

# “Death and the Dervish” by Meša Selimović and “The Tree of Dreams” by Fulvio Tomizza as Novels Inspired by the Authors’ Personal Experiences

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## Abstract

Personal tragedies caused by historical and political reasons are well-known today thanks to studies of otherness. Although there are already studies that deal with the literary production of Meša Selimović and Fulvio Tomizza, there is no study that attempts to compare their literary works.

The analysis begins with similarities in the biographies of the two authors. They were interested in communism, and both authors lost a family member to the regime. Selimović lost his brother, and Tomizza his father. These tragedies inspired “Death and the Dervish” and “The Tree of Dreams”. The two novels, which contain autobiographical experiences, are written in the first-person form of a diary and deal with the relationship between God and the narrator.

We expect that a comparative approach between the novels will be useful for further research on the relationship between Italian and Slavic literature and culture.

**Keywords:** Tomizza, Selimović, novels, autobiography, otherness

## 1. Introduction

This paper will analyse and compare “Death and the Dervish” (“Derviš i smrt”) by Meša Selimović and “The Tree of Dreams” (L’albero dei sogni) by Fulvio Tomizza, two novels inspired by the author’s personal experiences. These experiences of individual tragedy assume a universal meaning.

Fulvio Tomizza and Meša Selimović are prize-winning authors who, in the novels described and analysed here, illustrate personal tragedies during the Yugoslav communist regime after World War II. The personal motivation in Tomizza’s novel is more obvious, as he wrote about the Istrian exile he experienced, while Selimović set his work in Bosnia during the Ottoman conquest to describe the loss of his brother.

Although existing studies on “Death and the Dervish” and “The Tree of Dreams” mention Eastern European models that are present in both novels, there is no paper that compares the two novels.

Both authors lost a family member because of the regime and wrote novels to honour them. Both novels follow Eastern European models. They are written in the first-person voice of a diary and address the relationship between God and the narrator.

The study offers a comparison of the novels and their authors’ biographies in an attempt to better understand the relations between Slavic and Italian literature.

## **2. Otherness and autobiography in a theoretical framework**

In this paper, we will discuss the protagonist’s otherness. We will consider it, on the one hand, as a notion that is different and contrary to the protagonist's characteristics, and, on the other hand, as a notion that indicates that the protagonist adopts an attitude that is contrary to what is common, spontaneous, and expected for the majority. These views are supported by the definitions of “otherness” in the Encyclopedia Britannica, the Croatian Encyclopedia, the Treccani Vocabulary, and the Cambridge Dictionary.

The Italian dictionary Treccani<sup>12</sup> indicates that otherness is a philosophical term to refer to the “other” or the “different”, while the same source indicates that ‘Other’ refers to “someone or something different from something or someone mentioned or implied before”.

The Cambridge Dictionary<sup>13</sup> defines ‘otherness’ as a state and feeling that is different from what is “familiar, expected, or generally accepted”. Moreover, the entry in the Croatian Encyclopedia<sup>14</sup> proves that the concept goes back to Plato in antiquity, but within Christian philosophy, the concept of otherness received a new meaning, with God<sup>15</sup> being the transcendent otherness and guaranteeing the definition of other beings.

According to the Croatian Encyclopedia, the term ‘otherness’ gained importance in the 19th century, and its attention peaked in the 20th century with its importance in modern philosophy, literature, and cultural theory.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/alterita>, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/altro1/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/otherness>

<sup>14</sup> For additional information, visit <https://enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=16300>

<sup>15</sup> See the chapter “Otherness and nearness” of God in Judaism in the Encyclopedia Britannica (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Judaism/Ethics-and-society>)

The Encyclopedia Britannica contains important information about the philosophical reflections on otherness made by two great thinkers of the 20th century: Jacques Derrida, who was inspired by Martin Heidegger,<sup>16</sup> and Emmanuel Lévinas, whose philosophical reflections were directed against Heidegger.

Jacques Derrida<sup>17</sup>, one of the most important representatives of philosophical post-structuralism, dedicated his work to deconstructing the “Western ‘metaphysics of the present’” based on the predominance of ideas like “unity, identity, and totality over otherness, difference and marginality”. For this reason, he introduced a new term in philosophy and language: ‘différance’, to denote both ‘a difference (in space)’ and a displacement (in time). Another important concept, according to the philosopher, is ‘dissemination’. Here we can define it as openness and infinity of meaning.

Emmanuel Lévinas<sup>18</sup>, in his work “Totality and Infinity”, published in 1961, stated his interest in preserving otherness in the sense of a plurality destroyed by ‘domination’ and ‘sameness’. The philosopher explained that ‘otherness’ is something that people use to define a person before they establish and organise their beliefs or convictions about that person. On the contrary, in his work Lévinas advocates ethics linked to biblical allusions, and he defines infinity as ‘infinite openness’. Here, we could call it diversity.

‘Diversity’ or ‘otherness’ is the concept that inspired this analysis of “Death and the Dervish” and “The Three Dreams”, which can also be defined as autobiographical novels. To better appreciate them, we will explain the theoretical framework of autobiography.

