(Anti)-nationalist discourse in ex-Yugoslavia in the nineties

Women’s writing and (anti)-war women discourse in the nineties in ex-Yugoslavia can be discussed only in the context of historical and social changes, in the context of nationalist wars and in the context of political transformation: from socialist to nationalist society. Because of that, women discourse in the Balkan area became mostly a part of anti-nationalist activism and put the feminist theory in new spectrum of meanings – non-Western, in other words – Balkan.

If we look back at west-European postmodern theory, in the context of women’s writing, as well as women’s arts in general, we can notice that they are based on the critique of rationalism, as well as the critique of universal and powerful subject. It also contains strong revolt against stereotypical standards and values established on patriarchal tradition. In that way, women’s writing presents subversive act. Women try to find a way to get in forbidden area of society, and to put their own Otherness to relevant and equal position. In opposite to other East-European countries, SFRY (later well known as Ex-Yu) feminist movement started to develop still during the seventies. It means that this movement has certain social, historical and political advantages and continuity in development. Concerning all this aspects, feminist movement in SFRY is not foreign, West-product which has been delivered after communist period, more exactly after the fall of the Berlin wall. However, the movement has changed and contextualized by new events in the nineties: disintegration of SFRY, wars, social and economic crises, new distorted system of values, as well as isolation. In that way feminist theory, ideology and experience obtain new semiotic structure in the Balkans.

Under newly created circumstances, feminists were heavy attacked in spite of the fact that they were not numerous and that their influence was marginal in the former republics of SFRY (with new nationalist entities, which were created in the meantime). Women journalists, activists, writers and the others were not misleading by euphoria of nationalism and by quasi-parliament democracy. Because of that, they have become the targets of domestic totalitarian patriots and militaristic national warriors. All these women were declared traitors of their own country, and more than that. One of such stories came from Croatia. Five feminists tried to react against spreading of national hate and wars,
manipulation of women and their bodies, and against intellectuals who were a part of the nationalist program. One public campaign was enough to stigmatize them. I will only cite one of many newspaper titles from that period: *Croatia’s Feminist Rape Croatia*. After that, five feminists from Croatia where declared to be five witches from Rio. Witch-hunt in Croatia public had a ritual meaning and represented initiation of new national patriarchal system. Anti-feminist politics, which started at the beginning of the nineties in SFRY had more symbolic than any other meaning. Slogan: *fraternity and unity*, as a symbol of equal rights and great love between brothers, turned into fratricidal war as a new, but at the same time retro symbol of struggle for unique, pure, and more valuable paternal identity. In both cases the war is shown as the male game in which men manifest various abilities and skills proving their nature of warriors and their masculinity. Women do not belong to that symbolical system of public sphere and discourse, which is actually established on gender differences. Her place is in the private space, she is a mother and a sister of brave solders. Also, she is a symbol of the Nation, Homeland, and Liberty. As the ambivalent semiotic construct, presenting “our” and “inimical”, mother/sister of our heroes and of them, the enemies, women’s position in the nationalist discourse is arbitrary – in fact, no determined position, but a possibility to manipulate it in different directions. Thus, a woman’s body can represent Nation, Homeland, Liberty and other abstract notions – for instance as figural ornaments in public buildings. The gaze in power, the male gaze, is immediately informed by this woman’s body that the notion is abstract, that the bodies of woman, since it does not exist in the public, present an abstractisation.

**Manipulation of women writings**

Manipulation of woman body, symbolically marked as ethnic territory in national discourse, began in the eighties in the media, by spreading stories about systematic ethnic rapes of Serbian women perpetrated by Albanian men, and about Albanian demographic war against Serbian nation in Kosovo, effectuated by excessive birth rate. That period we can mark as the beginning of nationalist discourse in public. Serbian state authority and public persons such as journalists, national poets and so on have made up different stories and verbal clusters, liminal with poetry and especially epic tradition, but used equally in scientific discourse ever since. The theory of great national conspiracy against Serbian nation included Serbian women in the already mentioned arbitrary context. The story-making and the new public discourse include terms such as biological extermination, Serbian mothers burdened with “modernity” and Albanian women as “machines” for reproduction, the volatile existence of such rare Albanians who would back up Serbian nationalism, as a reminiscence of the “noble savage” literary and colonial tradition. This example that turned out to be very successful

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1 *Witches from Rio, Croatia Feminist Rape Croatia*, Globus, December 11th, 1992

2 At 58th PEN Congress hold in Rio de Janeiro, five feminists from Croatia were the reason of humiliation of Croat nation toward investigatory team of popular newspaper *Globus*.

model for spreading of national hate was also applied later, in Croatian and Bosnian wars, with much more drastic consequences.

