

Milena KIROVA

**Women's Literature and the Canon.
How to Write History of Women's Literature Today?**

Abstract

The paper opens by briefly outlining the development of women's literature in the ex-„East European“ countries since 1989. Then it turns to feminist literary theory tracking two different periods of its reception by, and adaption to, literary criticism in post-communist academic research. The concepts of women's generations and women's literary canon, vital for the western tradition of gynocriticism, are closely analyzed in line with their relevance to present-day women's literature in post-communist culture. The paper closes by outlining a threefold model of the prospective to speak of women's literature imbedded in, or in counter stance to, the traditional literary canon.

Keywords: women's literature; women's literary canon; female writing; Bulgarian literature; alternative canon; feminist criticism.

Резюме

Статията проследява навлизането на теоретичния феминизъм в България през 90-те години на 20 век – отначало като доминиращо влияние на френската школа, наречена *gynesis*, след това, вече в началото на новия век, като преобладаваща ориентация към англоезичната традиция на гине критиката. Изтеглени са паралели с други балкански литератури, изведени са някои проблеми на възможността да се обособи самостоятелна история на литературата, създадена от жени. След като очертава в най-общи линии явлението „женско писане“ от втората половина на 90-те години, изследването се фокусира върху отношенията между „женската литература“ и канона. В последната част на статията е разработен въпросът за онези подходи, които биха създали алтернатива на традиционната, андроцентрично ориентирана и йерархично структурирана литературна история. Представени са три модела на „женска“ литературна история – и трите с техните предимства, но и с техните недостатъци.

Ключови думи: литературен феминизъм; женско писане; история на женската литература в България; жените и канонът в литературата.

In the final year of the 20th century, Elaine Showalter, one of the pioneers of feminist criticism during the 1970s, summarized the state of British women's writing in a text published in *The Guardian*. Contesting the perception of Orange prize judge Lola Young that contemporary British women's fiction is „insular“, „parochial“ and „piddling“, Showalter articulated a daring hypothesis:

It may also be that as we reach the millennium, British women's writing may be coming to the end of its history as a separate and distinct 'literature of its own'. The self-consciousness that is the legacy of two decades of feminist literary criticism has made British women's writing self-reflexive in a new way. Now, every book is written in the shadow of feminist theory as well as Jane Austen, and in the consciousness of such female themes, metaphors, and iconographies as the mother tongue, embroidery, cookery, eating disorders, sisterhood, madwomen in the attic, lesbian eroticism and mother-daughter attachment (Showalter 1999).

Showalter's words appear prominent yet again when coupled with a popular claim by Lisa Jardine, an eminent professor in Renaissance studies at the University of London: "Women are now writing counter-current novels that run against the grain of the tradition, and they can do that anywhere. Women are always outside the canon – so that where they write geographically doesn't really matter."¹

The vision drawn by Showalter and Jardine is unabashedly utopian. It may even be said to be flattering, bearing in mind that a considerable part of British women's fiction of the 1990s, at least that portion which boasts some success in terms of salability, belongs to the genre of the chick lit. More intriguing to former „East European” countries appears to be the claim, that women – wherever they may be at any one point – seem to be somewhat „naturally” predisposed to write „against the grain of the tradition”, which places them (as a group), „outside the canon”. In addition to the fact that this claim is essentialist and mythological by nature even within the ambience of the end of the 20th century, it falls into stark dissonance with the literary practice of women in contemporary culture, especially during the first fifteen years in the new century. Literature, created by women in the countries of the former Communist bloc, on the other hand, has established itself in ways (and in that it is marked by specific features) which disallow its unproblematic referring to some kind of globalized, or even just Europeanized, model of „contemporary women's literature”. This is the reason why, in my attempt to dwell on the relations between women and the canon – I shall delimit my observations solely within the literature of these countries; at the centre of my study I should like to place that literature which I know most intimately: Bulgarian literature, whilst I shall also be providing examples from other „East European” literatures.