According to Mirna Velčić (1991), autobiographies are not only narratives of the author about himself or other persons written in the first person, but they represent an interaction between different texts<sup>19</sup> and between theory, fiction, and

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<sup>16</sup> In his most famous work “Being and Time”, published in 1927, Martin Heidegger introduced the term ‘Dasein’, which means ‘being-there’. Although the term seems to promote ideas such as ‘world’, ‘everydayness’, and ‘being-with-others’, it favours the perspective of an individual and introduces another term: ‘das Man’ or ‘the They’, also ‘The Others’. For additional information, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Martin-Heidegger-German-philosopher>; <https://enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=16300>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/continental-philosophy/Derrida>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-philosophy/Recent-trends>,  
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Emmanuel-Levinas>,  
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/continental-philosophy/Derrida>

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of autobiography as a genre and the problems of defining it, as well as the problems with defining the term ‘autobiographical novel’, see Zlatar (1998).

everyday practice, which have a greater impact on the reader than other, non-autobiographical texts. Autobiographies arouse the interest not only of readers, but also of literary critics, because they represent a special kind of genre in which fact and fiction are interwoven and are present in all kinds of oral production (cf. Zlatar, 1998).

According to Philippe Lejeune (2000), autobiography is a genre that has existed since antiquity. He defines autobiography<sup>20</sup> as retrospective prose written by a real person describing a life of his or her own, with the identification of the narrator with the protagonist characterised by first-person narration. Although it is also possible to talk about one's own life in the third person (cf. Velčić, 1991), this type of narration, as well as the second person narration, is rare in the genre of autobiography.

Andrea Zlatar (1998) has demonstrated in her research<sup>21</sup> that autobiographies written in the third person, that is, a mixture of autobiography and biography, are characterised by the fact that the narrator is anonymous, and the protagonist bears the same name as the author of the story.

Researchers such as James Olney and Gertrude Stein have discussed an autobiographical paradox in which the narrator in the story has a limited perception of the world and events, and yet he presents his view, which encourages further interpretation. This led to a discussion about the identity of the narrator and the fact that he is searching for his identity and constructing it at the same time (Velčić, 1991).

The other problem of autobiography is the time of narration. Paul Ricoeur believes that the time when a protagonist experiences the events is the actual time of narration (Ricoeur, 2000<sup>22</sup>; Velčić, 1991). Velčić (1999) writes about criticisms of Ricoeur's theory, and an important argument is the element of history. The person who writes an autobiography writes about his own life, but in the past, and so the narrated contemporaneity and the time of reading are not the same as the contemporaneity of the narrator and the author. An interesting

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<sup>20</sup> For more details on Lejeune's theories, see Zlatar (1998). However, there are some problematic points in Lejeune's theories that critics have pointed out and that Velčić (1991) has explained in her monograph, such as the question of who the author really is and how to define him, the passive role of the reader, and the fact that Lejeune's autobiographical pact includes not only the author and the reader but also the ideological context surrounding the text.

<sup>21</sup> See also Zlatar (1998) who has done interesting research on literature, with special emphasis on Croatian literature, which we can define as "literary theories of the use of the first title narration", the original title is "Ja" književne teorije".

<sup>22</sup> For more details, see Ricoeur (2000).

example of the autobiography is the diary<sup>23</sup>, a text with fragmentary narration legitimised using calendar time. Velčić (1999: 88-94) explains the calendar as a “chronological instrument” and a kind of “discursive show that offers the illusion of natural chronological time”.

We would like to emphasise that in order for a story written in the first person to be an autobiography, the author, narrator, and protagonist must be one and the same person (Lejene, 2000, Velčić, 1991), and the autobiographical novel, according to Lejeune (2000), is a fictional text that makes the reader believe that the author and the protagonist are the same people, although the author has not confirmed this fact.

### **3. “The Tree of Dreams” by Fulvio Tomizza and its interpretation by literary critics**

“The Tree of Dreams” by Fulvio Tomizza was awarded the Viareggio Prize in 1969 (Aliberti, 2001, Deganutti, 2018, Neirotti, 1979). The novel is written in the form of a diary. The diary begins in July 1953 with the death of Fulvio Tomizza’s father and ends fifteen years later.

Paolo Leoncini (2014) describes the novel as an essayistic diary<sup>24</sup> written between 1953 and 1968, characterised by introspective and dreamlike elements. Nižić (1996) also noted dream-like elements in which the protagonist imagines a reconciliation with his father. He also noted that the novel has a good balance between dream-like elements and reality. On the other hand, Roić (2002) noted fantasy elements in the novel, and Visintini (2002) noted psychological elements.

Marianna Deganutti (2018: 159, 163) sees the novel as an “introspective work” by Fulvio Tomizza, in which autobiography is central. The importance of the autobiography in the novel is confirmed also by Bellucci (2000). Neirotti (1979) sees Stefano Marcovich (cf. Visintini, 2002) as Tomizza’s *alter ego*. Thus, it can be stated that exile plays an important role (Aliberti, 2001, Deganutti, 2018, Neirotti, 1979) but is not the only motif in the novel. Carmelo Aliberti (2001: 48) and Marco Neirotti (1979: 76) note a “wide range of motifs,” such as Istrian exile and its representation in “historical, psychological, ideological, sociological, ethical, and emotional terms”.

