**BUKLA**

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**Karmina Šilec, Baba: Colossal Balkan Fiction, pb, 198 p., and Catalog, pb, 225 p., Sanje 2021**

Karmina Šilec is a phenomenon. Awarded several times, worldwide. She is extremely musically talented, but also literary brilliant, as both books from the Baba project prove. She is the author of musical and scenic projects, conductor, composer, and artistic director of Carmina Slovenica, the Kebataola ensemble, and the New Music Theatre Choregie. At Harvard, that prominent treasure trove of Balkan knowledge, she delved into the phenomenon of virginas – sworn virgins who took on a masculine role: breast-bound in men's clothes, they played the gusle, cursed, drank brandy, and represented male power.

I recommend reading first the Catalogue, which anthropologically, historically, and sociologically outlines the context of her research in a very unique way. The writing is guided by the ritual of coffee drinking with passwords for its sediment reading, collected from oral and written sources, like everything else in the book. *“I seem to be talking about coffee. (...) And then in continuation, it talks again about something else, about some distant places and times. It begins with the Balkans and the places inhabited by invisible spirits. It talks about spaces bending under the weight of the fruits of the romantic Western imagination.”* And she concludes, as only truly intelligent and therefore witty people can: *“This book, which is about otherness, is narcissistic, the reason being, it only talks about what I want (…) to explain things more to myself than to others.”*

It told a lot to me, so much and in such a way that no book has in a long time! It is topical right now, in the midst of the war that is a continuation and repetition of the same thing: women are still oppressed, it is women and their children who are paying, again and again, the ultimate price of the phallocentric male struggle for power and authority. *“This book is a mirror of limitations and choices.”* Mine too, and yours... That is why Baba is a hybrid work, “a project of a music-theater-narrative form that will break down the boundaries between the disciplines and become a metaphor for the opening up of thoughts, perceptions, experiences.” Old concepts plus new technologies through references “such as sworn virgins, Homeric oral epic tradition, fictional ethnicity.” What a sumptuous survey and what a narrative result of the cataloguing of findings, wow!

Why the title Baba? There is a grandiose array of content around *baba*, swollen with meaning. “Baba is adorned with honours (of men) and weighed down with scorn (of women).” Why the Balkans? Because it has always nurtured the culture of the gusle: the preservation of collective archetypes and identities from past times. In the musical mode of *sladobol* – sweetness in pain. And who are the subjects of Karmina's research? The virginas, they are the *others*. Born in families without sons (the right of inheritance!), therefore turned into men. Sworn virgins who despise women. And who spit on the floor in *kafanas* as men do. Women who regularly do really hard physical work, have an increase in the hormone testosterone: they develop a deep voice, their hair starts to thin, their body and facial hair grows increasingly, their clitoris grows, their breasts get smaller...

Colossal Balkan Fiction, in which the author collected the stories of ten virginas, following the Homeric storytelling principle, is dedicated to these and such women. Written to sound like a documentary narration, they are woven with Karmina's genius creativity from the fragments she has catalogued in the Catalog. Just a glimpse: *“Stana has been a murderer, albeit an innocent one, ever since he came into the world. His mother died in childbirth and this stole his childhood. With his coming into the world, his father’s joy dried up as if cut off. Stana didn't have any brothers and he was guilty of that too.*

*Life and death collided at his birth.*

*Stana didn’t have any brothers, and he was guilty of that too.*

*(…)*

*Her story will go through time and across the country.«*

As befits a gusle tale, each story has an introduction. The one about Slepica goes like this: *“When this narrative dies, we will be somewhat impoverished. Our gaze will linger in an empty space, like that of a blind man who has just woken up, opened his eyes, but his open eyes do not rest on anything. Poems, dreams and landscapes will be destroyed, and the narrative will take them with it.”* The ending must also be clear, like the one about Slepica: *“At the funeral, it seemed as if it was not the living who were saying goodbye to the dead, but the dead who were saying goodbye to the dead. The gloom on the mourners’ faces made them look as dead as Slepica's body in the coffin.”* And then Liljana, how she became Lile. I will become a professional musician and learn by listening, the sickly girl decided. The ear has a lot of work to, she would say. And she stepped in front of the master, played for a long hour and more, the audience was amazed and the decision was immediate: the boy should start playing tomorrow evening. What is his name? “Lile”, she said for the first time. *“As a woman, she went back in time and moved forward as a singer of tales.”*

Both the Catalogue and Colossal Balkan Fiction should be used to teach creative writing, to practice scriptwriting, and above all for a dance of fragments that Karmina's surplus creativity transforms into a whole, unlike anything we have ever read before. My compliments!