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## THE MULTICENTRIC IDENTITY OF DAVID ALBAHARI: A JEWISH SERBIAN-CANADIAN WRITER

**Abstract:** *Besides spatial dynamics, Albahari's literary poetics is to a great extent defined by his religious affiliation. The article aims to show how Albahari's different personal reference points (Serbia, Canada, Jewishness) build up the image of Albahari as an author comfortable in the emerging multicentric cultural economy.*

**Key words:** *Serbian, Canadian, Jewish identity; multicentric world.*

### Introduction

Somebody said that the destiny of an author was determined by the cities he lived in. David Albahari has been on the road for a long time now, and many cities can claim him, but his polar opposites are Zemun in Serbia and Calgary in Canada. It would be ungrounded to contend that this fact testifies to the proliferation of centres of cultural production, yet it definitely outlines his trajectory of creative migration (Curtin 2008, 108). If anything, spatial dynamics characterises modern art, not only in terms of physical mobility of the artists but also in terms of virtual accessibility of their works and ideas. Besides the places he lives in, Albahari's literary poetics is to a great extent defined by his religious affiliation, his Jewishness being unobtrusively present in many of his novels. Yet, Albahari repeats: "I have never believed that a writer has a role, any role to play except to follow his inspiration when it appears or to keep silent if there is no Muse in sight" (Albahari 1997, 2). This article aims to show how Albahari's different personal reference points (Serbia, Canada, Jewishness) build up the image of Albahari as an author comfortable in the emerging multicentric cultural economy.

### Serbia: Motherland

Though not born in Zemun, but in Peć, David Albahari has the fondest memories of it.

When his family moved there in his first grade, Zemun still retained some of its significance as a town on the border between the great empires: Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman. The demarcation line ran along the rivers of Sava and Danube, so Zemun, sitting on the banks of the Danube, became an administrative post with a port, customs, quarantine, and a multiethnic population. By the mid-twentieth century, Zemun lost most of its importance having all but merged with Belgrade, but it did not lose its beauty, especially impressive to a little boy: old quarters looked like a picture-card from the 19th century, while buses, trams, and new buildings glittered with the shine of the 20th century. The grand river, the picturesque town, and the family which encouraged reading were the first influences on the imagination of the lonesome child who started writing very early and soon developed his own style. By the time Albahari decided to leave for Canada, he had already been a well-established Serbian author, appreciated by the literary pundits but not widely popular.

The dominant theme in David Albahari's early works was intra-family relationships. His first book was a collection of short stories *Family Time* (1973), inspired by the extraordinary family history of his own parents. Every family is a potential source of unusual narrative plots and Albahari's shows that sometimes life is stranger than art:

My father, a Sephardic Jew, was born in Smederevo. He lived in Dorćol, studied medicine in Zagreb, got a job as a doctor in Niš, where he was when the war began. He was taken prisoner as army doctor and sent to a camp where he spent the following four years. His wife and two children, living in Niš, along with almost his whole extended family were killed in the course of 1941 and 1942, when the Germans purged Serbia of the Jews. In the meantime, my mother – who was born in Bosnia and lived in Zagreb before the war with an Ashkenazi Jewish man – was seeking shelter with her two sons around Serbian villages. When they moved to Belgrade to escape the Ustashes and the Nazis, her husband was shot by the Germans. She managed to survive the war with her children, but when she started for Belgrade after the liberation, both of her sons were killed in a train crash (Albahari 1997, 2, trans. VL).<sup>1</sup>

So much tragedy would be enough for a whole family saga, and too much for two persons to live with, yet Albahari's parents had no choice but to move on when they met and started their own family. It was also a source of puzzle for little Albahari to look at a family album with his mother in it, but with a different husband and two boys he never met, as much as it was perplexing that his father had no relatives. His collection of short stories, *Description of Death* (1982) and later novels *Tsing* (1988) and *Bait* (1996) deal with the figures of father and mother, individualised and at the same time universalised in their silent suffering. Exploring his relationship with them, Albahari digs through his heart and learns about happiness and pain (Albahari 2005, 1) as many of his readers do in a less public manner. He says in an interview that writing is a completely personal act for him because he writes in order to reach some answers, which seem to be relevant only to him, while the reader searches for his own intimate answers in the same text:

To be precise, a writer and a reader seemingly read the same story, but each puts the story in the context of his own self, which means that, naturally, a reader can't read what I wrote. I already know in advance that what I try to say reaches the reader in the form in which he wants to hear it. Not even I can read my story twice in the same way. Literature is like a river, and one can't step twice into

the same river, as a philosopher once said (Albahari 2008, 10).