Aliberti (2001) noted that the novel is set in Koper, which is referred to as Capris. Both Aliberti (2001: 45-47) and Neirotti (1979: 70) note a “contrast between city

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<sup>23</sup> More about Leujene’s research on a diary form can be found in Zlatar (1998: 161-168).

<sup>24</sup> See also Locatelli (2014: 203).

and village, Catholicism and Communism, wealth and poverty”, as well as the love-hate relationship with the father and the loss of identity (cf. Nižić, 1996). Bellucci (2000) explains that the opposition between the protagonist and his father is ideological and will later develop into a love-hate relationship. This relationship refers not only to the father but also to the Italian and Slavic worlds. On the other hand, Deganutti (2018: 29) noted “the complex condition of Istrian inhabitants in relation to the escalation of violence and political change”.

Critics such as Gianni Cimador, Marianna Deganutti, and Živko Nižić have noted duplicity in the character of the protagonists. Cimador (2020) writes that “The Tree of Dreams” shows Tomizza's peasant origins and his simultaneous affiliation with Croatian and Italian culture, Nižić (1996) writes about the protagonist's sympathy for both Slavic and Italian people (1996), while Deganutti (2014: 273; 2018: 4, 7, 25) writes about the protagonist's “dual existence” depicted in a “quasi-autobiographical” novel in which the protagonist wanders from Trieste to Belgrade to “find his lost identity”.

The novel shows both Slavic and Italian inspiration. Deganutti (2014: 232) stated that “Fulvio Tomizza is probably the Italian writer most open to Eastern European culture in the panorama of twentieth-century literature”. In fact, in his interview with Tomislav Marijan Bilosnić, Fulvio Tomizza compared his father's fate to the figure of Dostoevsky (Bilosnić 2003). Moreover, Aliberti (2001) stated that the novel can be compared to “The Brothers Karamazov” by Dostoevsky, and Deganutti (2014) also analysed the novel's relations with Dostoevsky and other Slavic authors such as Cankar and Andrić.

The novel also contains a motto written in Latin that quotes Vergil. Claudio Casoli believes that Vergil's verses referring to dreams gave the novel its title, indicating that the dreams are misleading traces (Deganutti, 2014; Deganutti, 2018). Neirotti (1979) states that the verses inspired the title of the novel. He also writes about the influence of Italo Svevo, as Tomizza's novel gives an impression of the protagonist's impossible liberation from the guilt caused by his father's death, and about a possible comparison with “L'isola” (“The Island”) and “Ritorno del padre” (“The Return of the Father”) by Giani Stuparich, and “L'ombra delle colline” (“The Shadow of the Hills”) by Giovanni Arpino, which share the motifs of the search for identity and the loss of the father.

To sum up, the award-winning novel “The Tree of Dreams” has attracted the interest of literary critics, who attest to the book's strong autobiographical reference, revealing not only Latin and Italian but Eastern European influences and models, demonstrating the author's appreciation of both Italian and Slavic cultures.

### 3.1. *The Plot of “The Tree of Dreams”*

Although Neirotti (1979) claims that it is impossible to describe the plot of the novel, we will try to present it here.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part begins with the departure of Stefano Marcovich, the protagonist, to the seminary in Capris, and describes both his education and life in Istria after World War II, when Istria became part of the former Yugoslavia and Stefano's father Marco, a wealthy man who had chosen the wrong friends to guide him, was imprisoned. After his release, he decided to seek a better life in Trieste in Italy.

In the second part of the novel, Stefano continues his education in Trieste while his father becomes a bar owner. The father's work is good at first, and the locals respect him, but as time goes by the work decreases, and they get into trouble. In the meantime, the father has fallen ill and wants to die in Istria. The second part of the novel ends with the death of the father.

The third part of the novel describes events related to Stefano's education in Belgrade, where he writes a diary. The diary describes imaginary events from July 1953 to August 1968. The last event described in the diary concerns Stefano's illness and his recovery. His family, including his father, visits him, and he manages to reconcile with both his father and God.

### 3.2. *The otherness of the protagonist of “The Tree of Dreams”*

“The Tree of Dreams” is an interesting novel for the discussion of otherness. Here we will discuss the otherness of the protagonist in the sense that he was rejected and marginalised, and so he was considered an Other. The notion of the Other, as we will demonstrate, also causes the protagonist to see the people and the world around him as the Other, in such a way that he rejects these people and their customs.

We have mentioned that the protagonist had an educational opportunity outside his native village. The new city and his classmates created a sense of otherness in the protagonist's mind. During his first stay outside Istria, he had the feeling of forever being the Other in the world, in the sense that he did not belong there and was afraid that he would never have a place where he belonged. On the other hand, he felt that his classmates in Capris were so different from him that he had an aggressive impulse and wanted to defend himself against the society that had called him the Other.

