

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO WOMEN: FEMALE CHRIST FIGURES IN SERBIAN AND AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

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Abstract. *The paper focuses upon the recurring figure of female Christ (or Messiana) in the Serbian women's writing of the nineties and its links with the American female gothic. Judita Šalgo and Mirjana Novaković use their respective plots and characters in order to present a possible Herland – Utopia founded by women - once designed in the writing of Charlotte Perkins Gillman.*

Serbian literature contains a variety of women's voices, which unfortunately fail to earn the critical acclaim they deserve, due to the dominant male-oriented literary canon which offers them nothing but silence and neglect. Some of the most remarkable women writers are Mirjana Novaković (1966) and Judita Šalgo (1941-1996), whose novels and stories focus upon the plots and motives mostly neglected by male writers: they deal with the field of themes including maternal body, matrilineal heritage and women's clashes with an oppressive society. They follow in the footsteps of their English and American forerunners, reiterating their perspectives and demands. Although Novaković and Šalgo 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*.

It is important to note that Gilman had never thought of herself as a feminist either. It was actually her standpoint of social Darwinism that made her criticise society as androcentric and male-oriented at its core. Her firm conviction that women should be a part of the economic order of the world is advocated in various ways, both in her Utopian fiction about a land of females and the gothic story of female frustration and liberation.

In the novel **Herland**, Charlotte Perkins Gilman describes a Utopian society in which competition and hierarchy are eliminated for the sake of the "community of life". Although this social formation may be seen as a community of happy slaves, it focuses upon equality as the final goal. Herland is a quiet and peaceful place where all individual

action should contribute to the well-being of the entire community. However, achieving social and economic independence of women needs that the role of men be diminished: thus only males able to accept women as independent and powerful individuals are allowed to "mate" with the Herlanders, whereas those who insist that women should be their property are shunned and ignored. Curiously enough, Gilman reprimands men for their creating an oppressive social pattern for women without expelling them from her utopia.

NEW FEMALE RELIGION: A WORM IN THE APPLE OF PROGRESS

Mirjana Novaković's novel **Master Fear and His Servant** was short-listed for several prestigious literary awards in 2000. Widely read and praised by both readers and literary critics, this vivid account of a Pynchonesque vampire hunt undertaken by a Turn and Taxis offspring and the Satan himself is a colourful postmodern tapestry which invites various readings and interpretations. However, we choose to focus here upon her first book, which deals with the female Christ figure, a topic somewhat rare in both European and American literature.

The literary career of Mirjana Novaković was launched with **The Danube Apocrypha** (1996), two novellas joined within the covers of a single book for a good reason: they deal with more or less identical implications of the divine miracle. *The Thunderbolt Legion* is set in the last days of the Roman Empire, whereas *The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman* describes the social and religious turmoil in the year 2000. The characters in *The Thunderbolt Legion* are all male, either heathen or Christian commanders and warriors in the Roman army, affronting adversity, defeat and the miraculous rescue. The story is narrated by a plain, deadpan omniscient voice, quaint and detached as if it were God's, but obsessed with the Christian and Barbaric concepts of fate. The second story is narrated by a female voice which tells of a secret female society which is, as Pynchon would have it, "silently awaiting" its Goddess to appear.

The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman is a bleak and sarcastic Utopian narrative about a society which advocates equality at the cost of a total identity loss. The story is set in a nameless city (once called Belgrade), where people are forbidden to use personal and proper names, but obliged to undergo plastic surgery and genetic modification. Advocating faultless physique and blank mind, the dismal state 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.

Such an allegedly egalitarian society turns education into a teacher's worst nightmare: students can press charges against the professors who insist upon their acquiring the basic knowledge in science. Equipped with handy arm-joint computers, students are encouraged to pursue a daily routine of much play and little work. They bask in bliss and oblivion induced by the drug called "hyperextasythree", at "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 hint at the apathy induced in the Serbian "lost generation" of the nineties.

Although Open Society advocates full implementation of human rights, it severely punishes civil disobedience, insisting that it might take people back to the chaos and anarchy of the past. The first attempt at disobedience, quite feeble and ineffectual, took

place before the story begins: the narrator's class have been temporarily forbidden to use their arm-joints because an infected disk had been inserted into the computer network. The punishment obviously aims at taking the disobedient back into the technological past, but it unintentionally points at the soft spot of the control-freak society: there is always a virus threatening to change it irrevocably.