This issue signifies the second major theme of Albahari's literary output, which marks his whole writing career both in Serbia and in Canada: the problem of language and communication. All his short fiction and novels without exception tackle the problem of the inability of the author to convey the particular meaning he intended. On the one hand, language betrays us all the time for it lacks precise words to express the nuances of emotions and moods felt by us, while on the other Wittgenstein may be right when he claims: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world" (86), the consequence of which is that each man inhabits his own world whose borders are sealed by their language. Even if that person is an author whose goal is to communicate through the language, the world spreads outside of that language. Albahari says that the language cannot follow the world, and in a post-modern fashion he disbelieves the possibility of accurately transmitting an experience. Language is very often a cause for misunderstanding, instead of being a source of understanding, so that silence occasionally seems to be a more reliable means of conveying sense (Albahari 2008, 11). Albahari resorts to question marks to express his own frustration with this state of things:

What you can say exists. What you cannot say does not exist. So if I am saying something, I make it exist. If I am discovering something through language, I have to find a way for others to understand it. Language does not have the power to transfer the complete meaning, so that is why I always end up with a question mark (Albahari 2013, 12).

What is said always points in its conciseness to what is not said, so that each paragraph break, each word break even may be given significance. What is paradoxical is that Albahari as an author depends on the language, which is so slippery and at the same time so seductive that his writing resembles a lover's game of courting and coaxing. He can play with silence but he cannot write using silence. To write about silence he needs to use words and thus betray silence. How-

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviation (trans. VL) will stand for (translated by Vesna Lopičić).

ever, the limits of linguistic expression do not stop Albahari from writing, quite the contrary. Though as a postmodern author he feels that there is no story, he writes a story to say so. It seems that he is spurred by these limits into ever new attempts to convey his thoughts and give them adequate words in the hope that the world of the author and the world of the reader will touch in at least one point: "At one point recently I thought that it's ridiculous that after 25 books you still think about how to write a book which is not a book at all, but if you write 25 books about the silence then something is wrong with your writing" (Albahari 2011, 1). This sort of frankness only proves that there is nothing wrong with Albahari's writing, which has been translated into 18 languages so far.

David Albahari sees his work as falling into three phases: the first one ends up with the Ivo Andrić prize awarded collection *Description of Death* (1982), following the novel *Judge Dimitrijević* (1978), and short story collections *Ordinary Stories* (1978) and *Family Time* (1973). The second phase opens up with the collection *Shock in the Shed* (1984), and closes with the collection *Cloak* (1993), with *Tsing* and *Simplicity* in between, both published in 1988. Albahari believes that it is characterised with an even more radical fragmentation of the text, a deeper connection to the elements of the 'mass culture,' and more pronounced metatextuality. Radmila Gorup in her review confirms that Albahari as a true postmodern author in this period manifests his belief in the impossibility of anything absolute or certain, in playful fiction, in the fragmented form, in the lack of chronological order, and employs a self-reflexive narrator who is prone to minimalist language, postmodern techniques such as parody, irony, and humour, metafictional asides, and surreal elements in the whirr of uncertainty (14). The current, third phase of Albahari's writing begins with the novel *Short Book* published in 1993 just prior to his departure for Canada. This piece already shows marks of change not that much in terms of style, to which Albahari remains true as the repository of his own authenticity, as much as in terms of preva-

lent themes. Damjana Mraović-O'Hare sums up this artistic transformation:

Albahari's books, prior to his exile, were almost exclusively concerned with the inability to communicate in a postmodern society. His early prose style was experimental and anti-realistic, fragmented and often autopoetical – closer to that of the lyric than to that of the epic narrative. Influenced by the social changes and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia, he transformed his prose, recapitulating reality within the epic form. Metafiction, dominant in his earlier works, gave way to postmodern realism (Albahari 2008, 12).

Indeed, Albahari admits that in the last twenty years his texts have tended to be longer and calmer with the themes of politics and history, almost absent in earlier works, now creeping into his prose. He does not find it out of place since he has always been interested in the moment, that segment of life belonging to the quotidian. That's what stories are made of: little moments of misuse of language, misunderstandings, the moments that matter to Albahari. However, whilst in his earlier works these were exclusively personal moments,<sup>2</sup> his more recent books deal with the moments of history of crucial significance for the whole nation: "When the reinvigorated history became part and parcel of our everyday lives, writing about it was in fact, just as before, writing about what is actually happening. I have not changed (or at least this is how I see things); the reality around me has changed" (Albahari 1997, 2, trans. VL). For that reason, Albahari does not favour the idea of himself as a writer of historical novels. He simply wanted to write about what had recently happened in Belgrade, in his beloved Zemun, and in Serbia, so he kept the postmodern convention of the unreliable narrator as in his novel *Leeches* (2005):

<sup>2</sup> "One of my characters had something like that happen to him. He wakes up one morning and can't find his wife. When he arrives in the kitchen, he finds a note from her saying, "Sorry, I never loved you." He reads it, sitting at the kitchen table, and flips to the other side in hopes that there's something there. But there's nothing. So he flips it again and reads the same sentence: "Sorry, I never loved you." He ends up taking the piece of paper, crumpling it, putting it into his mouth, and chews it. That's the saddest moment I've ever written. It's the essence of all my attempts" (3).



