

## Reimagining the Female Continent in Contemporary Serbian Literature

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### Abstract

The article focuses on the quest of the female continent, the founding of female Utopia and the recurring figure of female Christ (or Messiana) in the Serbian women's writing of the nineties. Judita Šalgo and Mirjana Novaković construct their respective plots and characters so as to present a possible Herland – Utopia founded by women - once designed in the writing of Charlotte Perkins Gillman. The motif of the territory which offers protection to women from hostility of all kinds springs from the wish to escape postcommunist contrarities by establishing a mythical hiding place which offers oblivion rather than revolution.

The paper starts with an introduction into contemporary Serbian fiction, which outlines three narrative strategies: postmodern textual play, rewriting history, and obsessive confession. The common interest of all the writers, however, lies in the reinvention of reality: Radoslav Petković, Dragan Velikić, Mileta Prodanović, Sreten Ugričić and David Albahari manipulate facts and fiction in different ways, exploring the blurry border between the two, and the result of this playful trespassing is metafiction packed with actual events from either recent or remote history, that offers a plausible redefinition of a world confused with rejecting the totalitarian past and embracing a promised future of capitalist consumerism.

Unlike their male counterparts, Serbian women writers explore the pursuit of happiness as a way to define priorities of a marginalized Other. Mirjana Novaković and Judita Šalgo either twist master narratives or reinvent intimate stories in order to escape preestablished designs imposed by the male-oriented literary canon which advocates the superiority of men by relegating women's stories and histories to dark and hidden places.

**Keywords:** *gender, Serbian literature, women writing, history*

### Contemporary Serbian Fiction: Reimagining History

Contemporary Serbian fiction could be described as an intersection of three narrative strategies. The techniques we regularly encounter in novels and stories by Serbian authors could be defined as:

- postmodern textual play (a concept relegated to the margins of critical evaluation, mostly used in the juvenile works by David Albahari and Sreten Ugričić but later abandoned);

- an attempt at the rewriting of history (resulting in some truly astonishing achievements, such as critically acclaimed novels by Radoslav Petković, Judita Šalgo and Mirjana Novaković, or in short stories by Mileta Prodanović, but regularly abused by writers of lesser value and dumbed down to reproducing national stereotypes);

- obsessive confession (Mirjana Novaković and Judita Šalgo have been most successful at using confessional techniques to depict the condition of the postcommunist Everywoman, whereas Dragan Velikić widely exploits memories and personal experiences in the process of character building).

The common interest of contemporary Serbian writers, however, lies in the reinvention of reality. They manipulate facts and fiction in a variety of ways, exploring the blurry border between the real world and the territories of imagination, playfully trespassing into a metafiction, which is packed with actual events from either recent or remote history with the aim to offer a plausible redefinition of a world confused with rejecting the totalitarian past and embracing a promised future of capitalist consumerism.

In his novels *Destiny, Annotated* (*Sudbina and komentari*, 1993) and *The Perfect Remembrance of Death* (*Savršeno sećanje na smrt*, 2008; French translation *Souvenir parfait de la mort* was released in 2010) Radoslav Petković explores the ways wars, revolutions and unrests shape up social and personal histories. The author twists and turns some lesser known historical facts so as to induce unexpected encounters of literary heroes and historical personages. For instance, in Petković's latest novel the Irish poet William Butler Yeats materializes within a crumbling world of the 14th century Constantinople as a revelation to a young man whose meddling with magic will force him to take refuge in priesthood and to find rescue in the form of the newly acquired identity: the nameless, immature and inexperienced practitioner of magic will grow to be the priest named Philarion. Since the authorities frown upon practical magic, even when its purpose would be to protect Constantinople from the impending Ottoman invasion, embracing religion will necessarily become Philarion's narrow escape of death. However, even as a dutiful monk, this young man will affront magic yet again, owing to his mysterious tutor Gemistos, a philosopher and wizard from Mistra. Abounding in mysticism, philosophy and juicy historical tidbits, *The Perfect Remembrance of Death* is both an esoteric thriller and an adventurous travelogue, as well as a bildungsroman of an enchanter.

