

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A WOMAN? Or how Serbian female playwrights depict female characters

Within the framework of the ARSFID¹ project, I collaborated with my colleague Ivan Pravdić on a performance which we named *What does it mean to be a woman? (Šta to znači biti žena?)* In it we investigated the attitude adopted by female playwrights towards the female characters in their plays.

The very fact of the existence of the ARSFID project, conducted by professors of the Academy of Arts and financed by the Ministry of Science, points to a new position of women in our society. This is confirmed by this year's Sterijino Pozorje festival – the festival has female selector - Ana Tasić, a considerable number of new dramatic texts were written by women, and, after all, yet another woman is the president of this conference's scientific committee. While recounting these facts I keep emphasising the use of the feminine gender of the nouns. Why? Because, in our society, there is still an ongoing discussion whether it is legitimate, justifiable and in the spirit of the Serbian language to use feminine noun suffixes to denote women who do certain jobs – *selektorka* (female selector), *predsedavajuća* (female president), *dramaturškinja* (female playwright), *spisateljica* (female writer). The argument against the use of feminine suffixes is that the masculine suffix is used to refer to both men and women, and, in the spirit of the Serbian language, may also be neutral in essence. Is this correct, and if so, why?

I will look for an answer in the history of the Sterijino Pozorje festival. Until the year 1976, i.e. during practically the first 20 years of the festival, almost all plays performed and all plays awarded prizes were the work of men. Furthermore, all selectors were men, all jury members were men (except for Ognjenka Milićević in 1968 i 1969), all directors and art directors were men, and the key theatre critics reviewing the shows were men. All these roles were fulfilled by men. May we assume that this was the reason why the words *writer*, *critic* and *selector* used to refer to both the men who wrote plays and critiques and selected the plays for the festival, and generally to the people who performed these activities?

I will cite two more examples to do with writing dramatic texts in the Serbian language. The critic Muharem Pervić, one of the more progressive literary critics who wholeheartedly supported Bitef (Belgrade International Theatre Festival), while reviewing the premiere of *Mravinjak* (The Anthill, 1976) by Vesna Janković on the Big Stage of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, wrote the following: "One more Serbian play by a young writer uncrowned with glory has entered great theatre..." (Pervić, 1978: 323). Muharem Pervić did not refer to Vesna Janković as a woman writer, but as a young writer (*mlad pisac*). Notably, this was not the first time the Yugoslav Drama Theatre had staged a play by a young writer, but it was the first play performed that had been written by a woman. The same reviewer, delighted by Milica Novković's first play, wrote: "Milica Novković has written a masculine play..." (Pervić 1978: 330). Muharem Pervić used the syntagm "masculine play" in order to highlight its quality, which was obvious in the face of its author being a woman. The critic did not wish to insult the female author, nor women in general. All he wanted was to support her, endorse her

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work, and position her alongside other Serbian playwrights who were, naturally, all men. Thus Pervić's words implicitly confirm the verdict by Vladislava Gordić Petković:

There is no greater fallacy on the Serbian literary stage than the one created by the term 'feminine writing': readily accepted as synonymous with 'writing for women' – and the latter, again implicitly, equated with trivial prose (Gordić Petković 2010: 16).

I believe the views expressed by Gordić Petković to be congenial to those of Virginia Woolf, who, in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, claims that the quality of writing is proportionate to one's opportunities to live and grow in independence and freedom. Hence I posed the question of the connection between the woman's position in society, the success of female playwrights and their attitude to their own female characters. This is what I found.

First half of 20th century, i.e. until the end of World War II

The actress Ljubinka Bobić was the first comic playwright to have written three successfully performed comedies: *Naši maniri* ("Our Manners", Belgrade National Theatre, 1935, and Danube Banate Theatre, Novi Sad 1936), *Otmeno društvo* (High Society, Belgrade National Theatre, 1937) i *Porodica Blo* ("The Blo Family", premiere in Belgrade National Theatre in 1940 and 24 performances by 1980). The theatre reviewer of *Vreme* magazine, Stanislav Vinaver, wrote the following comment regarding Ljubinka Bobić and her most successful and most often performed comedy, *The Blo Family*: "Of course, the play shows nothing of Sterija's vicious and irreverent intensity, nor of Nušić's consistent though milder sharpness – it is entertaining and superficial." Although Vinaver obviously does not hold Ljubinka Bobić's comedy in high regard and draws a disparaging comparison with Sterija i Nušić, he cannot help but observe at the end of the text that the audience "was screaming with laughter" (Vinaver 1940: 8). The main similarity between Bobić and Serbian most famous comic playwrights lay in the very subject of the comedy: a woman's attempt to live in accordance with the standards of the so-called *beau monde* and the failure of such an intention. Still, unlike Sterija and Nušić who deal with this theme in one or at most in two plays (*Pokondirena tikva* and partly *Laža i paralaža* by Sterija, and *Gospođa ministarka* by Nušić), Bobić turns it into her main subject in all her three comedies. In all three texts, the main female characters wish to dispose of their inheritance (since none of them have earnings of their own) as they please, as well as to choose her own partner, and in this way to free themselves of the confines of the traditional society. At the end of all the three plays, the main female character is back within the boundaries of the patriarchal society represented by, not a man, but the personage of an older female with a maternal function. Unlike the women, who may either have a disruptive influence on the patriarchal order, or may wish to preserve it at all costs, the men may have various roles. They may represent the power of money and succumb to the temptation of acting above their station in life, all to return to traditional values in the end, like the patresfamilias in *High Society* and *The Blo Family*. They may be swindlers (the gigolos in all the three plays and the lawyer in *High Society*). They may be reasoners and relatives – those who assist in restoring the deluded woman to her senses to the delight of the representatives of traditional values.