Then in '91 the war began and everybody forgot about marijuana. But in the book, the characters smoke marijuana because I wanted them to be unreliable narrators. It also made the action very slow and suggested to readers that maybe nothing the characters think or see is real. The whole story is, I don't want to say ridiculous, but maybe a better word would be impossible. For me this book is one big literary game. It shouldn't be read as serious. It's serious in what it says about certain things ... It's serious when it warns against anti-Semitism and nationalism. But it's a big literary puzzle. I took bits and pieces from different writers, from different books, which is a very postmodern thing to do (Albahari 2014, 1).

Albahari explains that he was somehow chosen by history as one of its voices, which happened when he moved to Canada. The geographical distance and the change of perspective on the events in his homeland made him negotiate his own conflict with history through his novels written in this third phase. His idea was to write a novel about his mother as a counterpart to *Tsing*, a novel about his father. Both their lives having been steeped in history, it was inevitable that he writes about history, but the actual moment of decision was an anecdote Albahari was involved in: "At one point, I introduced the tape recorder tape recorder, device for recording information on strips of plastic tape (usually polyester) that are coated with fine particles of a magnetic substance, usually an oxide of iron, cobalt, or chromium. The coating is normally held on the tape with a special binder. in the novel *Bait* as a symbol of times and things gone by. The narrator wants to buy a tape recorder, and while the salesperson knows what a tape recorder is, he has never actually seen one because it was at that time already an obsolete object. At that point, I realised that it had to be a book about history" (Albahari 2013, 13). This was happening in Calgary where David Albahari had been living since 1994 and writing his Canadian Circle novels: *Snow Man* (1995), *Bait* (1996), and *Darkness* (1997) in close succession. *Bait* is presumably about his mother, though it is in fact a novel about his motherland, the way Albahari remembered it. He spent the first half of his life in Serbia, or better to say Yugoslavia, and as an expatriate in Canada he refused to turn these forty years into nostalgia knowing that they could become a

dangerous burden. He would rather keep alive all the reminiscences and memories of them by returning to his beloved Zemun and resuming for some time exactly where he left, with the people and the places he loved most. That is how he keeps the motherland as a firm entity, as one source of his multi-centric identity, and his creative cauldron.

### Canada: Voluntary Exile

Nevertheless, having been living in Canada for twenty years, David Albahari reaches this conclusion: "One can feel at home in more than one place. I feel at home here because I spent the greater part of my life in Zemun, and as soon as I return here I feel like I never even left. Now, having spent twenty years living in Calgary, I also have the same feeling there. These are my two homes." (Albahari 2013, 14) Such testimonies look like the Canadian dream of multiculturalism come true, which is probably due to the fact that Albahari is quite frank and not inclined to criticism. His moving to Canada was almost accidental but most fortunate, for it allowed him the freedom to write. In the first place, he had all the time in the world to devote to writing, and in the second, maybe more important, he was spared participation in the active literary life of Serbia. Albahari had lived a very dynamic life in Belgrade, taking part in literary festivals, prize juries, book launches, editorial boards, and whatnot, which pampers the vanity of an author and makes him feel indispensable, though it is time and nerve consuming. Such experience is valuable but it is addictive, and Albahari admits that it was not easy for him to get clean. From the active literary scene he moved to his quiet Calgary study, producing three novels in three years, which probably made him feel really at home. While the protagonists of his Canadian novels are uncomfortable in the new environment, Albahari feels almost like an experienced native (Albahari 2008, 12), not aware of any cultural shocks:

The heroes of my three short novels tell their stories in Canada, as they live the life of the new immigrant. Those stories are still not happening entirely in Canada, but are

to a large extent devoted to the perceptions of difference between Canada and the world they come from. My longer stay in Canada will certainly move the events in my books to this country, although I'm sure that as an immigrant, I will continue to be fascinated by the act of transition from one culture to another, and by the necessity to change that this transition brings (Albahari 1998, 76).

This is how a new theme is introduced into Albahari's books: exile. Mihajlo Pantić outlines this change of focus. From the beginning of his career to the novel *Tsing*, Albahari insisted on the minimalist motto "less is more" and consistently denied the presence of grand themes of history and politics in his writing. Later, they imperceptibly sneaked in for which Pantić lists a number of reasons: "The effect of the events from your biography, first the death of your parents which transforms one and warns us that it's out turn next, then the political crisis and the war in the former Yugoslavia, the collapse of Serbian society in the 1990s, and finally your moving to Canada" (Albahari 1997, 2, trans. VL). From the theme of family relationships, to the theme of failed communication, and the theme of the impact of history on the private life, Albahari understandably comes to the theme of exile. Though his was a voluntary exile, it was still a life-changing experience, or at least an eye-opener. To paraphrase Scott Abbott's words, Albahari was sitting in the foreign land of Canada that itself broadened his ways of being himself (Abbott 2014, 14). Although he was quite familiar with the cultural milieu of his new homeland, living between two cultures was a blessing and a curse at the same time. As he says in an interview to Tomislav Longinovic: "It is a blessing because of the experiences offered by the new culture. The voluntary exile brought a different experience of life which all turned out to be very inspirational for me." He continues: "Living in Canada has influenced the choice of my topics. The theme of exile dominates three of the four short novels I have written in Calgary. They are about isolation and existence in a linguistic and cultural in-between." The curse is of course exactly in this distancing from the mother tongue: "The curse is in losing touch with one's native language while surrounded by English speakers, while at the same time

knowing that one is getting a bit too old for mastering the nuances of the new idiom" (Albahari 1998, 78).

