

## Forum

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### Experiencing Feminism

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#### Constructing a personal history

The present effort to write a personal history conceives the aim to construct my representation as a feminist. Where to start from? Where can be the foundation of such a construction? Does such a foundation really exist? I find one of Roland Barthes' thoughts on the perpetuation of reading as an adequate starting point for answering these questions: "Those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere."<sup>1</sup> My effort in the present text will be to try to reread my personal history in view of my attitude to gender theory and practice. In order not to "fail to reread" I will not present my personal history as a progressive record, which starts at one specific place and ends in another one. Rather, I will describe some moments that have (and are still) shaping my attitude to gender related topics. Rereading the history of my experience as a feminist requires specific arrangements of the events in my past and present life. These arrangements concern reshaping memories and facts from my family history, my studies, and my work as an assistant-professor in Bulgarian Literature at Sofia University and a fellow researcher at the university's Gender Studies Center.

I chose to begin the story of developing gender awareness by reconsidering certain relations and stories from my family history. When I return to my childhood years in my hometown Ruse, I recall curious narratives of my grandmothers and aunts about their

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1 See the quotation from Roland Barthes in: Joan Scott, *Rereading the History of Feminism*, in: *Only Paradoxes to Offer. French Feminists and the Right of Man*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998, 1–19.

times of thrive and despair, their experience of being mothers and workers, their versions of popular history, etc. It was there, in these soirees and meal times that I must have learned certain modes of behavior related to female-centered stereotypes – how to take part in a conversation, how to prepare a meal following the family recipe. Yet, exactly my memories of the life-stories of my grandmothers have evoked in me a certain sense of women’s agency. It is a sense of active and ceaseless desire for self-improvement, which intertwines in a miraculous manner with the daily care and concern for the family and for the world outside the kitchen window.

Back in 19<sup>th</sup> century, my grand-grand-grandaunt Maria Kazakova was one of the first female teachers from the time of the National Revival. To be an educated woman and a teacher required courage and strength to fight with the patriarchal stereotypes. Her favorite niece Maria – my grand-grandmother – recalls that Kazakova was a strict and accurate person who used to punish but also to encourage the pupils, exactly the way the first 19<sup>th</sup> century *daskals*<sup>2</sup> did. The granddaughter Maria also had an interesting life story. Soon after her marriage in the twenties of 20<sup>th</sup> century, she became a young widow with three small daughters. Maria had to struggle with hardship and poverty by quitting with her traditional role of a housewife and becoming an accountant at the railway factory. She was the first female worker at that factory. Maria was the bread-winner of a big family and from what I have collected about her she was “happy to get her daughters married to respectable husbands”.

Surely, these several examples do not adhere to some unwritten history of Bulgarian feminism, because neither of my relatives identified with this cause. Rather, these are narratives of personal achievements, which became parts of the imagined foundation I had constructed to solidify my feminist identity. Projecting identifications with those figures from the past is perhaps a way of forming a gendered subjectivity. “Subjectivity is also a structure that unites emotions and ideas”, said Luisa Passerini recently.<sup>3</sup> My remembrance of the stories about my foremothers contributes to the formation of a gendered subjectivity exactly through the combination between emotional investments and ideas, notions, concepts about gender and women’s history, which I have consciously used. The foundation of this “structure of emotions and ideas”, which I assume as an imagined one, is placed in the past family history.

Probably I would have never read the history of my female ancestors in such gender oriented perspective had I never studied women’s history. I reread my family history with the awareness that there is a grand historical narrative, that women’s versions of history should be heard, and that my female ancestors had something too say on that matter. In addition, my own self-reflection contributes to the story of how I experience feminism.

2 ‘Daskal’ is the most popular word for ‘teacher’ among Bulgarians in 19c. The word has Greek origin and implies respectability, honor and knowledge in the figure of the teacher at that time.

3 Luisa Passerini, Europe, Gender, Subjectivity, in: *Kultura* magazine, 14/15 (2004), 28.

## Learning to Experience Feminism

If my family history functions as the ground level of the construction of my feminist identity then another substantial level of this imagined construction is my university training. I started dealing with representations of women in the Bulgarian literary canon when I was studying literature at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. However, my academic training in the MA Program in “Gender and Culture” at Central European University, Budapest was the major influence in this direction. When I reflect on my life and study in Budapest in 1999–2000 I distinguish three arrows of influence on my future occupation as a researcher in gender studies. The first one is the knowledge I received in a very intense rhythm of studying. The second one is the climate at the university, the students and teachers in the program who intensified my desire for improvement. And last but not least, the location was influential as well – the capital of Hungary combined the atmosphere of the Habsburg Empire, memories from Socialist times, and aspirations (then) for joining the European Union.

