



PROJECT MUSE®

Dislocation and the Loss of Identity in Miloš Crnjanski's
Migrations : The Two Choices of the Émigré

Sasha Lazarevich

Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian
Studies, Volume 20, Number 1, 2006, pp. 121-129 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ser.0.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/257663>

Dislocation and the Loss of Identity in Miloš Crnjanski's *Migrations*: The Two Choices of the Émigré

Sasha Lazarevich
Columbia University

In Miloš Crnjanski's *Migrations* the issues of displacement and identity are paramount. A picture of two brothers is asserted by the author in an attempt to illustrate what happens to the psychology of a landless people who must choose between assimilation and the preservation of a culture that those in power cannot understand. In *Migrations* those who are dislocated must either adopt the norms of the culture dominant in their new surroundings in order to advance socially or they can cling to their heritage which prevents them from forming new roots and forces them to lead a nomadic life. The way the reader is presented with these two options is through the two primary male characters: Vuk and Arandjel Isaković. It is by virtue of their life decisions and interactions with the community around them, as well as attitudes towards each other, that we are made aware of the drawbacks of the choices they are forced to make. It is through Vuk that we learn about the perils of cultural preservation and isolation as well as the sacrifices a nomadic life can bring; on the other hand, Arandjel represents a caricature of westernization through his complete focus on monetary gain and his striking disregard for the importance of family ties and cultural heritage.

Vuk Isaković belongs to a transient population of Serbs who are in the employ of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire as mercenaries. They and their families travel without a permanent place to call their own, the men fight in battles and wars that are not directly relevant to their interests, and they do this all in hopes of someday regaining some autonomy in an Orthodox land. Initially Vuk, and other men like him, hope that joining the Austrians will allow them to avenge their homeland in a battle against the Ottomans. They work as mercenaries only as a way to regain control of Serbia, so that they may once again have an Orthodox country to call their own. However, "[before] long it became clear to everyone that they would not be fighting the Turks"—the Serbs eventually realize that they have been misled by those in

power.¹ Even then these warriors do not give up hope of a land where they can live freely and can practice their traditions. They attempt to cut their losses by continuing to fight for the Austrians in the hope that they may earn enough money to move to Russia where they would also be able to practice their “Sweet Orthodoxy” in peace and perhaps recreate something of a substitute for Serbia (121). This band of mercenaries represents a population that is displaced but persists in carrying all the baggage of ethnic cohesion despite perilous obstacles.

In the process, this transient Serbian population loses itself psychologically and physically. Families become disintegrated, men are separated from their children and wives, and many are torn between monetary security and a desire to preserve their Orthodox faith. In many ways, the experience of displacement is emotionally traumatizing for this population as their attachment to their former way of life is still very much ingrained in their psychology.

Because these expatriated Serbs do not have a geographic place to attach their language, religion, and culture to, they have to cling to abstract symbols and memories to maintain in-group cohesion. Vuk’s psychological experiences and perspective are especially emblematic of this point-of-view. For instance Crnjanski lets the reader ascertain early on in the novel that Vuk predominantly builds his identity upon the memory of his father. His father acts a symbol for a time and place that no longer exists. In Vuk’s mind this memory acts to compensate for the stability and certainty his current life as a nomad and warrior totally lacks. In various places throughout the novel the narrator describes Vuk’s father as a stable factor in his life, a representation of order and tradition which is in total opposition to Vuk’s daily life as an itinerant. The following two excerpts describe Vuk’s father as bringing peace, order, and tranquility to his life:

He felt a curious connection with his dead father, a kind of peace and tranquility, while everything around him, everything in the world was tumult, bedlam, folly, nonsense. (30)

... when everything spun around him in disarray, disorder, and confusion, the thought of his father would find him on a hillside, in a spring landscape, or, as now, over the roofs of a town, and would put everything back in place, restore order, return peace. (31)

¹ Miloš Crnjanski, *Migrations*, translated by Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994), 103. All subsequent quotations and paraphrases refer to this edition.

What we see in these quotations is that Vuk feels incredibly out of control as concerns his fate. He is powerless to determine the destiny that awaits his family and his community. In order to cope with this sense of chaos he substitutes literal stability with a memory of a more stable time. As concerns the Serbian culture and Orthodox faith, there is perhaps no stronger metaphor for stability and structure than the idea of “the patriarch.” At one point in the novel the narrator goes as far as to invoke the image of the mausoleum of Vuk’s father to impress upon the reader the type of permanent value this symbolism holds for Vuk. The permanence of “the patriarch” as a symbol is so real to Vuk that the narrator at one point describes it as “immutable” (31).