We find other examples of otherness in Stefano's life, which was changed by World War II, and we will underline the fact that the war events are triggered by

otherness. In our opinion, two or more parties involved see each other as the Other and use violence to dominate the Other.

World War II made Stefano's family the Other. Before the war, his family was rich. Even his mother worked outside the home and had a maid to do the housework. With the war, the mother lost both her job and her maid. We can therefore discuss the contrast between rich and poor, with the protagonist and his family experiencing both. The protagonist and his family were rich at first and were treated as Others by the rest of the poor villagers, but then the protagonist and his family became poor, and they were again Others to the same villagers, who became wealthier after the war.

The protagonist's father made some political decisions that made his son's life difficult. Stefano lost some friends who treated him as the Other, or the "son of a reactionary". On the other hand, others began to look at him differently and treat him with respect because of his father's political activity, and because they feared his father.

Stefano also felt like the Other during his education in seminary in G\*\*\*\*<sup>25</sup> because he was from a rural area, while the other students and the teachers were from urban areas. And when his father visited him in the seminary, Stefano treated him as the Other. Being ashamed of his father, who visited him directly from the prison, Stefano pulled him out of the sight of others.

Stefano also felt like the Other towards his brother Alfredo<sup>26</sup>, who adopted an ironic attitude when he saw the protagonist's homecoming. The protagonist also felt excluded because his parents preferred Alfredo over him, and after moving to Trieste, because he was not trusted by his Trieste professors, members of the Communist Party, and his classmates, Stefano felt like the Other.

In conclusion, the novel "The Tree of Dreams" has inspired us to discuss otherness, and as we have proved, the novel is full of examples. Otherness has

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<sup>25</sup> This term refers to Fulvio Tomizza's native village of Jurcani in Croatian, or Giurizzani in Italian. The Italian name is used explicitly in the novel, as can be seen in Tomizza, 1969: 226. Neirotti (1979: 72) explains that Fulvio Tomizza used the name 'Capris' instead of 'Koper' and 'G\*\*\*\*' instead of 'Jurcani' to make the protagonist's journey "less geographical and more introspective".

<sup>26</sup> In the interview with Riccardo Ferrante, Tomizza explained that his brother was four years older than him and had "a different ideological point of view". During their studies in Koper, Tomizza preferred to spend time with Istrians from Pazin who called themselves Croats, while his brother spent time with Triestine friends (Tomizza, 1992: 50-51). In the same interview, Tomizza shared the experience of being rejected by his professor and classmates, and other villagers in Istra.



accompanied the protagonist in his personal life, in his relationship with his father and brother, and in his school life, both within and outside his native village.

Stefano felt the difference between rich and poor, between village and city, between the feeling of being the Other and the rejection of the people he called the Others.

### *3.3. The two father-son relationships*

The problematic relationship between the son and the father is often present in the literary production of Fulvio Tomizza, and that motif has a strong biographical background.

According to Nižić (1996), literary critics have identified the relationship between Tomizza and his father as the central theme of the novel “The Tree of Dreams”, while Bellucci (2000) sees the death of the father as the central theme of the novel. Neirotti (1979) holds a similar opinion, and Aliberti (2001) points out that the father was a victim of the communist regime.

Ferdinando Tomizza was a rich Italian feudal lord who owned his own trading business. To be able to run it, he joined the fascist party, although he did not subscribe to the ideology, which caused him problems after the end of World War II when his homeland Istria became part of the former Yugoslavia. Ferdinando Tomizza was persecuted and imprisoned twice by Yugoslav communists. To save himself, he emigrated from Istria to Trieste, in Italy. He became ill and had no desire to continue his life. He died at the age of 47 when a young Fulvio Tomizza was 18 years old. Shortly before his death, he managed to reach Istria to die there. The death of his father ushered in a difficult time for Fulvio Tomizza, who felt guilty for not joining him in Trieste at the time, and out of sympathy for communism, decided to continue his education in the former Yugoslavia, and in October 1955 he moved to his family in Italy (Aliberti, 2001; Anonymous 2009; Bellucci, 2000; Bilosnić, 2003; Neirotti, 1979; Tomizza, 1992; Tomizza, 2009).

Fulvio Tomizza has stated that the events referring to his father in the novel “The Tree of Dreams” are true. The novel describes the “intimate conflict between father and son”, burdened by the “political and historical situation” of the post-World War II period that caused Tomizza to feel responsible for his father’s death (Bilosnić 2003: 42-45; Tomizza 2009: 134). The protagonist states that his father Marco Marcovich “was a great man who did not deserve such an ending” (Tomizza 1969: 103).

The novel contains “a feeling of a fatal ending” (Tomizza, 1969: 103) which can be noticed from the moment in which the protagonist goes to court to see the trial against his father.

In the novel, Marco Marcovich is described as a successful and wealthy man who embraces new ideas to achieve prosperity and could have saved himself if he had gone to Italy earlier. He was persecuted and oppressed by the Yugoslav communists, who deprived him of goods and work. But he preferred to stay in Istria and believed the “wrong people”. In the end, he decides to move to Trieste.