In Petković's previous novel *Destiny, Annotated*, which received all Serbian literary awards, more recent history is used as a material to be subverted. The narrative is underpinned by a consistent current of irony and the narrator uses every opportunity to appeal to the reader by using generic statements drawing on a commonality of experience. Petković's history takes on a cyclical form instead of the more common linear conception, with historic events relegated to the margins of the narrative and turned into a backdrop against which the personal histories and private turmoils of the two main protagonists are presented. The first two sections of the novel deal with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Trieste, and the third-person narrator whose identity remains unknown to the reader focuses our attention on Russian naval officer Pavel Volkov, who desperately tries to navigate his way among various national and religious communities of Trieste against the backdrop of the impending Napoleon's invasion of the city, unable to resist to the charm of the wife of a prominent Serbian merchant, Katarina Riznić, a fatal beauty who manipulates him both politically and sexually. The third section of *Destiny, Annotated* deals with the Budapest in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: this part of the book is written in the form of autobiographical notes taken by historian Pavle Vuković, in which he describes his doomed relationship with Márta Kovács and his visit to Budapest during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. Pavle is a Serbian intellectual who

unwittingly got caught amid the 1956 revolution in Budapest, his destiny intersecting with the eventful life of his ancestor and namesake, a 19<sup>th</sup> century officer who had been entangled into stratagems and schemes of some seemingly benevolent people around him. Petković's multilayered, intricate narratives which engage in deconstructing history are packed with both irony and suspense, having earned him a huge critical acclaim in Serbia and abroad, as his novels have been translated into Hungarian, French, German, Greek and Bulgarian so far.

On the other hand, Dragan Velikić has been warmly received in the German-speaking countries with his novels which mostly deal with personal quest for identity amid the turbulent scene of the South-east Europe. Inclined to investigate personal histories hidden behind the walls of European cities from the Mediterranean to the Central Europe, Velikić is deeply concerned with exile as the condition of the modern man, particularly the postcommunist man, who lost the illusion of sharing the dream of capitalism even before he dared to embrace it. Thus, his character Rudi Stupar from the much praised novel *The Russian Window* (*Ruski prozor*, 2007) travels from his hometown Szabadka further to the north in order to invent a new life unburdened with ethnic animosities and war conflicts. Rudi wants to escape the historical overdose which is imminent in his homeland Serbia, and he wants to break the magic circle of constant living in between wars or political crises. First Rudi successfully resettles in Budapest, until the city turns into a "Serbian Casablanca" with the flow of Serbian expatriates who have escaped the NATO air strikes in the spring of 1999. Velikić is at his best when he casts his elaborate sketches of the cities from Pola to Hamburg, which get to be much more than a mere backdrop to the characters' identity crises. His heroes are confident but dissatisfied lonely men who try to come to terms with their historical, cultural and intimate legacies, looking for their idols and friends among the figures of prominent artists who set the example of successful reconciliation of love, ambition and faith. The sacredness of art replaces the nightmare of belonging to the dreary world of postcommunism.

The inclination toward both the political and the fantastic can be observed in the fictional opus of Sreten Ugričić, which is positioned in between political allegory and a modern fairy tale with the element of the uncanny. As elsewhere, the intrusion of fantastic elements begins with the character's perception of reality as monstrous and perverted. Thus in his latest novel, *To the Unknown Hero* (*Neznanom junaku*, 2010), Ugričić skillfully combines the burning issue of Kosovo with dystopia and fable, turning the Serbia of the year 2014 into a bleak country packed with terror and ignorance, corruption and unrest, and the only free media in such a dismal place is confined to – telepathy. The love story in such a dystopic world imminently ends in tears and tragedy, but even the much used convention of star-crossed lovers leads to an unexpected twist: the lovers die of gas poisoning after spending only one night together, before they have managed to become the principal narrative concern of the plot. Ugričić boldly uses history and politics as deconstructed metaphors in order to show that they suffocate love and life in general: an inscription on the wall, saying "Serbia; it'll kill ya", turns from a simple reality bite into a concept of menace, which overflows the world of the novel. The all-pervading existential fear does not stem from political threats only: Ugričić surpasses the paradigms of postcommunism, entering the realm of the postapocalyptic world.

David Albahari records the existential confusion imposed on the displaced self and reflected in the linguistic fallacy. He has reinvented his fiction after having moved to Canada in the nineties, focusing upon a quest for faith, language and identity within a historical tapestry which is difficult to comprehend. Unlike Petković, who offers an elaborate historical background, Albahari is focused on his character's claustrophobic world of intimate dilemmas. The narrator of the novel *Bait* (*Mamac*, 1996) virtually fled his homeland, burdened with political unrests, to Canada, the promised land which, however, turns out to be not altogether hostile, but unsettlingly indifferent, not dangerous, but dangerously unable to tolerate the introspection and self-isolation of an expatriate who is trying to solve the puzzle of the identity, the history, the language and the erratic codes of his homeland. Canada has thus turned into a dismal colonizing force, into an estranged utopia whose slowness and simplicity are dreamlike, but also frightening and unnatural.

