ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ

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STORIES AND RESTORING: NARRATIVE, TECHNOLOGY AND RITUALS OF WOMANHOOD

Abstract: *Although the challenges women have had to face in their attempt to create and circulate their intimate and public histories are much older than computers and informational highways, this paper will mostly focus on the ways women's testimonies are mediated through the fictional and existential frames enabled by technology. The identification of women's social self in Jelena Lengold's* Baltimore, *will be, as a process that lavishly uses computer mediated communication, compared with the social and cultural reconstruction of motherhood in David Albahari's novel* Bait, *and to the bleak dystopian confession of betrayal within the borders of an alienated technology-enhanced society in "The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman" by Mirjana Novaković. The three novels are based on different kinds of women's narratives, mediated through technology.*

Keywords: *women, narrative, testimony, cyberspace, literature, technology.*

In his influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Walter Benjamin discussed the kind of collective experience that might replace solitary appreciation, whereas only three decades later, in 1970, Alvin Toffler coined the phrase "future-shock" in order to describe a psychological state experienced by those who faced enormous changes in a short period of time. The speed and perfection of contemporary digital culture resulted in the gradual discarding of pre-digital formats as inefficient and obsolete, yet they have never been abandoned despite the fact that tweeting, blogging, browsing and social-media networking in general have become verified strategies in social activism, advocating diversity rather than uniformity of goals and interests. Donna Haraway, who conceived the metaphor of a non-monolithic identity of a cyborg, half-machine and half-person, which travels within cyberspace, offered a political strategy for diverging interests by advocating the formation of coalitions based on affinity instead of identity. Her cyborg concept reflected a clear rejection of rigid boundaries, which turned out to be the only thing the women's activism strategies had in common.

The new technologies have readapted and reinforced systems for capturing the multitude of voices lingering at the margins, and cyberspace has offered new ways to construct gender and identity by helping us transcend our grounded identities. This transformation became necessary for the new media environment and its capacity to represent a virtual entity, which has proved to be an enticing possibility in relation to transgressing restrictions. The challenges women have had to face in their attempt to create and circulate their intimate and public histories are much older than computers and informational highways. In the history of oppression against women and other marginal groups, language and the tools of patriarchy have naturally forced the creation of resistance.

15

Using the World Wide Web with the intention to gratify either their social or artistic needs, women meet several challenges in the virtual realm. They clearly observe the gap between those who have access to the new information technologies and those that do not, having to bear in mind that they must ensure the star-like potential of informational technologies to be directed towards enhancing human well-being rather than strengthening existing power monopolies. What is also of great importance is not only the advantage of having a large number of women users of information technologies, but also their being partners with men in the process of adapting to a new environment with the intention to solve the crucial issues of status, identity and power. Cyberspace provides the sense of trust, solidarity, partnership and collaboration for women who are rooted in their local culture and want to have their share of global civil society.

Communication may involve the exchange of meanings or information, but it always functions within a social relationship that has its own qualities and constraints that intertwine with those of communication (Hook 2011:1). The virtual voices of women who are reconsidering their identities in cyberspace are growing stronger and more articulate in media, art and culture. Women are too often disempowered and burdened by the strains of productive work, the birth and care of children and other household and community responsibilities, often without enough energy and time to develop their artistic, creative self. A strategy of promoting women's economic, political and cultural status is best documented in Marisa Rius's article "Crossing Borders: From Crystal Slippers to Tennis Shoes", which provides us with an almost romantic insight into the ways women's voices could be empowered.

In Tijuana, right at the border between Mexico and the US, while queuing at the American consulate sometime in 1997, the author was invited to the birthday party of a young girl. In the rural areas of Mexico, turning fifteen is an event, a ritual of womanhood, apparently associated with the initiation of a young girl into society, but actually being an initiation of a developing woman who is ready to marry. What Rius witnessed was a rite of passage, transformed into a cyber-ritual of entry into structures of knowledge, power and identity, which are substantially different from those implied by traditional feminine roles. The present to the birthday girl was a computer with a modem; for Rius, this was a signal that the young girl would negotiate with the cultural expectancies more confidently once she entered cyberspace and understood the cyber-possibilities: "How do cultural scenarios change when dining rooms are 'crowned' with a computer next to the refrigerator? How do women deal with their cyber-skills vis-a-vis patriarchal laws and patriarchal language in mixed cultural locations? What happens to women at the border, at the limits of cultural hybridity and frontier technologies"? (Harcourt 1999: 27). The answers to some of these questions begin with the idea that the wish to communicate is engrained into all technological projects that are supposed to improve the quality of our life.

