

Damir Arsenijević in Conversation with Šejla Šehabović

Translated by Tag McEntegart

Damir: Let's talk about "Plan B," one of the stories in our graphic novel on environmental violence, which I instigated as a collaborative project between you, as the scriptwriter, Marko Gačnik, as the illustrator, and me, as the editor. The graphic novel is entitled *Zemlja—voda—zrak* (2020, Earth—Water—Air) and bears the name of the first platform for environmental humanities in Bosnia and Herzegovina—*zemljavodazrak.com*—which enables research and intervention into the nexus of war-time violence, carried out by authoritarian ethnic elites and environmental violence. The graphic novel examines stories that cover the continued destruction of social structures through environmental violence: from factories destroyed and stripped of assets in enforced and corrupt privatization to illegal and clandestine dumping of hazardous waste in communities, leading to illness and death of its members. But this story, "Plan B," is specific in several regards. Tell me in more detail how you conceived of the idea for the story, from your point of view as the writer.

Šejla: The story was born as a direct response to what I feel are the dominant social affects concerning the pollution created by factories in contemporary post-socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). One of these affects is grieving for the loss of the factories. Privatization is corrupt and criminal by nature and has caused a whole 'world' to vanish. We are left with nostalgia and a feeling of loss, which is followed by fear. People are afraid to even talk about it. Even when these factories were in

production and not privately owned, they produced disease and death. I unpack that nostalgia and fear. I do this through a literary character who is both father and grandfather. Our parents, especially our fathers, are the people who used their labor to express their masculinity, and they were the ones who built socialist Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were in the limelight. Naturally, our female workers were building our socialist homeland, too, but those who took center stage, such as the engineers, directors, the visible managers of the production process, were educated males. Their lives and masculinity, their right to be judged as valuable members of our society, as well as their own abilities, education, and dedication, depended on the era when socialist society was being created. They were aware that they were destroying nature, and at that time, they firmly believed that they could fully compensate for this through their dedication and innovation. They believed that there was no other way to accomplish such a big leap in material, educational, and cultural advancement. Their contribution to society was measured by the increasing number of people with more secure livelihoods and better prospects. In the period of transition into neoliberal capitalism, they lost their power. In reality, just because they are currently in a powerless and weakened position, like the father in the story "Plan B," now we blame them for having let the socially-owned property slip from their grasp.

The engineers admit that mistakes were made, that there was strife over weighing what portion of the natural environment was worth sacrificing for the good of society. During the transition, they were stripped of their power; they resisted using all of the skills at their disposal; but once they realized they could no longer resist, they started to break down. They were no longer important for a society in which so many people had depended on them. It's important to speak about this because there are environmental movements in Bosnia and Herzegovina who despise these former workers, who would legally prosecute them. These workers need the acknowledgment that they acted rationally. We could not have freed women from patriarchy between '45 and '85 by agricultural work, say, by just growing potatoes, for sure. We could not do that. We could not build 100 schools in

100 villages by growing potatoes. That was not possible. These people knew that something would need to be sacrificed in order to achieve a greater goal. What they could not have planned for is that all the fruits of their sacrifice would be handed over to the capitalists during the transition and that all the burden of the damage of this transition would be shouldered by the workers.

Damir: The so-called post-socialist transition—that is the truncated term for the war against socialist Yugoslavia and its invention of socially-owned property—carried out by ethnic elites who bring neoliberal capitalism through war into the former Yugoslav republics—was marked by sacrificing the workers. At the end of our story, a Hindu businessman buys a factory in BiH and extracts profit from it, while the state turns a blind eye. That puts the workers in a position of extreme loneliness.

Šejla: All those who feel aggrieved think it is only they who have suffered losses. I think this is the predominant public sentiment, not only amongst the workers in the factories—we all feel like that.

Damir: You are referring to an individualized sense of guilt, in that we are forced to assume this guilt as individuals, yet it is a burden of guilt that is greater than all of us?

Šejla: That is correct. That is why, in the graphic novel, we have a father justifying himself to his family. We've been convinced it is all our fault. The resistance I previously mentioned came down either to physical sacrifice or suffering in silence. The health of the engineers was compromised, and after the war, they suffered from heart conditions and high blood pressure and lived in a state of continuous shock, unable to convince themselves that, from now on, this was how life was going to be. From someone who firmly believed that, by sacrificing some parts of nature, society would be helped; that this country could be transformed for the better, having seen that it was possible with your own eyes, now you are forced to undertake the same sacrifice knowing all too well that

it will not benefit society. This is a harrowing position to be in. You work hard, but you do not believe in what you are trying to achieve. This is what it was like when the factories restarted after the war in the late 1990s.

Damir: What emerges from this is that there is a hefty price to be paid for suffering in silence. The father says, “I am silent, but the body remembers.”

Šejla: There is a price, and they paid the price. He could build the Koksara factory when he was 25 years old. But, as a mature man with a family, as someone who has proven his masculinity by being able to take care of his family and society, with all his knowledge and experience, he was not able to save society from that factory. It was a heavy blow to the core of his being and everything he knew about himself.

