



Research Paper

Encountering Outsiders and Recovering Repressed Memories: On Animalistic Allegories in Aminatta Forna's *The Hired Man*

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ABSTRACT: As a British author who grew up in war-torn Sierra Leone in the early 1970s, Aminatta Forna has continuously engaged with themes of genocide, human rights, and trauma in Africa throughout her literary career. However, Forna chose to set the story of her third novel, *The Hired Man*, in a fictional Croatian town named Gost, where a wealthy British family intrudes into a seemingly tranquil and harmonious world, without knowing the complicated history of ethnic cleansing that took place there in the early 1990s. This essay analyzes how the encounters between the locals and the strangers propel the recovery of repressed memories of internecine conflicts, drawing on the parallel between the interpersonal relationships in the fictional world and Forna's own identity as both an insider of war trauma and an outsider to the Serbo-Croatian conflicts. With a close analysis of animalistic themes throughout the novel, this essay explores how these imageries allegorize the barbaric nature of human conflicts, which mimic intragroup carnages in the bestial world.

KEYWORDS: Aminatta Forna, *The Hired Man*, British literature, Serbo-Croatian conflicts, animalistic allegories, genocide, human rights.

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I. INTRODUCTION

When Scottish-Sierra Leonean writer Aminatta Forna decided to set her fourth book *The Hired Man* (2013) in a small town named Gost, whose real-life counterpart is the border region Gospić/Krajina in present-day Croatia (Norridge 106), many readers and critics were surprised by the novel's seemingly incomprehensible leap from the author's previous works (Parssinen 26), which all engage in some ways with the traumatic history of the Sierra Leonean civil war in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Forna regards this geographic shift as a logical step, due to the two regions' striking similarity: both had an agriculture-based economy, similar geographic size and population, and two decades of dictatorship followed by an economic recession before the outbreak of a civil war (Parssinen 26). In this sense, Forna is both an outsider and an insider when narrating the story that unfolds in *The Hired Man*: as a Londoner of African origin, Forna does not belong to the Croatian town where the events of the novel take place; on the other hand, having survived a massacre herself, Forna approaches this parallel event of ethnic cleansing in Eastern Europe with a great degree of familiarity.

The encounter between the insider, Duro Kolak, and the outsider, i.e. the British family that recently moves into Gost for their summer vacation, likewise stands at the center of the novel's narrative conflict. Though the outsiders' ignorance of the local history characterizes them as naïve visitors, their distance from bygone conflicts offers them the ability to uncover and stir up the repressed collective memories of the locals, who have glossed over past atrocities through deliberate amnesia. The gradual disruption of the town's peaceful façade as a result of interactions between the insider and the outsiders is represented by recurrent references to various animals, which acquire allegorical meanings as their appearances and behaviors mirror the actions and fate of the human characters. This close interconnectivity between animals and humans reveals the barbaric, bestial nature of the civil war at the core of the story.

II. THE AFFINITY BETWEEN HUMAN CONFLICTS AND INTERNECINE STRUGGLES IN THE ANIMAL WORLD

Unlike Forna's previous international bestseller, *The Memory of Love*, which recounts the aftermath of war with great intimacy and lurid, harrowing images as the protagonist attempts to cure maimed, traumatized civilians (Cole, "Interview with Aminatta Forna" 241), *The Hired Man* approaches history through a gradual

unveiling of the dark waters beneath Gost's tranquil surface. The story begins with the narrator Duro discovering a British woman Laura and her teenage son Matthew and daughter Grace moving into "the blue house," which formerly belonged to Duro's childhood companions Krešimir and Anka Pavić. Hired as handyman, Duro begins repairing the dilapidated house for its new owner, while guiding the family to discover the hidden mosaic once created by Anka. The restoration of the mosaic, along with the repair of Anka's red Fićo, evokes memories of the house's previous inhabitants, thus generating great unrest in town. The resurrection of past recollections unravels Duro's role as perpetrator during the civil conflicts, who avenged the deaths of his father and sister by hunting down enemy soldiers. The novel ends with Duro recounting to Grace how he helped Anka escape from persecution by Croatian militiamen due to Anka's marriage to a Serb, only to lose contact with her ever since.

The undercurrents of conflict beneath the façade of peace are disclosed as the brutal nature of civil war is allegorized by the tale of freezing rats in chapter eight. The fact that Duro's house was once a shelter for pigs (Forna 103) hints at the affinity between human behavior and animalistic nature, a theme that becomes more explicit as the evening unfolds. Inviting Laura, Matthew, and Grace to his home for dinner, Duro warns them of the danger of rats gnawing their way into the house and talks about ways to trap them in cages. To fulfill Grace's relentless curiosity, Duro describes how the rats freeze to death: "At first the rats huddle together. As the cold goes to their brains they become confused, stumble around the confines of the cage and into each other. The cold makes them aggressive. They fight, viciously, with what little strength remains" (Forna 107).