The motives of communication and confession are best related in *Bait*, Albahari's best novel on exile, memory and inheritance. Its plot revolves around the audio tapes, brought to Canada from the Former Yugoslavia, containing the personal history of the narrator's mother. Her voice is heard speaking in Serbian, his mother tongue, "across time and outside of life"<sup>1</sup>, equalled to an urn containing ashes and to a substitute to reality. For this woman, "history had been a fact, a mallet that with inexorable precision had come down on her"<sup>2</sup>: born in Bosnia, she got married in Zagreb to a communist Jew from an Ashkenazi family, and converted to Judaism at the beginning of the Second World War. In order to escape the Holocaust, the family moved from Zagreb to Belgrade, but the father was sent to a concentration camp and killed. Upon her return to Serbia, the narrator's mother has to represent herself as an Orthodox Serb again in order to save the lives of her children, and her manipulations with her identity go on. "I never stopped being a Serb, nor did I renounce the Jewish faith then. In war, life is a document. What was written on the paper, and on all my papers, still said that I was a Serb"<sup>3</sup>. At first forced to change her identity because, as a non-Jew and a symbolical intermarital threat to the survival of Judaism, she "did not exist" for her husband's family, the narrator's mother had to revert to the "old", abandoned identity which suddenly provided her with an existence in the historical context.

All the identities in the Balkans thus seem to be tragically inconvenient, unstable and subject to change, adopted and renounced, lost and found. The impossibility of self-identification in the Balkans seems to be as absurd as the postmodern transfigurations of identity: the narrator's mother was born shortly before the fall of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy and saw the birth of a new country, which first became the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (1918), then The Kingdom of Yugoslavia (1929), only to – shortly after World War II – turn into the National Federative Yugoslavia, and then the Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia that fell apart in the 1990s. These changes denied the possibility of the formation of a fixed identity, and the result of dismal social-political discourse was disintegration of the private self. In the case of the identification of the Balkans the playfulness and experimental potential of the postmodern identities are irretrievably lost to a dismal threat of social exclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> David Albahari, *Bait* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Albahari, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Albahari, 28.

Mileta Prodanović's collection of stories *Agnus Dei* (Agnec, 2009) revolves around the motives of miracle and penance, using transition as an emblematic condition of either the nation as a whole or the pursuit of an individual. Loaded with irony and grotesque, the stories reflect shallow and careless attitudes of the transitional age by their style which reminds of anecdotes or newspaper sketches, delivered in the colloquial and jovial tone of an objective, yet bemused reporter. For instance, the story "Patriotism" tells of a religious order "Mary Magdalene", whose duty is to provide sexual gratification to the soldiers in the First World War. On the other hand, fantasy, religion and parody are blended so as to stress the absurd elements in the world of today. Thus the story "Agnus Dei" tells of a miracle which occurs where it is mostly needed, amid crude material concerns. The narrator is a transitional businessman who made money on recruiting beggars, only to find out one day that his pack of paupers has inexplicably turned into a flock of sheep. Moral and religious hypocrisy results in a mixture of satire and catharsis after having provoked miracles of all sorts: either circus animals all of a sudden blurt out the startling testimony of the Second World War ethnic atrocities committed in a small Vojvodinian village, or an elderly lady literally grows the new generation of "homo machiavellicus" from plain tomato sauce. Hypocrisy, greed and blasphemy are frequent motives in the novels of Mileta Prodanović as well, such is the case with *Collection* (*Kolekcija*, 2006), whose plot joins art history with criminal records, and postmodern experiment with newspaper scandals, in order to investigate the dangerous mystery of a collection of silver gone missing.

## The Female Utopia

Both playful and confessional, either twisting the master narratives or sticking to intimate stories, Serbian women writers, unlike their male counterparts, all set to explore the pursuit of happiness along with its various, unexpected consequences. The postcommunism meant the death of the idea of "collective good", as well as it brought the awareness that there is no common goal to be sought. The introduction of individual growth and building personal priorities in life that came along with capitalism settled with the gender advocacy of women's non-restrained development, introduced by virtually all women writers.