This program was the only one in the region at the time. It aimed at introducing gender methodology and moreover it aimed at applying and testing the concepts of gender and feminism to the historic and social context of Central and Eastern Europe. This goal reflected on the organization of the program. The courses in the curriculum were related to the historic, sociological, philosophical and literary usages of these concepts. The program was multidisciplinary and that interrelatedness between disciplines led to the convergence of the interests of persons who had come from various countries and backgrounds.

My scope of interests broadened to include new historical and social perspectives. Besides my literary interests, in Budapest I learned more about the possibilities to account for women’s presence in history and the evidences for that cause. Autobiography as a self-reflective narrative and a “figure of reading”<sup>4</sup> that combined aesthetic and historical functions was my major field of research. My thesis dealt with the autobiographical writing in the narratives of two East European women – the Russian anarchist Vera Figner and the Bulgarian feminist Dimitrana Ivanova. Along with my research on the “*art of memoir*”<sup>5</sup> I practiced working with archives, collecting testimonies and interpreting self-reflective texts. Even in this presentation of myself as a feminist scholar I cannot resist interpreting my life and writing through theoretical, analytical lenses. Presumably, this account cannot be a spontaneous recollection of past events but a conceptualization of my remembering. The point of my rereading here is to achieve double perspective with interference of the voice of the interpreter in the story of the narrator. It is an experiment for me, another way to experiment with the experience of feminism.

4 The term is used by Paul de Man in: *Autobiography as Defacement*, in: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York 1979, 68.

5 Jacques Derrida, *The Art of Memoirs*, in: *Memories for Paul de Man*, New York 1989, 59.

The Central European University offered me different modes of intellectual exchange. On the one hand, the teaching methodology was completely different from what I had known from my studies in Bulgaria. Instead of the usual monotonous mode of teaching, I was encouraged to prepare and participate in game-based discussions that provoked students' competitiveness and provided for plurality. On the other hand, the intellectual exchange between students and professors was quite fruitful. All of the students were young and very ambitious persons, who came from Central or Eastern Europe. All of them belong to a generation that remembered the last years of socialism and witnessed the first decades of democracy. Certainly, the experience as well as the history of what had happened was different for everyone. All of us shared interests in the questions of women, feminism and gender, yet our opinions on the application of concepts such as "sex", "gender", "sexual difference", "feminism(s)", etc. to the regional context differed much. These similarities and differences in experience and standpoints opened space for debates and raised awareness of the existence of social groups whose peripheral position was due to their sexual, racial or ethnic difference. Another advantage of this exchange of opinions was the opportunity to meet and discuss the terminology and practice of feminism with prominent scholars in the field, coming mainly from the region, from Western Europe and from the United States. The collaborative spirit produced by the intellectual exchange between feminist scholars and students made me realize the multifaceted structure of feminist knowledge and choose a path for research for myself.

Perhaps the specific location of Budapest was impetus for discussions on the geography of concepts such as "gender", "Eastern/Western Europe" and "feminism". The place provoked various identifications with what can be called *European* – Europe from the time of the great empires, Europe, divided during the cold war, and Europe of today. I felt it as a place between the "East and the West of Europe" (or may be "the 'West' of the Eastern Europe", as many Bulgarians used to regard it long before the end of the socialist era). Living one year in the Hungarian capital made me reflect on the location of my country's own in-betweenness and the usage of the metaphor of the "crossroad" for it. As a geographic site, the crossroad was often used for historical explanation of invasions, territorial arguments and mentalities. Crossroads are reasonable explanations for the mixture of cultures and ethnicities that characterize Europe today. The definitiveness of the directions on the compass does not endure the challenge of rhetorical redistribution of territories, for example more to the West or more to the East of Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Before coming to Budapest I used to consider this image from my historical textbooks as specifically 'Bulgarian' and did not have an idea that its reproduction is so widely spread. When I started meeting scholars from 'the region' I was surprised that the image of the

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6 In the nationalistic rhetoric of 19th century Bulgaria was envisioned as a forgotten part of the Christendom. On the other hand, the ideologists of the Revival account for the contamination of the Orient to the Bulgarian mentality which hampered the intensity of the revolutionary upheaval. See Georgy Rakovski, Selected readings, vol. 2, Sofia 1983.

crossroad was exploited both in personal conversations and in public debates. I have heard persons from Poland, Turkey, Slovenia or Russia talking of their country as a place on a crossroad. The quality of in-betweenness<sup>7</sup> came out in these conversations despite the exact geographic location.

