

Adem Demaçi  
The snakes of vendetta  
[*Gjarpijt e gjakut*].  
Ljubljana. Lumi. 1990. 84 pages

The republication of *Gjarpijt e gjakut* (The snakes of vendetta) is somewhat of a literary sensation thirty-two years since its first appearance in Yugoslavia in 1958. After over twenty-eight years in prison, its author, Adem Demaçi (b. 1936), whom many have referred to as Europe's Nelson Mandela, was unexpectedly released on 28 April 1990 at a time when a gesture of good will to the Albanian minority was long overdue from the Serbian government. He had been arrested in 1958 for criticizing the expulsion of tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Yugoslav Albanians to Turkey on the pretext that they were actually Turks. In 1964, he was sentenced to a further fifteen years for allegedly organizing a Kosovo national liberation movement and for distributing student leaflets critical of the system. In 1976, he was sentenced once again in a mock trial to fifteen years in prison where he remained until 1990 as one of Yugoslavia's most prominent political dissidents.

Interestingly enough, 'The snakes of vendetta' is not directly related to Demaçi's political cause nor does it concern the political dilemma in Kosovo, but the 'other' problem to plague Kosovo Albanians: blood-feuding. It is a timely publication not only in view of the author's release and his continued political significance in Kosovo, but also amidst the present campaign to put an end to the senseless carnage. Those who might have thought that vendetta, which at the beginning of the century decimated the male population of entire regions of northern Albania, was nothing but a curious relic of the past would be surprised to know that it is still alive and well, and living in Kosovo. Taking advantage of the current sentiment of unity and solidarity among Kosovo Albanians in the face of a ruthless Serbian determination to rule the impoverished province at any price, and of human rights violations unprecedented in Europe since the fall of Ceausescu, a committee of Kosovo intellectuals was formed in 1990 and in the course of dramatic scenes during well-attended public rallies has managed to pacify over nine hundred cases of vendetta, including several among Albanian-Americans in the United States.

The title of the work derives from an allegory about three giant serpents of different colours which set upon three men - a Turk, his rayah servant and an Albanian - who, travelling in search of their destiny, enter a huge cavern inhabited by an old man, to take refuge for the night. In the darkness, the yellow serpent coils around the neck of the Turk and bites him in the forehead. The second serpent coils around the leg of the rayah and bites him in the heel. The blood-red serpent, hence the title, coils around the right hand of the Albanian and bites its victim in the finger. The next morning, the keeper of the cavern explains their fate to them:

*"You, Turk, have been bitten by the serpent of leisure. You are destined to live a life without work. It is God's will that you reign and enjoy earthly pleasures. You, rayah, have been bitten by the serpent of suffering. You are destined to toil and moil your life long. God has ordained that you be the first to rise and the last to bed. And you, Albanian, you have been bitten by the serpent of blood feud. You shall slay your own brother, and your brother shall slay you until the end of time. God has ordained that you drink and vomit blood."*

*Gjarpijt e gjakut*, published by a courageous little company in Slovenia, that Switzerland of the Balkans, and sold under the counter into Kosovo, is the passionate tale of a conflict of

generations, both of which Demaçi can understand and sympathize with. The patriarchal head of a conservative Kosovo family sees no alternative to upholding vendetta as the only means of preserving male honour, whereas the son comprehends its destructive effects and fights, in vain, to put an end to the feuding. In the end, the son entreats his own children to crush the head of the serpent.

Adem Demaçi, once the committed son striving for a better world, has now himself become something of a spiritual patriarch for the over two million Albanians in Yugoslavia. Since his release, he has stressed the need for a peaceful solution to the present political crisis, for passive resistance at the most, and has publicly reiterated the dedication to the work he published in Prishtinë in 1958:

*"Not to those who raise their hand in crime,  
But to those who extend their hand in conciliation."*

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