Serbian literature contains an unexpected variety of women's voices: some of its most remarkable women writers are Mirjana Novaković and Judita Šalgo, whose novels and stories deal with the field of themes including maternal body, matrilineal heritage and women's clashes with an oppressive society. Although they have never publicly sided with the feminist movement, some of their plots and characters can take us back to the feminist texts such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland*, and the belatedly acclaimed *The Yellow Wallpaper*. There are several women novelists who offer compelling visions of the female continent, and all are based upon the revision of the past. Instead of distilling historical truths, they rather choose to invent parallel, unacknowledged realities. Serbian women writers engage in imagining either a self-contained community of women, working on the patterns taken from popular genres (Novaković) or mix psychoanalysis with postcommunist heritage in order to devise a feminine Utopia (Šalgo).

Judita Šalgo's posthumous, unfinished novel entitled *A Voyage to Birobijan* (1997) attempts at creating a "gospel according to women" and launching an investigation of a female Utopia. Her female Christ figure named Messiana has a most unusual flock of followers who spread the word about a Utopian refuge for all the weak and defeated:

Messiana's advent was announced and foretold [...] by prostitutes, single mothers, women swollen with venereal diseases and tuberculosis, illegitimate children and orphans, pregnant underage girls, by women and children from the streets, as well as women and children bought and sold to Balkan brothels and Turkish harems. Some of those women through whom the advent of the Egyptian woman was announced remembered a peculiar traveller, a German woman who visited brothels and boarding houses, asked questions and initiated conversations<sup>4</sup>.

The "German woman" is Freud's former patient Bertha Papenheim, whom Šalgo borrows from the psychoanalyst's opus in order to create a catalyst for the plot of her novel. What at first seemed to be a field project investigating the position of socially deprived Balkan women, turns into a gothic quest for the female continent. Bertha is both confused and encouraged by the tribe of destitute, pregnant and ailing women who rant about the promised land of plenty and the advent of a female goddess, while experiencing the cruellest procedures in hospitals and prisons.

This strange lot suffers from a strange side-effect of their therapy called "syphilitic messianism". A Hungarian expert for venereal diseases has his own explanation of the symptom: he tells Bertha that

prostitutes, especially the syphilitic ones, believe that they are chosen to save the world. Or, at least, the female part of it. You see, the fact that you do not have to die the most horrible death right away, the fact that you can postpone it for a while and escape the worst, has perplexed these poor women.<sup>5</sup>

Miss A., Bertha's companion, has her own opinion of the matter: "If Messiah had been a woman, she would have had probably arrived by now. The coming of the man grants them with syphilis, illegitimate children, poverty and death."<sup>6</sup> The male and female interpreters of the symptom both recognize the expectations of the raving tribe. What the destitute women desperately need to postpone the tragic demise is both the divine miracle and the divine justice.

The search for the feminine continent is associated both with syphilis and hysteria, the latter taken to be a poor substitute for the adventure: "While travelling around the world in their ships, men discover new worlds. Woman's uterus can, if it does not give birth, detach itself from the intestines and sadly roam in the world of the body."<sup>7</sup> The uterus "which is *afraid of the fetus and escaping it* roams and distracts body and soul,

<sup>4</sup> Judita Šalgo, *Put u Birobidžan* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture), 66-67. Translation mine.

<sup>5</sup> Šalgo, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Šalgo, 85.

<sup>7</sup> Šalgo, 105.

the brains, brings disturbance, revolt and fear.”<sup>8</sup> Bertha feels the same way: “she feels like a uterus wandering through the body. Hysteria as an evil, unhealthy substitute for pregnancy, for the childbirth. Hysteria as an alternative, an unsuccessful substitute.”<sup>9</sup> Hysteria is thus a missing effect, a signal that women’s growth is aborted or unfinished.

Faced with both the reiterated references to the female exile and her own inexplicable emotional turmoil, Bertha comes up with her own idea of the Herland: “If women are not allowed their rights and a complete life here where they are, they should *travel somewhere*. They can establish the world of their own, a state in which things will be properly placed from the very beginning.” Bertha identifies the feminine continent with the typical female symbols, the moon and the water: “Instead of the masculine SUN CITY, they will found the CITY OF THE MOON [...] the city of the water”<sup>10</sup>. The clear reference to Moore’s *Utopia* suggests that the female world should be a dynamic contrast to the male vision of paradise.