A bleak dystopian vision which counterpoints idyllic reality described by Rius establishes itself in literature when least expected, showing that the story of women dealing with technology needs to be retold, restored and reiterated. The 1996 novella "The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman" by Serbian writer Mirjana Novaković (published in her book *The Danube Apocrypha*), written at approximately the same time Rius witnessed a young girl's initiation into the world of cultural hybridity, describes a social and religious upheaval in a high-tech society which is, owing to the new digital media technologies, largely estranged from the societal and cultural values that could serve to empower wom-

en. The story is set within a near future community, which has to face the greatest fear of all totalitarian societies: revolution of thought. The novella describes an unsuccessful uprising caused by the advent of a female goddess that walks on water and preaches about diversity.

The unnamed female Messiah, soon to be betrayed by a woman follower who is her most ardent acolyte (and who is, accidentally, the narrator), can be seen by her followers only: she is a ghost-like virtual entity whose presence cannot be registered except as a voice in the distance, or a gentle touch. Being an epitome of human imperfection, a condensed image somewhere in between imagination and material reality, the goddess takes shape of a bespectacled and nondescript young girl who, unlike the citizens of the Open Society, has never been subjected to either genetic modification or plastic surgery and thus invites the narrator's compassion. The anonymous narrator, whose name, Catherine, will be revealed at the very end of the gospel, has been indoctrinated by the Open Society to prioritise the appearances. Thus she pities the goddess for being "tragically ruined before her life even begun", but is also shocked to learn "that there is someone who has less, who is worse off, doomed to inherit all of her parents' inadequacies" (Novaković 1996: 59). This compassion indicates emotional awakening, which is the first sign of the impending revolutionary changes but, most of all, testifies of women's solidarity, needed to initiate the negotiation of change within cultural scenarios.

The plot of "The Gospel According to a Thirsty Woman" is set in the Open Society, a community, which puts a ban on the use of personal and proper names, for the reason of erasing all differences among its population. However, the imposed anonymity is easily associated with a lack of intimacy: confessing one's name will prove to be the necessary step in strengthening ties among young women described in the novella, as sharing has always been the practice of utmost importance in women communities. The Open Society strongly discourages its citizens to confide in their friends and relatives, and in turn encourages them to indulge either in pointless entertainment or to share banal and irrelevant information. Quality education in such a state is an unachievable goal, science is relegated from the curricula, whereas students are taught about Dolce and Gabbana, and trained to use their portable arm-joint computers in search of information rather than engage in critical and creative thinking. Technology is used to demonstrate and reinforce the motives of intellectual laziness, listlessness, and overindulgence, to point at erosion of standards, values and ideals, thus making a strong case for a widely spread webophobia, otherwise a dominant attitude in the Serbia of the 1990s, which Novaković obviously wanted to put emphasis on. Technology as narrative element provides a strategy of criticising a culture of uniformity, which subdues individuals without offering an alternative, but, on the other hand, is also an efficient reminder of the anomie induced in the Serbian lost generation of the nineties.

The Open Society serves as a metaphor of oppression against women and their feminine gospel: while preaching of an unnatural equality, this Orwellesque community also attempts at obliterating gender differences. Thus the female construct of love, compassion and commitment advocated by the female goddess has to work in secret and to grow and prosper in the hidden pockets of resistance, among individuals who struggle to make the world safe for diversity. The novella will end as an apocryphal narrative of betrayal, told by Catherine, who reluctantly betrayed her goddess to the bleak apparatus of Human Rights Representatives, thus playing a major role in putting down the rebellion. Instead of committing suicide by swallowing

pills, as suggested at the very beginning of the novella, Catherine will atone for her sin by turning it into an oral history of devotion and betrayal, first by telling it to her peers and then by jotting the story down in form of an alphabetically ordered gospel.

