljene stipendije Fondacije "Karim Zaimović"*, 2023). In 2013, stage director Selma Spahić adapted *Tajna džema od malina* as a theatre play, which met with considerable success (Kreševljaković, 2017). Recently, Zaimović's family donated the author's archive (containing his original drawings, drafts for comic strip scenarios, and the first two manuscript chapters of the unfinished novel *Oštrica svjetova* [The Blade of the Worlds]) to the Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina; in 2023, thanks mostly to the efforts of Dr Ifeta Lihic and her colleagues, the author's original documents were all digitalised and displayed in an exhibition, whose catalogue also features interviews with Zaimović's friends and family members (Abaz, 2023). All these events, together with a 2016 mural painting commemorating the author's life and literary work (Agić, 2016), prove that Karim Zaimović's stories are still resonating in Sarajevo. War did not silence his voice.

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Wojna i miasto, fantazja i fakt. Oblężenie Sarajewa w postmodernistycznych opowiadaniach Karima Zaimovicia

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł analizuje pośmiertny zbiór opowiadań Karima Zaimovicia (1971–1995), zatytułowany *Tajna džema od malina* [Tajemnica džemu malinowego] (1997), napisany przez bośniackiego autora podczas oblężenia jego rodzinnego Sarajewa. Zaimović, który zmarł pod koniec konfliktu, przedstawiał rzeczywistość wojny, wplatając klisze zaczerpnięte z literatury gatunkowej w quasi-dokumentalny opis życia w oblężonym mieście. Zabieg ten można porównać do cech uznanych przez Lindę Hutcheon za typowe dla literatury postmodernistycznej, która często stosuje techniki literatury popularnej do treści historycznych, aby uświadomić czytelnikowi społecznie konstruowaną naturę narracji historycznych. Mieszając fantazje z faktami, Zaimović chciał zdekonstruować propagandę oblegającej armii i odbudować tkankę społeczną Sarajewa za pomocą wyobraźni. Aby lepiej zrozumieć twórczość autora, przyjrzymy się rozwojowi literatury popularnej w Jugosławii i obecności podobnej tematyki w twórczości innych sarajewskich pisarzy, takich jak Aleksandar Hemon.

Słowa kluczowe: Karim Zaimović; postmodernizm; metafikcja historiograficzna; Sarajevo; literatura wojenna; proza popularna

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