



Healing Traumatic Pasts Through Emancipatory Futures Narratives

By Ivana Milojević

Our past and our present realities shape the stories of today and yesteryear, and vice versa. So do stories that envision better tomorrows. In other words, if we are to create more inclusive and less violent societies, we need to create stories that support such change. All this can be, and has been achieved to a varying degree, via an accessible, inexpensive yet powerful medium of storytelling.

When I was young, we studied historical events in school extensively. I was also an avid reader who immensely enjoyed books about different time periods and different worlds. At the same time, being a sensitive child, I could not understand nor stomach all the the horrors described in some of the books I was reading. I'll tell you about one such horrible narrative...

Along, long time ago, many people believed that it was not possible to build anything, not even a house, let alone significant buildings such as bridges, castles, wells, monasteries or citadels, without offering something in return to the spirits of the land. The motif of a construction whose completion demands a human sacrifice is found in legends and stories across most of the world, in cultures and societies as diverse as Scandinavian states, Russia, France, Italy, Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, India, Oceania and Polynesia, China, Japan and Sudan. Modern builders sometimes come across human or animal skeletons which were built into foundations centuries ago. and there is some evidence that many of those sacrificed were built into foundations alive. Sometimes, a human effigy or a sacred object was placed in the foundation to substitute a human victim.

Many buildings in Europe still carry signs of remembrance of those early human victims by symbolically substituting them with statues carrying walls and balconies at the ornaments of the facades. Unfortunate real human victims were most commonly slaves, orphans or foreigners, but sometimes close members of the family were also sacrificed. In the area of the Balkans, virtually all societies know of a traditional folk story which tells how a sacrifice of a wife of a master builder or a king took place. Known as 'the walled-up wife' legend, the story is entitled in different ways and has many versions, but the common theme is as follows: 'there were three, nine or twelve masons, or brothers, who decided to erect a building, bridge, castle or a citadel, but whatever they constructed during the day collapsed at night; this went on for weeks or years until they learned that they needed to make a sacrifice, usually a first wife who comes to bring a meal for her husband. After the young woman, also often a new mother, gets built into the walls, the building no longer crumbles down at night.'

We studied the story of 'the walled-up wife' in school, for its 'poetic beauty' and as part of our cultural heritage. I remember the story traumatizing me – the human cruelty and the imprisonment of a young mother was too much to bear. What was worse, the method of studying the story was to simply memorise it, so there was neither discussion about hidden meanings within it nor any suggestion how to emotionally process it.

Fast forward many years later. I am a young woman in search of better narratives. I no longer accept stories handed to me which portray women as victims of violence. But I still see violence all around me, not only in stories but also in 'real' life. I especially bear witness to horrible violence committed during the times my society collapsed into civil war. To me, 'the walled-up wife' story then became a symbol of much that is wrong with our world.

Fast forward, once again, many decades later. With a good friend and colleague of mine, I sat down and wrote a book of stories. We chose to rewrite familiar stories, traditional and widely known, and replace not only violence present in them, but also gender-based and cultural stereotypes.

Each story we have rewritten liberates someone from a prison or some other form of human cruelty. We freed the unnamed young woman from the story I described earlier. And we also gave her a name: Slobodanka, meaning Freedom. We wanted to heal the child in us, crying out for fairness, justice and peace. More importantly, we wanted our dreams for the future to be reflected in stories we tell to younger generations.





Slobodanka (Freedom) discussing various options and alternatives to violence with a very smart fairy and other women in her community.



Slobodanka (Freedom) inspecting the castle that kept on crumbling down.



Slobodanka (Freedom) is taken out of the castle where she was built into the walls.



Slobodanka (Freedom) using her education and knowledge to properly build the castle.



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