We have said that the character of Tomizza’s father is often described in the author’s works, but this novel introduces some new elements that Tomizza does not repeat. The peculiarity of this novel lies in the detailed description of the character of the father and his life in Trieste, and in the description of his mother’s life there. Marco initially succeeds in settling down in Trieste and is accepted by the locals. But then his business fails. The ultimate fate of the father, who falls ill and wants to die in Istria, is well-known to readers of Tomizza.

The fate of Tomizza’s father and the protagonist can also be understood as an otherness to the world. In Yugoslav dominated Istria, the father is seen as the other. Once a wealthy man, he becomes an undesirable who has to emigrate to save himself. He is later accepted in Italy but ultimately becomes an Other again. He gets sick, loses the will to live, dies, and thus becomes an Other to the world and distances himself from his son, who can no longer reach him and has no chance to work on their relationship.

### *3.4. The protagonist’s religion*

Tomizza’s literary production is highly influenced by two elements: the death of the father and the exile of Istrians. We will try to prove that both motifs are not only connected in the novel but also show the religiousness of the protagonist. This leads us to the biographical elements of the author.

“The Tree of Dreams” is autobiographically inspired, so we will try to offer a biblical interpretation of the novel.

It is known that Fulvio Tomizza was Catholic. He was married in the Triestine Catholic church.

The Istrian exile of the author can be understood as a kind of pilgrimage. Indeed, the word “pilgrimage” is employed in the novel (1969: 10) to refer to the protagonist's life outside his native village. This term can be observed in the

context of the Istrian exile, as Nižić (2014) states when he writes about biblical interpretations<sup>27</sup> of the event.

In “The Tree of Dreams” the word ‘God’ is repeated a few times. This was also noted by Deganutti and Neirotti, who used the protagonist's phrase: “In the name of God, who am I?” (Tomizza, 1969: 193) to discuss the identity of the protagonist (Deganutti, 2014; Neirotti, 1979). We will not discuss the protagonist’s identity here but rather his search for God.

Nižić’s (1996) statement that Ferdinando Tomizza represents God for Tomizza is very interesting. The key to interpreting this statement can be found in “The Tree of Dreams” when the protagonist declares that “the god never existed, does not exist, and will not exist” (Tomizza, 1969: 168). This sentence reflects the complicated relationship between the protagonist and his father, because when the protagonist’s father dies, the protagonist says, “The God was really dead” (Tomizza, 1969: 170).

Moreover, in the dream-like scene, when the protagonist imagines that his father is still alive and the two of them have reconciled, he says that the “good God had repaid him for everything and saved them both [the father and the son] and brought the one back to the other, reconciled” (Tomizza, 1969: 292).

In summary, the two motifs of Tomizza’s production, the exile, and the relationship with the father, are strongly inspired by Catholicism, which is another autobiographical element. The father and the son have experienced exile, which can be interpreted as a pilgrimage, and the protagonist himself has made his pilgrimage, physically and psychologically. His physical pilgrimage is related to the change of place and, as we have already seen, is characterised by otherness, while the psychological pilgrimage is a way to find God. The protagonist's belief in God depends heavily on his relationship with his father. The protagonist sees his father as a God who died and was resurrected in a dream, offering a final peace between father and son.

#### **4. “Death and the Dervish” by Meša Selimović**

According to Birviš (1989), “Death and the Dervish” is Selimović’s best literary work, written between 1962 and 1966. The novel made Selimović famous. It was published in 1966 and awarded the “Goranova nagrada” prize (Majić, 2017).

“Death and the Dervish” is presented in the form of a written testimony of Ahmed Nurudin, a dervish who knows that his life will soon end. He describes the events that began when he learned that his brother had been captured. This triggered his inner struggle. As a dervish, a respected Muslim, he was supposed to represent the order established by the authorities, while in his opinion his brother must have been innocent. Unobtrusively, he tries to get more information about his brother. During his unsuccessful attempts to help him, he finds out that his brother was not only captured by the authorities but also killed, even though he was innocent. Ahmed Nurudin makes a speech in the mosque in honour of his brother and buries him, after which he is imprisoned. After his release, he imagines what he should have done to save his brother. In an uncertain time of unrest in Bosnia under Ottoman rule, Ahmed Nurudin becomes an important figure, but his friend warns him that he will be captured and suffocated by the secular government. His writings end with quotations from the Quran, which remind us of the truthfulness of the events described and show that Ahmed Nurudin was killed.

#### *4.1. Interpretation of “Death and the Dervish”*

The protagonist of “Death and the Dervish” is a “dervish” or Islamic priest. The title of the novel also reminds us of death. For these reasons, we will discuss how religiousness is portrayed in the book.

It is noteworthy that each chapter begins with quotations from the Quran, and that the quotations of the first and last chapters are the same. Critics have noted that Selimović uses the Quran in his novel not to present the Islamic religion, but to show the irony of life (Jakiša, 2009; Majić, 2017). Kupareo (1979) claims that irony serves Selimović in illustrating contradictions in the minds of characters, while the origin of evil lies in human nature. From this, we can conclude that the characters and their religiousness are connected. Birviš (1989) holds a similar opinion, noting that Selimović not only studied people but their religiousness too.