Šalgo adds a touch of complicity to the concept of the female Saviour, since the tribe of the deprived needs union, patience and perseverance in silently awaiting their kingdom, but also the utmost secrecy and strict confidentiality. Their creed is cherished not only by the sick and the destitute, but also harboured in the unconscious. For no matter how ardently Bertha desires to give voice to the rejects of the society, she, along with the author, also wants to articulate the female unconsciousness. Šalgo’s 1987 novel *Skid Marks* is also a study of the unconscious inspired by Freud, centred around two Jewish sisters who are, as most Šalgo’s characters, greater than life and yet lesser than it. Freud’s history of the unconscious, being at the same time a story, thus turns into a relevant literary topic. Freud’s theory is taken by Šalgo as a legitimate imagination’s territory: therefore she reads his case studies as if they were a literary text, using them both as a source of information and invention. The structure of *A Voyage to Birobijan* resembles the work or the unconscious: the narrative holds against the dominant motives of an unknown country, the female Savior, the weak and the sick.

It is worth noting that the Utopian vision of the Female continent stems from the Jewish myth of the undiscovered country, since Birobijan is at times termed “a spare homeland”<sup>11</sup>. Still, the promised female land also becomes associated with bedlam, due to the fact that women’s visions and reveries are seen as side effects of insanity, since they contradict societal male-oriented values. In a mock picaresque manner, *A Voyage to Birobijan* tackles the issue of physical abuse and sex trafficking, offering miraculous escape instead of eternal suffering. This unfinished novel is also an intimate story of a social worker who appeases her own fears of mental illness and death by helping the women in need. The curious mixture of complicity, obsession and religious mission makes this mysterious quest for a land of Cockaigne unparalleled in Serbian literature.

Critics such as Elaine Showalter avoid concepts of female imagination, preferring to observe the ways the self-awareness of the woman writer translates itself into a literary form and to trace this self-awareness within the tradition. Judith Fetterley’s book *The Resisting Reader* (1978) discusses mental confusion of the “immasculated” woman reader, forced to identify against herself with male characters, whose essential experience is betrayal by the female, and forced to see women characters scapegoated

<sup>8</sup> Šalgo, 105.

<sup>9</sup> Šalgo, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Šalgo, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Šalgo, 63.

and killed off. The initiative, choice and action may not be ubiquitous features of female character, but it is worth looking for them.

Mirjana Novaković's *Fear and Servant* is undoubtedly one of the most popular and, with its seven printings, the best sold Serbian novels in the last decade. It is probably the first page turner in recent literature supplied with a rich referential frame containing ancient and modern history, political allusions and witty parodies of authors and styles from Emily Dickinson to Thomas Pynchon. *Fear and Servant* is a happy union of transparent style and multilayered narrative with a great number of elusive characters and motives combining comic, satiric and apocalyptic. The novel is easy to read and to follow, yet difficult to decode with its multitude of historical personage, fictitious characters, archetypal forces and even politicians of today. However, *Fear and Servant* is impossible to grasp without turning back to one of its author's first publications.

Mirjana Novaković's *The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman* (1996) is a bleak and sarcastic Utopian narrative about a society which advocates equality at the cost of identity loss. The community described in this novella seems to be an unimaginable crossing between a severely criticized capitalist society and an equally vilified totalitarian state. The story is set in a nameless city formerly known as Belgrade, in the year 2000, where people are forbidden to use personal and proper names, but obliged to undergo plastic surgery and genetic modification. The bleak community dubbed Open Society also advocates the dissolution of family ties: the citizens are expected to live happily in self-sufficiency and detachment, without friends and relatives. The openness mentioned in the name suggests gradual closing down of all possibilities of individual growth.

Such an allegedly egalitarian society turns education into the worst nightmare of the academia: students can press charges against the professors who set high standards; equipped with the handy arm-joint computers, young people are encouraged to pursue a daily routine of much play and little work, and they bask in bliss and oblivion induced by the drug called "hyperextasythree" at the "rage" parties. The motives of intellectual laziness, listlessness and overindulgence obviously aim at criticizing a culture of uniformity which subdues individuals without offering an alternative, but also hints at the apathy induced in the Serbian "lost generation" of the nineties, which was encouraged to follow cheap thrills and false ideals, to take the lack of future perspective for granted and to reject career building in favour of chasing the pipe dream of the so called Great Serbia.