Another way in which Vuk discloses his preference for preserving the traditional structure of his people’s culture is by the fact that his foremost priorities are his family, community, and religion. To Vuk his family, his fellow warrior Serbs, and his Orthodox religion are synonymous with everything that is proper and good. To him it is of primary concern to tend to those issues in order to preserve what is left of his traditional way of life. The all seeing narrator makes the reader aware that “just as [Vuk] cared for his wife and children, he cared for his men, his churches, all his people ... (31).” Though Vuk had dedicated his life to fighting other men’s wars, in the hope that his military victories would lead to a peaceful outcome for all his peoples, and was confident in this choice he was also greatly pained by the mandatory separation imposed upon his family and the sacrifices it forced him to make. The narrator makes this clear by stating that Vuk was painfully aware that “his land, his livestock, his children’s ailments and tears—they were not taken into account...” despite the fact that “... he was continually forced to pick up and move on (29).” His values are not respected by his Austrian superiors.

Perhaps the scene that best dramatizes the psychological trauma experienced by people who are violently stripped of their identity is the conversion scene described in chapter 2 when the Bishop of Pecs attempts to covert Vuk to Catholicism. This scene is relevant to the assimilation versus identity preservation debate in two different ways. First, it shows that forced assimilation can result in psychological torment and trauma for those who still have an attachment to their land of birth. Second, it illustrates the great price that is paid for resistance and the benefits that are lost.

As to the first category, in this scene, Crnjanski clearly demonstrates that Vuk’s attachment to his culture is not only ideological but that it is also psycho-emotional. His culture is a part of his psychology and taking that from him would be like surgically removing a limb. Because Vuk is attached to his cultural heritage at a primal level he has to detach himself psychologically from attacks made on his identity. In order to survive he has to remain self-

deluded about the reality he is faced with. During the Bishop's attempts to bribe, coerce, and intimidate Vuk into converting to Catholicism he not only becomes upset but also shows symptoms of physical illness. After the fact, when he was found by the other officers, he was literally convulsing and in tears (41).

In order to cope with the disturbing nature of this event he first tries to summon help from his own Orthodox faith by "... invoking the aid of the family's patron saint, Mrata" (46). Then he goes as far as to numb himself completely by excessively indulging in drink. The only way Vuk could cope with being stripped of his identity is if it happens to him while he is in an unconscious state so that he does not have to fully face the implications of the act. It is because of this that Vuk "... resolved to down so much drink that if in fact they did force him to convert, they would at least fail to convert him sober" (46).

The second point of the conversion scene illustrates a more practical but no less important concern. By retaining his cultural identity Vuk loses the opportunity to advance professionally. This in turn, distances him from his ultimate goal of finding a new place to call home where he can practice Orthodoxy freely. The narrator allows the reader to ascertain the Bishop's intent, "... his goal being to make it crystal clear to Isaković that had no choice but to become a Catholic" (43). It is clear that as long as Vuk maintains his Serbian culture he will never be truly understood by the nation that he is fighting on behalf of. They will always suspect him as an outsider and question his motives. This attitude is exemplified by the Bishop who firmly believed that "Isaković simply had to convert" as a "non-catholic" could never really "serve a Catholic Empress" (45).

Conversely, Arandjel Isaković's character abandons all of his cultural traditions because he sees them as constraints that would prevent him from attaining material success and assimilating to his new surroundings. Unlike his brother he sees no inherent value in preserving cultural cohesion nor does he feel that benefits are derived from bestowing significance upon family ties. While Vuk is extreme in his tradition-centeredness Arandjel is singularly interested in monetary gain. He belongs to a new urban class that is obsessed with possessions and objects. However, as we will see he is later softened by his feelings towards Daphina and it becomes clear that on a personal level he suffers as much as Vuk from cultural fragmentation and dislocation.

Arandjel's commercial success is what gives him security and identity. This is seen both in his attitude towards his brother and in the nature of his lustful obsession for Daphina. Throughout the novel the unseen narrator emphasizes that Arandjel is not emotionally invested in his relations. He main-

tains a cold businesslike demeanor as concerns all of his decisions including those that are personal. For instance, upon his father's death he "... fleeced [Vuk] of his entire inheritance..." and then invested this money to expand his own business. This material success gave him power over Vuk even though he is the younger brother which would traditionally prevent him from being in a position of authority as concerns family decisions. After he usurps Vuk's birthright as "patriarch," he then uses his power to try to control Vuk's destiny by purchasing for him a bride and attempting to force him out of his chosen profession in hopes that he would settle down and would also assimilate. Arandjel does not comprehend Vuk's obsession with tradition, or his interest in being a warrior which results in his not having a normal brotherly respect for Vuk. The narrator emphasizes this at many points throughout the novel by using words such as "malice, envy, and distaste" to describe Arandjel's attitude towards his elder brother (60). The following excerpt also illustrates Arandjel's mindset nicely:

