

SUMMARY

Women Intellectual Mentors:

The Serbian Feminist Essay (From the 19th to the 21st Century)

An exploration of the Serbian feminist essay, this book provides a diachronic panorama of the genre: from the rather cautious beginnings in the 19th century to the typology of the essay in the 20th century to its projected future in the 21st century. It also offers a summary of the most interesting original works in the feminist essayist canon built by Serbian women writers, philosophers, sociologists and cultural anthropologists from the time when the first inklings of the genre began to appear in individual texts in the 19th century to the most recent period in which the form, now increasingly influential, has reached its maturity. It traces the evolution of the (sub)genre of the feminist essay in Serbia from its initial to contemporary forms, and its changing literary, social and political functions.

The essay, a genre exempted from the pedantry of the generic tradition and academic strictures – and not being fiction either – is open to autobiographical intrusions and personal associations drawn from one's own experience of gender. This is why, from its inception, it enabled female authors to speak about the situation of women from their own perspective, from the core of their own experience, in a language that was still in the process of developing its own expressive devices. The book recounts how Serbian women entered literature and spoke in their own language, gradually overcoming their fear of authorship. At the same time, they co-created the feminist discourse which partly became a discourse of learning the vernacular and 'taming' the language. Tracing the stages of the emergence of the female-authored essay allows the author to sketch a tentative map of Serbian feminism as a kind of memory archive or a repository of remembrances. The attendant aim was to systematize our knowledge of the female-authored Serbian essay, filling out the cognitive gaps in the process, although the criterion for selecting the texts, apart from their genre, was also thematic (emancipation and feminism). These principal issues frame the discussion presented in the book, which seeks to show the Serbian authors' essayistic practice both on a micro and macro scale. The former includes individual texts with a clear authorial signature of style and subject. The focus of the latter is to create a network of mutual intellectual and institutional links, merging the diachronic and the synchronic dialogue, especially when generating and developing feminist ideas. The book argues that the essay became a genre that co-created the platform for the crystallization of the idea of women's emancipation. The essayists inspired change and emancipation, becoming as a result, each in her own time, ideological guide for many generations of women, blazing the trails for thought, writing and action. In short, they would become intellectual mentors for many generations of Serbian women.

The book consists of five chapters. Chapter One, methodological in character, focuses on the theory of the essay, attempting to answer the question why the essay has become women's natural ally (*a form of their own*). Chapter Two presents the difficult beginnings and stages of form crystallization of the proto-feminist essay in 19th-century Serbian literature. Starting with Eustahija Arsić and her search for the adequate idiom and feminine forms, it proceeds to essayistic passages in the self-censored, hybrid, family-chronicle-like diary of Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, ending up with Draga Dejanović's fiery speeches to Serbian women, given at rallies and public meetings (subsequently recorded and published in the press), and the increasingly coherent and mature emancipatory project of the late 19th century, as represented by Draga Gavrilović. This part of the book stresses the evolutionary nature of the dissident and alternative mode of thinking among first Serbian women writers who, having entered the literary scene, found it hard to find their place in the then prevalent cultural paradigm. At this point, the process of their repeated attempts at form adaptation and coming up with *a language of one's own* by creating adequate forms of expression comes clearly to the fore.

Chapter Three, covering the period between 1900 and 1918, explores the next stage – more mature and much richer – in the process of emergence of the essay exploring clearly feminist themes. It discusses the work of Jelica Belović Bernadžikowska – especially the role of her almanac *Српкиња* (Serbian Woman) and her unique essay *Жене и књижевност* (Women and Literature) – as well as the rarely analyzed feminist essays by Isidora Sekulić, an undisputed master of form. An emerging network of mutual relations and collaborations between authors, combined with a growing awareness of the essay as a tool for articulating women's problems, is foregrounded here.

Chapter Four describes the staggeringly prolific, so-called Golden Period of the feminist essay in the interwar years (1918–1941), when a group of highly educated erudite and polyglot women involved in forging an intellectual community entered the stage. They would become true women intellectual mentors in the fields of mysticism and theology (Jela Spiridonović-Savić), philosophy (Anica Savić-Rebac and Ksenija Atanasijević), or social activism and sociology (Julka Chlapec-Đorđević). In those days the essay became one of the forms co-shaping the models of female discourse, forming distinct modes of feminist thought and writing. The processes of the essay's creation and interactions, as well as some interesting and representative examples of the genre at work are presented here.

The principal focus of the fifth (and final) chapter are two contemporary essayists, Svetlana Slapšak and Branka Arsić. The chapter demonstrates how, at the turn of the 21st century, the essay became involved in interpreting the nationalist culture of fear during the break-up of Yugoslavia, thus becoming a tool for creating an analytical-methodological platform and a means of prompt anthropological-cultural diagnosis, as well as a portable form of transfer of social and philosophical ideas.

Charting a map of the Serbian feminist essay, the book not only draws the map's outlines but also puts first texts and cultural signs on it. As a whole, it fleshes out on Isidora Sekulić's 1924 concept of *isochimens*, i.e. the blue lines of the hidden image of literary life and the discrete yet rigorous links between all that is connected and interrelated in the literary process. The *isochimens* traced out in the book either reveal a close link between distant points in time (from the 19th to the 21st century) or indicate geographical and cultural links (e.g. between Virginia Woolf and some Serbian essayists coming up with similar concepts at the time), uniting them into a coherent generic-thematic whole. The book's crucial point, however, is its focus on the clear presence of the tradition of the feminist essay in the cultural space of the Serbian language and the tracing of its evolution over the past two centuries.

Translated by Piotr Zazula