On the whole, the ideas of feminist literary scholarship broke into the culture of communist countries after 1989². Despite the sporadic appearance of some information, the idea of women's literature could not possibly exist in the climate of communist ideology, because the opposition male-female had been invalidated by the ideas of class antagonism (bourgeois women against working-class women), on the one hand, and of class solidarity, on the other.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the ideas of women's literature and women's writing arrived and took hold in Eastern Europe in a paradoxical way, which, eventually and yet again, dismantled the Marxist thesis that a social theory could get rooted only when there are economic conditions mature enough as well as a well developed class-bearer³. In a total lack of a feminist movement and social

¹ As quoted by Elaine Showalter in the text in hand published in *The Guardian* (Showalter 1999).

² Certainly, there have been a few exceptions, like Serbia, for instance, where the appearance of feminist ideas dates back to 1978 (see Дойчинова-Нешич 2004: 171), whilst in Poland, in 1981, there appeared a translation of the article „Is female to male as nature is to culture” by Sherry Ortner.

³ In fact, the arrival of Marxism in Bulgaria dates back precisely a century earlier, similar to the feminism of the end of the 20th century and in denial of its own theory. In a state with a feebly developed industry, strongly dependent on its

activity in support of women's rights, the avant-garde theories and schools of post-structuralist feminism emerged on the literary scene with the glamour and the attraction of Western humanities scholarship of the end of the 20th century. During the 1990s, feminism got easily inscribed in the common panorama of a striving to catch up with the decades missed, to compensate for major lacks, to establish the commencement of a tradition which would serve as an alternative to that built on the props of Marxist-Leninist ideology. At that, the most appealing, the most unique turned out to be the French school, oriented towards Lacanian neo-Freudism and the post-structuralist philosophy of authors such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. This was the time when the ideas of *l'écriture féminine*, as well as of the uniqueness of female experience and the fluid eroticism of the female body, entered the academic area by the laws of cultural transfer and they turned into an indispensable and indivisible part of the common efforts to revive and change the academic thought of educated people of those countries which, until very recently, had been termed communist.

In concord with (the spirit, rather than the writings, of) the new theories, literary works written by women in novel ways started to appear. Logically enough, the new authoresses of the 1990s were predominantly academics or, at the very least, proved to have been related, in one way or another, to the intellectual avant-garde. I am far from categorizing them as „copyists” of the ideas of Western theories about women that had been in circulation for the past thirty years; it was not uncommon for them to have been entirely unfamiliar with those ideas, or at the most, they might have been only vaguely and fragmentarily aware of recent new translations of relevant works. Literary feminism was part of the modernist climate of the 1990s: it was, generally speaking, inseparable from the ideas of psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and post-structuralism. The need for it was part of a larger need for a quick and radical turn towards the new (the newest, if possible), the foreign, the anti-dogmatic. This may account for the delay in the translation of seminal works from the Anglophone feminist theory, as well as for the paradox of literary feminism without (translation of) pioneering, in terms of feminist philosophy, works such as those produced by Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir, for instance.

One more thing. Poetry and prose created by women went apart in their development. The works of innovative poetesses surged on the wave of post-modernism, and to a great extent paid tribute to its general and specific features in respect of subject matter and poetics. The most curious thing (in Bulgaria, at least) was the need of poetesses such as Kristin Dimitrova, Mirela Ivanova, Silvia Choleva, Miglena Nikolchina, Amelia Licheva and Virginia Zaharieva, to follow (in one way or another) the

agriculture, in an almost complete lack of a working class, Marxism took on and got rooted through the faith and efforts of the young generation of Bulgarian intellectuals, including those who were to become – several years later – the first modernists in Bulgarian literature.

fashion wave of post-modernism, whilst at the same time making up for (in the case of Nikolchina and Licheva in a way conscientious and conceptually well-wrought, whilst in other cases – more akin to the effect of a rebellion against tradition and restrictions) the generic lack of awareness of female identity and female sensitivity, whose growth had been an outstanding task of feminism since early modernism. Thus, modernism and post-modernism occurred concurrently within Bulgarian women's poetry during the 1990s. It is hard to say where exactly the boundary between these two phenomena passes, which poetical collection belongs to one or the other, and which one may „simply” be perceived as fashionable in terms of the dominating trend of the end-of-century moods.

