

Telling Stories about a Culture of Resistance and Dissent

Milena Dragičević Šešić

Who is the author of this book? In one sense, it is Srško Leštarić, the Serbian translator and writer who started his professional career in Yugoslavia during the period when the Non-Aligned Movement brought Yugoslav businesses into contact with many of the newly created post-colonial states in Africa and Asia. Unlike his colleagues, Srško spent his evenings and every free moment at literary clubs and cafés from Damascus to Cairo discussing cultural issues with writers and other artists, as well as broader questions related to freedom of speech, censorship of literary magazines and publishing constraints. Back in Belgrade, he took advantage of the new freedom granted to literary journals in the 1980s (*Književna reč*) to publish his translations and comments about the then-unknown world of contemporary Arabic literature. Hence, this book developed over a long span of time, as he collected stories about patterns of resistance throughout the Arab world. As he gained the friendship and trust of numerous writers who saw in him a guarantee that their censored words would somehow reach an audience, Leštarić also gained access to the most dangerous information and texts and eventually saw in them the potential to create a unique book – a book of provocative, meaningful stories of dissent.

These twelve forbidden (censored) stories, followed by nine stories in which Srško describes the fate of the authors, their texts, and the way he succeeded in getting them, constitute both a perfect book about resistance and the culture of dissent, as well as an analysis of the cultural scenes in different Arab countries.

For every story, Srpkó precisely describes the context and the circumstances under which he was assigned the task of saving the work for the future and making it known, yet without endangering the author. In Srpkó's stories, Arab cultural life comes alive as vibrant, mutually dependent, resistant, provocative and brave. Leštarić shows how integrated the Arab cultural scene is: describing his efforts to trace the authors who publish under pseudonyms; debating with new editorial boards that replaced previous ones because the old ones were "politically unsuitable"; how regimes succeed in "helping" cultural organizations lose institutional memory (meaning the memory of dissent); and discovering Arab inter-textuality (Salwa Bakr's story refers to Zakariyya Tamir's story). Leštarić's micro-narratives are more helpful in fully understanding the cultural landscape of the countries in question than any statistical data. The book can also be read partially as an "action story" about smuggling texts across borders, spreading messages and transmitting ideas to the world. It is also a story about friendship and solidarity, showing the importance of every small window to the world – which is what Srpkó represented to many Arab writers.

Perhaps the most impressive quality of Srpkó's work overall is his ability to understand contemporary Arab culture and contexts and to select for translation the best and most representative novels, some of them otherwise unknown and untranslated in the Western world. He has translated numerous novels, including two books for children: *Why Did the River Become Silent?* (2002) and *My Invisible Friend* (2008), both by Zakariyya Tamir; several books by Salwa Bakr; *Season of Migration to the North* by Tayeb Salih, and many books and stories by Abd Al-Sattar Naser, among others. All of these texts come from different regions and sometimes even use very different dialects of Arabic. He personally collected and adequately translated *The Fisherman's Daughter: An Anthology of Iraqi Folk Stories* (1998) using different dialects of the Serbo-Croatian language(s). All of these books were published in Yugoslavia and Serbia by the most renowned publishers.

The present book is much more than just a translation, however. As noted above, Srpkó Leštarić did not plan to collect such stories, he did not choose them from journals and books. In fact, the police and state security services in the repressive Arab states chose the stories and authors to be censored and imprisoned. The authors or their friends found "creative ways" to hand copies of forbidden magazines or manuscripts to Srpkó Leštarić as the only guarantee of their preservation. He immediately recognized the value of these stories and the necessity

of describing how he had gotten them. The title *12 Impossibles* reflects that these stories were selected from a "culture of dissent", from a tradition of resistance – they are unsuitable writers and unsuitable stories. The book was finally published in Belgrade in 2005 as an anthology of the culture of Arab resistance.

The first group of three stories uses symbols and metaphors which allude to the immortality (invincibility) of the resistance; they refer to government efforts to control and destroy free voices. The character Ibn Alvan, reappearing at different historical moments, despite the fact that he is killed by the regime every time, personifies the indestructibility and sustainability of a culture of resistance. The indestructible voice of the school teacher, Mr Vladi, still echoes through the school, although he was taken from his class and "disappeared." All these are strong metaphors for the culture of rebellion and resistance. The second group of stories reflects life in totalitarian states. "The City of Silence" is an excellent metaphorical title, expressing the artists' worst nightmare – bans and prohibitions on speaking. Finally, the third group of stories addresses individuals' capacity to resist oppression, to raise their voices, to choose independent paths – or to enter the world of corruption and dishonesty for a small reward and comfort.

In 2005, the same year *12 Impossibles* appeared in Serbian, I was invited by the European Cultural Foundation to design and implement a training program in art management for eight Arab countries (through the Cairo-based cultural NGO Al Mawred al Thakafy). As preparation, I read all the books of Arabic literature I could find in Serbian. Among those books, one struck me as crucially important for cultural managers: *12 Impossibles*, translated by Srpko Leštarić, whose name repeatedly appeared on many of the books I was reading and whom I had not met before. During the training sessions in Cairo and Aman, I realized that none of my Arab colleagues had read any of those stories and that many of the authors were unknown to them, having been censored and often distanced from public life. Thus, I started advocating for the publication of this book in Arabic, as I felt it was extremely important that Arab audiences read it and discuss its messages – especially cultural managers and cultural policy makers. At that moment, publishing the book was still unimaginable in the region due to its clear political significance, so I started thinking about how to present the book to the world audience through English. Fortunately, today, many years later, the book is now ready to enter the world – which is so full of prejudices and stereotypes against Arabs despite some temporary changes in

world media representation during the Arab Spring movements. Now, when the whole Arab world is between the rock and the hard place of macro and micro politics, since the current situation – with civil wars, millions of refugees, terrorists attacks, the rise of fundamentalist groups, etc. – is far worse than was expected when the liberal intelligentsia started leading civil protests from Tunisia to Syria, this book nevertheless bears witness to the fact that this desire for justice, dignity and freedom has existed for a long time, as an ideal that numerous artists who later took the lead in different activities related to Arab Spring had long been striving towards. In the carnivalesque atmosphere of the street protests in Tunisian, Moroccan and Egyptian cities, artists who had been silenced for a long time finally got the chance to enter freely into public debate without the necessary metaphors and cryptic language which predominates in the twelve stories collected and presented by Srpko Leštarić long before Arab Spring had begun to take shape. These stories represent in the best possible ways not only the tradition of storytelling, but also the culture of rebellion and dissent which have always been a suppressed part of Arab societies.

Now, when Arab Spring has given way to new forms of authoritarianism and both globalized and national elites are disillusioned with its results, this book is once again extremely topical. It underscores the many challenges that the Arab intelligentsia still faces in creating institutions and organizations capable of leading processes of democratization. Thus, the major result that the English-language edition of this book can hope to achieve is an eventual appearance in its original form – in Arabic, allowing these stories to finally be read and discussed in Arab countries, thus becoming a true part of Arab cultural heritage.

We hope that there will be Arab publishers ready to contribute to such an endeavor, to put an end to “The City of Silence”, such that the metaphorical title of one of the twelve stories no longer applies to the whole region. If published in Arabic, this book could also help foster and endorse processes tied to the fight for freedom of expression, which is so necessary there, as well as throughout the world.