The heroes of his novels have to negotiate many issues in their new cultural environment, which Albahari becomes aware of now that his perspective has changed. In an interesting text, *An Interview with Myself* published in *Alter Ego: Twenty Confronting Views on the European Experience*, Albahari confesses that he has been ideologically biased with regard to the position of his country within Europe. His imaginary map of Europe was distorted, reflecting political and cultural prejudices, and putting Yugoslavia in a wrong place. It took him some time to realise that he had lived an illusion as an unsuspecting victim of ideological propaganda. Albahari describes this instance of eye-opening as an anecdote happening in Canada. While visiting a friend in Calgary, he noticed a map of Europe on the wall, and when he took a look at it, he was momentarily confused:

It took me quite a long time to recognise that it was a map of Europe, that's how wrong it looked to me. Former East European countries were now almost in the middle of Europe; Western Europe had moved to the left; the Baltic countries were not so far east after all; the Balkan peninsula was not in the central southern area; instead, it had been pulled down towards Turkey and Asia (Albahari 2006, 48).

This revision of truth happened after the breaking out of the civil war in Yugoslavia and the Albaharis' decision to move to the North American continent. From that standpoint, many things related to the homeland looked different, and these were the shocks that Albahari had to deal with, rather than the surprises of his new environment. It is not easy to deal with the realisation that very few people are immune to the virus of ideological thinking, which can infest one's mind imperceptibly and turn the world into an illusion. It is even worse to know that there may be other imperceptible and undiscovered viruses working on the inside out and shaping one's responses to events. As an exile in Canada, Albahari finds the best way to cope with such revelations by making his characters go

through similar life experiences. The unnamed narrator in the first novel written in Canada, *Snow Man*, talks to himself just like Albahari when he interviewed himself:

"I came," I tried again, although I was no longer addressing only my toes, "because I believed that when I looked back from another place, that I would see that *first* place in a way that I had never been able to see it while I was there, and then, freed of the subjectivity and passion for possession, I would see that everything might have unfolded in a different way, that reality, actually, is contained in the act of choice, in opposing any sort of imperative (Albahari 1995, 91).

These are the truths that Albahari definitely shares with his characters. His anti-hero watches the maps falling off his walls in a symbolic representation of the break-up of the old vision of the world. Both of them, the character and the author, reached this point of revision once they changed the point of view, and became exiles in Canada. That is also the point when Albahari comes to understand that it is easy to get rid of one set of borders and establish a new one, either by pulling walls down or re-drawing political maps, but also that dealing with the borders preserved in one's memory is altogether a more difficult issue. In fact, he knows that "the whole human history is one long dispute about borders: the borders of body, the borders of mind, the borders of nation" (Albahari 2006, 50), and sometimes, just like in the case of Yugoslav republics, the dispute is utterly futile because the borders remain unchanged. After years of manipulation, victimisation and devastation when those in power abused the people by showing them imaginary maps of political entities they wanted to create, there was still no change to the benefit of the people themselves. So territorial recombinations prove less potent than the mental borders an individual grows with and keeps in his mind. Albahari prefers visible to invisible borders, because physical borders can introduce some order into the world, while one need not be even aware of the invisible borders in their mind and still be hurt by them.

It is interesting that the critical reception of Albahari's novels written in this transitional pe-

riod for him, between 1993 and 1999, is less favourable than could be expected. In her 2011 article for the journal *Literary History*, Ewa Kowolik explores the phenomenon of silence or almost deliberate misunderstanding that characterised the response of the leading literary journals (230). Unlike the collection *Cloak* and the novel *Short Book*, both published in 1993 before Albahari's departure, which received the reception standard for Albahari's books - although they already contained indications of new interests, the novels published after 1994 were mostly ignored. If reviewed, they were interpreted in terms of stylistic and poetic continuity or change, while new themes and innovative narrative strategies were overlooked. The novel *Goetz and Meyer* was reviewed a year after its publication while *Snow Man*, *Bait* and *Darkness* received meager initial reception, although it was evident they were dealing with a hot political and historical moment. Only after Albahari was awarded the NIN literary award for his *Bait* (1996) did the literary critical circles start acknowledging a new focus in his writing. From stressing the complexity of his texts and the peculiar terseness of his language, the critics gradually moved to the issues of social changes they were exploring. Circumventing the context, they selected the main problem: in *Goetz and Meyer*, for example, they concentrated on the Holocaust marginalising the civil war which is the background of the story, or they targeted the change in the narrative technique in *Darkness* leaving out the current historical dimension. Kowolik supposes that Albahari's voluntary exile and the way he thematised the reasons for it in his Canadian Circle novels have not been met with approval by the Serbian public, which explains the hesitant reception and conventional intertextual interpretations (229-252). Over a dozen years later, after a much more socially engaged novel *Leeches* (2005), Albahari is more severely criticised for his political attitude expressed in the latest novel *Checkpoint* (2011). He is accused of being a pseudo-humanist who hides behind the appearance of a novel that seems to be universal in its condemnation of the meaninglessness of war, while it in fact stands as a disguised critique of Serbian radicalism. The