Novaković's novella records growth of solidarity and intimacy which are seen as long-standing and everlasting values, opposed to the tenets of a technological, allegedly dehumanised, age. Honesty between women was a cherished ideal in the era of feminism, and writing letters became a strategy of confession and purgation, the first way to create an intimate archive that contains women's narratives. Correspondences survive as a powerful record of women's willingness to build relationships among themselves. Traditionally, letter writing has been seen as the ritual of literate femininity, and this paradigm holds in relation to twenty-first-century e-mail habits. Like letters, computer technologies help crystallise the idea of the relational self as a feminist ideal (Jolly 2008: 3). Catherine started spreading the word of the gospel after having understood that no word of God or goddess can be rendered ineffective by either technology or state repression, since neither of them can defeat women's willingness to build a better society.

The motives of communication, technology and women's confession are also related in David Albahari's *Bait*, a novel about exile, memory and inheritance, but in a thoroughly different way. The audiotapes, brought to Canada from the Former Yugoslavia by the main character, contain his mother's personal history, told by herself. Alike Novaković's novella, names are omitted, but not revealed in the end to signal an impending change; in the case of *Bait*, the refusal to name characters offers them a chance to be reborn and restored in a new world, new history, new community. However, the anonymity might also mark

the ultimate defeat of the main character at the very end of the novel.

Albahari's hero, a Serbian-Jewish intellectual who seems to be a sad and aimless drifter, imagines a story he could weave out of the magic and woeful voice of his mother's, which comes from the past as an apparent promise of restoration and recuperation. The hero persuaded his mother to record the recollections of her young age, to tell of her experiences and observations during the Second World War, when she lost her first husband and their two sons: many years later, in drastically changed conditions, he listens to his mother's testimony, trying to use it as therapy for both life and art. Against the backdrop of the atrocities and horrors of the Balkan ethnic conflicts in the nineties that are implicitly compared to the memories of the Second World War, the narrator dwells on his own inability to turn his mother's painful testimony into words. In order to listen to the tapes that have become technically obsolete, he borrows an old tape recorder from his acquaintance Donald, the only character who is given a name, as if to indicate that he belongs to the real world of material interests and practical matters. Donald's understanding of art, life and history is deeply rooted into verifying the visible and the transparent, and thus, just as he provides technology, which will bring his mother's voice to life, he also provides a sane, therefore mercilessly objective, point of view.

Albahari's main character becomes obsessed by the voice of his mother, which brings back memories that have already started fleeing from him. The author deliberately turns the oral history into a technological fact, as if trying to show that the alleged alienation that came along with the mechanical age, can be understood as a safety belt that ties us to the memories of our past lives. The only way to save his mother's voice, to capture memories and keep the language of his homeland is to

use technology. His mother's voice tells the (hi)story in his mother tongue, which has already started slipping from him, as have his homeland and its painful history he is desperately trying to comprehend.

The narrator's mother sees history as a row of facts which haunt her with inexorable precision. The utmost threat and the most alluring promise to her life story is geography: her routes are not only spatial, but also ideological and strongly connected to her changing ethnicity. Born in a small Bosnian town, 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 that had started in Zagreb, she moved with her family to Belgrade, only to see her husband imprisoned in a concentration camp and killed. During her dubious exile in Serbia, the mother has to represent herself as an Orthodox Serb again, since that is the only way to save the lives of her children – the lives which will be, ironically enough, lost in a railroad accident. Such ways of manipulating identity through changing confession and ethnicity make her understand that "in war, life is a document" (Albahari 1996: 28). At first forced to convert because she "did not exist" for her husband's family, the narrator's mother had to revert to the "old", abandoned ethnicity and identity, which suddenly provided her with a safe existence in new historical circumstances. In spite of changing documents and thus narrowly escaping death, mother sees sorrows coming into her life in battalions, they pile up in the way that would be least convincing and most absurd had her life story been a complete invention. All the changes of names and political systems undermined the possibility of forming a fixed identity, and helped the disintegration of the private self. Playfulness and experimental potential of postmodern identities are irretrievably lost to a dismal threat of social exclusion and extinction.