Damir: How would you describe your attitude to history in this story? How does the father inscribe his experience in a wider historical frame when he says, “and there is always someone who wants to secure the future on the back of the current workforce”? In what way does the grandfather, as a literary character, relate to history, and how can his personal experience be critically assessed through the ‘lens’ of this saying?

Šejla: It is important that you have some insight, that you have a wider grasp of history, in order to be able to pass on that kind of message to the next generation. The problem is that the grandfather in this story does not offer his grandchild more than a glimpse of the emotions stirred by the resistance of the past. A wider historical framework is what is necessary. In a narrow historical framework, which comprises the construction of socialist society, the post-socialist transition, and the destruction of the socialist heritage, only one thing can be preserved: the need to fight for mere survival. The attitude of disengagement is what begins to dominate, the same attitude promoted in the media and education, fostering a feeling of provincialism, disconnection from the wider world, a feeling of ruination and disengagement:

we are constantly persuaded that we have to give up. We should not sacrifice our environment for capitalism. That is the truth. However, in building socialism, we have built something else: the feeling of responsibility towards society. The feeling that silence has no place here. Shall we spend the next 100 years talking about the loss and how incapable we are in the face of it, or shall we talk about the possibility of putting all our capacities for social organization and the tradition of resistance to work for us? We cannot use the “dirty” coking coal; there is more harm than good in it. However, we can use our historical knowledge of how to fight successfully and thus contribute to society. This graphic novel was created by a feminist: it is an attempt to grant mercy to our fathers, to those who, in their era, had a chance to build an egalitarian society, who, in many ways, did participate in building it, and yet today, we treat them as if they had little or no experience in the struggle for emancipation. Whereas that is simply not true.

Damir: Your intervention in this story comes across as a sort of rebellion against a binary polarization: the perpetrator—the victim. Is there another viewpoint that could be espoused?

Šejla: There are both perpetrators and victims here, and all of them are capable of rational thinking and of understanding what happened. The victims here aren't completely helpless. Some of the most educated members of our society are victims. These were people who produced so much capital that an entire society was able to be built from the ground up, so much so that several subsequent generations have places to live, healthcare, and free education. When compared to the lives of their mothers, the lives of our mothers have changed beyond recognition and advanced greatly. In one generation, several important emancipatory landmarks became possible, which were not realized in previous attempts at emancipation. Despite all of today's efforts towards the re-traditionalization of BiH, those who want to turn the clock back have not succeeded in abolishing women's right to abortion, let alone women's right to education; for women to be active in politics; for women to take up senior official positions. The roots of

those normalized gains for women and society have deep foundations in our socialist society. But those gains came at a price. The price had to be paid. And one part of the price has included the destruction of the natural environment. Today, the people who destroyed nature, the majority of whom were men, are despised. Unlike most of the workers, the engineers could explain the mistakes they made. These are not the people who will say: in order for society to be affluent, we have to exploit nature, we have to extract everything, poison the water—all that matters is that we produce more capital. They would never say that. They all—rationally and scientifically—know how to present their own factory's actions in the best light. They are ready to talk about the mistakes they made during the most productive, most upbeat, and most glorious period of their lives. That does not deserve our contempt. That is what we need to take into account nowadays when we plan, to be able to create a better, kinder society. Society will never move forward if we are not ready to make sacrifices. However, we should have a consensus on what to sacrifice, when, and at what cost. Today we all pretend that social progress can be made without sacrifice. That is not how it happens.

Damir: This story is clearly gendered. This is a dialogue between a grandfather and his grandson. What is transferred to future generations of men?

Šejla: From a woman's and feminist perspective, as the author, I show how knowledge is transferred from one man to another. The story ends with a lyrical moment, stemming from oral mythology, from local tradition. Resistance doesn't mean just digging your heels in—it has to be planned and well thought through. What is it that you believe in, and what are you willing to sacrifice? Being aware that you have a tradition of resistance that you can call on—that is important.

Damir: Is there an element of resistance in the story that is never explicitly communicated but exists as a tacit understanding?

Šejla: Well, there is a memorial to a mythical goat in Tuzla. But it is not a local story that is found only here in our home town. Istria, too, has memorials dedicated to goats because the goats fed Istrians; they are native to that region, and Istria is their natural habitat. They are part of a natural fire-fighting system because they eat bushes that can become fuel for brush fires—fires that can cause huge damage to the natural environment. In Tuzla, it's different. The officials have constantly forbidden the keeping of goats since they damage the environment. On the other hand, the goats have fed people. There is that same impossible contradiction: you are maintaining the very factory that you know is destroying the natural world. Also, people in the past held the same position: I want to keep a goat even if it eats all the forest, but who cares about forests? That type of resistance is rarely spelled out. And this is what it sounds like when you put it into words: I know that you take from me more than I can produce. In America, when the indigenous population was forbidden to hunt buffalos, supposedly to keep nature intact, they prevented the most experienced stewards of that natural environment from using it wisely. In fact, there is a question of ownership here—it is that question that is never spelled out. The history that is not spoken aloud and the history that “they” will never find out. If the forest is mine, my goat can eat it. But when you take the forest away from me and tell me that it is no longer mine, even though it is my birthright, then my goat can still eat that part of the forest which can never be controlled by any authority in the world. So there!