unspecified place and time, unnamed war and its participants, vague allusions, even the plural pronoun 'we', which is used in the greater part of the novel, all these are just a poor camouflage for anti-nationalism, claims Aleksandar Dunđerin in his review (45). Albahari's anti-war discourse is thus seen as hypocritical because it was composed in the comfort of his Calgary home instead of closer to the warfront. This type of criticism is also part of exile experience which an author has to deal with especially when the autobiographical element in all his stories is given the form of the narrator, who is himself, in turn, an author – Albahari's alter ego.

An expected outcome of Albahari's immigrant experience is the theme of identity, very much present in all his works in the same manner in which the ineffectiveness of the language to communicate is part of his output. The twin nature of one's ethnic and language identities has been discussed elsewhere (Lopičić 2012, 435-443) as well as the deconstruction of Serbian cultural identity in Canadian diaspora (Lopičić, Mišić Ilić 2010, 333-340), so the aspect which remains to be explored is a writer-in-exile's identity. Whether to change the language of his writing or not has been a dilemma for Albahari for a very brief period. It would be superfluous to elaborate on the benefits of writing in English but Albahari decided not to change his language:

I don't change languages; I write stories and novels only in Serbian, and most often other translators translate them into English (and other languages). In other words, my writing identity is not changed. The language in which I write defines me as a Serbian writer, but the fact that I live in Canada, in a multicultural country that accepts the possibility of creating in all languages, makes me a Canadian writer. I accept that duality because it's a reflection of my reality, as well as my readiness to accept an occasional feeling of confusion about [my] identity. For a writer, that position is very suitable because it opens an array of themes that can be written about, simultaneously looking at two different cultures, two histories, and two worlds (Albahari 2008, 16).

David Albahari is evidently quite frank about the creative advantages of being an immigrant author so he does not lament over his small reading public in Canada or his separation from

the reading public in Serbia. His accessibility to an English-speaking readership is growing with the number of his books being translated into English<sup>3</sup> while his estrangement from the Serbian fans has never been deep. He goes back almost every October for the Belgrade Book Fair of which he is very proud. Although the estimate is that only 3-5% of Serbian people read regularly (Albahari 2011, 1), the Fair lasts for ten days and thousands of people of all ages visit it, with professionals from the area as well. It is an ideal opportunity for Albahari to reconnect, to feel the excitement of his readers, and the literary pulse of the nation. Rather than stressing the crisis of identity and ontological uncertainties, which are topics common to immigrant writers, he accepts his duality as a Serbian-Canadian author, and makes the best of it. This duality is part of his multicentric identity, and if he ever had any dilemmas, they become the dilemmas of his heroes. In the novel *Bait*, for example, the main character moves to Canada with the oral history of his mother on the tapes he brought with him. As much as he longed to listen to them, they are a sort of millstone round his neck: "and the whole time I was tormented by the fear that a return to my native language, reinforced by the fact that it was precisely my mother who was speaking it, would bring me back to where I no longer wanted to return, especially now that, thanks to someone else's language, I was finally beginning to feel like someone else" (Abbott 2014, 1). The mother embodying the motherland and speaking the mother tongue now stands in the way of her son moving on in a new cultural environment and experiencing an identity shift. Albahari avoids this clinch by preserving his native language: "Serbian is my language. It's the language I best express myself in." (Albahari 2014, 1) There are many interviews in which he explained that behind this decision to remain loyal to Serbian is in fact his need to remain loyal to his identity as a writer, to his style, which spontaneously developed under the influence of Beckett mostly. Using

<sup>3</sup> So far, six of them are available in English: *Words Are Something Else* (1996), *Tsing* (1997), *Bait* (2001), *Goetz and Meyer* (2003), *Snow Man* (2005), and *Leeches* (2011).



a foreign language would compromise that recognisable postmodern style that earned Albahari a few prestigious awards in Serbia but also a lot of disheartened readers, unaccustomed to the formal experimentation Albahari embraced. English was simply not an option for Albahari as an author: "It was like this artificial language spoken by this artificial being with an artificial intelligence" (Albahari 2014, 2).

In a 1998 interview to Longinovic, Albahari frankly admitted that his physical absence from Serbian literature is also a sort of personal gain rather than loss in terms of preserving his authentic identity, among other things:

I have been freed from the "obligation" to write in ways which were expected of me. The burden of being a writer in the East European way has also been lifted off my back; this means that I no longer have to be engaged in political events, constantly striving to "serve my people" (Albahari 1998, 78).