In prose fiction, however, „female thinking” occurred in an anthological manner. All of a sudden, as if from nowhere, prefaced by no previous tradition, in the midst of the 1990s, there surged a wave of female novels and in this case, female does not simply mean written by women. I mean, in particular, texts with an alternative sensitivity; these texts – like the ancient Pallas Athena – appeared completely wrought out, clad in the ideas of the French *écriture féminine*. To begin with, there was Emilia Dvoryanova's *Passion или смъртта на Алиса* (“Passion or the Death of Alice”, 1995), *La Velata* (1998), and *Госпожа Г.* (“Mrs. G.”, 2001); shortly after that appeared Maria Stankova's cycle of novellas on female madness in *Искам го мъртъв* (“I Want Him Dead”, 1998) and Kerana Angelova's *Зана. Папазини* (“Zana. Papazini”, 1998) and *Елада Пиньо и времето* (“Elada Pignio and the Time”, 2003); there also came out Teodora Dimova's *Емине* (“Emine”, 2001) and Albena Stambolova's *Това е както става* (“Everything Happens as It Does”, 2002). And all this occurred during slightly more than half a decade. Women writers seemed to have been seized by some kind of feverish intensity as they portrayed the female literary self in writing, some incidentally mastered rhetoric of the other was felt as discovered in qualities like carnality, vitality, sensitivity, the fluid erotic of psychosomatic experience; their language was full of hints, puns, cultural associations. Heroines of unconventional, transgressive character emerged – free to cross the borders between the daily routine/the norm and madness, crime, abnormality – prompted by the inner urge of their own private experience.

At first, literary critics demonstrated a dose of resistance, or rather, astonishment, or perhaps some anxiety. Yet the 1990s was a time marked by a desire to change, so that anything different appeared appealing, everything daring was part of an attempt to break free from the detestable past of ideological dogmas. At that, the newly sprung women writers proved unexpectedly good, whilst their books ranked amidst the most successful ones in Bulgarian prose fiction at the time. And somewhat unnoticeably, gradually (if the duration of a decade may allow one to speak of „gradation” in historical terms) the canon-centered thinking of part of the critical guild began to crack, it opened niches, cleared

space to accommodate these women writers who eventually obtained their own territory in the idea of „high” and „modern” contemporary literature. The end of the 20th century felt to be the moment when the operative canon⁴ demonstrated the highest degree of readiness to accept and let in the alternative of some „female writing.”

Women’s work (especially prose fiction) manifested, in addition, a strong tendency and an immense potential of self-reflective perusal and insight in terms of expressing this impulsively attained dissimilarity. I am not in a position to support this statement by providing concrete examples from all ‘East European’ countries, yet, I daresay, it is valid for all of them. Under the influence of feminist philosophy and literary theory, related to French structuralism (especially authors such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) the 1990’s succeeded in showing (and, to some extent, fostering), chiefly amidst academics and progressively minded intellectuals, a sense of autonomous difference in the work of writing women. In literary theory, this decade shall remain as the time of intellectual upheaval, of variety and vividness in the panorama of ideas, or carnival festivity and a feverish longing to make up for, at one go, all that which had been missed, including certain ‘Western’ metamorphoses in the behaviour/frame of thought of ‘the second sex’.

With the advent of the new century, the joy and festive exultation quickly started to withdraw. What got clearly distinguished was the „gradually” budding up until then neo-traditionalist moods and directions, also present in the work of women themselves. Part of them chose to be ‘popular’, i.e. mass women writers (of crime fiction and fantasy novels, of mystery thrillers and books in imitation of Dan Brown’s), and this, precisely, was what automatically imparted to their work the clichéd gender rhetoric, typically meeting the needs of mass public readership. At this moment one may be tempted to believe that former ‘East European’ women writers might have reached the achievements of British women’s writing of the 1990s (as that described by Showalter). Yet it must be clearly explained that the trend for women’s novels at the beginning of the 21st century has not been down to a desire for some kind of emancipation of female thinking and behaviour, not even of the variety we have come across in Anglo-American chick lit. It is no incident that the genre of chick lit itself, despite its categorical market success in Western countries, has failed to get firmly established ‘in the East’, where popularity, regrettably enough, is measured primarily by the revitalization of conservative

⁴ With the phrase operative canon I endeavour to denote that constellation of books (and authors), which get rewarded by the greatest volume of attention and the highest respect during the first years following upon their publication. This evaluation is formed „on the move” under the influence of a variety of factors which have impact on public space, for instance the opinion of operative criticism; the prizes awarded at literary competitions; their appearance in the various media, not least on the Internet; the approval of the public readership expressed in a book’s large total print; the publishers’ efforts to organize advertising campaigns, and last but certainly not least, an author’s personal skill of organizing self-promotion. The presence of one work/writer in the operative canon does not necessarily or reciprocally guarantee presence in the „real” canon; in fact, a very limited number of representatives of the former „canon” gain a place in the latter.

gender stereotypes⁵. At this point, perhaps more than ever, we feel the lack of a feminist movement during the second half of the 20th century.