This minor offence anticipates an even more serious threat to the community: a secret resistance movement comes into the lime-light after the female narrator has met the tribe of the thirsty and learned about their nameless goddess, called only She or Her. During a short nap in the classroom, the (equally nameless) narrator hears a voice announcing that "the one who calls Her name will become thirsty", "so thirsty that nothing will ever be able to quench that thirst." (Novaković, p. 51). This is the beginning of her quest for truth. Thirst is an inverted parallel of the Biblical motive: while the followers of Jesus Christ never get thirsty again having tasted his creed, his female counterpart aims at causing eternal thirst. 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. This Messiana works miracles and walks on water just like Christ does, but otherwise she is an epitome of human imperfection: she assumes the shape of a plain looking girl in ragged clothes, 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" (Novaković, p. 59). This lament over a scapegoat is the narrator's first human emotion. Naturally, she blames an unsuccessful genetic modification for this outburst of feelings, but her emotional awakening shows how the influence of 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 others. Supposedly, when you love someone very much, and that person loves you too, the two of you can exchange names. But nobody I knew had ever experienced that. The rumours spread, and that's about it." (Novaković, p. 93). The narrator herself will need some time and many a traumatic experience to reveal her name.

In her struggle to articulate her true feelings and wishes, the heroine uses a succinct language and a matter-of-fact style which appear improper and unconvincing. Her idiom is taken from her oppressive surroundings, implying that she may have, in the long run, adopted the world she unwillingly inherited. 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." (Novaković, p. 48). The story that follows is the one we have been listening to all along, both a fable and a testimony.

The Open Society serves as a metaphor of 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.

FEMALE MESSIANISM: THE SECOND COMING OF THE BODY

Judita Šalgo's posthumous, unfinished novel entitled **A Voyage to Birobijan** attempts to create yet another version of the gospel according to women. Her female Christ figure named Messiana has a most unusual flock of followers who spread the word about an Utopian refuge for all the weak and defeated: "Messiana's advent was announced and foretold by unrefined, uneducated women and young girls (...) by prostitutes, single mothers, women swollen with venereal diseases and tuberculosis, illegitimate children and orphans, pregnant under age 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". (Šalgo, pp. 66-67)

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 her plot. What at first seemed to be a field project investigating the position of the socially deprived Balkan women, turns into a 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 deity. 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, that you can postpone it for a while and escape the worst, has perplexed these poor women. " (Šalgo, p. 84). 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." (Šalgo, p. 85). 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 with both 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." (Šalgo, p. 105). The uterus "which is *afraid of the fetus and escaping it* roams and distracts body and soul, the brains, brings disturbance, revolt and fear." 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." (Šalgo, p. 105) 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 Herland: "If women are not allowed their rights and a complete life here, 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 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". 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 not only cherished 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 female unconsciousness. Šalgo's 1987 novel **Skid Marks** is also a study of the unconscious inspired by Freud, centered around two Jewish sisters who are - as most of Šalgo's characters - greater than life and yet lesser than it. Freud's history of the unconscious, being at the same time a story, becomes 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 as a source of both information and invention. Thus no wonder that the structure of **Birobijan** resembles the work of 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". Still, the promised female land also becomes associated with bedlam, due to the fact that women's visions and reveries are seen as a product 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.

OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION: WHAT'S GILMAN GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Both Novaković's and Šalgo's alternative histories of female networking parallel the seclusion and liberation of Charlotte Gilman's nameless protagonist of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This story, which needed decades for a breakthrough, deals with the social strug-

gle against male domination, presented through a story of a female patient captured by her doctor who is at the same time her husband.

The story gives voice to rebellion against patriarchal society, but it also deals with highly ambivalent issues of maternity and female creativity, seeing these two as inevitably clashing. The same as the Messiana followers, who are endowed with divine vision only when being insane or in severe pain, Gilman's heroine has madness as women's only way to freedom. The main character's fixation upon the yellow wallpaper could be interpreted as her rebellion against both the patriarchal society and male-centered writing. The story dramatizes the concept of female captivity, the house and the room symbolizing women's body and her wish to break free from the restrictions. Being treated as both an invalid and a prisoner, the heroine has to recover her freedom first. The vision of a female Utopia as a rescue for all the subdued women is yet to come, after the personal conflict is resolved.

Although the husband from *The Yellow Wallpaper* is well-meaning, he is by no means less oppressive: the female protagonist is denied reading and writing, allegedly for her own good, the same way the Open Society denies the right to feel and think. Therefore her fascination with the ugly wallpaper turns into an obsession with a woman captured behind it. Her mental and emotional liberation at the end of story equals madness and raving of the Birobijan heralds. On the other hand, **Herland** describes a feminine Utopia which the two Serbian writers made their characters look for: a society containing no men, and none of the problems their rule imposes. However, the namelessness of the protagonists in the works of Novaković and Gilman signals that the bitter struggle for equality starts with acquiring identity and adopting a name. It is only then that a woman can join hands with other women.

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JEVANDELJE PO ŽENI: FIGURE MESIJANE U SRPSKOJ I AMERIČKOJ ŽENSKOJ PROZI

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Rad obrađuje motiv ženskog Hrista, ili Mesijane, koji se pojavljuje u srpskoj ženskoj prozi devedesetih, i njegove veze sa američkom ženskom gotikom. Zapleti i likovi u proznim delima Judite Šalgo i Mirjane Novaković pokušavaju da predstave žensku utopiju, na način sličan onome kako ju je Šarlota Perkins Gilman videla u svojoj knjizi Herland.