Naturally, it was impossible to avoid political events as much as the immigrant themes of the in/ability to move from one culture into another, from one language into another, from the feeling of belonging to the feeling of exile which begin to dominate his narratives after he settled in Canada. Albahari regrets the failure of the supranational Yugoslav identity,<sup>4</sup> which was a possibility dear to him and irretrievably lost with the regression into isolated national identities but accepts the sordid facts and wants to live in the present looking into the future. Indeed, what he tries to serve is his artistic integrity more than

<sup>4</sup> In a 2008 interview to Damjana Mraović-O'Hare, Albahari passes a comment on the identity of recent immigrants to Canada: "And it is certain that between territories and identities there are contiguous points. The collapse of Yugoslavia also shook up the identities of the people who live there – those who thought about themselves as Yugoslavs all of a sudden lost a state, to be precise, they found themselves in a situation that changed their identities out of the blue. However, that relationship between a territory and identity is visible here too. For example, our immigrants don't think about themselves as Canadians, and they call Canadians those people (most often white) who are born here. Legally, our immigrants are Canadians because they acquired Canadian citizenship, but they will talk about themselves as, for instance, Serbs or former Yugoslavs" (13).

anything else, especially because of the challenges of the exilic state.

### **Jewish Identity: The Impact of History**

A monolithic individual and collective identity is an illusion which Albahari never enjoyed due to the fact that his identity has always been very complex. A literary critic, Teofil Pančić, describes Albahari as a Jew in Serbian Diaspora and a Serbian author in Canadian Diaspora (Pančić 2009, 2), which multiplies identity layers of Albahari's personality. Jewish identity is essentially important to Albahari and he describes to Mihajlo Pantić how he gradually "became" a Jew. His early childhood was marked with close connections to the Jewish community through the activities of his parents so he was growing up imbued with the Jewish tradition and ritual. These have been definitely formative experiences, and although in the second phase of his life, when he was a rebellious adolescent obsessed with the issues of body and sex, with doubts about education, in his creative dilemmas, immersed in the rock-culture of the 1960s, Albahari did not develop into an angry young man ready to change the world but rather into an introspective person inclined to self-questioning and self-improvement. His acquaintance with the cultures of the Far East and especially with the philosophy of Zen Buddhism made him a quiet observer disposed towards self-examination, which was his silent way of opposing the family and political establishments and possibly creating a new composite tradition as an alternative to his reality. Finally, when he turned to translating and writing as his life career, his interest in the Jewish heritage was revived followed by his active engagement in the life of the Jewish community in that part of the world. It was at the beginning of the 1970s that his multicentric personal identity was definitely formed with Judaism becoming its important focal point.

David Albahari is not hesitant to explain the hybrid nature of his identity. Namely, his mother was of Serbian origin and since she converted to Judaism both her children, David and his sister, were officially Jewish. However, geneti-

cally speaking they were of mixed blood, Serbian and Jewish, which was never denied in their family. The children grew up familiar with both traditions and they were given the freedom to live their lives as they pleased. Maybe for this reason Albahari holds today that life is a sort of constant quest:

In other words, identity (if that is the topic) is not felt as a given by me, but as an ability to choose, although history warns me that our identity is at critical moments determined by others, not by ourselves. A Jew is principally an exile, just as an artist is by the nature of things an exile, and it is maybe that equation mark between them that draws me towards both (Albahari 1997, 2, trans. VL).

The need to quest is evident in Albahari's creative career as much as in his life. Leaving his country for Canada is part of his quest for political alternatives while the changes of his form and themes testify to his personal quests: "Albahari, too, transformed his own identity as an author, abandoning the indeterminate subject position common in experimental fiction and embracing a self that is grounded firmly in a historical moment, however incoherent and violent it may be" (Albahari 2008, 76).

In this respect, the historical moment seems to be more important than the historical place, which Albahari makes sure his readers understand. He does not give Jewish people, or Jewish authors for that matter, a privileged position simply because of the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, knowing that other nations have also had terrible moments in their history. His experience of life in the former Yugoslavia and Serbia during the civil war and the bombing reminds him of this fact. Albahari even minimises his own Jewishness saying, "For me it is a blessing, but nothing special" (Albahari 2013, 13), as if aware that some may object to his continual return to the issues of anti-Semitism. Indeed, Albahari's critics do not fail to identify this theme in his writing and seek for explanations, which easily place him in the group of Serbian anti-nationalists who severely denigrate their own people. Even foreign journalists, like Anna Hohle notice: "In your novels you draw a lugubrious picture of

Serbia in the present. Anti-Semitism, nationalism and homophobia threaten minorities and dissenters." (Albahari 2011, 2) Albahari deals with such criticism calmly and patiently, explaining that Anti-Semitism is simply one of the human weaknesses in the category of bigotry and prejudice, practically ineradicable. If it is unacceptable to hate the Jews then it is equally inadmissible to hate the Roma, or the Arabs, or the Chinese, as it is equally unbelievable that the world will be ever free of such intolerance:

After the war in the '90s, and then also after the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the '80s, the anti-Semitism grew all over Eastern Europe, because suddenly people felt that the idea of freedom means also that you are free to express these ideas as well. And of course, it's regulated all over the world, so you cannot – freedom does not mean that you can suddenly be allowed to speak against Jews or Gypsies or whoever, although we see these things happening all over the former Eastern Europe (Albahari 2012, 2).

