

Aktuelles und Kommentare

To “Write as a Woman“ in Bulgaria in the 90s of the 20th Century

Milena Kirova

This paper presents the results of my studies of “Women and the Bulgarian Canon in Literature”. During the last year, I’ve been trying to understand how women are writing in a very specific situation that is at a time when the national literary Canon, due to historically specific circumstances, has nearly vanished. By “Canon” I mean a “list” of writers and poets who are considered to constitute the “high tradition” of Bulgarian literature and whose works are, as “classical” and most important, studied at schools and universities.

A good example for a time in which the Canon appears to be vanishing, is the Bulgarian literature in the 90s of the 20th century. It is true that the word “vanished” is a hyperbole. The matter in question is more adequately called a “passive” Canon in a very specific situation, a situation of profound uncertainty in the hierarchy of traditional norms and regulations, especially with respect to their ability to regulate the current literary production.

Nowadays, there is no “great literature” in Bulgaria like in former times, especially in the communist past, when the “greatness” of texts was often decided by way of ideological considerations. Today, there are no names and no texts which can unite the expectations of the critics, the pleasures of the readers, or the standards of a “Bulgarian” tradition. Of course, this is not characteristic of the Bulgarian culture only, but has to do with the so called “post-totalitarian” situation, shared by other countries in Eastern Europe and connected with the general uncertainty and ambiguity of traditional, Western, patriarchal discourses at the very end of the 20th century.

For literary criticism this is a very specific, even unique and highly gratifying situation – not much unlike the chance offered to astronomers by a full sun eclipse. It is the chance to observe the mechanics of what is happening during a “Canon eclipse”, in the twilight of tradition. Of course, it is a situation which affects Bulgarian literature in general, but here I am interested primarily in finding out what is happening with women’s literature, and actually not with all of the literature written by women but only with the kind of literature written

by women in a gender specific way, i.e. in a way which denies certain texts and writers that identify with male-constructed models of traditional ("feminine") experience in literature.

Women and the Literary Market

Before going further in this direction, let me try to present briefly the specific changes which happened on the literary market in Bulgaria after 1990. These changes constituted an appropriate socio-economic background of the new processes taking place in the sphere of "women's writing". What first disappeared was the ideologically constructed, politically directed control over the system of literary preferences or the literary "taste", as we say in Bulgarian. This "taste" broke down into "tastes", each of them going into a separate direction. As a result, the reading public also broke down into "publics" with the specific effect of totally changing the people's reading habits: people who liked to read (and their number was great) read everything they could find – from classical novels to science fiction, from James Joyce and Marcel Proust to Agatha Christie, not forgetting Mark Twain or Herman Melville who sold an enormous number of copies in a hard-cover, five-volume edition. Forbidden literature might have been read in other languages, but was not published. And if it was available from pre-communist editions, it was simply locked up in the National Library. All of Sigmund Freud, for instance, was in a special archive, and very, very few got personal permission from the Central Committee of the Party to have a look upon it. Samizdat literature also hardly existed in Bulgaria.¹

The democratization of the literary "taste" appeared first of all as a break-down of the previous patterns of taste, which was (and continues to be) accompanied by a general reduction of the very desire to read. "The" market turned into "markets" according to the specific spheres of the desire to read which also developed in the course of this break-down. And this happened even in a literal sense. The old system of all-books stores disappeared, and new places, specialized in selling a certain type of book appeared instead: stands (mainly in the streets) for foreign bestsellers, together with stands and (poorly visited) small book stores for Bulgarian literature appeared, and the academic literature went to the universities, and so on. The very word "market" which was a symptom of the "degraded bourgeois" attitude towards culture, ceased to be understood as insulting when applied to literature. And what is more, the market started to work as an invisible mechanism regulating writers and their motivation to write. A great many of those who used to write and publish during the previous decades (especially elder writers, women included) simply stopped writing because of their inability to adapt to the new (idea of the) market. The development of "market consciousness" proved to be specifically related to the creative efforts of writing women. The patriarchal cultural tradition has always mythologized "the woman" as a more primitive, more spontaneous, and more "corporeal" human being. This tradition has always been very strong, though "invisible", and it has never been critically articulated in Bulgarian literature. In poetry, for example, women were supposed to write "as women", i.e. emotionally, "sincerely" (closely identifying them-