The thought that his many-times-wounded, decrepit brother was again leaving for the field aroused no pity in him, or did the thought that in a matter of weeks he might be all alone in the world, brotherless as well as fatherless. (59)

The first part of this quote reflects Arandjel's thought process and his attitudes. It demonstrates that he is cognizant of the fact that his brother suffers yet he has no empathy for him. Instead, he sees Vuk's injuries as a sign of weakness or something to be looked upon with disdain. We then see that Arandjel is so detached from his heritage and cultural identity that he has no emotion, no attachment, no sympathy, or understanding for his brother's way of life. He is so immersed and so consumed by his materialism that he is no longer able to sympathize for even his closest of kin. As far as Arandjel is concerned "[h]is brother could fall from his horse and break his neck in Italy for all he cared; he would get precious little sympathy from him. And he told him so" (60). This complete cold-heartedness is extreme and unnatural.

We also learn about the implications and consequences of Arandjel's choice to assimilate and detach from his cultural past through the cold hearted and materialist tendencies which characterize his lustful obsession and courtship of Daphina. Because Arandjel is unable to feel the importance of personal ties the fact that she is his brother's wife does not stop him from coercing her into an adulterous relationship while Vuk is at war. However, this part of narrative has many complex implications for various themes throughout the

book I will currently only touch on those aspects of it that are relevant to Arandjel's avarice and greed and his choice to assimilate.

Two things become very apparent throughout the scenes which illustrate this affair. The first is how incredibly selfish Arandjel has become by assimilating. He doesn't think about the consequences of his actions and he doesn't feel as if he would be betraying his brother by seducing his wife. Instead, he wished that "his brother would die in the war" and rid him of any outside scrutiny or appearance of impropriety (61) just so that he might gratify any lustful feelings he had for her. What is equally shocking about this is that his disregard for his brother initially is not moderated by genuine feelings for Daphina. At first, his obsession is primarily characterized as lust, and he woos her in the hopes of having a secret affair that will not affect his life in a significant way. Daphina is seen just another conquest, another object that can be bought or sold. As the unseen narrator states instead of making romantic advances "[Arandjel] showered her with gifts" in the hope of winning her affection (67). He also tried to read her reactions and her levels of interest in the same way he might determine the price of a flock of sheep: "As in his dealings with silver, [Arandjel] tried to measure the degree of her consent..." (68).

It seems that by opting for material success at all costs Arandjel has lost all ability to see that human life has intrinsic value that defies any method of pricing or currency. Though he gave up his cultural past, he has not substituted it with another way of thinking about the world that takes into account those elements of life which do not fall within the economic sphere. His desire to be successful is so strong that his mercantile tendencies come to dictate every aspect of his life. This is a direct consequence of his lacking a cohesive moral framework to act as a basis for his decisions.

However, what we eventually learn is that even Arandjel's hard-nosed materialistic perspective is actually a defense mechanism which he uses to cope with the trauma he has also experienced. He acts like a stoic because he has suppressed his bruised feelings and damaged identity. His obsession for Daphina, which starts off as being lustful and possessive, eventually develops into a deeper spiritual desire because Arandjel is really emotionally vulnerable and weak. It is as if all his materialistic tendencies were but a hard shell around a soft, nostalgic core. Once he became emotionally vulnerable to Daphina, even Arandjel begins to long to form a family unit. Before he let down his defenses, Arandjel had dismissed nostalgia for the past as unproductive. To him, financial success was the only viable path he could take. In this context, his new spiritual love for Daphina shows him a glimpse at the possibility of a happiness that is more personal. His attitude towards her begins as the desire for a one night stand, then the attempt at establishing a

longer affair, and eventually escalates to the point where Arandjel wants a union that is sanctioned by the community everyone thought he had abandoned long ago.

This change in Arandjel's attitude can be seen by the language the narrator uses to describe his feelings towards Daphina after this transformation has taken place. Initially, Daphina is simply another object to be bought. As can be seen by the content of the quotes below these feeling have changed drastically by the time of her illness and death:

... he knew deep down that she had something else in mind, that what he actually hoped for in his sister-in-law was a haven of long, very long duration. (97)

His desire for stability and permanence had for years been one with his desire for the body of his sister in law. (99)

These excerpts depict two important points. First, they demonstrate that Arandjel's lust has finally grown into a more stable obsessive love-state. Second, this obsession has started to take the place which had been previously held by his greed. That is instead of using objects to fill the empty part of him where is cultural identity use to be he is now hoping to fill that void with a romantic relationship and family ties.