The banality of evil related to Albahari's *Goetz and Meyer* has been explored elsewhere (Lopičić 2008) but in many other works of his the themes of Jewishness and Anti-Semitism are indeed quite present.<sup>5</sup> The historical moment of the civil wars in Yugoslavia might have reminded Albahari and other artists of the potential for evil inherent in human nature, but Albahari flatly denies any allusions to the current events as the main goal of his fiction, which was put as a cross on his back. Further, in an interview in 2011, Albahari endorses the claim that the situation in Serbia is getting worse, but his experience of living as a Canadian citizen for many years also teaches him that this is a universal phenomenon:

<sup>5</sup> In an interview, Albahari outlines the presence of these themes in his books: "Actually my first book, the collection of stories *Family time* (1973), openly talks about my family and my background. Many details from those stories appear and are developed in *Bait*. To a lesser extent, the Jewish theme is also present in my other collections of stories and, of course, in the already mentioned novel *Tsing*. In the more recent novels that theme received more room, although the novel *Goetz and Meyer* [2003] is not based on autobiographical details, while the novel *Leeches* is completely out of the family context in which my fiction is immersed from the earliest stories until today" (13: 184).

I think that this is true, but I also think that this happens all over the world. For example in Canada, where I live, the Jewish communities publish a list of anti-Semitic incidents every year and they usually have more than 500 of it. But nobody would say that Canada is anti-Semitic. The number of anti-Semitic incidents in Serbia is unfortunately growing. That's because the stronger nationalism is, the stronger grow anti-Semitism, homophobia and all those anti-feelings – all over the world. It's something that happens in other European countries, too. So maybe the whole world is in a progress where the parties and politics on the right become stronger than those on the left or in the middle (Albahari 2011, 2).

In such a world, politically fragmented and historically massacred, an individual responsibility is of paramount importance, Albahari believes. For that reason he acted as the chairman of the Federation of Jewish Communes in Yugoslavia, and got well-acquainted with local differences and the position of Jewish communities all over the country, but also penetrated deeper into his own Jewish identity. When the war broke out he had to travel to the war zone and evacuate the people so that he was personally exposed to a version of pogrom suffered by the Jews for ages, and he thus became part of that history about which he wanted to write in relation to his own family. Public and private were inseparable, and by witnessing the public he understood the private, like the terrible agonies of his parents. His Jewish identity was confirmed in the grip of history, that history that he envied his father listening to his stories. In the novel *Tsing* the narrator was saying that his father had lived in history, and that he did not feel it at all. That was quite naïve in view of the forthcoming events in Yugoslavia, and Albahari was soon to experience too much history in his own life, which probably brought him to Canada. When history becomes livelier than life (Dimitrijević 2011, 1), when the reality rapes the imagination (Pantić 2006, 1), the writer needs a distance.

### **Conclusion: the Role of the Writer in a Multicentric World**

Having published fourteen novels and many collections of short stories, David Albahari is often asked the same question, whether his

Jewish identity informs a particular responsibility with regard to his fiction. His answer is straightforward: “I do not believe that Jewish writers or people have any special responsibility compared to other writers” (Albahari 2013, 13). The idea behind this seemingly confusing response is that a particular form of suffering should not distinguish a nation or an artist and give them a special position. Historical injustice is not a privilege to be put to political use or employed for a social purpose. Albahari is adamant “that a writer is really a writer only at the moment when he creates, specifically when he writes” (Albahari 2008, 18). At all other times, he is simply a person who may and may not be socially engaged, and should not have prerogatives as such. If his ‘voice’ is followed, that should not be because he is speaking in somebody’s name, and if he assumes the role of a political leader, his literary status should not be invoked: “It doesn’t mean that the writer should be a political leader simply by being a writer, or that he understands things better” (Albahari 2012, 2). “By the way: I hate writers who discuss political questions,” Albahari adds in another interview (Albahari 2011, 1).