There is a constant displacement of territories on the mental maps that we create. Concepts also have stereotypical locations in these mental maps. However, the change in the context of usage can influence their meaning. I mean here specifically terms such as *feminism* and *gender* and their Eastern European and Western European spectrum of meanings. I imagine Budapest as a crossroad which allowed me to choose that path of research and try to reconsider the above mentioned concepts in different social and historical contexts. Later when I returned to Bulgaria and got a position as an assistant-professor at Sofia University, I had the possibility to apply *feminism* and *gender* in the Bulgarian academic context and see how they work.

Referring to the complex concept of *feminism* I have to take in mind that *feminism* is thought to be a Western terminological invention. The translation and application of this concept to the Bulgarian context in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (in which women had traditional subordinate role) was infiltrated with negativism and men's fear that women might forget their sexually determined place. Those women who identified with the suffragist cause were subject to mockery and disrespect.<sup>8</sup> The term did not find its rehabilitation after 1944 during the Socialist era. The main assumption at the time was that the equality was achieved in every sphere and feminist claims were not an issue any more. Feminism was considered bourgeois and the feminist identity was officially condemned. Even at present the identification with feminism is regarded with aggression and suspect. I have also acted in a defensive way when I was provoked to explain why women still have pretences when equality had been already achieved. Sometimes I try to explain the differences between feminist causes and feminisms in general, but most often I face rigidity in the conviction that feminism is outdated.

In my opinion, *gender* has a more optimistic terminological life despite the problematic translation of the term in Bulgarian, or perhaps because of it. Gender is a new concept; it does not evoke existing prejudices. Moreover, it does not discuss only women's issues but refers to the complex relationships between men and women. *Gender* is accepted as a variable such as class, race, or ethnicity; it allows much sharper social characteristic of a person.

The analytic capacity of the term is visible in its usages in the language of research projects. In the recent years a lot of non-governmental organizations and academic groups did research using gender methodology. Gender becomes an important issue when migration, geopolitical enlargement, or social politics are concerned. In addition to the work done by

7 Homi K. Bhabha, Introduction, in: *The Location of Culture*, London/New York 1995, 4.

8 See the biography of Dimitrana Ivanova in: Krassimira Daskalova. *The Women's Movement in Bulgaria in a Life Story*, in: *Women's History Review*, 13, 1 (2004), 91–103.

gender activists from NGOs, a lot of research has been done in the academia on the historical, philosophical, political and literary questions concerning women and gender. Gender activists and academics did collaborate in various gender programs and projects in Bulgaria. A good example for this cooperation is the assistance we as a research team from the Gender Studies Centre at Sofia University had when we participated in an international project on gender and governance.<sup>9</sup> Some of the most active NGOs in the field, such as Gender Project for Bulgaria, Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation and Center for Women's Studies and Politics provided data and gave opinion on the presence of women in power since 1989. Another premise for cooperation between Bulgarian academics and gender activist is the fact that a number of NGOs representatives apply and study in the MA program at the Gender Studies Centre.

### Projecting feminism onto professional history

I keep gathering observations about *feminism* and *gender* in my work as a researcher at the Gender Studies Centre at Sofia University. Taking part in international research projects enhances my knowledge and expertise in gender-related problems. The main advantage of this kind of work is the possibility to analyze the ways in which gender functions in social practice. From a broader perspective, it is a way to learn and receive an update of the present state of certain gender-oriented problems in each country in Europe. It increases the possibility to distinguish similarities but also differences between European countries and opens space for new axes of cooperation and new constellations of research groups.

In this respect, it was very important for me to participate in an international research project on marriage and migration of women who have migrated from Bulgaria or Hungary, to Italy or the Netherlands.<sup>10</sup> The aim of the research team was to identify new forms of subjectivity that are part of the contemporary history of Europe. The research assumed migrants to be active subjects, creating possibilities and taking decisions in their own lives, as well as being subject to legal and political regulation. The observations on women's self-reflexivity and the changes in their legal, marital and social status were based on more than hundred testimonies of migrants and native women. The testimonies both of migrant and native women confirm the central role of human mobility in the redefinition of relations between Eastern and Western Europe in post-1989 period. Mobility and migration between the East and the West bring about a wide variety of social, political, economic, cul-

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9 European Commission Fifth Framework Funded Project, Enlargement, Gender and Governance: The Civic and Political Participation and Representation of Women in the EU Candidate Countries (EGG), contract No. HPSE-CT-2002-000115. Project coordinator: Yvonne Galligan, Queen's University, Belfast.