¹ Samizdat literature are texts published by means of unprofessional methods (Xerox copies for example) and in small numbers.

selves with their lyrical subjects), romantically; and mainly about love (towards men, of course). Unfortunately, one of the most drastic changes which occurred in poetry after 1990 was the fact that pathetically romantic, "self-expressing", dramatic lyrics became perfectly unsaleable. Women (especially those over 35) who wrote poetry found themselves facing the difficult question of how to accept the idea that literature should be sold and one should "offer oneself" (one's "personal dramas") on the market and still be "a woman" (romantic and passionate according to tradition).

Writing Poetry

Now, I would like to present some of the tendencies which made the new women's writing slip away of the Canon. These tendencies also imply the solutions of the problem presented above.

Let me start by explaining that (according to a very long but rationally inexplicable tradition) poetry has always been the better part of Bulgarian literature² and usually the predominant field of experiments and modern strivings. The 90s are no exception in this respect, at least for the number of writers who were looking for a change. Since the middle of 19th century, when poetry emerged out of its close connection with the imagery of folk poetry, modern poetry in Bulgaria has preserved the tradition to express personal (lyrical) experience in symbolic images inherited from folk mythology. This is the point for women's writing, too. The first (nowadays accepted as "classical") woman poet, Elisaveta Bagryana, back in the 20s of the 20th century, expressed her desire for freedom from the patriarchal norms of femininity by identifying her lyrical heroine with the images of the *nestinarka* (a woman playing barefoot on hot embers, a relic of the female magician) and the cuckoo (a bird which doesn't make a nest or a "home"). The identifications of the "emancipatory" type have usually emerged in the sphere of traditional folk-mythological imagery.

The "new mythology" of the 90s seems to echo this tradition, while simultaneously breaking away from it. It deliberately rejects folk imagery as a mirror of traditional patriarchal identity. What comes to substitute it is a number of mythological figures which belong to the global cultural heritage: from Eurydice and Penthesilea via Dido and Phaedra to the Sleeping Beauty. There are two poets whose works are very characteristic in this respect – Miglena Nikolchina³ and Amelia Licheva⁴. In their works it is especially Penthe-

2 Like in other less sophisticated societies, modern Bulgarian literature appeared very late, in the middle of the 19th century, with no tradition of education and even literacy in the country.

3 Miglena Nikolchina, born 1955, graduated in English literature from the University of Sofia with a Ph.D. in literature from the same university and from a Canadian university. In 1985, her doctoral thesis *Mitu t za Promjetej i poetikata na anglijskija romantizim* (The Myth of Prometheus and the Poetics of English Romanticism) was published and followed by *Smisul i majtseubijstvo. Tschetjene na Wirdzinija Ulf prez Julia Krustewa* (Meaning and Matricide Reading Virginia Wolf through Julia Kristeva), Sofia 2000. Currently she is associate professor in West-European Studies at the University of Sofia and author of four books of poetry, the last two explicitly feminist: *Asimvolija* (Asymbolia), Sofia 1995 and *13 raskasa sa ljubowta I pisanjeto* (13 Stories about Love and Writing), Sofia 1999.

4 Amelia Licheva, born 1968, graduated in Bulgarian literature from the University of Sofia with a Ph.D. in

silea, queen of the Amazons, whose “royal” presence makes explicit the ambivalent situation of femininity throughout the patriarchal world (the woman-in-power against the power of the woman, or immanent femininity which is usually a lack of social power). Miglena Nikolchina is the first to introduce the theme of *sororicide*, together with the feeling of guilt accompanying it. I should add here that Bulgarian poetry until this moment hardly knew the themes and the problems arising out of the relations among women, with the exception of the attitudes (always gratitude) of the daughter towards her mother. Amelia Licheva deconstructs the image of Penthesilea keeping in place the traditional idea of the woman warrior while at the same time viewing her situation from behind, at a distance – as a situation inadequate to modern women, and at the same time as an occasion to understand the dramatic lack of female presence in modern culture.

