

Elvira Dones

*Yjet nuk vishen kështu* [Stars do not dress up like that]

Elbasan: Sejko. 2000. 256 pp. ISBN 99927-642-9-5

Boy meets girl at the school grounds of an economically depressed and depressing provincial town in Albania. Love at first sight. Boy proposes to girl that they marry and move to Italy where a decent home and jobs await them. On their arrival, girl is savagely beaten by her new husband, gang-raped by his mafia friends and sold into slavery to work the streets of Milan. Boy returns to Albania for another bride.

This is not contemporary fiction but an Albanian reality as the new century dawns. Nowhere has slavery been reintroduced to Europe with such ferocity as it has by the Albanian mafia. The brothels of most Italian and Greek cities now teem with innocent country girls from Albania held in captivity against their will. It is to this phenomenon, Albanian prostitution and slavery abroad, that Elvira Dones has devoted her latest and as yet most impressive novel *Yjet nuk vishen kështu* 'Stars do not dress up like that.'

Dones chooses not one protagonist to follow, but a whole range of destinies. The patterns are similar, but the individuals are very different. Many of the figures she studies arrive in 'Europe' in the manner mentioned above, others come voluntarily for the money and adventure of it all, thinking at first that they are in control and know what they are getting into. Still others are entrapped even before departure, like Leila, with whom the novel makes a candid and disturbing start. As her own corpse is being transported in the coffin back to war-torn Albania by ferry, accompanied by her tearful father, Leila reflects: "When I left home, Aurora came across the sea with me, arriving in the same harbour from which father and I set out a few hours ago. There were light showers that day and, though I didn't know so at the time, it was the last moment I would ever see my sister. Six months later, they sent me pictures of her corpse. Her eyes were still wide open. The day after I saw the pictures of Aurora's body, I consented to work as a whore. And to die, bit by bit, from that day on."

With *Yjet nuk vishen kështu*, Elvira Dones has reached a new height in her literary career. It is a mature and gripping novel which, despite minor stylistic imperfections, has now made her among the most widely read Albanian authors of the day. The book is currently being translated into Italian and one hopes that other translations will follow.

Elvira Dones was born in the ancient port city of Durrës in 1960. She studied at the University of Tirana and worked for a time for the television and film industry there. In 1988 she managed to flee the country, then still under Stalinist rule, and now lives in Switzerland. Her first novel *Dashuri e huaj* 'A foreign love,' (Tirana 1997), translated into Italian as *Senza Bagagli* (Lecce 1997), was followed by *Kardigan* 'Cardigan' (Tirana 1998) and the recent short story collection *Lule të gabuara* 'Mistaken flowers' (Tirana 1999). Much of her writing, not without autobiographical elements, deals with the theme of women in emigration.

Robert Elsie

Olzheim / Eifel, Germany

[First published in: *World Literature Today* 75.1 (winter 2001), p. 185-186.]