It would seem that Ljubinka Bobić is even more vehement than Sterija and Nušić in her defence of traditional values – but not quite. Unlike Nušić, whose female characters always depend on their interaction with the male ones, Bobić is much more preoccupied in her plays with the relations between women (mother – daughter, daughter-in-law – mother-in-law,

female companions, landladies and maids, female relatives and neighbours). The particular detail that distinguishes Bobić from the writers who were her role models is that her female protagonists do accomplish their goals up to a point. Unlike Fema who only dreams of Paris, or Živka whose ministerial power came to nothing more than attempts to engage in nepotism and to get rid of her son-in-law, the protagonist of *Our Manners* does manage to travel to the seaside and to enjoy, for a short while at least, being part of the high society she used to dream of. Leposava from *High Society* manages to get a divorce and spend a short time living independently with a lover, and Kosara from *The Blo Family* regularly goes to Paris, speaks fluent French and chooses her own spouse (who is, naturally, the spitting image of the traditional patriarchal man). In her understanding of both society and comedy, Ljubinka Bobić never brings into question the cultural framework that she shares with Nušić; instead, her comedies cater to the values of the audience. I believe that the key difference between Nušić and Bobić is the absence of the connection in her plays between politics, financial machinations and the amount of money at the men's disposal. Female emancipation, if that is at all what her plays can be said to discuss, is an emancipation that does not question the traditional community and the division of means. Its stage representation is negative, as of a vacant copying of manners observed in the *beau monde* of the rich Europe.

Thus assembled, the facts point to the conclusion that Bobić, even though she herself was an example of an emancipated woman (earning her own money, living on her own and choosing her own partners), did not promote such values in her plays. In order to understand her views, we must consider the context of her creative output. In the history of women's movements, her era belonged to first-wave feminism – fighting for the right to vote, the right to education, the right to equal wages. In Serbia, women were entitled to education, but did not have the right to vote, nor to enter professions for which they had been educated. If they did work, they often received lower pay and had fewer chances of promotion. Abortion was illegal, which significantly restricted the woman's right to control her own body. Ironically, it is by upholding the values of a traditional society that Bobić managed to become the first successful Serbian female playwright.

In 1945, women were granted the right to vote and to an equal status with men in formal and legal terms. Still, there was a difference between legal and actual equality. The 1974 Constitution guaranteed the woman's reproductive rights, which meant in practice that her doctor could put her on the pill or schedule an abortion. That was the first pre-condition of actual sexual freedoms and second-wave feminism in Yugoslavia. After this decision, more women appeared among the successful and recognised playwrights. I insist on referring to them in Serbian using the masculine and not the feminine gender of the noun *playwright*: gender was not the subject matter then explored in the works of Serbian female playwrights, although their attitudes towards women characters had undergone a significant change. Those female playwrights were Zorica Jevremenić, Vesna Janković, Milica Novković, Deana Leksovar, Jelica Zupanc and Vida Ognjenović. Along with these writers, female dramaturges such as Borka Pavićević and Dubravke Knežević were also very active.

We will start this investigation with the play *Little Ado About Mika* (*Malo vike oko Mike*) by Vesna Janković, because this comedy is one of the first prizewinning plays authored by a woman (Jagodina's Comedy Award, 1973). Of all postwar plays written by female playwrights, this one is stylistically and ideationally closest to Bobić's work and clearly delineates the development of the female authors' attitudes to their female characters. The

story revolves around the mother claiming that the father is dead, hoping for a free widow's status, whereas the daughter maintains that he is alive and insists on "waking" him. The father keeps mum until the very end, thus the plot evolves through the interaction between two generations of women. The older woman is representative of what is sometimes referred to as bourgeois (*građanski*) pre-war Belgrade, and also of the narrow-minded provincial female who treats her husband as property because it is only through him that she can have access to money. In contrast, her daughter is a graduate of the Philosophy department, where she works as a teaching assistant, whose frustration stems from the inability to establish a satisfying relationship with men. Thus, the only topic of conversation available to two women of such disparate views of the world is men, and the logical resolution of the plot comes with the awakening of the father. Vesna Janković's work is significant because she was the first playwright who openly discussed female sexuality and the issue of relationship vs. sex in modern society.