What cannot but astonish us, is the complete lack of identification with figures of the Bible (or of Biblical origin), and also the unwillingness to make parody of and to play with biblically legitimized identities of the patriarchal world. An example for this is Virginia Zaharieva⁵. In the mid 90s, she was considered to be the most “emancipated” (even “feminist”, a label not lacking insulting connotations even nowadays in Bulgaria), the most “scandalous” woman poet, personifying anti-romantic trends in lyrical writing. Parody of traditional feminine values was an important suggestion in her early-90s book *The Hen with the Sewn Eye*. Even she, when (bravely) identifying with (the suffering of) Jesus Christ, turned very serious, losing her usual sense of irony. Reasons for this may prove to be implied in the very idea of suffering which is still very important to the paradigm of female experience, often epitomizing “the woman’s fate” in the context of traditional ideas of femininity.

Among the new phenomena of the decade we should mention also a tendency to write philosophically, with a lot of cultural erudition; a general tendency towards intellectualizing the position of the writing woman. In the tradition of Bulgarian culture, but also as a general phenomenon, the ability to write in an “impulsive”, “sensitive”, “cordial” way has always been among the greatest, “naturally born” advantages of women’s writing. It seems symptomatic that the new women writers often have an academic career. Literature for them is not any more a kind of romantic escape from the kitchen of everyday life, but just part of their total professional and social self-realization. As a logical consequence, the audience that (wants to) read this new poetry has also changed. In the years before 1990, “women’s poetry” did its best to be popular (“for the people”, as the saying went), it should be read by “all women”, and this populism was considered to be of very high value. Nowadays, the readers of the new women poets constitute a much smaller

theory of literature with her doctoral thesis *Zhenskijat glas w literaturata* (The Female Voice in Literature), Sofia 2001; assistant professor at the University of Sofia and author of three books of poetry: *Okno, wtrjencheno w ucho* (An Eye, Staring at an Ear), Sofia 1992; *Btorata Bawilonska biblioteka* (The Second Library of Babylon), Sofia 1997 and *Azbuki* (Alphabet), Sofia 2002.

5 Virginia Zaharieva, born 1959, graduated in Bulgarian studies from the University of Sofia and works as a radio journalist and editor of the popular feminist magazine “Post Scriptum”. She is the author of three books of poetry: *Kamukut, kojto ne sluschashe rekata* (The Stone Which Didn’t Listen to the River), Sofia 1989; *Kokoschkata sus zaschitoto oko* (The Hen with the Sewn Eye), Sofia 1992 and *Kadril kusno sljedobed* (Quadrille late in the Afternoon), Sofia 1996.

group, mainly people with university education, in the age group between 20 and 45. As a rule, this poetry is published only in specialized cultural newspapers and magazines and never in the mass press. As for the previous popular consumers of women's poetry, they simply ceased to exist. "The people" don't seem to read poetry any more, or some of them still read the poets of the previous decades but cannot change their "lyrical taste" and adapt to the new phenomena.

Having in mind the predominantly philological academic education of the new women poets, it is no wonder that many concepts of literary theory and philosophy have entered their poetics, and that they frequently use paraphrases, quotations, and discursive commitments – a clear-cut cosmopolitan trend. The title of the last but one book of Amelia Licheva is *The Second Library of Babylon*. It is also the title of the first poem which is somewhat of a program to the book. The lyrical character declares herself as guardian of all the books that have ever been created, a librarian of Logos itself; she is the very necessity of Logos, the personification of its presence in human civilization.

Both Amelia Licheva and Miglena Nikolchina not just write in an intellectual way. There is a very important change. Sometimes it seems to me that they write in order to live, instead of: live in order to write.

If we now go back to the tradition of Bulgarian literature, we shall find there the great thematic importance of love. Love in fact is the very foundation of the ability to write in a feminine way. Even recently, in the year 2000, the only anthology of women's poetry that has been published in Bulgaria for the last ten years, was an anthology of love poetry under the symptomatic title *100 Years of Love*. It is no wonder then that the new poets have to "deal" with love in one way or another. Christine Dimitrova,⁶ for example, simply "forgets" to write about love; Amelia Licheva codifies it in such a philosophic and intricate way that it is hard to guess whether there is any place for love in her poetry.

