

**ALEKSANDAR HEMON'S METAFICTIONALITY AND
REPRESENTING EFFECTS OF DISPLACEMENT IN "THE
CONDUCTOR" AND "THE BEES, PART 1"**

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Abstract

On the outbreak of the Yugoslav war, writers like Aleksandar Hemon suddenly found himself stranded in a foreign land watching his beloved country breaking into parts and people fleeing out of the country to be alive. This sudden displacement and the feeling of cut off from home have affected the creative mind of Hemon, resulting in a metafictional narrative of Balkan characters in his short stories. The trauma of displacement and the struggle of adapting into a new life in a new country haunt the characters of the short stories "The Conductor" and "The Bees, Part 1." The narrator in "The Conductor" is a well-accepted and known writer in the United States; however, his Bosnian past regularly intervenes into his present life. Whereas in the story "The Bees, Part 1," father of the narrator finds it hard to get along with the Canadian lifestyle, therefore, he starts a project of his own of writing about his family history instead of going to a language school or social meetings. In short, writing has helped him overcome the trauma of displacement. This paper will argue that Aleksandar Hemon uses metafictionality as a tool to create new identities for his displaced characters, and the experience of displacement acts as one of the many catalysts in creating and re-creating new identities.

Keywords: Metafiction, Identity, Displacement, Aleksandar Hemon

1. Introduction

In the 1990s, after the Second World War, Europeans again witnesses the atrocities of war taking place in the very next to them in former Yugoslavia. It seemed to be so close yet

remained safely on the other side of an invisible threshold in the eyes of European or American people. Writers like Aleksandar Hemon, who was in the United States at that time, suddenly found himself stranded in a foreign land and watching his beloved country breaking apart and people were fleeing out of the country to be alive. The war atrocities back at home and the feeling of cut off from home affected the creative mind of the writer, which we can trace easily in his writings. Aleksandar Hemon was born in 1964 in Sarajevo, but since 1992 he lives in the USA. On the eve of the Yugoslav civil war, Hemon went on a cultural exchange program to the USA and later became a naturalized US citizen. In writing about being emotionally close to, yet spatially removed from Bosnia, Hemon has attracted tremendous critical attention, least due to the fact that he does not write in his mother tongue, but the language of his adopted country. His displacement has led him to a different and often times to an unusual perspective on Yugoslav war, a perspective that offer complex narratives and spirited resistance to popular Western discourses about the Balkans.

The trauma of displacement and the struggle of adopting into a new way of life in a foreign land haunt the characters of Hemon's short stories, even at the time they are all settled into a new lifestyle in a new country. The narrator of the short story "The Conductor" is now a well-accepted and known writer in the USA; however, his Bosnian past regularly intervenes into his present life. Whereas, in the story "The Bees, Part 1," father of the narrator finds it hard to get into the lifestyle of Ontario, Canada and has begun to write about his family history; in other words, narrator's father converts his experience of being displaced into creativity. Regarding the matter of creativity and displacement Vilem Flusser (2002) in his essay "Exile and Creativity," says that the experience of displacement is "unliveable" and a displaced person should have sorted out "meaningful messages" from the new surroundings "to make it livable" (p. 1). A displaced person, similar to an immigrant, in a new land, have to create constantly meanings of literally everything she/he encountered in the surroundings. A displaced person persistently transforms almost all the new data feasible to make the existence meaningful; and to create a form of identity by making a distinction between the processed data and the previous habits, i.e. the cultural background. In the process of making meaning, a creative mind often incorporates all the texts that the person has read or has come across earlier and positions them to get a firm hold on the present situation. This incorporation of different texts leads to the 'Metafictionality' and 'Intertextuality,' which is evident in the short stories in consideration both explicitly as well as implicitly.

This paper will argue that Aleksandar Hemon uses metafictionality as a tool to create new identities for his displaced characters, and the experience of displacement acts as one of the many catalysts in creating and re-creating new identities. As the title of this essay indicates, the analysis here centers around metafictionality and displacement. More precisely, it is concerned with the usage of intertextuality in creating metafiction, and representing effects of displacement in two of the short stories “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1” from the book *Love and Obstacles*. In the following, this essay will provide a short overview on Aleksandar Hemon and the theoretical bases of the analysis. Then, the paper will analyze metafictionality and intertextuality, and effect of displacement in “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1” respectively.