The narrator of *Bait* is both the alter ego of the author and his fictional persona, which desperately tries to give voice to the voiceless identity struggle. Torn between the abandoned homeland and the new country he has yet to accept, he finds refuge in the audio tapes with his mother's personal history, and in a futile attempt to overcome death, loss and anxiety by writing a novel which should consist of "apparently contradictory fragments, united by the same sense of loss" (Albahari 2001: 1). The narrator's ill fate repeats his mother's, since his identity and nationality are also constantly questioned. Bereaved over the loss of his mother and his homeland, he worries that he might lose his mother tongue as well, and desperately struggles to reimburse his losses in life and history through literature; yet, the irony is, he is incapable of creating art that might serve as a consolation for historical and existential losses.

Albahari's male characters, who always hold exclusive rights to narrate the story, often admit their fear and weakness, but their frailty is never disguised, and their cowardice never used as a weapon. The narrative of *Bait* is the first in Albahari's fiction, which largely depends on the powerful voice of a woman, while its narrator obsessively focuses on the feminine oral history as the primary source of his future book. Borrowing the plot for his novel from his mother's life, the protagonist also symbolically borrows his traits from her: her responsiveness to both pleasure and pain, together with her refined sensitivity.

The change of the biographical and literary setting has substantially influenced Albahari's narrative, along with his artistic priorities, which currently focus on the quest for faith, language and identity within a historical tapestry difficult to comprehend. Still, the author remains focused on his character's claustrophobic world of intimate dilemmas, the same as at the beginning of his literary career. The

character from the novel *Bait* is set within an environment which might not be altogether hostile, but is not willing to deal with one's identity crisis; the new homeland offers security, but shows no compassion for the introspection and isolation of an expatriate who is looking for answers about his identity and ethnicity. The empowerment of his mother's voice turns into a desperate strategy of resisting the world by employing sheer vulnerability as the strongest weapon. Albahari interrogates the boundaries of literature and the effectiveness of the strategies people use in coping with their memories and dreams. He knows the limitations of ordinary speech and the language of our daily life, yet feels he is himself restricted to its use, and that using simple words and short sentences could be the best way to reach into the essence of things.

The vulnerability and frailty of women's voices have been of primary interest for Jelena Lengold, who describes ordinary lives by focusing on the tricky and ambivalent concept of everlasting love, which is sometimes inexplicably suspended between linguistic presence and semantic absence. Her novels and stories seem to be timeless and universal in their rejection to ask big questions about history, culture, social injustice or gender inequality. Lengold neglects history in favour of micro histories, and her specific kind of minimalism chooses to focus on the sisterhood of women who are irreparably lonely in their seemingly well-balanced lives. Her stories deal with emotions and relations, and scrutinise the concept of everlasting love with its imminent row of triumphs and tribulations, telling of the many mysterious ways love lives and reigns in human life. Lengold's fiction is filled with adultery, divorce, dysfunctional families and burnt-out passion dissolved into melancholy and loneliness, but her stories never end in expected narrative climax. Lengold's female characters are frail and oversensitive, and

their fear of happiness is almost as unbearable as their fear of death. Their turbulent family histories teach them to value love and devotion on the one hand, but to be constantly aware of the fragility and brevity of romance on the other. Women in Jelena Lengold's fiction are obsessed with gender-linked miscommunication, with the unbridgeable gulf between men and women, and with a specific kind of unarticulatedness characteristic of long relationships. Not yet estranged but already far from burning with desire for each other, the couples in her fiction try to redefine their relationships, looking for excitement in the novel mass media formats of communication in order to rekindle the flame that has long burned down to ashes.

A particular rendition of a cyberritual of womanhood can be found in Jelena Lengold's novel *Baltimore*, which portrays a woman in her forties who is trying to manage almost unmanageable things: she is trying to accept the fact that the days of marital bliss are over, to settle a strained relationship with her dominant mother and to overcome her writer's block. In a seemingly simple plot we find an unexpected twist: the solace for futile life and lost inspiration can be found in a specific union of literature and technology. In the narrator's imaginative territory, the identity of Edgar Allan Poe transforms into a "virtual unknown" – he becomes her imaginary friend and lover whose reflection can be observed only in the eye of a web camera. The wordscape of the novel suggests that the pursuit of love turns into a journey towards death, transforming the virtual and fictional Baltimore into an allegory of death and the land of Never More.