Still, genuine success in the form of Sterija's Award for the Best Dramatic Text was attained by Milica Novović for *A Stone to Lay Your Head On* (*Kamen za pod glavu*). This play is of importance because it focuses on village life – the female characters are positioned within a patriarchal rural community. The meaning of a woman's life is to bear as many children as she can, and to serve her husband. Crucially, Milica Novković does not glorify such a position imposed on women by society, but defines her heroines as sufferers and victims who are not capable of perceiving that there is a world outside of their village. It is worth noting that there are no differences of opinion between the young and the old women, and that they exhibit great solidarity (unlike men). It is of crucial significance that the playwright views all three female characters (one married and with many children, one married and still childless, and one unmarried) as equally valued and equally suffering under the burden of degenerate traditional relations represented by men.

In the play by Deana Leksovar, *The Pictures of Sad Adventures* (*Slike žalosnih doživljaja*), we could follow the heroines' emancipation from the patriarchal and poor rural village to urban decadent life in Belgrade. Then, in the late eighties, Jelica Zupanc penned a play about WWI from both a female and a European perspective. Then, Zorica Jevremović was the first female playwright to discuss the relationship between politics and money in (*Oj Srbijo nigde 'lada nema*). However, in her play, politics is conducted entirely by men (the play revolves around life at the court of Prince Miloš Obrenović), and the female characters are reduced to appearances only, which is of less interest to this paper.

It is worth noting that not one of these women maintained an enduring presence in theatre. The first female playwright whose play was to achieve significant and continued success was Vida Ognjenović. Her play (*Je li bilo kneževe večere?*) is a significant contribution to the history of Serbian theatre and drama, because it was the first critique of national "mythomania" (which culminated at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties). In this criticism of national mythomania, a significant part is played by female characters. One of the more beautiful and relevant scenes takes place in the Association of Serbian Women, where they embroider handkerchiefs, tablecloths, napkins with the motifs of Serbian history, sell these handicrafts and donate the money to the Association. The first clash between those who view national myths critically and those who glorify them takes place precisely in this women's association, between the older generation who advocates myth glorification and the young ones who take issue with it. The writer wholeheartedly supports

the young and confirms their opinions in the well-known monologue by the historian Ilarion Ruvavac on the dangers of confusing national history and myth. We should emphasise that Vida Ognjenović is the first Serbian female dramatist who has continued, for decades, to write and direct her own plays on the Serbian stage, the first who has won a number of Sterija's Awards (Dramatisation, Direction and Original Play), as well as the first who actively joined the political life of the country in a way that, before her, had been characteristic only of men – intellectuals such as Čosić, Mihiz i Selenić. She is simultaneously the most successful and, in the domain of theatre, the most long-lasting female presence who came of age after WWII and prior to the war over the Yugoslav heritage during the nineties.

The question of gender and gender roles was first posed in Serbian dramaturgy in the second half of the nineties and the first half of the 2010s in Biljana Srbljanović's play *Family Stories* (*Porodične priče*) and the plays by Milena Marković *Tracks* (*Šine*) and *The Doll Ship* (*Brod za lutke*). In *Family Stories*, Biljana Srbljanović explores the connection between family hierarchy in the traditional family and violence in Serbian society. Milena Marković, in her play *Tracks*, makes the statement that, in a world marked by violence, the woman, whether educated or not, younger or older, has only one purpose – that of the *Rupica* – the name for vagina in sleng. In the play *The Doll Ship*, the authoress explored the specificities of a female artist's life in contemporary society.

With the arrival of Biljana Srbljanović and Milena Marković, female playwrights have remained a continued presence on the stage of the Sterijino Pozorje festival and regularly garner main awards. A whole group of new and promising female playwrights, such as Maja Pelević, Branislava Ilić, Olga Dimitrijević, Tanja Šljivar, Tijana Grumić, investigate various aspects of a woman's existence in contemporary society, which are: motherhood, the media enforcing the market-friendly vision of a woman, the inferior status of older women in contemporary society, the issue of gender, the relationship between the woman and the class issue... This proliferation of new topics points to the growing awareness that the role of the woman in society cannot be reduced to the three female functions *a la* Luce Irigaray – the whore, the mother and the virgin. This phase in the development of Serbian theatre overlaps with third-wave feminism. It seems that the situation is now favourable. One needs to be careful, though – the rights and freedoms, once won, may be lost again if not defended and re-affirmed.