And what actually happened to the rebel women writers from the 1990s? In a nutshell, what happened was what happens to any generation of rebels: after the inebriation with the upheaval and the new each of those authoresses took her own path. Amidst their choices at the beginning of the 21st century there dominates social prose fiction, not all that seldom interspersed with criminal subject plots (Maria Stankova, Elena Aleksieva) or with didactic Christian messages (Teodora Dimova). Women's writing still persists with two authoresses: Emilia Dvoryanova and Kerana Angelova; with these authoresses it gets consolidated within a characteristic type of presence which boasts moderate popularity amidst a constant circle of readers. Women's writing in terms of poetry, on the other hand, seems to have dissipated within a wide spectrum of poetries to the extent of it becoming impossible to draw certain common, gender specific, features in the lyrical self's behaviour and perception.

Independent of our personal likes and dislikes, we have to admit that the idea of a gender sensitive operative canon failed to materialize with the advent of the new century. In contrast to the promising tendencies of the 1990s, women writers of today – especially those who are awarded prizes and enjoy greater recognition – avoid identifying in public as subjects of an alternative female consciousness. The literary field, on the whole, gets re-traditionalized; the opportunity of winning prizes and recognition seems conversely reciprocal to the willingness to reveal alternative ('female') sensitivity. (In fact, it was this very tendency that affected other alternative manifestations of cultural democracy, for instance the modest commencement of gay literature, set towards the end of the 1990s through to the very first years of the new century). Nowadays, the mass public readership, as well as the blogs and committees (which obviously tend to include popular writers and non-academic critics) award prizes/recognition to those women writers who demonstrate an ability to write in a genderless way, that is, from the covert perspective of the male gaze), or to those who identify with traditional models of female identity.

As if striving to resist conservatism and gender unification in literary writing, literary scholarship has displayed certain curious processes. These processes appear common for scholarship in the area of the humanities in all 'East European' countries⁶. With the abatement of the enthusiasm

⁵And as ever, there are to be encountered but few exceptions, which intertwine, in an intriguing manner, the emancipative perceptions of the 1990s with the tendency for popularity in the next generation. In Bulgaria, for instance, we have only one typical relevant example of a chick lit novel and that is *Да преминеш по сенчестата пътека* ("By the Shady Path", 2013) by Boryana Hristova (professor of Old Bulgarian literature and director of the National Library).

⁶ The particular examples I can provide come from the history of feminist-minded literary criticism on the Balkans. On what happens in Macedonia see Boyadzhievska (Бояджиевска 2004: 77–79); on analogous processes in Serbia see: Doychinovich -Nešić (Дойчинович-Нешич 2004: 174).

for feminist avant-garde there followed the time for the maturation of literary-historical assessment. In order to be able to form a relatively wholesome national tradition of women's writing academic women scholars recognized the need for a background, i.e. beginnings, roots and continuity in the work of women writers. They thus aimed back in at least two respects. To begin with, back to the literary past of their own countries, to what has and/or has not been written about women in it, to the task of re-considering and revising the national literary canon from a female point of view. If I were to paraphrase a well-known metaphor by Elaine Showalter, then I would have to say that the lost continent of female tradition should have emerged from the sea of literary history, as should Atlantis. It is hard to overestimate the abundance of opportunities, which sprung up after this direction was evaluated. Within a period of twenty years there formed (in each of these countries, without a single exception) a core of established women scholars who summoned up their potential to research particular women writers or more generic phenomena in women's literary history. These cores started to attract – and this is very obviously an ongoing process still – MA and PhD women students, as well as young women academics who would conscientiously relate their academic practice to the study of the history of literature created by women. There can be sensed a vehement striving for discovering and promoting the founding mothers, there has formed a string of symbolic generations of women writers, female paradigms of experience get identified, modes of female presence get categorized. In this respect, I believe we are justified to speak of a scholarly research tradition with an established if not even an irreversible, character.