The novel has an identical Quran motto at the beginning of the first and last chapters, but we will see that the truth of the Quran was changed by Selimović (1996: 3, 455), who wrote the following lines:

“I call to witness the ink, the quill, and the script,  
which flows from the quill;  
I call to witness the faltering shadows of the sinking evening,  
the night and all she enlivens;  
I call to witness the moon when she waxes, and the sunrise  
when it dawns.  
I call to witness the Resurrection Day and the soul

that accuses itself;  
I call to witness time, the beginning and end  
of all things - to witness that every man always suffers loss.”

Cooper (1996) notes that the Quran quotations are altered, and Majić (2017) cited Husein who noted that the Quran quotations are only partially written. For example, Selimović quoted the part of the Quran that states that “every man always suffers loss” and omitted the following part, “except for those who have believed and done righteous deeds and advised each other to truth and advised each other to patience” (Majić 2017: 59, after Husein, 1967: 375). Selimović's omission radically changes the message. His version of the quotation in the first and last chapters emphasises that “every man always suffers loss”, regardless of what that person does in their lifetime.

The first sentences of the novel reveal the unhappiness of the protagonist, who writes his story not to profit from it, but because he feels he must: “I begin my story for nothing, without benefit for myself or anyone else, from a need stronger than benefit or reason.” (Selimović 1996: 3).

Majić (2017) sees the novel as a “self-psychoanalysis” of the protagonist<sup>28</sup> and an attempt to come to terms with the traumatic events and arrive at a larger meaning of the events, while Petrović (1981) emphasises the autonomy of the protagonist's consciousness, who at first does not know whether the writing should be a testimony or an accusation.

According to the Croatian Encyclopaedia,<sup>29</sup> the novel can be described as an existential novel, while the Treccani Encyclopaedia<sup>30</sup> describes the novel as a “meditation on the relationship between dogmatism and freedom, guided by the story of dramatic events and the restless spiritual quest of an 18th century dervish”.

Majić (2017) compared Selimović's novel to Dostoevsky,<sup>31</sup> but also to Camus, Wolf, Hesse and Andrić. Jakiša (2009) and Petrović (1981) also wrote about the relationship between Andrić's and Selimović's novels.

According to Petrović (1981), Ahmed Nurudin's tragedy is triggered by his inner conflict, and Nurudin can be seen as the *alter ego* of the authorities. In other words, a portion of the blame for his brother's fate falls on Nurudin. In this sense,

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<sup>28</sup> In fact, “Death and the Dervish” is characterised by first-person narration (Petrović, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=55294>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mehmed-mesa-selimovic/>

<sup>31</sup> See also Kusturica, N. (2006), *Meša Selimović i Fjodor Dostojevski u svjetlu teorije polifonijuskog romana Mihaila Bahtina*, Grafing.

the novel depicts the authorities and the protagonist's inner conflicts (Birviš, 1989).

In conclusion, the novel is religiously and historically inspired. We agree with Petrović (1981), who states that events described with local meaning acquire universal value. In fact, we believe that the insecurity of the Bosnian territory on a global level mirrors the insecurity of the protagonist and his brother on a private level. It shows the sufferings of ordinary “little people” during great historical movements.

#### *4.2. Ahmed Nurudin's otherness*

The doubts and conflicts of the protagonist are unexpected given his political and religious authority within Ottoman-Bosnian society. We believe that Ahmed Nurudin's story is one of otherness.

Ahmed Nurudin is a forty-year-old man who has served as a dervish for twenty years. After the arrest of his brother, he no longer fits into the world. He cannot find a way to save his brother. Moreover, he has been taught to follow the rules, and now he does not know how to stand up and save his brother.

Majić (2017) sees the protagonist's decision to accept his fate as the only direction in which his life can go. The world has become an enigma to him, and he has become the Other in a world that he no longer understands.

Nurudin also sees women as the Other. While talking to a woman, he notes that he is “unskilled in a conversation with women, especially with women of her beauty<sup>32</sup> and age” (Selimović, 1996: 14). He saw the duality of his character before the beautiful woman. He saw her as a “peasant” and a “dervish” would, and “both” parts of his personality were not ready to deal with the woman, who reminded him of his love. So he saw the woman not as a man, but as a dervish would. This conversation with the woman could have been an opportunity for him to save his brother, but he did not have the courage to do so.

The examples given show Selimović's tendency towards deep analysis of his characters, which confirms Kupareo's (1979) statement that Selimović is a great psychologist. Kupareo (1979) also recognised fear as a predominant emotion in the novel, where the premonition of death is seen as eternal loneliness. One could also characterise this feeling as one of otherness. Birviš (1989) recognised God's

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<sup>32</sup> Kupareo (1979) sees the encounter as a meeting of two people whose love is impossible to realise.

will guiding the events of the novel, while Kupareo (1979) recognised fatalism, which we believe emphasises the sense of otherness.