When speaking about love, women-poets "revolutionize" the point of view towards the traditional type of relations between men and women. They raise the priority of female experience and subvert the obligatory tradition of romantic sentimentality. Virginia Zaharieva, Sylvia Choleva, and Miglena Nikolchina literally "treat" love from the premises of sexual experience; love is anything but romantic in their poetry; it can be neurotic, depressive, also boring, and – what is most subversive from a male point of view – just one aspect of a life-consuming attitude, like food for example. Some details, unusual for women's poetry, appear: poses and circumstances of the sexual act, concrete details of body behaviour, and so on. Therefore we should say something more about the body, the male body in this case. Tradition lets woman write about the male body only from the premises of her romantic, loving attitude towards the man: she speaks pathetically about the look of his eyes, the power of his hands, and so on. The new women poets started segmenting the male body from the point of view of its sexual functionality; they started

6 Christine Dimitrova, born 1963, graduated in English Studies from the University of Sofia and is assistant professor in English at the same university. She writes poetry and short stories and works as a translator. She is the first translator of John Donne in Bulgarian, see *Anagramata (The Anagram)*, Sofia 2001 and the author of four books of poetry: *Trinadjesetoto dete na Jakov (The Thirteenth Child of Jacob)*, Sofia 1992; *Obraz pod leda (An Image Under the Ice)*, Sofia 1997; *Poprawka na talismani (Repair of Talismans)* 2000 and *Chorata s fjenelite (The People With the Lanterns)*, Sofia 2003.

calling the parts according to their physical and not psychically-metaphoric aspect of presence. I will mention an emblematic poem of Miglena Nikolchina which bears the title *18 Centimetres*. What puts even more fire to the scandal is the declaration of femininity as a point of view of the writing subject, as well as a meeting point of interest with the reader. The last of Virginia Zaharieva's books has a stamp – both on the cover and inside, in the pages – “For women only”.

This is how we come to the most important feature of the new women's poetry of the 90s: it is a kind of writing which conveys the feeling of being possessed with itself; a self-oriented realization of lyrical subjectivity, we may also say – the productive sublimation of female primary narcissism. Definitely – I don't have in mind that kind of narcissism which Freud has always attributed to women and according to which they should ever stay chained to their situation of infantile dependence upon men. I rather think of the narcissism which has always been considered “normal” of men, even as a proof of their creative capacities. In this respect, the new women's poetry turns subversive to the very basis of patriarchal experience; it is perfectly new in Bulgarian literature which lacks any serious attempts to write explicitly as gay, or as belonging to a gender minority.

Prose Writing

At last, let's turn our attention from poetry to prose writing. As I already said, poetry has always been the “easier” part of the genre economy of Bulgarian literature; there are many more poets than prose writers in the Canon. Prose seems to be a more “difficult” genre; the novel especially has always held a privileged position. It won't be a surprise, therefore, to say that women have traditionally been expected to write poetry (this has also to do with the idea of their spontaneity, “naturalness”, and so on). The Canon firmly localized women's writing in poetry, marginalized it in fiction, and never let it enter drama. This is a twofold process: there exists a general (socio-cultural) attitude towards women, and women (having internalized it) really do behave according to the rules of “their” femininity. For the last three decades before 1990, there was only one woman fiction writer, who came next to being accepted in the Canon – Vera Mutafchieva,⁷ author of historical novels (among the greatest compliments to her works was the phrase that she writes “like a man”, which was quite true). All this makes the changes in the 90s even more symptomatic and dramatic.

In the middle of the decade, the former tradition seemed to have been broken down. Women wrote some of the most interesting novels, the trend came to a peak in 2001, and still continues. Emblematic of the changes are two women writers, who made their

7 Vera Mutafchieva, born 1929, graduated in history from the University of Sofia and works as a historian of the Ottoman Empire with many scientific publications in Bulgaria and abroad. She is a very popular and prominent novel write, see *Letopis na smutnoto vreme* (Chronical of the Troubled Times), Sofia 1964; *Sluchajot Dzhem* (The Jhemme Case), Sofia 1966; *Az, Anna Komnyna* (Me, Anna of the Komnins), Sofia 1991.

appearance both during the 90s – Emilia Dvoryanova⁸ and Maria Stankova⁹. I know that when they started writing, they had a very, very vague idea of feminism as social theory and philosophy, and especially – as a practice of post-modern writing. It seems that the Bulgarian “écriture féminine” was born as a result of an immanent necessity, which is actually part of the all-European changes during the last decades of the 20th century. The Canon eclipse in our case allowed us to realize the insufficiency of the Canon itself, of the very idea of writing according to some Canon.