2. Aleksandar Hemon and His Writings

Aleksandar Hemon was born and grew up in Sarajevo, the capital city of Bosnia; however, he has been living in the United States for the last three decades. His life in America has a tremendous influence on his writing. His stories accounting immigrants struggle in America brought him both fame and recognition as one of the most prominent and talented writers of the time. One of the most relevant information of his life is the Yugoslav civil war and him being stranded in Chicago while on an exchange program. This sudden exile life has contributed to Hemon writing stories of displacement, struggle, and transformation of immigrant characters in the USA.

His family background also plays a crucial role in forming his idea of displacement. Originally, he got a Ukrainian ancestry from his father’s part and a Serbian ancestry from his mother. As a result, the history and trauma of displacement are always a part of Hemon’s family history, which in a way influenced Hemon to write about the feeling of being displaced or stranded more acutely than many of the contemporary writers with an immigration background. In addition, Hemon’s sudden exile in the USA also forces him to reinvent himself in a different context, and to redefine his writing (he was a journalist and a writer in a local Sarajevo newspaper) in a completely different language. He started learning English at the beginning of his exile life; and finally, in three years he gained mastery over English; and in 1995, he published “The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders” in *Triquarterly*. Immediately, he gained popularity for his envy-inducing facility in English and ability to extract levity from tragedy; and he has even been compared to the great Russian

writer Vladimir Nabokov (cf. Rohter, 2009). As a result, he has earned many recognitions such as Guggenheim Fellowship, MacArthur Fellows, and National Book Critics Circle Award.

3. Conceptual Orientation

The primary research question for this paper is concerned with how Aleksandar Hemon uses metafiction and intertextual references to create a plethora of narrative that, in a way, gives new identities to his displaced characters. Besides, this paper wants to locate the effects of displacement in the selected short stories too. Hence, it is essential to establish the groundwork of the concepts (i.e. metafiction, intertextuality, and displacement) for an informed analysis of “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1.”

Patricia Waugh in her book *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* says ‘metafiction’ is “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (p. 2). Furthermore, she argues that metafiction does not only critique the narrative of the fiction but also examine “the fictionality of the world” outside the literary fictional text and the language itself (p. 2). So, metafiction not only questions the relationship between fiction and reality, but it also questions the perception of language being a coherent, meaningful, and objective representation of the world. In other words, language is an independent, self-contained, and self-reflexive system which generates its own “meanings” (p. 3). On the other hand, Mark Currie in the book *Metafiction* comments on the self-critical attitude of the contemporary fictions by describing metafictionality as “a borderline discourse” (p. 2) which stand between fiction and criticism. Although Waugh and Currie defined ‘metafiction’ differently, both agree on the fact that metafiction display a self-reflexivity of the author’s understanding of theories pertaining to the construction of any fictional works, which can be explicitly traced in Hemon’s fictional works.

Metafiction, often, employs intertextual references and allusion to other artistic, historical, and literary texts by examining fictional systems itself. In addition, metafictional works incorporate aspects from both theory and criticism; and create biographies of imaginary writers, or present and discuss fictional works of an imaginary character. Moreover, metafictional narratives often violate narrative levels by intruding to comment on writing or by involving the author directly with fictional characters. Furthermore, the author,

occasionally, questions the narrative assumptions and conventions that transforms reality, which, in a way, upholds the fact that no singular truths exist. Many of these traits of metafiction can be found in “The Conductor” or in “The Bees, Part 1,” and those will be in scrutiny in the analysis part of this paper.