The story about traditional molestation of Serbian women by Croats since the time of World War II was marked the beginning of war in Croatia. National conflicts dating from the World War II were now presented as barbaric and cruel continuation of the acts of fascistic collaborators known as Ustashe. Memories of that period and this military formation were very frequently present in the public discourse – different kind of public speeches, football fan songs at stadiums, and new form of nationalist literature. From the other side, the media in Croatia, during the Bosnian war, had regular reports about mass rapes of Muslim women exclusively by Serbian soldiers. Croatian women at that case were raped in incomparable less number. Nationalist propaganda based on rapes of Muslim, Serbian or Croatian women by national soldiers was clearly used for war propaganda, not in favour of women. This was the main criticism of the media treatment of war rapes, expressed by the five Croatian women declared witches.

I will present two examples of women writers and their novels, one from the beginning and the other from the end of the nineties. One of them was a contributor to the nationalist discourse in Serbia and became one of the most popular writers in the nineties, and the other was one of famous witches from Croatia and a feminist writer in the exile. They have different backgrounds, but their two novels have the same effects: one inside, and the other outside the national borders.

The first one is Ljiljana Habjanović-Durović, a writer from Serbia. Her contribution to radical nationalist discourse arose from manipulation of women’s writing in order to achieve mainstream ideological purposes and in that way she included women into the machinery of Serbian nationalism. In 1991, Ljiljana Habjanović-Durić published her first novel of trilogy: Ana-Marija didn’t love me, intending to demonstrate, through a family story, the real causes of the Croatian-Serbian hate. The plot of the novel contains a lot of memories of the World War II brutalities and their painful consequences. A narrator describes her grandmother from Croatia, from the position of a little girl originating from a mixed marriage. Ana-Maria (name of the grandmother) is a stereotypical model of Croatian cold and insensitive women who cannot accept daughter of low from Serbia. For her granddaughter, she is a complete stranger (from her name to her appearance and behavior) in contrast to her grand mother from Serbia. Also, Ana-Maria speaks some strange dialect and that makes things even more horrible for the little girl. The character of Anna-Maria is completed by a letter, sent by to her son after she finds out that he is in the relationship with Serbian woman: If you bring that Serbian Gypsy to my house, I will kill her, without a doubt. I will cut her throat, most definitely, lake in Kulisic’s street, where, alas, willows don’t grow, and they are, you should never forgotten that, my son, the best place for Serb.4

This novel repeats a lot of usual patriarchal models and displays national stereotypes through the story about women’s suffering, and in that way contributes to the nationalist discourse. For that purpose, the author manipulates women’s bodies in the same way the current nationalist media did. Note a popular media discourse link – suffering Jews and suffering Serbs being included in the narrative: Three young, strong, cruel Ustashe jumped on a woman and brought her down to the floor. They tore her dress and underwear, until she was fully naked. She was lying with her legs spread apart and arms open. Like Christ on the cross. (...) One of the men already has his pants down and jumped to the women brutally. He slapped her, hit her cheeks, her neck, and her breasts, moaned and grunted, put his hands into her hair and painfully pinched her all over her body, his hairy buttocks move back and forth. Even before he clamed down after the last, strong cramp, already the other Ustasha was there terribly excited, impatiently ready. The women did not defend herself. She was lying lifelessly whined softly, lost, beaten dog...⁵

On the other side, unexpectedly and paradoxically, Slavenka Drakulić, an activist, feminist writer, formerly opposing the nationalist discourse in the public sphere in Croatia published the novel: S. – a Novel about the Balkans,⁶ in 1997. With other feminists from Croatia she was pointing to the fact that victims of the rapes were women, above all, no matter what nationality they were. All these stories of Muslim women in which they were represented as less capable to defend themselves were very close to the recognizable racist propaganda. The Croatian activists founded a center for help for all raped women in Bosnian war. Together with other institutions for humanitarian help and support, they also started a research on the exact numbers of victims, because the number of raped Muslim women reached fantastic scales, due to the state propaganda. Such initiative was very difficult to accomplish in the Croatian public space at the time. Regarding their activities, five women, journalists and writers (Dubravka Ugrešić, Jelena Lovrić, Rada Iveković, Vesna Kesić and Slavenka Drakulić) were accused for their public and provocative statements about women rapes in Bosnia. Their statements were declared as fascistic, and theirs appearance in public, especially abroad, was considered dangerous for the Croatia. In the eyes of Croatian public, they became instruments of Serbian racist and imperial politics⁷. That statement was confirmed by publishing their personal data in popular newspapers under the title already cited above Croatian feminist rape Croatia, so that anybody wanting to harass them was equipped with the necessary data.

