



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing:**  
**Literature and society: Lana Bastašić and Dževad Karahasan**  
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## **Literature and society: Lana Bastašić and Dževad Karahasan**

*This briefing will take a closer look at two influential contemporary Bosnian authors and their views on the Bosnian society. Lana Bastašić and Dževad Karahasan were awarded this year with prestigious international awards. The briefing will present their work and views on personal experiences of emigration, memories of Yugoslav war of the 1990's, issue of multiple identities and the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans in general.*

### **Lana Bastašić, awarded with the Euroepan Union prize of Literature**

Lana Bastašić was born in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1986. In the 1990's, she moved to Banja Luka where she had spent most of her life. After living in Barcelona for a while, she currently resides in Belgrade and Zagreb. In May 2020, she was awarded the for her first novel "Uhvati zeca" [In the Hilly Wonderland]. Before the novel, she published two books of short stories, a book of poetry and a book for children.

When asked about her novel, Bastašić explained that her symbolic point of view of Bosnia and Herzegovina is that of comparing the country to a used and raped woman, who is afterwards ignored and whose body is a territory for only big male-dominated stories. That is why she decided to put a female voice into the novel and why the critics also referred to Bastašić as the "Elena Ferrante of the Balkans". The novel entails such themes as childhood, friendship, memory of a country and voyages. It unusually connects the famous Lewis Carroll book "Alice in Wonderland" with the Balkans.

Bastašić says that the most important issue for her was the question of identity, especially while growing up in the 1990's Bosnia and Herzegovina. For her, living in that country was like having a childhood in Wonderland. She saw Bosnia and Herzegovina as a country with no logic: senseless and violent. She was asking herself how to know who you are when everybody else is forcing an identity upon you before you are old enough to understand your own self and your own desires. She didn't want to write yet another war story but shed a light on a perspective of children, young girls in particular. Growing up as a girl and maturing as a woman in a violent and patriarchal society had consequences on her entire generation, claims the writer.

In the novel, through their joint voyage, the destinies of two women are intertwined, touching the questions of friendship and nationalism. The author does not find this feminist perspective as an act of activism but rather an experience closer to her: after all, women make up for half of the country's citizens, says Bastašić. But it is important to talk about female experiences. Although the war in the 1990's is a very repetitive topic, it still has to be told from the perspectives of those who haven't been heard yet, but still endure the consequences of the war, especially in literature.

Another topic addressed in the novel are the so-called "sins of the fathers" and collective guilt of the Serbian people in Banja Luka. Bastašić thinks that literature should be, in a way, society's bad conscience. Literature can be entertaining but that's not its purpose: it should talk about what the society collectively surpasses and deal with the issues of personal privileges. Bastašić is interested in her own privilege of growing up in Banja Luka with the right kind of surname which gave her a peaceful childhood. She talks about the darker side that others don't want to see, regardless if they are Serb, Bosnian or Croat. She herself felt the need, after witnessing the sufferings of others, not to turn the head the other way but to ethically speak of some memories through human stories.

Regarding the patriarchal side of the Bosnian society, Bastašić feels that there is a constant problem of women who are active in the public sphere, especially female artists who constantly have a need to justify their work. One of her colleague writers commented that she got the European Union award for non-literary reasons, out of political correctness, just for being a woman. There is a common attitude that women are taking up places of male writers, feels Bastašić. She also thinks that her generation has it better than the one before her, as the stereotype of a writer who is an older man with a talent to tell stories is slowly disintegrating. It took a long time to even have female writers as role-models for girls who want to become one as well. But Bastašić thinks that things are improving, as there are enough people who regard writing for itself without the issue of who is writing. Still, the writer believes, the society also has to work on that in schools the girls' voices are as important as those of boys.

Lana Bastašić is currently working on another short stories book and has only recently returned to the Balkans, because of literature she says, now living between Belgrade and Zagreb. Living in Barcelona has allowed her the distance needed to write about Bosnia, she believes.

## **Dževad Karahasan, awarded with the Guethe prize for literature**

Dževad Karahasan was born in 1953. in Duvno. He was schooled in Sarajevo and Zagreb and had worked as a dramaturg and professor in Austria and Germany. Dževad had written numerous novels, short story and essay books which have been translated to 15 languages.

Recently, he was awarded with the Germany's most prestigious book award, the Goethe prize. The prize is given out by the city of Frankfurt every three years. As explained by the jury, Dževad Karahasan received the prize, among other things, for building bridges between German speaking countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina, between East and West, between Christianity and Islam. Also for his continuous literary dedication towards understanding between European nations and countries.

Karahasan claims that his books, just like his literary heroes, cannot be simply nationalistically labeled. Thus, the readers who see themselves and others as foremostly identified by national belonging cannot identify with his characters. Karahasan believes that people should never accept the images put forward by pseudo politicians, as no nation or any bigger community is ever homogeneous. Life and people themselves are more complex than ideologies forced upon us.

The writer claims that he generally writes to find somebody to talk to. He also finds himself not liking to usually agree with opinions of others. Agreement for Karahasan means the end of a conversation, but societies and cultures like to reward what they see as agreement on the reflections of themselves. When comparing the German society to the Balkan one, Karahasan thinks that the latter one should follow the German example. In Germany there had been a thorough confrontation with the demons of the political past based on ethics. He finds this to be like a difference between a mature person and a child. A mature adult is aware that he can act foolishly and carries some evil within, while a child seriously believes that it is a center of universe and everything it does is good. The Bosnian pseudo-national political profits keep on repeating messages to their communities and hoards that they had done no wrong whatsoever. So, according to Karahasan, one should face their own infantile human nature and the evils they have done. Only after doing that, he believes, we are able to let go of the internalized pressure and face the others by recognizing the good in them as well. Quoting a Montenegrin writer Marko Miljanov: "It is heroic to defend oneself from the others, but it's human to defend the others from oneself."

Karahasan thinks that the Balkan nations are historically and linguistically connected and have no choice but to ethically and humanly mature think about and talk to each other. His new novel should be coming out by the end of the year and its main character is a classic philologist who ends up in Sarajevo during the first war occupation year of 1993. He decides to stay in the city and explores the forms of inner freedom that can be known only in isolation and captivity.

### **Conclusion**

Both Bosnian writers, Lana Bastašić and Dževad Karahasan have received prestigious international awards for the works that promote ethics of human dialogue and for giving voices to characters that surpass nationalistic ideologies. Bastašić and Karahasan believe that past and the current conflicts in Bosnia should be maturely dealt with by facing one's own darker side and commencing dialogue of understanding with those who are identified by the others. Karahasan promotes skepticism of local pseudo-politicians who advocate nationalistic viewpoints while Bastašić addresses more problems of patriarchal society in Bosnia and Herzegovina and promoting female voices in literature.