During a short nap in the classroom, the narrator hears a voice announcing that "the one who calls Her name will become thirsty"<sup>12</sup>. Thirst is an inverted parallel of the Biblical motive: while the followers of Jesus Christ never get thirsty again after having tasted his creed, his female counterpart aims at causing eternal thirst. This Messiana works miracles and walks on water just like Christ does, but otherwise is an epitome of human imperfection.

Unlike the Christians, the followers of Her cult are not meant to be peaceful and content once they have found their religion. The Female Christ can be seen by her followers, but is never really present: She is either a voice coming from afar or a gentle immaterial touch. She assumes the shape of a plain looking girl in ragged clothes,

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<sup>12</sup> Mirjana Novaković, *Dunavski apokrifi* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska), 51. Translation mine.



wearing glasses. Unlike the citizens of the Open Society, their goddess has never been subjected to either genetic modification or plastic surgery. The narrator pities Her for being “so tragically ruined before her life even begun”, not being able to understand “that there is someone who has less, who is worse off, doomed to inherit all of her parents’ inadequacies”<sup>13</sup>. This lament over a scapegoat is the narrator’s first human emotion: she blames an unsuccessful genetic modification for this outburst of feelings, but her emotional awakening shows how the influence of the societal values gradually weakens. For instance, the narrator stops using the hyperextasythree at approximately the same time: thus her resistance to the Utopian rules becomes resolute.

The emotional revelation induced by the thirsty tribe helps the heroine recover her childhood memories and come to terms with her spiritual growth. However, she needs to take one step at a time. In the society of the nameless, the awakening must start with knowing your own name and sharing it with others. The heroine is shocked when one of the thirsty women introduces herself:

She told me her name! No one has ever told me his or her name before. I have never been that close to anyone. I have never believed the rumours saying that some people revealed their names to the others. Supposedly, when you love someone very much, and that person loves you too, the two of you can introduce yourselves to each other. But nobody I knew has ever experienced that. The rumours spread, and that’s about it.<sup>14</sup>

The narrator herself will need some time and many a traumatic experience to reveal her own name. Her transformation will take a more turbulent course than she, or the reader, expected. She will even become a traitor, a sort of turncoat who abandons her goddess and her creed. However, she will turn a Judas only to serve as a better Peter to her Christ: this becomes evident after she has faced the grim prosecutors called the Human Rights Representatives. This all-male death squad almost manages to extinguish the tribe of the thirsty, but their creed persists, owing to Catherine. We learn her name at the very end, when her wrestling the demons within and without earned her the privilege to spread the word of the Thirsty Woman. Instead of committing suicide after she betrayed her goddess, Catherine decides to live and tell: “It seems it makes no sense to take a leave without leaving an explanation or a message behind.”<sup>15</sup> The story that follows is the one we have been listening at all along, both a fable and a testimony.

The Open Society serves as a metaphor of the oppression against women and their feminine gospel: while breaking family bonds, eradicating marriage, advocating rational thinking and an unnatural equality, this Orwellesque world also attempts at erasing gender differences. Thus the female construct of love, compassion and commitment has to work in secret, through imperfect individuals struggling to make the world safe for all the differences.

Mirjana Novaković inserts complex cultural and political issues into the frame of an either realistic or fantastic plot, telling her elaborate tales in a seemingly casual, jovial style. *Fear and Servant* is a paradox in itself: it is both a page-turner and a complex experimental novel with a rich referential frame. Set in 18<sup>th</sup> century in

<sup>13</sup> Novaković, *Dunavski apokrif*, 59.

<sup>14</sup> Novaković, *Dunavski apokrif*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Novaković, *Dunavski apokrif*, 48.

Belgrade under Austrian administration, the narrative revolves around historical facts such as the 1725 arrival of the commission from Vienna to investigate vampires in Serbia. Allegedly, after the death of Petar Blagojević in the Serbian village Kiseljevo, several peasants claimed in their dying moments that late Petar was coming to them during the night to drink their blood. After the commission and the local priest had exhumed Petar's body, stabbed it with a hawthorn stake and burned it, the report about the arch vampire was sent to Belgrade and Vienna. Mirjana Novaković uses this trivial event as a trigger for her novel.