As mentioned earlier, metafiction often uses allusion to other artistic, historical, and literary texts, i.e. intertextuality. To that end, intertextuality is the instances of referring another text within a text. In a broad sense, intertextuality is the instances where any literary, media or social text is used within another literary, media, or social text. In literature, intertextuality takes place when any fictional text refers to a second text by its title, scene, character, or storyline, for instance; or when a text refers to a social phenomenon such as a media, social, or cultural story (cf. Brooker, 1999, p. 123). In *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes says, “We know that a text is ... a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (cited in Brooker, 1999, p. 124). This borrowing of innumerable centers of culture asks for a comparative understanding of the text concerning its function outside of the book with inside of the book. In other words, intertextuality asks the reader to think about the authors intention, motif, and reason behind choosing a particular literary or social text; and its effect on the readers’ understanding of the text.

Displacement is a willing or unwilling movement from known surroundings to a totally unknown place. Therefore, displacement is strongly connected to the understanding of the place. However, culturally, displacement can be interpreted as a subjective reinvention of a place in terms of language, narrative and myth. It also talks about the experience of displacement by closely associating with “Heidegger's term *unheimlich* or *unheimlichkeit* - literally ‘unhousedness’ or ‘not-at-home-ness’ [feelings]” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 73). However, I argue that displacement is the strong mental and physical feeling of belonging to a ‘place’, which initiates the sense of ‘identity’ in sets of symbolic and physical association with a place called ‘home’.

4. Fiction about Fiction: Metafiction and Intertextuality in Hemon’s Writing

Aleksandar Hemon creates a strong sense of interest into the reader’s mind at the beginning of the story, “The Conductor” by referencing to an anthology, “In the 1989 *Anthology of Contemporary Bosnian Poetry*, Muhamed D. was represented with four poems” (Hemon, 2009, p. 61). This statement presents Muhamed D. as a poet in a better position than the narrator, who is a writer now. Nevertheless, within a few lines narrators’ comment on

Muhamed D. surprised us “I thought that Muhamed D.’s poems were silly and fake” (p. 61). These two sentences show the metafictionality within the story, questioning the relationship of the fiction and reality; and reminding the reader that they are reading a fictional work. It also poses a critique of the claimed anthology and questions the existence of the anthology too. The narrator of the story also comments on his writing and say that “... I consider myself a far better, more soulful poet than Muhamed D.” (p. 61). Nevertheless, few lines later he makes it clear how ambiguous his poems are by stating that his poems reach to a “realm” that is “unknowable” and he also does not understand them, though, the name of his poems are fascinating such as “Peter Pan and the Lesbians”, “Love and Obstacles”(p. 62).

We can speculate that Mehmed Alija Dizdar, the most famous Bosnian poet of this age, is the inspiration for Aleksandar Hemon to create this imaginary and fictional poet Muhamed D. Mehmed Alija Dizdar, also known as Mak, is best known for his volume of poems entitled *Kameni Spavač*, or “Stone Sleeper,” a milestone in the twentieth century Bosnian and southern Slav poetry (cf. Mahmutćehajić, 2008). By imitating Mak, Hemon is blurring the border between the fictional world and the real world, which confirms Mark Currie’s observation of metafictionality as “a borderline discourse” (Currie, 1995, p. 2). Imitating Mak and visioning the plurality of Bosnian identity the narrator of the story “The Conductor” mentions a few lines from a poem of the imaginary poet Muhamed D:

Whichever way I go, now, I’ll reach the other shore.
Old, I no longer know what they know: how to regain
What is meant to be lost. On the river surface
Snowflake after snowflake perishes. (Hemon, 2009, p. 65)

This poem of Muhamed D. has a similar tone like that of Mak’s poems in “Stone Sleeper”, and the “I” in this poem represents the city of Sarajevo itself. The city is now old enough that it cannot pace with the new flow of people and thinking. It does not understand what the present inhabitants want; however, they have to return to the origin again. These lines also intensify the war looming fact in Sarajevo. A couple of paragraphs later, the narrator of the story presents the fact of overlooking the reality of the upcoming war saying, “We knew – but we didn’t want to know – what was going to happen, the sky descending upon our heads like the shadow of a falling piano in a cartoon” (p. 66).