The character of the rats' fighting mimics human conflicts during the Serbo-Croatian war. To begin, the coldness symbolizes the general political atmosphere of the time, which sanctions the act of killing. Direct references to the "change of weather" as catalyst for the betrayal of one's neighbors appear in chapter eighteen, immediately before the Crisis HQ begins the systematic persecution of Serbian residents: "all that governs us is the weather, the changing of the seasons, the land." (Forna 246-247). Just as the insidious coldness confuses the rats and makes them turn against each other, the "changing of seasons," i.e. the increasingly hostile, nationalistic political atmosphere, becomes the preconditions that bring out the murderous and treacherous side of human nature. In addition, the fact that the rats in the story vigorously fight against members of their own species parallels the internecine conflict in the human world, in that the perpetrators of genocide come not from the outside, but from inside the village: under the encouragement from the Crisis HQ, students inform on their teacher, a farmer takes revenge on his wife's old lover, people denounce their neighbors, and a small boy betrays his own father's hiding spot (Forna 247). That the participants of the atrocities are mutual acquaintances or even blood relatives demonstrates the extent to which the human-world conflicts bear similarities with the intragroup carnage among the rats.

The similarities between the human and the animal world, as well as their connection with war/genocide, are further emphasized through the anecdote of Patrick Watkins during the dinner. Duro mentions that the tale of Patrick Watkins appears in a book about the Galápagos Islands, where Charles Darwin first conducted his research on animal species (Forna 104). He follows this factual observation with a rhetorical question: "did you know people lived there, too? Slaves, convicts, stranded sailors, pirates. [...] Life there was brutal with any number of crimes committed between such violent inhabitants" (Forna 104). Duro's emphasis on the proximity of humans and animals, as well as his description of life as "brutal" and "violent," hints at the barbaric nature of human and animal societies alike, in which survival justifies the act of killing.

The connection between this survival doctrine and the narratives of war in the novel's main storyline becomes evident as Duro envisions himself in Patrick Watkins's situation. A marooned Irish sailor, Watkins managed to escape with several others in a boat, but when they arrived at the destination, only Watkins remained alive (Forna 105). Duro wonders whether Watkins killed the others with his bare hands, and what happened when the group were down to the last three men. After spending the night with Laura's family, Duro dreams of himself on a similar boat, sometimes perceiving the surroundings from Watkins's perspective, sometimes seeing Watkins from the angle of his travel companions (Forna 113). Duro's ambivalent position in the dream corresponds to his dualistic identity as both perpetrator and victim of war in real-life. The way in which Duro imagines Watkins killing the others with his bare hands is strikingly similar to Duro's own headstrong murders of the enemy soldiers during the war. Furthermore, Duro's puzzlement at the dynamics between the last three survivors on the boat relates to the antagonistic relationships between himself, Fabjan, and Krešimir as the three participants in Anka and her husband Javor's persecution. The underlying similarities between the animalistic, brutal, and violent world of the island dwellers in Watkins's story and Duro's own experiences during the Serbo-Croatian war hints at the murky moral ground on which the novel's protagonist operates, while foreshadowing the complete disruption of the hitherto peaceful dynamics of town life at the end of the story.

III. KNOWING/NOT KNOWING: UNCOVERING REPRESSED MEMORIES THROUGH ENCOUNTERS WITH OUTSIDERS

Though Laura's family embodies the ignorant outsider who does not truly perceive the complexities of the bygone events, it is their presence alone that enables the resurrection of repressed narratives. During the family's

dinner conversation with Duro, Grace asks about the meaning of the word “Gost.” Duro indicates that it can mean either “guest” or “visitor,” while also explaining Gost’s historical significance as a provincial capital of the Austro-Hungarian empire that has welcomed travelers and settlers throughout the ages, arguing that “mountain people have a very strong tradition of hospitality” (Forna 108). The discussion of hospitality in this passage can be linked to the artificial creation of borders between Serbia and Croatia after the downfall of Yugoslavia. Sarah Gibson argues that “To think about hospitality is to acknowledge the function of borders (and their crossings) in the construction of the nation-state. [...] A nation’s hospitality is necessarily conditional as it consists of ‘welcoming particular guests and...as a result, not others’” (694-695). In other words, by marking the national border, a state automatically denies the access of certain peoples since its hospitality is conditional, not universal. In fact, hospitality and hostility share the same etymological root (Gibson 695).

Through the creation of the two new states of Serbia and Croatia, a border between the two ethnic groups is erected, so that one group is not welcome in the territory of the other. The conjunction between friendly and hostile elements in the concept of hospitality is likewise evident in the English cognates of Gost: “Gost in English sounds like a cross between guest and host. Or ghost” (Forna 108). The coexistence of people who belong to Gost, i.e. the host, and people who do not, namely the guest, can be interpreted as hinting at the sudden distinction between Croats and Serbs in the same town following the erection of new national borders. The once universally hospitable town that is open to all mountain travelers does not exist in reality anymore; it is only a “ghost” from the past. As guests who are currently accepted into the town, Laura’s family functions as a foil to the former Serbian residents, who were brutally rejected by their neighbors and family members and treated even more disgracefully than complete strangers. By inquiring about the hidden meanings of “Gost,” Grace succeeds in resurrecting the local residents’ decade-long repression of the past.