The first woman writer, who created strikingly post-feminist works during the 90s, is Emilia Dvoryanova. Until now she has published three novels and a long story. All of them depend upon her rich knowledge in philosophy and Christian theology; all of them demonstrate professional knowledge in art and music (she started her career as a piano player but then broke a finger). These are works which don't try to hide their desire to be intellectual, even elitist; there is nothing stranger to them than the desire to turn popular and get inscribed in the flow of mass literature which certainly did exist in the 90s (women are also among its producers; they write mainly science fiction, moralistic “psychological” novels, and some crime fiction). The works of Dvoryanova seem highly estranged from the traditions of Bulgarian national fiction-writing; they seem better inscribed in a tradition that would include Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Georges Batailles and Marguerite Duras. Even if we try to be meticulously attentive, it will be hard to detect any traces of Bulgarian folk imagery and poetics in her works. At the same time, they are highly symbolic; their symbolism comes directly from the Bible, from Greek mythology, and from knowledge of West-European, as well as Russian literary traditions.

The second writer who managed to “discover” the poetics of post-feminist writing is Maria Stankova, mainly in her first novel, *A Guide of Self-Made Murders*, and in a cycle of seven stories. Both the novel and the stories are heavily focused on a female character that is highly untypical, extravagant, extra-normal compared to the standards of “feminine” experience. All the characters merge into a single idea of femininity as something which is “un-normal” with regard to “normal” behaviour. Madness and criminality are ever present features of this femininity though they seem to epitomize what can be defined as the normal madness of common sense. Maria Stankova's female characters are always marginal, autistic, ecstatic, and rationally inexplicable. They are never infantile or neurotic – two of the most typical obligations of patriarchal women. The greatest “madness”

8 Emilia Dvoryanova, born 1958, graduated in philosophy from the University of Sofia with a Ph.D. in philosophy titled *Estetycheskata sustnost na kristijanstvoto* (The Aesthetic Essence of Christianity) 1994. After working as a high school teacher for many years, she teaches Creative Writing at the New Bulgarian University, Sofia. She is the author of three novels: *Kuschtata* (The House) 1992; *Passion Passion ili smurta na Alisa* (Passion, or the Death of Alice) 1996; *Gosposha G.* (Mistress G.) 2001, and a long story, *La Velata*, 1998.

9 Maria Stankova, born 1956, graduated from the High Musical School at Sofia and works as free-lance fiction writer and dramatist. She is the author of three novels: *Naruchnik po samoručni ubijstva* (A Guide of Self-Made Murders), Sofia 1996; *skam go m(-)rt(-)w* (I Want Him Dead), Sofia 1998 and *Katalog na duschite Po* (Catalog of the Souls Called Po), Sofia 2001.

of their behaviour seems to be exactly their self-sufficiency, the psychic comfort of the ability to live according to one's own desires.

As a conclusion, I would like to recall a legend that is very popular in Bulgarian folk poetry and widely spread over the rest of the Balkan region. It tells of a group of men who are engaged in building a church (or a bridge, or a monastery). They build it during the day, but every night the church gets destroyed all by itself. In order to finish their work, they have to make a human sacrifice so they actually build in a human being alive in the basis of the building. No need to say that the victim has to be the youngest and the prettiest among the wives of the builders. This legend is symptomatic of the way patriarchal civilization makes use of woman in order to thrive and grow. Now, at the beginning of a new millennium, the buried or built-in female body starts to speak. It proves not to be dead, neither estranged nor neurotic. It simply wants to get out and to start building by itself and without the necessity to sacrifice any other, any otherness for the sake of human civilization.