Another question is also frequent: “Do you think it’s possible that Serbian authors can influence the change of modern Serbia at all?” Albahari again has serious doubts about the social function of literature, although many Eastern European societies believed in what writers can say and should say to society. On the one hand, he does not believe that a writer has a predetermined role in society, while on the other the reading population is getting smaller and “writers, technically speaking, do not influence anybody except one single reader” (Albahari 2011, 1). In a wider context, due to the impact of political events, the image of Serbia in the world is still unfavourable, and it is not easy to be a person from Serbia when suspicion rises in many hearts at its mention. It is even harder for Serbian writers who have to surmount cultural barriers through translations of their works. Being an experienced translator into English, Albahari is more than aware that with translations there is

always a part that is retained, a part that is lost, and a part that is gained, and his reaching a foreign audience is a two-fold process: he first interprets an experience through his creative fiction, and then a translator interprets his writing in a foreign language. Only the best of literature can truly live in both cultures, but again this victory is achieved, if at all, by winning readers over one by one. Still, Albahari's impression is that there is no organised resistance towards Serbian literature by publishers in the world, and a good work of art will most likely reach its audience sooner or later. In the case of Serbian authors who live abroad, Albahari also believes that they are not treated as political dissidents in the past, who could not publish in their home country: "My reading audience was not where I lived, but I wrote knowing where my reading audience lived" (Albahari 2013, 14). Although a possible change of Serbia through writing will be a slow process, Albahari's present popularity gives hope.

Finally, there is a question about the significance of literature for an individual: "Do you believe that literature can somehow help us face or work through traumatic events such as the Holocaust or the breakup of Yugoslavia?" (Albahari 2013, 14). Albahari is again quite realistic when he says that a work of art is an interpretation of a historical event, subjective and selective regardless of how good it may be. Writers from different periods will offer different versions of these events in line with the ideology they endorse, so the picture is seldom complete or free from misinterpretation. Albahari thinks that familiarity with different sources of information may help in bringing the event closer to the person who did not experience it personally because fiction may also be partial and one-sided in its approach. "Stories themselves can't actually change anything though. They only make us more aware, help us learn, maybe, from the experience of another person" (Albahari 2014, 2), Albahari explains hedging himself against idealistic representations of literature. He believes that it is dangerous to mythologise history or treat myths and legends as history so literature should expose such practice when it is present in society. The

closest Albahari gets to helping his readers deal with traumatic experiences is perhaps in *Goetz and Meyer*:

I've known for years that the story about the holocaust of the Serbian Jewish community has never been told, and I was waiting for the right voice to tell it. I thought that it was, in a way, my duty to write about it, and not only about the story itself but also about how one deals with that terrible legacy today (Albahari 2005, 2).

His main character is a professor of Yugoslav literature, an approximation of the writer in his feeling that history might happen again. The failure of this character to deal with the consequences of the Holocaust for his own family may illustrate Albahari's personal wariness of the palliative potential of literature. As if to put a full stop to the topic of the identity of the writer, this is how Albahari answers the question whether he is a Serbian writer, a Jewish writer, or a post-Yugoslav writer:

Being just a writer, without any adjective, ought to be the natural aim of every writer. At the same time, the writer should not try to run away from what makes him a human being, from those factors that determine his roots and tradition. That should be a normal situation, unless those factors start to dominate the way he or she writes. If writing begins to serve any of those factors, I am deeply convinced that the writer begins to stray from the path of his vocation. In other words, I see myself as a sum of all those identities contained in your question, while at the same time I try to be a writer without any particular determinants (Albahari 2008, 78).

Albahari's multicentric life story opens up his fiction to new topics that he finds important. To understand a historical moment, a writer can only benefit from his multi-identity, as Albahari admits: "I think that having this sort of multi-identity is a blessing for a writer. When you try to understand it yourself – unlike somebody who comes from one place, for instance – you try to do it from many different perspectives." (Albahari 2013, 14) Although "the dilemma about the power or impotence of language to actually register our experience" (Int. 2008) remains, he dis-



covers that “the history of the former Yugoslavs in Western Canada has not been fully developed in either the Yugoslav or Canadian literatures” (Albahari 2008, 78), so that is the fictional space he will explore in his future books. Whether written in one mega-paragraph, like most of his pieces, or not, his text will always be a sort of labyrinth which engages both the reader and the writer who are in a constant dialogue, caught in a shared ignorance and uncertainty, fighting the form to reach the end. His journey through a multicentric world is not a symphony of silences, as Mueller might say, because he gives voice to the places he lives in and the people who are silent. In 2008 he said: “For now, that’s how I see my life: as travelling between two houses ...You know, I don’t have a feeling that I’ve left, so I don’t have a feeling that I need to come back. How could I come back, if I have never left?” (Albahari 2008, 18) Only a citizen comfortable in a multicentric world can feel like David Albahari.

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**МУЛТИЦЕНТРИЧАН ИДЕНТИТЕТ ДАВИДА  
АЛБАХАРИЈА, СРПСКО-КАНАДСКОГ ПИСЦА  
ЈЕВРЕЈСКЕ ВЕРОИСПОВЕСТИ**

Резиме

Поред просторне динамике, Албахаријева књижевна постика је у великој мери одређена и његовом верском припадношћу. Циљ рада је да покаже како личне референтне тачке овог писца (Србија, Канада, јеврејство) стварају слику о аутору који се у мултицентричној културној економији сасвим добро сналази.

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