The interactions between the insiders and the outsiders, as well as the use of animals as allegory for the forgotten past, are epitomized through the recovery of the mosaic in the blue house. The bird mosaic in its entirety is meticulously described in chapter eleven, when Duro first returns to Gost after a ten-year residence on the coast: “On the wall of the house a great bird rises, wings outspread, beak pointed to the sky. Glorious. Alive. A bird with blue wings, tipped with azure. A red-bodied bird, golden-plumed, dragging a golden tail. The bird’s head is turned to the left, as though it’s looking at me with a haughty stare. Its breath is exhaled in curls. Green hands outstretched below, trying to catch the bird or having just released it, who knows?” (Forna 155). This vivid imagery simultaneously emphasizes the vivacity of its creator, while hinting at the impending tragedies that would later befall her. The stark contrast between the green, blue, red, and golden tiles of the mosaic together constitutes a visionary, dynamic color palette that differs from the prevailing white-black imagery that dominates on the island of Pag (Forna 149) and from the greyish palette of the town itself. The red-bodied bird resembles Anka’s own newly gained freedom away from the constraints and hatred of Krešimir and their mother Vinka. Red is repeatedly emphasized throughout the novel as Anka’s characteristic color, since images of Anka’s red hat and the red Fićo unleash rumor that her ghost has returned years later (Forna 242). The upward motion of the bird as it “rises, wings outspread, beak pointed to the sky” portrays a general mood of mobility, hope, and confidence that stand in opposition to the stagnation of life and to Duro’s own feelings of rejection and isolation as he returns to his native town after a failed romantic relationship.

At the same time, the latter part of the description qualifies the otherwise overwhelmingly positive imagery. That the bird looks at Duro “with a haughty stare,” rather than a loving, welcoming gaze, underscores the fact that Anka and Duro’s decade-long relationship will not be rekindled with the same intensity as when it flourished before his departure from Gost ten years ago. In addition, the ambivalent relationship between the green hands and the bird above hints at the general family dynamics and political atmosphere that would eventually lead to Anka and Javor’s persecution: Krešimir seems to have stopped bullying his sister and let go of her as she found her own shelter and family, though later he would be the one who betrays Anka, thus becoming directly responsible for her persecution. Though the townsfolk accept Anka’s marriage to a Serb for the time being, they would later become Krešimir’s accomplices by tolerating the ethnic cleansing that leads to Javor’s demise and Anka’s disappearance. In this sense, the imagery of the mosaic at once symbolizes Anka’s newly gained freedom and liveliness, while also representing the insidiously destructive forces beneath Gost’s peaceful surface.

As outsiders, Laura’s family possesses the courage and ability to rediscover Gost’s hidden past, which has been forcefully eliminated from the view of the town’s Croatian inhabitants. Andrea Zlatar-Violić argues that the establishment of the new state calls for a collective cultural amnesia: state politics and media mechanisms of the early 1990s seek to break away from contemporary history by suppressing the dark history of genocide, selecting only parts of the past as the new country’s cultural heritage, while constructing a new image of national history (232). The local residents of Gost employ similar ways of representing their new identity and achieving a cultural amnesia. They depart from the gory past of ethnic cleansing by eliminating traces of those who left, for instance, by covering up Anka’s mosaic. They selectively identify with different segments of Croatia’s history, such as when Duro talks about Gost’s former glory as provincial capital of the

Austro-Hungarian empire, without mentioning its role in contemporary history. In addition, the locals of Gost strive to convince the newcomers that the town is far away from bloodshed and military conflicts, as if those tragedies only take place in the Middle East and Africa (Forna 138). In the general atmosphere of collective amnesia, it is the intrusion of outsiders alone, who are unaware of the memories repressed, undaunted by societal disapproval, and unthreatened by the moral guilt of complicity, that could accomplish the task of unearthing what has been buried out of sight, represented symbolically through the recovery of Anka's mosaic. In a similar way, Fornas status precisely as a British-Sierra Leonean writer enables her to tell the story of genocide in Croatia without being accused of being partisan, as local writers certainly would be (Parssinen 26).

IV. CONCLUSION

Approaching the topic of civil war in former Yugoslavia with great skill, Aminatta Fornas portraits the barbaric nature of internecine conflicts by drawing a parallel between the brutal tussles in the human world and its counterpart in the animal world. The tales of freezing rats and Patrick Watkins disclose the disquieting past that lies beneath Gost's façade of peace. The discovery of war atrocities can only be achieved through the encounters between the insiders and the outsiders, whose cultural ignorance enables the suspension of moral and societal norms that help maintain the status quo. Though *The Hired Man* appears provincial in scope, it in fact possesses a vast geographical outreach, since the themes of war, trauma, and encounters between the foreign and the local possess a universal quality that resonates across the globe.

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