The narrator of the story “The Conductor” always feels jealous of Muhamed D. because of his apparent effortless writing style. The narrator compares Muhamed D.’s poems with Dante

refereeing a line from a poem, “I did not know death hath undone so much” (Hemon, 2009, p. 69), which creates an allusion that in a way critique the story of the imaginary poet, Muhamed D.; therefore, it critiques the narrative itself. He also finds the poetry of Muhamed D. after the end of Bosnian war are full of images of death and destruction; however, he does not give any more references from Muhamed D.’s poems in this time.

The instances of mentioning Beethoven and his works happen twice in “The Conductor.” At first the reference of Beethoven and his most acclaimed and renowned symphony “Symphony 9” is mentioned at the beginning of the story. Furthermore, the second reference of Beethoven takes place in the middle of the story, where the narrator talks about a poem by Muhamed D. in which a description of a hanging foreign conductor playing the *Eroica*. *Eroica* is Beethoven’s third major composition with great emotional depth on it. These references of Beethoven’s symphony confirms Ronald Barthes observation of texts borrowing “from the innumerable centers of culture” (cited in Brooker, 1999, p. 124) and creates a sense of intertextuality that questions Hemon’s intention behind choosing Beethoven’s symphony within the narration. I believe, Hemon has used Beethoven and his works to intensify the fact of mental and emotional loss of the Bosnian people before, during, and after the Yugoslav war.

Though the narrator is constructing and deconstructing the imaginary Bosnian poetic figure Muhamed D., he does not fail to mention his inner longing for ‘home’ by saying, “... something of me [him] remained in Sarajevo” (Hemon, 2009, p. 70). He also does not forget about his identity as a Bosnian,

I was Bosnian, I looked and conducted myself like a Bosnian, and everyone was content to think that I was in constant, uninterrupted communication with the tormented soul of my homeland. (p. 71)

In “The Bees, Part 1,” one finds references to various stories within the story itself. Here the narrator of Hemon’s story talks about his father’s obsession for reality. For the father of the narrator, everything written and expressed in literature is a “scam” and “precarious”.

Whatever conveyed reality earned my father’s unqualified appreciation. He was suspicious of broadcast news, relentlessly listing the daily triumphs of socialism, but was addicted to the weather forecast. (p. 129)

In another instance, the narrator mentioned about reading a story from Garcia Marquez, where an angel with wings falls from the sky and confines into a chicken coop. Here, Hemon

questions about the reality of applying imagination into creative writing. In other words, the fiction of Hemon makes a critique of another fictional writing style, i.e. “magical realism”. Here, we can argue in line with Mark Currie’s description of metafiction that Hemon’s writing posits itself on the borderline discourse between fiction and criticism. Through the view of the narrator’s father on literature and other forms of text, Hemon directs a question on the narrative assumptions and conventions that transform and filter reality, ultimately uphold the fact that there are no singular truths or meanings exists. The quality of questioning reality and fictions is a characteristic function of metafiction. Father of the narrator trusts the distinction and exclusivity on either side of the fiction/non-fiction line. However, as he struggles to write an entirely true story, he ends up extending a beekeeping metaphor and relying on memory rather than verifiable fact. Referring to one character, in particular, the narrator states, “I’ve inquired about the Japanese tailor, and no one else remembers him or has heard of him” (Hemon, 2009, p. 135). The father nonetheless counts the tailor as one of the seventeen nationalities he remembers in the town of Prnjavor. In this example, Hemon draws attention to the questionable reliance the father places on memory to highlight the care with which an author can unintentionally fabricate data, even in a non-fiction piece. Also, in a move similar to Hutcheon’s distinction between brute event and meaning-granted fact, Hemon demonstrates how that which “conveyed reality,” or asserts itself as non-fiction, may not be based on fact or could mark otherwise negligible information as highly relevant (p. 130). The father claims to “stick to what really happened;” yet, his narrative is based on perspective and memory, and he highlights beekeeping as the most important event of the time (p. 130). This demonstration forces the reader to recognize the politics of narrativization and reevaluate the author’s facts and emphasis.

It is also arguable that “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1” are full of intertextuality within itself and is a ‘fiction about fiction’. Because Hemon always make references to the imaginary poet Muhamed D.’s poems in “The Conductor”; and includes passages from the writing of the narrator’s father in “The Bees, Part 1”. One could also argue that the unnamed narrator in these two stories is Hemon himself, and he intentionally does it to create an identity for all Bosnians in the States. These intertextual references, instances of the narrator’s experiences in Sarajevo before the war, observing war in the eye of an imaginary poet, and going back and forth with father’s account of family history constitute a new pluralized identity of Bosnia.