*Fear and Servant* narrates two versions of the hunt for vampires: the *his-story* and the *her-story*, the former told by the Devil himself, under the assumed name of Otto von Hausburg, and the latter comes from Maria Augusta, Princess of Thurn und Taxis, wife to regent of Serbia. The Satan desperately needs to know if the vampires are real, or just a figment of public imagination. If the vampires are real, that means that the Last Judgment is approaching, and that the dead have risen to mark the ultimate defeat of the forces of darkness. Joined like Mulder and Scully and in much the same way drawn to each other, the princess and the devil set off on a vampire hunt in order to investigate the case, but also to redefine their beliefs and priorities. They are both foreigners in a country they perceive as uncivilized, but the very lack of civilization will affect them in much the same way Joseph Conrad's Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness* was provoked by the Congo wilderness to explore the dark side of the European spirit.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Belgrade, at the end of the brief Austro-Hungarian rule whose good outcomes will shortly be erased by Turks reclaiming Serbia without much effort owing to the betrayal, Otto von Hausburg and Princess Maria Augusta Thurn und Taxis will embark on the same adventure, pursued for different reasons, eager to spin their respective stories and resolve their respective conflicts. The Satan is worried that the Judgement Day might have come if the dead have risen for real, whereas Alexander von Wirttemberg, Regent of Serbia, uses the investigation to cover up his treason, unaware that his wife pines away after his love, and that her ambitions are far from politics or plotting – or so it seems to the reader ready to take her words at face value. Whether they admit to be the part of it or not, the conspiracy is a powerful weapon of all the participants of the vampire hunt, an effective exit strategy for all sorts of problems and a cunning disguise of betrayal and cheat. For instance, the flow of refugees coming from Niš by the end of the novel are officially proclaimed vampires so that they could be denied help and assistance. Vampires are blamed for all the wrongdoing in the novel, but they are never more than a rumour, or an excuse to commit atrocities. With the intention to use fantastic motives for political purposes, Novaković needs to establish the vampire as the main force of the political: it is more likely to be a trigger or a pretext, while the real evil lies elsewhere, mostly in the mind of those who seem to prosecute evil.

Far from being the proud Master of Hell, Von Hausburg still makes a great first impression: he is handsome, polite and educated, well-bred, cynical and self-centred as a nobleman is expected to be, but very soon he proves to be an unthinkable coward. Displaying many human traits but only a few remotely demonic characteristics, this Satan turns into a bitter parody of manhood as conceived by traditional masculinity types.

Irony and parody are carefully invested into the characterization of Otto von Hausburg, since Mirjana Novaković deliberately constructs him as an inverted parallel

to the famous demonic figures ranging from Milton's Satan to Bronte's Heathcliff. Being proud and easy to scare, he is at the same time prone to succumb to charms of fallen women such as Mary Magdalene and quick to sneer at love and devotion. Whenever he is afraid, he smells of brimstone, he recites the lyrics of "Sympathy for the Devil" by Rollingstones, drinks beer and smokes hashish. He constantly mocks Christian doctrine, exposing it as a clever and vile manipulation.

Social scientists Deborah David and Robert Brannon elaborated the following four rules for establishing masculinity which were widely referred to at the beginnings of the sociological research of socially constructed masculine sexuality. As we shall see, all of them come in handy when we attempt at revealing the true Otto von Hausburg. The first rule calls for "*No Sissy Stuff*": this means that anything that even remotely hints of femininity is prohibited to the real man. Throughout the book, Von Hausburg often displays fear and weakness, frailty disguised by garrulousness, as well as inability to face the adversity. Whenever he is overwhelmed with fear, he starts giving off the smell of brimstone. Von Hausburg uses his weakness and cowardice as his weapon even when he is truly ashamed of them.

The second rule, requiring the man to "*Be a Big Wheel*", implies that masculinity is measured by success, power, and the admiration of others. Von Hausburg is shown as painfully aware of his unsuccessful attempts to gain love of God, Jesus and Mary Magdalene as he tells several anecdotes of his failures and defeats. Never loved, worshipped or respected the way he desired to be, Von Hausburg can only take revenge on the mankind and by manipulating several characters in the novel prove as a big wheel, or a big problem.

The third rule obliges a man to "*Be a Sturdy Oak*": manliness requires rationality, toughness, and self-reliance, all of which Von Hausburg lacks, being quite irresponsible, petty and totally unheroic. According to the rules of a patriarchal culture, a proper man must remain calm in any situation, show no emotion, and admit no weakness, and that is exactly what he fails in every single time, whether confronted with angry hajduks, or cheating a beggar girl out of her money.