The literary–historical turn ushered in the Anglo-American school into feminist criticism and this caused a reversal of the traditional paradigm, which used to maintain women's studies. To the fore came the model which Elaine Showalter chose to term gynocriticism. Unlike the philosophical and psychoanalytic research of the French Avant-garde (gynesis, following the same typology) we are hereby faced with an effort not so much to write in a female way (and this concerns also philosophy and literary studies), as to write about women who write literature. Gynocriticism possesses a clearly defined historical orientation, it strives to rescue from oblivion, to sort out and popularize, the names/work of women writers, its ultimate aim is to systematize a certain female tradition, which exists parallel to the „male”, or to official literary history, and one which contains and develops, at the same time, its own „feminine” features.

Every time I remember the enthusiasm, the thrill of intimation, which characterized our embrace of the (by that time somewhat shabby) ideas and methodologies of post-structuralism and post-modernism, the way we deconstructed tradition, examined the 'eternal' truths, and then I jump into the next decade – with its historical rationalism, neo-conservatism and its return to the need for

‘props’ – I tend to reach the conclusion that the nature of human thought is marked by an ineradicable essentialist impulse, that it cyclically retrieves and reproduces the need to cognize the world within well distinguished, unambiguously termed, defined by their ‘essence’ (preferably ‘eternal’ and ‘universal’) categories and concepts. The opportunity of re-writing the canon, or even establishing a novel, alternative ‘female canon’ has attracted even authoresses who would never describe themselves as feminist, and in the academic environment it has won certain male contributions. ‘The female cause’ – though still provoking condescension and scorn – is ‘essential’ for it relates to the natural division of the two sexes. It can be grasped (by both men and women) and selected as (because being still un-researched and in this sense productive) a field of academic realization. Rather different appears to be the case of gender problems and of the gender dependence of literary writing. After the departure of the 20th century, when the attempt to adopt the opposition sex-gender found itself amidst our general desire to be modern, nowadays gender theory is getting progressively marginalized and distinguished amidst a group of feminist women scholars, it appears even somewhat redundant against the background of the avalanche of constantly emerging social problems.

And so, at present, in the midst of the second decade of the 21st century, ‘East European’ cultures appear to have matured so that they can perceive and even, to a certain extent (unique in each country) adopt the idea that we are in need of revision of the traditional literary canon and that an alternative⁷ variant can be constructed with the purpose of amending historical injustice. The advantages of gynocritical practice appear undeniable: university students demonstrate willingness to attend lectures in the history of literature created by women; new vistas for PhD and advanced, habilitation, academic studies arise; previously undiscovered ingredients of the cultural past get revealed; the names of worthy women resurrect... The construction of a female canon albeit chiefly directed at the past, draws a frame within which there could be accommodated, arranged and explained the otherwise haphazard attempts of some contemporary women writers to write ‘in a female manner’. The molding of a methodology of research and an apparatus of conceptualization also enhances the recognition and stimulation of ‘female’ deeds in the future.

And yet – despite all its advantages and virtues – the situation is ambivalent as it engenders numerous reasons for us to be cautious in our evaluation. I shall now try and name at least some of these reasons – the way I see them.

The idea of an alternative canon hides the implicit creed that literature must necessarily be considered in terms of the need for a canon. We may be cajoled to believe that the semantic accent

⁷ ‘Alternative’ in this case, regrettably enough, implies nuances such as ‘second-rate’ and ‘compromised’.

falls onto the first element of the phrase (alternative canon) but actually, it is much more a question of an alternative canon, or of a desire to reproduce – in a novel way and from a new position of authority – the old system of rules of hierarchical value. The struggle for a new canon (be that an ‘alternative’ one) is in fact a struggle for symbolic power and social prestige. Once formed, the female canon shall suppress and marginalize a considerable number of phenomena of women’s literature itself for reasons to do with ethnicity, class belonging, or religion. Thus, the premature statement that femininity *per se* carries an alternative charge exhausts and disempowers itself through practice itself trapped in the old and familiar patriarchal game. I should like to provide a specific example from Bulgarian literary studies; it is not directly related to the issue of gender and femininity yet it seems a suitable illustration of the hazards to do with the opportunity of constructing a new canon.