Few years after that, Slavenka Drakulić wrote a novel on rapes committed by Serbian solders. She used documentary material and personal narratives of war victims in Bosnia. The letter S. from

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⁷ Witches from Rio, Croatia Feminist Rape Croatia, Globus, December 11th, 1992
the title represents a teacher from a small village in Bosnia, and marks the main character in the novel. The story begins in the maternity hospital in Sweden where S. recollects incessantly the horrible women’ room in a Serbian camp in which she has been exposed to everyday rapes and violence, together with other Bosnian women. She doesn’t know what to do with her newborn child; she can not surpass her traumatic experiences from the Serbian camp, neither the fact that one of those Serbian solders is the father of her child.

At the presentation in Ljubljana, on the occasion of the Slovenian edition, the author told that her intention was a literary reconstruction of emotional and psychological states of women victims in Bosnian war, which were very hardly understandable from documentaries, personal stories, and even from intimate conversations with them. Many reviewers, this was a very convincing literary rendition of the monstrous side of the Bosnian war. However, the novel by Slavenka Drakulić, finds somehow its place in an already deeply established nationalist discourse. The Other is one more time presented as evil, not only in this region, but all over the world. Reviews after the first, English edition in America confirm earlier media presentation of Bosnian war, a simplified version about good and evil guys. Here are some quotations:

1. The use of rape as a mode of warfare was one of the atrocities that made "ethnic cleansing" such a horrifying euphemism in the '90s. The number of Muslim rape victims has been hard to establish (estimates are as high as 60,000), and the depths of the damage even more difficult to comprehend. Hidden behind the newspaper accounts--the mind-numbing policy changes, drawn and redrawn borders, and fluctuating statistics--are the stories of what happened to thousands of Muslim women and how they have since dealt with their experience. In S: A Novel about the Balkans, the journalist Slavenka Drakulic uses a fictional everywoman, S., to convey the complex psychological torture of the victims of large-scale, systematic rape during the Bosnian War.

2. These days war is everywhere – television, newspapers, radio, even conversations overheard on the street – but the horrors of war have never been as real to me as they were while reading S. The images presented in Slavenka Drakulic’s all-too-real story of life in a Serbian detainment camp in 1992 during the height of the Bosnian War are much more disturbing than anything I’ve seen on CNN. (...) America fought in the Bosnian War, but we did it from the skies with bombs and care packages, never getting close enough to get a good look. The real story of what was actually happening over there never reached the American public. Now, for those courageous and curious enough to wonder what it was all about, S. brings the experience to life from the inside. Before reading S. I did not really know why we had gotten involved in the Bosnian War, now I wish we had done more.
3. Just how easily my distracted sympathies flitter hither and yon, from Somalia to Kosovo to Chechnya, whenever the latest TV footage bids me turn my head was brought home to me by "S.: A Novel About the Balkans." The book forced me to stare at an already half-forgotten horror: the Bosnian war of 1992-95, in which the Serbian minority laid siege to Sarajevo and began rounding up and massacring Bosnia’s Muslim population.8

My parallel between two manipulative narratives on rapes can be well illustrated by the academic presentation of the same problem, which offers very similar manipulative twists, for instance in the collection by Alexandra Stiglemayer9. Obviously, we are dealing with different policies and different intentions mixed with a real life trauma, and it is a shaky ground for reflection. My intention is to point to these parallels in order to question any “universal” response to war crimes and traumas, and to point to the role of literature and its relation to the media as a source of popular images and notions, and consequently the common views.

Instead of conclusion

I have chosen to present a manipulative side of women’s writing because it fits more effectively to the prevailing stereotype production, often presented by official sources and propaganda machines. Bringing this short analysis to the end, I want to point out, instead of conclusion, the other, in my view a better side of women’s writing in ex-SFRY in the nineties – the critical one, decisively feminist and anti-nationalist. Women’s literature was clearly different, and differentiating in the war situation, proposing a specific literary approach, including the choice of genres, narratives models, and ways of rhetorical argumentation, but also in the manner of literary reconstruction of the war history. All of this was done under pressure of the nationalistic policy, and opposing the brave speech of national warriors. There were no such situations in which an institution or a critic would approve of such writing, and there were no international supporters for these women authors. The discourse, both artistic and documentary, was denied access into the media, culture, and general public during the war years, and the authors were publicly attacked. Some of these women writers retired in a kind of voluntary asylum and wrote often autobiographical prose, an authentic historic document on its own.

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8 editorial reviews published at amazon.com

The others dared to appear in public discourse, using irony and allegory, which then was accepted in ghettoized circles that did not share the opinion of creators of national myths in the Balkan area. These women, who were very courageous and sensible in that dark period of war and the remaining totalitarian regime, fulfilled their commitment as intellectuals. I will mention some of them: Dubravka Ugrešić, Alma Lazarevska, Daša Dndić, Ljiljana Đurđić, Svetlana Slapšak and others.

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