In the end, we have demonstrated Ahmed Nurudin's otherness to beautiful women and a world he no longer recognises. This causes him to feel that he is an Other to himself, to the person he once was when he believed in a system that he once belonged to.

The inevitability of his brother's death and his own underscores his sense of otherness.

#### *4.3. Selimović's political activity and his brother's destiny*

Jakiša (2009) and Enciclopedia Treccani<sup>33</sup> state that the novel "Death and the Dervish" is set in 18th century Ottoman Bosnia. Cooper (1996X) is more precise noting that Selimović did not specify the exact time of the novel. We know that the action takes place during the Ottoman rule over Bosnia, from the end of the fifteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. Cooper noted that the novel could be set in the seventeenth century, since the uprisings in Krajina and Posavina mentioned took place during that period. However, according to Cooper, Selimović's intentional omission of precise time markers evokes a "sense of timelessness." This serves to remind us that the events narrated can be repeated.

We agree with Cooper's statement that Selimović chose this historical setting to depict his own pain and the loss of his brother, who was murdered by the Yugoslav communists, and we agree with Jakiša's (2009: 250-251) statement that Selimović's works can be read as a "critique of socialist Yugoslavia".

Jakiša (2009: 250)<sup>34</sup> attributes the success of Meša Selimović's career to his political activity. He was an "active member" of the "national liberation movement" and later a member of the communist party. His brother was imprisoned by the communist regime and died during his imprisonment. In some sources, according to Jakiša, there is talk of a possible execution. In Meša Selimović's works, such as "Tišine" (Silences), "Tvrđava ("The Fortress"), and "Derviš i smrt" ("Death and the Dervish"), there is the figure of a brother who disappears or is imprisoned despite being innocent or not proven guilty.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mehmed-mesa-selimovic/>. Also Majić (2017).

<sup>34</sup> In fact, of all the critics I have cited, only Jakiša writes about the death of the brother. The Croatian Encyclopaedia mentions that Selimović was a partisan during World War II (<https://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=55294>), while the Encyclopaedia Treccani mentions that Selimović "participated in the War of Liberation" (<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/mehmed-mesa-selimovic/>).

Again, Cooper (1996) offers a more accurate picture. He notes that Selimović was an atheist and a communist, as were his brothers and sisters. After World War II, Meša Selimović's older brother Šefkija was executed "as an example for others" for taking some furniture from a warehouse to rebuild his house, which had been destroyed in the war. Although Meša Selimović and the other brothers were communists, they failed in saving their brother Šefkija. Cooper notes that some people believe that the two brothers did not try hard enough.

We can conclude that the novel, which Cooper (1996: IX) describes as "a case study of the narrowness of spirit, emotional cowardice, and moral indecisiveness", has a strong autobiographical background. The protagonist's brother and Selimović's brother were captured and killed by the authorities, and little effort was made to save them. The feeling of guilt inspired both the protagonist and Selimović to write. The pain of loss produced Selimović's most famous literary work.

## 5. Discussion

We have analysed "Death and the Dervish" by Meša Selimović and "The Tree of Dreams" by Fulvio Tomizza, two novels written after World War II. The experiences of the authors were woven into literary works that won prizes and became a testimony to personal tragedies that acquired a universal significance and promoted universal human values when they were sorely in the Slavic and Italian worlds and cultures.

Both Selimović and Tomizza were interested in communism, which may have influenced Selimović's professional career, while Tomizza rejected it and chose exile in Italy. This could partially explain why Selimović chose the period of Ottoman rule over Bosnia to write about the loss of his brother, whereas Tomizza could write directly about World War II and the former Yugoslav communist regime.

Both "Death and the Dervish" and "The Tree of Dreams" are written in the first-person diary form. "Death and the Dervish" is the diary of a man who knows that he is about to be executed, while "The Tree of Dreams" is only partially written in diary form.

In both novels, the protagonist is someone's *alter ego*. Ahmed Nurudin is the *alter ego* of the authorities, while Stefano Marcovich is the *alter ego* of Fulvio Tomizza, illustrating the history of Istria after World War II and the exile.

Both novels offer a perspective on otherness. Ahmed Nurudin is an Other to himself, to women, and to a world that he cannot understand, while Marco



Marcovich becomes an Other to the new authorities, which leads to his persecution, imprisonment, exile, and death.

Both novels have a religious element. In “Death and the Dervish” the Quran is quoted, and its messages are transformed into pessimistic ones, while “The Tree of Dreams” has a biblical structure in which the protagonist's father can be seen as Jesus Christ and the exile as a pilgrimage.

Both novels are marked by fatality but with different outcomes. “Death and the Dervish” has death as the final event; the protagonist has lost his brother, faith, and life, while “The Tree of Dreams” ends fifteen years after the death of the protagonist's father and offers a reconciliation and a renewed religion. In the protagonist's dream, the father appears as Christ, and over time relations between Italy and the former Yugoslavia have improved. Many Istrian exiles have rediscovered their faith in a better life, having conducted a pilgrimage from exile to freedom.