During the past several years, very much owing to the efforts of a core of ambitious and diligent research scholars, the perception was established, and the practice of an „alternative canon” developed, striving to correct the historical injustice, caused by the ideology of communism prior to 1989. This canon takes out of the real (the one that did happen in its own time) literary process the names of those (about ten in all) authors who, according to the popularizers of this idea, deserve to be granted the highest mark for their combination of talent and minimal conformism. Ostensibly just and democratic, this manner of making literary history is truly, deeply and unavoidably teleological: it turns the finale of a historical era into a criterion for the evaluation of that which actually did occur in its duration. The communist ideology has simply been replaced by a new, historically profitable (not so authoritarian, yet clearly one striving to get institutionalized) ideology. The new choice reproduces one of the most typical tasks of criticism of the totalitarian age – to name which is important and which is not as well as to orchestrate and rule over the literary tastes of readers perceived as a monolithic group. In the long run, the ‘democratic’ alternative canon demonstrates above all else the predetermined preferences of its own authors. No wonder, therefore, that in this canon there are to be found only poets – and amidst them – only one woman.

The very early attempts to reconstruct the ‘male’ canon so as to construct a new (‘female’) one in the mid-1970s were connected with the ideas of pioneering mothers, of matriarchs, of female generations and primaeval ties of female experience, of even ‘female blood’, which could be defined as more lasting and deeper than any relationships of social nature whatsoever. The fact that these concepts have been forged as a social reflection of already established concepts of patriarchal culture itself signals a covert danger. We immediately become aware of their mythological character; they are all rooted in that paradigm of mythological experience, which Mircea Eliade defined as ‘the myth of eternal return’. Not at all coincidentally, Julia Kristeva defined ‘the time of women’ as mythological,

referring it to a pre-lingual, pre-logical state of being which she chose to term 'chora'. The problem is that what may indeed appear captivating in the field of philosophical essayism should not be imported literally into the practice of historical research because there emerges something that may be referred to as 'a contradiction by methodological definition'. The striving for the construction of a female canon based on 'great mothers', 'female generations' and 'female blood' contains a tendency to de-historicize the content of what has been included in this canon. This leads to severing the ties which might have been topical at the time of the creative act so that these ties are ascribed a new, teleologically born, context of cognition and consideration.

Let us focus on the concrete example of the idea of female generations within a particular national literature. This idea feels rather daring in terms of the canon yet appealing in its alterity, because of which it soon got popularized even in the former 'East European' countries⁸. Behind the immediate use of this idea, there lurks the practice of referring the experience of real women with specific problems, and whose life has been conditioned by definite historical circumstances, to a category, which tends to unify and align. The term generation is a slippery one, especially when applied in a metaphorical way, as is the case here, for it deceives one into considering the individual and the specific for each authoress above all else through the prism of the (im)possibility of it being crammed into the model of certain resemblances shared by one or several inter-related generations. Transformed into methodological practice, this term effaces that part of personal experience, which confronts the common and the typical for a sequence of women, and eventually starts producing collective subjects of female identity and female experience.

The idea of female generations, amidst other things, renounces the historical nature of female tradition that it actually describes; it represses the ability of female tradition to get engendered, raised by (and consequently become representative of) the national/European/world tendencies in the culture of a given era. Albeit inhabitants of the 21st century, we find ourselves hurled back, towards the frame of thinking typical of the end of the 19th – beginning of the 20th century. Back then, the father of modern sociology, the generally speaking free-thinking and liberated from the philosophical mainstreaming of his age, Georg Simmel defined the 'woman's character' as *primaeval*, closely related to nature, conservative, unalterable and unable to experience those changes which could bear modernity in the European world, and therefore unlikely to produce art outside the housekeeping-aesthetic practices in a traditional world.

⁸ In Bulgarian literary criticism, it is best explicated in Miglena Nikolchina's book *Born Out of the Head. Subject Plots and Subject Themes in Female Literary History* – see Николчина 2002).