This is where the greatest similarity between Vuk and Arandjel's respective choices becomes apparent. The loss of their homeland has created a deep emotional void in both of these brothers. They are both traumatized by having been torn away from the traditions of their cultures and each result in an internal emptiness that is equally volatile. Vuk tries to hold on to the past with an iron grip but fails. He never ends up battling the Turks, he never moves on to Russia. He is ultimately incapable of combating Austrian aggression against his people's faith. Similarly, Arandjel tries to fill the void in his soul with money and possessions. He also occasionally admits that he wants peace for his people, but he wants to do this through the pursuit of commerce: "What Arandjel really wanted was to unite these people... through commerce" (99). When he is softened physically by his drowning experience, and then emotionally by his love for Daphina, his true wounded heart is exposed and he once again wants to build a personal haven and home. He even goes as far as to ask Patriarch Šakabenta to dissolve Daphina's marriage to Vuk so that he can build a legitimate home with her (94). Despite their differences, these two brothers are trying to accomplish the same goal. They want to fight the instability that surrounds them and heal their wounded hearts. They both

suffer from having fractured identities which they are desperately trying to make coherent and solid once again.

Others have also noted these behavioral tendencies in the Isaković brothers. For instance, in *Social Time, Self and History* David Norris also addresses the issues confronted by Crnjanski's characters in *Migrations*; however, he does not focus on relocation as a personal or psychological experience. Instead, he focuses on how the temporal organization of Crnjanski's novels, that is the characters' individual symbolic perceptions of time, affects their assessment of reality and ability to maintain control during eras of historical change. Norris states that "[in] all Crnjanski's novel's time is established as the medium through which consciousness becomes aware of the self; hence, time is an order of individual experience" (141). Therefore, where I argue that Vuk's preoccupation with family and tradition and Arandjel's monetary proclivities are no more than manifestations of the two choices available to the émigré, Norris is arguing for a broader philosophical perspective which is guided by the passage of time. Norris believes that the passage of time and the historical change that follows are factors that Vuk and Arandjel seek to control through their personal decisions.

In this sense time is more than just the passage of hours and years. To Norris, specific periods of time are analogous with different manifestations of the self. This view is somewhat in accord with my own. For instance, both Norris and I agree that Vuk uses the concept of "father" as a symbol that provides stability. However, I believe this is also representative of Vuk's desire not to have his cultural identity corrupted by his new surroundings. I believe his attachment to Serbia is too meaningful to be easily replaced. Norris, on the other hand, argues that the symbology Vuk utilizes is emblematic of his ethnic ties but is ultimately expendable. In this view, ideas of tradition and patriarchy stand for happiness in the past, instability is what governs the present, and Russia represents the possibility of a new stability in the future (147). Norris does not see any particular reality as entirely unique and believes that it is possible for Vuk to replace Serbia with a reality that is similar (in this case Russia). He underplays the fact that this alternative never manifests in *Migrations* which is perhaps indicative of its impossibility.

I believe that both my interpretation and Norris's are valid but for different reasons. He is approaching these characters from a literary perspective and through the lens of time. He views time as the thread which ties together a wide spectrum of values and experiences. This view is valuable from an abstract perspective, but I feel that Crnjanski is also illustrating an experience that is private, painful, and primarily internal. The journey taken by the Isaković brother's in *Migrations* makes us privy to the psychological experience of

dislocation. We are able to witness the personal sufferings of those who are dislocated and become sympathetic to their condition. This novel allows the experience of alienation to be shared both by the reader and the characters of the tale. This is something that renders the text priceless as a tool that can help improve human understanding.

The two choices that the émigré is presented with upon finding themselves in a new and strange land are obviously not easy ones and it is clear that Crnjanski himself sees both as far from ideal. It is hard to transition within one lifetime between two realities that are so drastically different without placing into questions values that one might hold at the very core of one's being. Those who think about assimilating might feel as if they are betraying their forefathers and their families. Yet this resistance results in slow material gain and a lack of security for families and entire communities. Alternatively, abandoning one's past too quickly can be morally dangerous and could leave a person without a value set on which to gauge the validity of his actions. For Arandjel the choice to leave behind his past left him with little more than the rubric of trade on which to base his life decisions. He hid behind the mask of materialism and tried to disguise his fragmented state. Since he never directly coped with his feelings he discards any possibility of future happiness. Both Vuk and Arandjel's decisions were ultimately ill-fated.

However, we should not lose all hope for the émigré as it is obvious that the particular population described in *Migrations* is subject to particularly harsh circumstances. They did not have the choice of transitioning slowly because they had been displaced by war—their homeland had been aggressively occupied by the Ottomans. A more peaceful relocation might have allowed a slower generation transition that would not be as drastic and psychologically jarring. However, as Norris might say, history and an era of drastic change made this impossible for Vuk and Arandjel Isaković.