Ultimately, the analysis revealed multiple relationships between “Death and the Dervish” by Meša Selimović and “The Tree of Dreams” by Fulvio Tomizza. The authors' motivations were autobiographical. They both lost a family member for political reasons and had a deep sense of otherness in their private lives. They transposed these experiences and feelings to their novels, which they composed in the form of a diary.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of “Death and the Dervish” and “The Tree of Dreams”, which at first sight seem very different, has revealed multiple relationships between the novels. These include autobiographical experiences, personal tragedies, the same historical and political backgrounds, and concepts of otherness, fatality, and faith.

The analysis has shown that there are multiple relationships between Italian and Slavic literature and culture. Both novels also describe a personal tragedy that takes on a universal value and testifies to the experience of World War II, in which ordinary people became victims of historical and political movements.

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## Sažetak

Zahvaljujući proučavanju drugotnosti, u današnje su vrijeme poznate osobne tragedije uzrokovane povijesnim i političkim motivima. Ti su događaji u „Drvu sanja” Fulvija Tomizze i „Dervišu i smrti” Meše Selimovića nadvladali značaj osobne tragedije te dobili univerzalnu pozornost i vrijednost, potkrepljenu nagradama koje su autori za svoja djela dobili.

Iako već postoje članci i monografije koje se bave literarnim stvaralaštvom Meše Selimovića i Fulvija Tomizze, kao i rasprave o utjecajima istočno europskih autora na njihova djela, do sada nije bilo pokušaja usporedbe djela dvaju autora.

Ovo je istraživanje započelo propitivanjem sličnosti dvaju autora. Obojica su pokazala određeno zanimanje za komunizam, ali su i izgubila člana obitelji upravo zbog njega. Selimović je izgubio brata, a Tomizza oca. Ove su tragedije nadahnula njihova djela „Derviš i smrt” te „Drvo sanja”.

„Derviš i smrt” djelo je nadahnuto Kuranom. Radnja romana smještena je u Bosni tijekom osmanske vladavine, u kojoj protagonist Ahmed Nurudin bezuspješno pokušava spasiti zatvorenoga brata. Brat biva ubijen, a vjera Ahmeda Nurudina poljuljana, dok sam roman završava njegovom smrću.

„Drvo sanja” nadahnuto je autobiografskim iskustvima Fulvija Tomizze. Pripovijeda o odlasku iz Istre u svrhu školovanja protagonista Stefana Marcovicha, njegovoj neprilagođenosti, jugoslavenskoj dominaciji nad Istrom te progonima, zatvaranjima i smrću oca koje će uslijediti. Djelo završava dnevničkim zapisima u razdoblju od očeve smrti 1953. godine do 1968. godine kada se u snovitom prizoru protagonist miri s ocem.

Dva romana pisana su memoarskoj formi i prvome licu te sadrže autobiografske elemente. Bolno iskustvo gubitka brata Tomizza i Selimović pretočili u svoje romane koji su ovjenčani nagradom. Tomizza, koji se komunističkih ideja odrekao te je optirao za Italiju, izravno piše o Drugome svjetskome ratu, dok Selimović radnju svoga romana smješta vrijeme osmanske vladavine Bosnom, budući da je njegov interes za komunizam možebitno utjecao na njegovu profesionalnu karijeru.

U oba se romana može uočiti nečiji alter ego. Ahmed Nurudin može se interpretirati kao alter ego lokalnih vlasti, dok je Stefano Marcovich alter ego Fulvija Tomizze te oslikava povijest Istre nakon Drugoga svjetskoga rata i istarski egzodus.

Dva romana također pružaju mogućnost rasprave o drugotnosti. Ahmed Nurudin je Drugi naspram svijeta u koji se uklapa, dok je Marco Marcovich postao Drugi nasuprot novih vlasti, što dovodi do njegovih progona, njegova uhićenja, egzila i smrti.

U „Dervišu i smrti” kuranske su poruke izmijenjene i zadobivaju pesimističan ton. Naime, Ahmed Nuridin izgubio je brata, vjeru, a potom i život, dok „Drvo sanja” ima biblijsko nadahnuće i moguća je usporedba protagonistova oca i Krista te usporedba hodočašća i istarskoga egzila. U Tomizzinu romanu otac i sin mire se u snu, dok je protekom vremena uspostavljen diplomatski odnos Talijanske Republike i bivše Jugoslavije, što je poboljšalo situaciju tadašnjih istarskih ezula.

Provedeno istraživanje, za koje se nada da će potaknuti daljnja propitivanja veza između talijanskoga i slavenskoga svijeta i kultura, ukazalo je na brojne sličnosti između romana „Derviš i smrt” Meše Selimovića i „Drva sanja” Fulvija Tomizze, romanima gdje su osobna bolna iskustva pretočena u nagrađene romane koja su zaprimila univerzalnu vrijednost te postala živi svjedoci događaja koji su uslijedili nakon Drugoga svjetskoga rata.

**Ključne riječi:** Tomizza, Selimović, romani, autobiografija, drugotnost