What happens in gynocriticism is not all that unique to literary studies – rather it is situated within the wider framework of feminist methodology which encompasses other social sciences and the humanities. Let us take the example of anthropology: as early as the beginning of the 1970s a tendency developed for women to research still unnoticed/uninvestigated by that time features of female being and mentality. This has brought about the discovery of new phenomena and has initiated a surge in the development of anthropology itself. At the same time, however, the practice of women writing about women hides unforeseen and previously unknown risks. Literary-critical attempts to work out a female canon are threatened by the very same risks for in this case, too, women constitute more than 90% of the authors. These risks arise from the fact that writing about women turns into female practice and this itself essentializes – in terms of sexual and gender belonging – both literary studies and literature as an object of research⁹. The national literary canon ceases being perceived as an entity, it now looks composed of two different and even oppositional canons: male and female. At first glance, it appears that a break-through in the *status quo* has been achieved, yet this breakthrough, especially if conducted in a more decisive manner, could lead, in totalitarian countries, to the marginalization of the construct which can therefore be now perceived as ‘a second canon’, this may well also lead to the ghettoization of studies dedicated to it as ‘female business’.

It is no surprise that nowadays – impulsively sensing this danger – the majority of women writers feverishly reject the opportunity of their work being defined by the label ‘women’s writing’ (to say nothing of the ‘accusation’ of feminism). I should like to emphasize, yet again, that the one-time lack of female social activity and respectively of gender sensitivity in post-totalitarian societies is like a time bomb capable of inducing unexpected and unforeseen reactions.

When we put together all the problems I have so far outlined (and there are some others which this particular research study chose to leave aside), it will turn out to be the case that feminist literary criticism nowadays dwells in a situation furnished with many traps (some of them unique to the culture of former ‘East European’ countries). The only right way ahead, it seems to me, cuts through the necessity of discovering, expressing and debating on the dangers, which make the methodological field of feminist criticism so slippery and unreliable. As for ‘East European’ criticism, it appears, it has once

⁹ It was as early as the 1990s that Serbian feminist Žarana Papić started asking herself whether feminist women anthropologists of the preceding two decades „may not have in fact interiorized and repeated this very asymmetrical dualism of the two sexes which they have so savagely criticized” (Papić 1993: 118). The British anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has formulated problems even more precisely. If we were to support the practice of women anthropologists committing themselves to studying the lives of other women, then that would mean, in effect, a division of the object of research itself which has often been defined as female subculture (see Strathern 1981: 669). On the level of methodology there gets legitimized the assumption that between women scholars and their object of research there exists a ‘natural’ bond based on the very fact that they are women (see Mohanty 1995).

again found itself in the paradoxical position of considering the outcome and the aftermath of phenomena which we cannot guarantee when, or whether at all, will happen.

At the end of my text, I should like to delineate and summarize three models within which feminist criticism in former 'East European' countries has started to develop. Despite the fact that I present these models separately, I should like to point out that they occur in simultaneity, though in various configurations according to the degree of the manifestation of the significance of one model or another.

In the first model there dominates the desire to discover and pinpoint those lacks in a national literary history¹⁰, which have to do with the presence and the work of women writers. Criticism reads the history of literature created by women parallel to official literary history and it indicates those places where particular authors and works should be present, though they are not to be found there, they have been denied right of access for one reason or another (in relation to social, historical or gender belonging). In a nutshell, I am talking about the cause to reinstate women, if not exactly into the canon, then at least in the visible expanse of national literary history, rearranging, retrospectively, this history's dented and disfigured wholeness. The methodology of this model is the most moderate and the least ambitious one; without irritating the *status quo*, the women followers of this model humbly and gradually accumulate knowledge, driven by the Hegelian faith that the quantity may well turn into quality.

According to the second model, the already existing canon practically remains intact in its most popular shape – a memorial of a (patriarchal) age. Yet parallel to that there is constructed a second (alternative) canon which accommodates and arranges only women writers. I believe I have already discussed at length the advantages and the perils of this model so I intend to immediately focus on the third one.