The last rule David and Brannon named, interestingly and ironically enough, demands the proper man to "*Give 'em Hell*": men must exude an aura of daring and aggression, and must be willing to take risks, to "go for it" even when reason and fear suggest otherwise<sup>16</sup>. Although spiteful, envious and determined to act like a villain, Von Hausburg is regularly incapable of giving hell to anyone and he usually harms only himself. The important part of his character is effeminacy and he seems to be the picture perfect "failed man" in terms of social stigma imposed upon the gay men before their masculinity was recognized by small circles in social sciences.

Von Hausburg is utterly cynical with the use of language as with practicing religion: he hates travelling at the very *crack* of dawn, he hates dawn and "whatever crack it crawls out of."<sup>17</sup> He contemplates about the idiom "talking nineteen to the dozen": "Why nineteen, I've always wondered; why not eighteen, or twenty, or even my old favourite, thirteen."<sup>18</sup> Hausburg might well wonder about the origin of idioms but he is the one who, powerful in his solitude, produces meaning and advocates the discord

<sup>16</sup> Martin P. Levin, ed, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of The Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press), 145

<sup>17</sup> Mirjana Novaković, *Fear and Servant* (Belgrade: Geopoetika), 13.

<sup>18</sup> Novaković, *Fear and Servant*, 25.

between opposed and irreconcilable parties. Although he lies, invents stories and cheats, the Devil is an allegorical principle of critical reinvention of the truth. Refusing to accept God as the ultimate ruler and possessor of truth, the Prince of Darkness advocates suspicion and resistance. His ironical examination of myth, history, epic literature and moral code signals a refusal to be a blinded follower of the divine principle, but it marks also the rebellion against rules and hierarchy.

Telling an adventurous gothic story of a search for vampires in 18<sup>th</sup> century Serbia, the novel of Mirjana Novaković exposes political manipulation and struggle for power. *Fear and Servant* offers a multilayered encyclopaedic narrative which is almost impossible to find in contemporary Serbian literature: mixing horror with politics and mystery with history, this novel becomes a truly postmodern recount of politics and religion. The reader is offered the devil's version of the New Testament, and a parody of dogma, as well as a comic apocalypse and an apocryphal recount of Belgrade's history. Utopia and the reimagined female continent are the things the Serbian women writers made their characters look for: the society containing no man, and none of the problems their rule imposes.

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## Reimaginându-ne continentul feminității în literatura sârbă contemporană

Articolul se concentrează asupra căutării continentului feminității, formarea Utopiei feminine și imaginea figurii christice (sau mesianice) feminine în literatură anilor '90 din Serbia. Judita Šalgo și Mirjana Novaković își construiesc intriga și personajele în așa fel încât să prezinte o posibilă Herlandă - Utopia formată de femei – așa cum fusese ea desemnată în scrierile lui Charlotte Perkins Gillman. Motivul teritoriului care oferă protecție femeii împotriva ostilității de orice tip izvorăște din dorința de a scăpa de contrarietățile de orice tip, prin crearea unui spațiu mitic care oferă mi degrabă uitare decât revoluție.

Articolul pornește de la o introducere în proza sârbă contemporană, care subliniază trei strategii narative: jocul textual postmodern, rescrierea istoriei și confesiunea obsesivă. Interesul comun al tuturor scriitorilor este reinventarea realității: Radoslav Petković, Dragan Velikić, Mileta Prodanović, Sreten Ugričić și David Albahari manipulează faptele și ficțiunea în moduri diferite, explorând granița neclară dintre cele două, iar rezultatul acestei încălcări de frontiere este metaficțiunea plină de evenimente reale din istoria fie mai depărtată, fie mai apropiată, care oferă o redefinire mai plauzibilă a lumii care se confundă cu respingerea trecutului totalitar și îmbrățișarea unui viitor al consumerismului capitalist.

Spre deosebire de scriitorii de sex masculin, scriitoarele sârbe explorează goana după fericire ca modalitate de a-și defini prioritățile unei ipseități marginalizate. Mirjana Novaković și Judita Šalgo fie împletesc narațiunile principale, fie reinventează povestiri intime care să le dea posibilitatea să evadeze din proiecțiile prestabilite de canonul literar de tip patriarhal, care pledează pentru superioritatea bărbaților prin exilarea prozei și istoriei feminine în spații întunecate sau ascunse.