Chapter Four

Mapping the Bosnian Identity

Sacred Space, Rootedness, and Continuity in Stone Sleeper

As suggested in the previous chapters, the originality of Dizdar’s Stone Sleeper lies in the poetic transformation of the medieval burial ground into the cradle of national culture. Marginalized as spaces of death and forgetting, the stećak cemeteries are assigned by Stone Sleeper a new role in the collective memory of contemporary Bosnians. The stećak’s taciturn presence, seemingly impervious to the passage of time, also turns attention to the land in which the tomb is anchored. In animating stone inscriptions as ancestral voices, Stone Sleeper establishes the importance of cultural genealogy and continuity in territorial terms. Brought together in the poetic text, the two components—geography and nationhood—refashion the sentiments of belonging and introduce a new possibility for contemporary Bosnians to appraise the cemetery as the sacred ground of their national culture.

Why this emphasis on the link between nationhood and geography? The answer to this question, as suggested in the first chapter, should be sought in the specific circumstances that enveloped the political culture of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the twentieth century—especially during the socialist era, when the territorial component of the Bosnian people’s national taxonomy officially lost currency. At a more general level, of course, the issue of territoriality features prominently in the process of self-definition and self-determination in societies at large. In
the formation of national communities, some scholars argue, “Territory is so inextricably linked to national identity that it cannot be separated out. Neither the identity, or consciousness, shared by members of a nation nor the physical territory of the nation itself can be viewed in isolation.” Indeed, while geography is neither a key dimension of identity nor its determinant, it is one of the most important categories through which nationhood can be explored and articulated. It both grounds a sense of national selfhood and gives it a framework through which a continuous shaping of identity can “take place.” Narration is key to that process, since it reveals the modes and conditions of a people’s communal relationship with the land. Whether literary or political, narratives allow the land to be told and retold, at times as a continuous tabula rasa, in accordance with the evolving concerns of national selfhood, thanks to the seeming immobility of national space. Even when competing nationalities lay claim on the same territory, the contested narratives rarely lose their pedagogical force for the community they target. Within such narrative productions, specific locations feature as focal narrative points. As John Agnew suggests, the significance of these places is defined through their physical characteristics (locale), the meaning given to them in the national narrative (sense of place), and their position in the overall territorial setting of the nation (location).

In the case of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as suggested earlier, it is important to historicize the territorial question: In contrast to other republics in the former Yugoslav federation, territoriality was a conspicuously absent category of national self-definition. As Bosnia never attained the status of a national republic, its population was partitioned along nonspatial, ethno-confessional lines into Serbs, Croats, and Muslims/Bosniacs. Reduced to regional consciousness, Bosnian territorial identity never attained discursive weight in the national self-definition. Instead, the Serbian and Croat identities were spatially redirected to Serbia and Croatia, while the Muslim, on the other hand, was aspatialized (or, in some views, had to be redirected to Turkey). The ideological evacuation of the Bosnian people from Bosnian land, especially in the case of Muslims, made the land a non-functional category of belonging. Consequently, the material vestiges of Bosnian historical culture, including the stećak, became little more than landmarks of curiosity. This political dislocation of national culture from land was a reality that was partly compensated by the fostering of a dual sentiment of belonging among most Bosnians: a merely “regional” sense (Bosnian) and a recognizably “national” one (Serb, Croat, Muslim).

Against such dissonance, Dizdar attempts to fuse the regional and the national by assigning to the stećak a distinct topographic relevance, and