Book Review

Sylë Osmanaj, *Pena i shkruante lirisë. Shkrime autoriale të botuara në gazetën e përdishme ‘Rilindja’ në kohën e suprimimit të shtetësisë së Kosovës 1989-1999*, Pristina: Bindi, 2019. 242 pp., ISBN: 978-9951-586-20-7, € 4.00

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The history of Kosovo in the first half of the 1990s is rather poorly described in memoirs. Many foreign observers and participants in local events remember the period between 1990 and 1997 as a kind of ‘temporary calm’ between the two big waves of the Albanian national movement in the region, that is 1987–1990 and then from the beginning of 1998 onwards. This is especially striking given the parallel dramatic events in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. However, the apparent silence in Kosovo was misleading. During the 1990s, in fact, two parallel centres of power were formed: the Serbian, led by Slobodan Milošević and his supporters, and the Kosovo Albanian, where the most significant movement was led by Ibrahim Rugova of the Democratic League of Kosovo (*Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës*, LDK), which united the larger part of the intellectual elite. Published in Pristina in 2019, the collection of articles under review here, by Kosovo Albanian writer Sylë Osmanaj and titled *Pena i shkruante lirisë* (The quill guided by freedom), is dedicated to this confrontation.

Osmanaj’s biography is quite typical for a Kosovo intellectual. Born in 1941, he graduated from the Pedagogical Institute in Peja (Peć in Serbian), and then studied at the Department of Albanian Language and Literature in Pristina. From 1969, Osmanaj worked as a journalist for the leading Kosovo newspaper *Rilindja* (Rebirth). Having begun his literary career during his student years, he wrote a large number of poems and stories. However, before the Kosovo war of 1999, Osmanaj published only three separate works: two books of stories—*Kaltërsi dhe shi* (Clearness and rain) and *Tisi i rrëfimi* (The veil of confession)—as well as the theatrical drama *Shënjestra e syve* (The target of the eyes), all published by the *Rilindja* publishing house.¹ In 1990, the banning of *Rilindja* and other Kosovo Albanian media by the Serbian leadership for ‘anti-state activities’ knocked the author out of his habitual life; he was forced to take a path of struggle. Osmanaj and other authors began working for *Bujku* (The farmer), *de facto* the only Albanian sociopolitical newspaper allowed in Kosovo during the Milošević era. Founded as a

¹ Sylë Osmanaj, *Kaltërsi dhe shi*, Pristina 1978; Sylë Osmanaj, *Tisi i rrëfimit*, Pristina 1980; Sylë Osmanaj, *Shënjestra e syve*, Pristina 1988.

periodical for farmers and gardeners, *Bujku*—until the founding of the weekly newspaper *Koha Ditore* (Daily Time) by Veton Surroi in 1997—actually presented one of the few opportunities for political expression for the Kosovar Albanian intellectual elite in the 1990s. Osmanaj's articles for *Bujku* from 1991 to 1995 are the basis for the book under review. Only two of the texts, at the beginning of the book, were written for other newspapers: *Rilindja* and the Kosovar periodical for teachers, *Shkëndija* (The spark).

In his articles from this period, Osmanaj consistently criticises the policy of the Serbian leadership towards the Kosovar Albanians. He criticises tendentious publications about Albanian literature and culture in the Belgrade press, which in every possible way tried to belittle it in the context of Kosovo. Osmanaj protests against the closure of the Kosovo Albanian media by Belgrade, considering this harmful to interethnic relations. His main concerns are the inequality of the positions of the two nations and the attempt to make the great Serbian idea the dominant one. However, Osmanaj does not only address the situation in Kosovo. In one of his recent articles, entitled *Motivi i nje provokimi enigmatik* (The motive behind an enigmatic provocation), he worries about the political situation of the Albanians in the newly independent state of North Macedonia.

But the most important issue addressed by Osmanaj is the scholarly and sociopolitical work of Kosovar Albanian researchers during that difficult time. The staff of the Institute of Albanology and the Academy of Sciences of Kosovo were under constant pressure, exerted both directly by the Serbian leadership and media and, in a hidden manner, by state security agents. Fighting off attempts to usurp property by the authorities, Kosovar writers and philologists tried to conduct normal scientific work. Despite the brain drain their community experienced—a fairly significant number of researchers was forced to emigrate—academic and literary ties were preserved. After 1999, this contributed to the revival of Kosovo's scientific and cultural institutions in Pristina.

I recommend this collection of articles for study. Sylë Osmanaj provides insight into the political and cultural situation in Kosovo in the first half of the 1990s. Of course, his articles cannot be called impartial. But at the same time, they fill a significant gap in the description of events in Kosovo between the limitation of autonomy on the part of Belgrade in the late 1980s and the appearance on the political scene of the Kosovo Liberation Army (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës*, UÇK) ten years later.