5. Moving From Known to Unknown: Effects of Displacement

Hemon's most prominent theme in *Love and Obstacles* might be described as the suffering of a displaced person. No matter where he is, or how old, or how American, the narrator cannot escape a certain feeling of displacement.

I was sick of being asked where I was from, and I hated Bush and his Jesus freaks. With every particle of my being I hated the word "carbs" and the systematic extermination of joy from American life, et cetera. (Hemon, 2009, p. 80)

The narrator here is well adopted into the American way of lifestyle, but the surrounding continually reminds him of his origin. In the story "The Conductor", Muhamed D.'s wife through him and the narrator of the story out of home and both come out to a dark alley to save them from so-called police officer Johnson. To give the situation a further impetus, the narrator describes their position as this, "...we staggered down an alley in an unknown direction: the alley was deserted except for a sofa with a stuffed giraffe leaning on it" (p. 83). This sentence has the essence and dilemma of displaced persons inner self, where the displaced people do not know about the future they are heading. The journey of displaced people is not one of a religious pilgrimage to a specific holy place. The journey of displaced people is slightly towards a holy place that they do not even know about, and the place has only an appeal of heaven like entity to the displaced mind. They do not know about the harsh reality of the promised land. Hemon rightfully depicted it in "The Bees, Part 1" by describing the mental turmoil of the narrator's father, "... he didn't know where they had landed, how they were going to live and pay for food and furniture; he didn't know what would happen to them if one of them got terribly sick" (p. 131).

Even after overcoming the mental agony of settling into a new place, new society, new culture and new environment, the displaced people still go back regularly to the land they left behind. Mothers of the narrator, in "The Bees, Part 1," is continuously watching TV to learn about the war situation back in Sarajevo, though, she has no solution to the matter.

My mind stores an image of her patiently and unfalteringly turning a Rubik's Cube in her hands, while a report on a Sarajevo massacre is on TV, completely unfazed by the fact that she is not, and never would be, anywhere close to the solution. (p. 131)

Hemon's writing shows the despair and destitute of the displaced people in a more straightforward way than twisting them into a different shape. When the narrator "The Bees,

Part 1” calls his family, who are now living in Hamilton, Canada, from the other side of the phone his father reply

“So what are you doing?” I’d ask.

“Waiting,” he’d say.

“For what?”

“Waiting to die.” (p. 132-133)

Later on, we are informed that the narrator’s father has overcome his boredom of life in a new land through investing his time on writing about his family history. In the course of the development of the story, we find the narrator’s father as more involve in work and finally into beekeeping in Canada. Now he has twenty-three beehives and collects a few hundred pounds of honey a year.

6. Conclusion

In the end, Hemon’s success, as a writer in a land far away from home, has not only depended on the fact that he writes in a dominant world language but also to the strength of positioning himself into an outsider point of view on immigrant experiences. My analysis, however, takes a step forward by centering the focus on metafictionality and its apparent use in Hemon’s writing, specifically within “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1.” This focus allows insight into the ways in which Hemon creates strong narrative power for his displaced characters to form new identities. The analysis of “The Conductor” and “The Bees, Part 1” presented here offers a glimpse at Aleksandar Hemon’s depth of understanding on a self-reflexive narrative, i.e. metafictionality, and his reflections on displacement and its effect on a displaced person. The analysis shows that the effect of displacement within the stories is in two-folds: one, the inevitable mental agony of moving from a known place to an unknown place; and two, the constant battle of keeping in touch with the land that a displaced person left behind. This is especially the case in “The Bees, Part 1.” Finally, as a writer, Hemon has reasonably employed many traits of metafiction in his writing through which his characters from Eastern Europe gain permanence in literature. Additionally, without naming the narrator both in “The Conductor” and in “The Bees, Part 1” Hemon has allowed the reader to create the identity for the narrator.

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