Baltimore portrays a woman in her mid-forties who is feeling lonely and adrift in her hometown much like Albahari's hero in exile; however, instead of looking for comfort in familiar things and familiar voices, she escapes to far off territories of imagination. She has developed a habit

that borders on voyeurism: the heroine keeps watching, via web camera, a man in Baltimore heading off to work at quarter past eight his time. The nameless narrator invents a biography of the Baltimore man, names him Edgar after E. A. Poe, and devises his quotidian routine and emotional history. The mystery man becomes a growing concern in her life, his existence bordering on a fictional character entity she is eager to write about, or a romantic projection of a dream lover. The narrator becomes attached to him as she becomes estranged to her husband, but at the same time is ready to embrace a cyber-romance as an exit strategy out of the dilemma about the true nature of love. She firmly believes that the deepest bonds are created between strangers – "the more your nearest and dearest love you, the lesser their wish to know who you really are" (Lengold 2003: 63), therefore the most intimate friendship springs where people know almost nothing of one another. This proposition empowers the cyberspace with countless possibilities denied in everyday offline life. Therefore only a fictitious, virtual character in the novel *Baltimore* is endowed with a name and a history: the narrator remains nameless as well as her husband, her mother and her therapist. The only exception to the rule is found at the point when the narrator gets involved in an online romance with a young man: her short-lasting virtual self, constructed as a sexual predator and dominatrix, goes under the name of Lucy. The affair that develops in real life after the virtual encounter is brief and insignificant, not a feasible way to compensate passion and romance missing from her marriage, and is quickly forgotten. The reader is even misled to believe that the sexual adventure might have been nothing short of an emotional idealist's wet dream.

Lengold's character's need to communicate is easily observed in her obsessive desire to see her own reflection in Edgar's eye, in spite of the distance between them.

At times she almost manages to meet his gaze when he smiles into the survaillance camera. Although she constructs his life and fantasises about their affair, this is not another fantasy of a perfect love or a simulation of an alternative life, since *Baltimore often refers to death, articulating her heroine*'s strong belief that perfect love and the extinction of life create an indissoluble whole. In the end of the novel, the heroine makes one puzzling remark which questions both her destiny and her sheer existence: "Nobody will ever know why I went away, where I went and what became of me. Some will try to find the clues in my first and last novel. They will start looking for me in Baltimore, but in vain". (Lengold 2003: 102)

The wordscape of *Baltimore offers to readers an explanation that the search for love and devotion is only a part of our journey towards death. Baltimore is thus not only a point on the virtual map, but rather the Poesque land of Never More, or a Shakespearean land from whose bourn no traveller returns. Lengold weaves an intimate history dealing with a cyber-ritual of womanhood, her narrative differing significantly from historical and cultural reconstruction of motherhood in Albahari*'s novel and also from the bleak testimony of a failed women's uprising in Novaković's story. The three narratives map the social and psychological reality of women who are affected either by historical changes in *Bait*, political turmoil in the case of *Gospel*, or an emotional crisis in *Baltimore*, and the writers use imaginative ways to mediate the stories that reflect terror and bliss.

What is common to the three authors is their acute awareness that technology offers multiple ways of dealing with women's histories. Both new and old technologies can be used to capture the multitude of women's voices, and cyberspace offers new ways to construct gender and identity by helping us transcend our grounded

identities, like the young Mexican girl who got her first computer back in 1997.

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ОБНОВА ПРИЧЕ: ПРИПОВЕДАЊЕ, ТЕХНОЛОГИЈА И РИТУАЛИ ЖЕНСКОСТИ

Резиме

Полазећи од текста Марисе Руис о технолошкој иницијацији једне младе жене у Мексику, рад испитује однос између идиличног поимања технологије, с једне стране, и дистопијске књижевне визије, с друге стране, уочљиве на примеру „Јеванђеља по жедној“ Мирјане Новаковић. Рад се фокусира на технолошке ритуале исповедања, предочене у још два прозна дела писана на српском језику. Док у роману *Балтимор* Јелене Ленголд главна јунакиња уз помоћ технологије обликује лик имагинарног пријатеља Едгара и тако трага за спасењем од одговорности и оптерећења, у *Мамцу* Давида Албахарија историја игра важну улогу у мајчином сведочанству које јунак покушава да преточи у уметничко дело.

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