What I mean is a bold and radical strategy, which dissolves not only 'the masculine', or the androcentric, in the experience gained so far, but it actually blurs the boundary itself between male and female, significant and insignificant, centre and periphery. That is, the precise possibility of rejecting the canon *per se* as authoritarian practice which annoys our perception of literature and discriminates against one certain range of phenomena in favour of another; the possibility of rejecting the legitimacy of the literary canon as an institution with a centrocratic, monophonic and authoritarian character. However, we may not be entirely sure what shall come to supplant it. Wouldn't it be the

¹⁰ I deliberately avoid speaking of a canon because it is there that tradition has been guarded most watchfully through a system of institutions so that the effectuation of alterations in the canon is immeasurably hard, not to say impossible, unless academic practice couples with political activity in the public space.

case that the lack of a traditional canon could really affect/undermine the historical study of literature? Every answer in this direction could only ever be hypothetical. I believe it is possible to replace the canon with a liberal constellation of independent centres of the idea of significance: centres marked by a varied thematic, genre, ideological etc. orientation. This shall destroy the authoritarian character of the traditional canon and shall recover the natural pluralism of the processes within which every literature happens. This approach shall work out a polytopic and polyphonic non-canon. Thus, there shall come the time for ‘women’s literature’ to not need any longer to fight for the right to gain a place in some traditional system of measures of value¹¹. Naturally, such an approach seems still utopian, and that is the case not only in ‘East European’ countries. Neither is there any certainty as to the fact that the development of culture in the next decades shall follow a direction which shall facilitate the need for this canon to exist; we may not be sure whether the avalanche of class, ethnic and religious conflicts shall corrode, or alternatively, shall strengthen, traditionalist views of culture created by women. This, however, does not automatically mean that it is pointless to work against the old literary canon, or even towards something that we are still powerless to name. The least we can do is cultivate the need for it in the way we think of literature written by women.

Literature

Mohanty, Candra Talpade. 1995. Feminist encounters: Locating the politics of experience. In: Nicholson, Linda and Steven Seidman (eds.) *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 68-85.

Papić, Ž. 1993. Novija feministička kritika patrijarhata: relativizacija universalizma. – *Sociologija. Časopis za sociologiju, socialnu psihologiju i socialnu antropologiju*, vol. XXXV, br. 1, p. 118.

Showalter, E. 1999. Written off. – *The Guardian*, <<http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/may/11/features11.g2>>, Tuesday, 11.05.

Strathern, M. 1981. Culture in a net bag: the manufacture of a subdiscipline in anthropology. – *Man. New Series*, vol. 16, no. 4 (December 1981), pp. 665-688.

Бояджиевска, М. 2004. La jeune née: всеки път. В: *Гласове. Нова хуманитаристика от балкански авторки*, съст. М. Кирова, Б. Бояджиевска, Б. Дойчинович-Нешич. София.

Дойчинович-Нешич, Б. 2004. Сърбия: с друг глас. В: *Гласове. Нова хуманитаристика от балкански авторки*, съст. М. Кирова, Б. Бояджиевска, Б. Дойчинович-Нешич. София.

Николчина, М. 2002. *Родена от главата. Фабули и сюжети в женската литературна история*. София.

¹¹ At this point, I should like to revive the fact that the word canon in Ancient Greece used to mean ‘measure’, at first to do with length, and later in a more general sense.

Milena Kirova is professor in Bulgarian Literature and Biblical studies at the University of Sofia. She has a Ph.D. in literature (1987) and Doctor of Sciences degree in literature and anthropology (2000). Apart from a long teaching career (since 1983) at the University of Sofia, she has taught Bulgarian literature and History of Bulgarian culture at many other universities in Bulgaria and abroad (University of Warsaw, 2009; University of Belgrade, 2002; University of Helsinki, 2000; University of Kent, 1995; UCLA, 1989-1991, and others). M. Kirova has authored twelve books and a vast number of chapters in collections and articles in scientific journals. She has been new books' columnist for the Culture weekly since 1995, having published about 600 bookreviews. Some of her books are: "The Dream of Meduza. Towards Psychoanalysis of Bulgarian Literature" (1995); "The Problematic Realism" (2002); "Biblical Femininity. Mechanisms of Construction, Politics of Representation" (2005); "David, The Great. History and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible" (2009). Editor of the first history of women's literature in Bulgaria, "The Canon Which Never Happened", Part 1 (2009), Part 2 (2013).