10 European Commission Fifth Framework Funded Project, Gender Relationships in Europe at the Turn of the Millenium: Women as Subjects in Migration and Marriage (GRINE), Contact No. HPSE-CT-2001-00087. Project coordinator: Luisa Passerini, European University Institute, Florence, Italy.

tural exchanges; they also give rise to new transnational forms of subjectivity that emerge in Europe today.

I consider the experience of traveling and searching for respondents – Bulgarian women who migrated to Italy and the Netherlands – as quite valuable, because it helped me to develop a certain notion of feminist agency. I was actively in search of women's voices, and approached critically the recorded material which contained women's efforts to create their personal history. The interviewees became very relaxed as soon as they realized that my whole point was to let them represent themselves in the way they wished to. They felt free to situate their life and actions in those moments of their life-story, which they found most appropriate. The women were encouraged to reread their own personal history from a present perspective and articulate the attitude to their families, their workplace, their past and their future in the country of migration. The stories of migration and marriage created a map of imaginary routs, based on the personal histories of these interviewees. That map was a way to envision "The Other Bulgaria"<sup>11</sup> – the imaginary space of Bulgarians abroad.

These journeys inspired me to clarify my own sense of belonging, to formulate my own "spatial story".<sup>12</sup> The most attractive topic/*topos* for research in this land of "other Bulgaria" was the intercultural relationships between the East European migrant women and their West European partners. I tried to combine literary, gender and philosophical competences on the question of the *topos* of love in the interviews of the migrant women. I approached the concept of love through the philosophical tradition of Plato and regarded love as "a mediator of experience".<sup>13</sup> My thesis was that the reformulation of this experience in a story reveals forms of self-reflexivity in women who migrate and "marry out of love" (which was quite often the answer I got from east European women married to Italian or Dutch men).

In my present research, I am still interested in accounts of traveling, love and spatial distribution of emotional investments, but in another literary and social context. Returning to my major sphere of interest – Bulgarian literature of 19<sup>th</sup> century – I am doing a research on women's voices and women's spaces in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bulgarian literature. It is a difficult field of research inasmuch as it concerns authentic women's voices in the male-dominated Bulgarian literary canon. In the time of its formation – the time of Bulgarian National Revival in 19<sup>th</sup> century – the canon was getting more and more rigid of the possibility of including women in it. In the absence of women-authors, I try to analyze the presence of fictional women-of-letters and the ideological mechanisms of creation of female characters in the literary production of 19<sup>th</sup> century. I also work on travelers' accounts

11 The initial use of the notion "The Other Bulgaria" was discussed in the book: Elena Stelova et al. eds., *The Other Bulgaria. Documents of the Organizations of Bulgarian Political Emigration 1944–1989*, Sofia 2000.

12 Michel de Certeau, *Spatial Stories*, in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 2002, 173.

13 Plato, *The Symposium*, translated by Walter Hamilton, London 1971, 45f see also Luce Irigaray, *A Reading Of Plato, Symposium, "Diotima's Speech"*, in: *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, London 1993.

on the position of women and men and the distribution of power and dominance in the private sphere. I deal with questions of privacy, of closeness and exposure, when it comes to fictional spaces and relations between characters. In my dissertation, I explore similarities and differences in the images of harems and monasteries in Bulgarian literature of 19<sup>th</sup> century. My hypothesis concerns the influence which space and institution have on the notion of love, as it appears in some literary examples from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In contrast with the image of the harem as an imaginary space of orientalist love, Bulgarian literature reproduces the harem as a space of hostility, hatred and pernicious passions. The fictitious space of the monastery receives similar connotations, when the Bulgarian authors reproach critically the institution of the church. I keep searching the *topos* of love, especially in those literary texts where there are dynamic changes in the level of exposure of the spaces of harems and monasteries.

So far in my text I have mentioned several spheres of research that I find significant for the formation and sustainability of my feminist identity. At the beginning, I denied the possibility to describe my life as a progressive record of events. However, when I revealed moments from my family history, my studies and my work that had influenced my identification with feminism and gender, I was constantly tempted to seek causality in my professional choices and decisions. I analyze my effort to bring together and discuss subsequently different subjects of research as a chance to rationalize my choice to deal with gender-related topics. Moreover, this convergence of research topics can be interpreted as my wish to insert causality in this autobiographical text. In order to become a narrative my self-history had to come to terms with causality. Yet, its analytic parts hampered the smoothness of a regular biography. My rereading of my own experience with feminism as an ideology and social practice gradually became a new experience in this direction.