

RSAA JOURNAL

Book Review: **Mirela Roznoveanu**

Domnica Radulescu. *Country of Red Azaleas*. A Novel. Twelve, 2016, 308 pp.

Domnica Radulescu is perhaps the most successful Romanian-American fiction writer of her generation. She succeeded not only in printing three novels with Anglophone publishers, but also in being acknowledged within the American literary milieu.

Her first novel, *Train to Trieste* (2008), transcribed Mona Manoliu's life in communist Romania. She escapes Romania, and the second half of the story moves to Chicago, with flash-backs to the life left behind in her native land. The characters in *Black Sea Twilight* (2010), also a novel written in the first person, plan to defect from communist Romania and succeed. Nora's confession records the increasingly unbearable life in the 1980s Romania under the rule of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Hounded by the secret police, Nora defects to Turkey. The experience of exile, played out through a plenitude of psychological and emotional events, is scrutinized during Nora's journey to Turkey and then to France.

In *Country of Red Azaleas*, also a first-person confession with pages that read like a nonfiction memoir, the main character Lara doesn't like her name, just like Mona in *Train to Trieste*. The first

part of the novel is set in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, while the second part transports us to America. It is in Belgrade in the year 1980 that Lara meets Marija, a Bosnian girl of uncommon grace, intelligence, and beauty. Both girls are in the first grade, and their friendship is described all the way to college. This time Ceausescu is replaced by Tito, and the secret police war on Romanians by the nationalistic tendencies of the Serbs, culminating in the Bosnian war (1992 - 1995), the Bosnian genocide, and all the subsequent violations of human rights. Developed and viewed through the friendship between the Serbian Christian-Orthodox Lara and the Bosnian Muslim Marija, the conflict is narrated from Lara's perspective, interspersed here and there with Marija's notes, journalistic pieces, and war journal.

Lara marries the American Mark in 1992 and flies to Washington, D.C. and Marija embarks for Sarajevo as a front-line war journalist. While Lara has a decent academic life in Washington, D.C. troubled at times by the clash of cultures and the vanishing of her love for Mark, Marija is raped, injured, delivers a baby boy conceived by rape, and lives through all the terrible events of the war,

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at last arriving in America too. Both women and their children will find an answer to their lives while visiting Sarajevo in 2004. Here they come to peace with themselves and the countries they belong to, America on one side, and Serbia and Bosnia on the other.

Radulescu's stories have many complications and split on different threads. The author loves to submerge in diverse cultures and recount the exotic differences. What I find questionable in this novel about the war in the Balkans is that the author idealizes the victims while being terribly harsh on the aggressors. She is too politically correct. I think that Radulescu had the opportunity to give in this novel a minimal historical background, at least a short one, about the roots of the tensions in the Balkans, which actually began with the Ottoman Empire's occupation after the battle of Kosovo (1389). The Ottoman rulers converted villages and regions inhabited by Orthodox Christians to Islam by force and bribe (those who converted to Islam didn't pay taxes, and enjoyed many other rights, such as the right to possess firearms and fast horses). From Kosovo on, the butchering never ceased on both sides. History bequeaths a terrible legacy to the present. The roots of conflicts have to be known and under-

stood in order to find a better strategy for solving them.

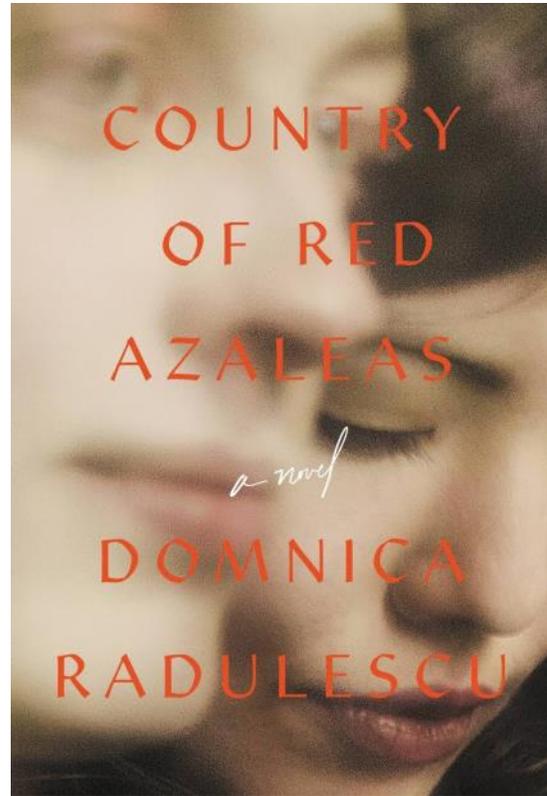
On another note, in exposing the consequences of war in Belgrade and Sarajevo the author relies too much on the United Nations' human rights documents and journalistic narratives to the point of their tone sometimes intrudes into the novel. Although it is hard to reconstitute an environment the author can only imagine through documents, there are pages about rape and domestic violence written in a journalistic tone, useful perhaps for lectures on human rights. Some romantic plot aspects are also hardly plausible, such as Lara's adulterous love affair with a Tunisian university professor (almost all Radulescu's characters have an academic life), connected to post-9/11 issues such as profiling and visa clearance.

Domnica Radulescu's novels are confessions of immigrant life written as thrillers. As we know, the monocular epic perspective has its pluses and minuses. It is hard to sustain the reader's interest narrating only in the first person, but generally speaking Radulescu knows how to fuel suspense.

The single perspective is compensated for by passionate love affairs and imminent dangers.

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Radulescu makes good use of three of the ingredients in the recipe for the novel: love affairs, war or turbulent times, and exotic places – in this case the country of red azaleas, Bosnia. Another remarkable quality resides in her descriptions and keen psychological analyses, especially of longing for one's native land. There are many memorable passages in her novels, but I will cite this one from *Train to Trieste*: “In the silence, when my loneliness is sharper than ever, so many miles, so many worlds away from my birthplace, I feel my limbs stretch into strange shapes. They reach out past the walls of my house ... out into the world, across cornfields and the whitecaps of the Atlantic.” (p.262)



Note:

Domnica Radulescu (born June 1961) joined Washington and Lee's faculty in 1992 and was promoted to full professor of French and Italian in 2003. A political refugee who fled her native Romania for the United States in 1983, she received her B.A. in English from Loyola University of Chicago, and her M.A. in comparative literature and Ph.D. in Romance languages and literatures from the University of Chicago.