

# WOMEN IN THE CROATIAN LITERATURE OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY — ZDENKA MARKOVIĆ AND MARA ŠVEL-GAMIRŠEK

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Literature is, unfortunately, always determined by the gender, race, and nation. Humans — much as they analyse the world around them — are always determined by means of their affiliations. Men and women writers — are still less determined than literary critics who instill in literary histories only the well selected texts of those writers who are best liked by critics themselves. The problem of female writing is not that it is specifically an experience which describes female fates, as the same inconsiderable sacrificing souls could be also found in men. But, female writing is problematic as the literary critic, most often a man, cannot identify with it, and therefore such a book becomes less significant to him and he marginalises it.

The twentieth century brought a refreshing change to the literary history and criticism, as it began to recognise different focal points and appreciate all experience transposed through literature. Thus, we detached ourselves from the experience of the average white European man and began to read black literature, female literature, intimate homosexual letters and revolutionary manifestos against all restraints.

The Croatian literature of the second half of the twentieth and the first half of the current century still deals with problems typical of the former socialist countries, such as the main character's failure to belong to any context; the waning of diligent workers who become insufficiently qualified in the age of information technology; war profiteering; numb army conscripts with post-traumatic stress disorder; a new broken family without the maternal or paternal guidance, strained single mothers. Poor quality literature that emerges only in order to entertain with certain stupid clichés can also be found. There are also authors who are so angry that their texts literally offend the reader.

The first half of the twentieth century dealt with other — but then again — the same problems. The themes were the destruction of co-operatives; the social status of women, which is hardly a topic today; the themes were also the newly fledged urban population of rural parents; the student days of the youth then which was not as disorientated as the youth today; the state, which still represented an ideal then, was also a topic. The two world wars also brought the politically organised literature, but also the romantic one in which the past times were missed.

Female writing, thus, represented an alternative that was being published — but most frequently in journals — first and foremost in those for women — but also in order to reinforce the national concord in the time of the war. In war times, female writers struck the right note when they wrote about the beautiful memories of their childhood, the past years of peasant unity, as the politics in power found the idea of people being amenable to concord suitable. At the same time, it was also good to write literature for children, since it pacified the children's readership. When the same writers wrote about powerful emotions of escaping the everyday routine, about the personal suffering in the education professions of a teacher and a nursery school teacher, when they wrote on the difficulties of married life, infidelities and abortions, such themes were not published, or such short stories were published only after the 1990s, when they became current again.

Judging by their choice of themes, certain of such contemporary authors are also ZDENKA MARKOVIĆ (1884-1974) and MARA ŠVEL-GAMIRŠEK (1900-1975). The fate of female writers was most frequently going into the teaching, nursery school teaching, or translating, professions. Zdenka Marković is not an exception. In her long life she was a poet, a short story writer, and a literary historian. She studied Slavic studies, history of art and philosophy in Zagreb, while in Switzerland she obtained her PhD. She was an expert on comparative literature, since she was among the first ones who wrote on the close ties between Polish and Croatian literature. She wrote a comprehensive study on the poets of old Dubrovnik from the middle of the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century. Just like the majority of her female colleagues of that time, she wrote the autobiographical prose work *Moj bijeg iz grada* (*My Escape from the City*, 1941). She published several books of prose poems, the epistolary book *Let* (*The Flight*, 1920), several studies on the history of Slavic literature with regard to it being taught in schools. She was a high school teacher of the Croatian language and literature in Zagreb for thirty-five years. She published nine books of Polish authors in Croatian translation. She collaborated in Croatian journals, and she was the editor of *Domaće ognjište* from 1912 to 1913.

Regarding her creative work, she wrote mediocre prose poems of a somewhat moralistic nature. Her childhood memories are cloying and perfect, without any negative incident, which is already in the manner of the writers from the period. However, in her short stories, where she describes human fates, she could create very impressive characters; she will use — most commonly — descriptions from the female everyday life: such as the ones of nature, house, garden. Her expression is decidedly floral, she tries to place all metaphors within the floral world of ideal nature. She gives an excellent description of a wanderer, a woman in a Slavonian village and a female counterpart to the male roué, a restless soul that cannot settle down. Her wanderer Manda is a true prototype of a modern woman who wants to live without commitments, without socially imposed norms. Her Smilja exclusively craves for marriage, which is also one of the genuine portraits of the woman-mother from that period. A genuine female personality can be seen in the short story “Romantika” (“Romantic Charm”), where an old miller's daughter belongs to an unknown world, in which dwell powerful and unadapted people. Such women and men — misfits owing to their ambition for the beautiful and the honest — have remained entirely contemporary until the present day. Her powerful appearance shows her mighty personality. It is a character much more different than a modish lady in several different dresses, or a plain chatty peasant woman, as presented by the female characters of the period.

However, a much finer style was developed by Mara Švel-Gamiršek, who writes in a more direct, less florid, concise and honest manner. Her short stories are direct presentations of the decay of co-operatives, the breaking of female dreams, a powerful abuse of the female workforce in the rural economy, vague images of sexuality and amorousness of the married woman and the disappointment of the peasant girl who goes to the city to study. Mara Švel was a poet, a prose writer and a translator. She started to study medicine, but she stopped it due to her getting married, and commenced writing, which was her sole preoccupation. She translated from the German language and collaborated with numerous journals, and she wrote about the regional Slavonian topics. In the period between 1945-1950 she was forbidden to publish. She wrote two books for the youngest readership (*Priče za Sveu i Karen*; *Legende*; / *Stories for Svea and Karen*, 1967; *Legends*, 1969). She wrote the novel *Hrast* (*The Oak*, 1942), but the best characters emerged in her short stories, especially in her collection *Portreti nepoznatih žena* (*The Portraits of Unknown Women*, 1942). One can testify to the superb descriptions of an unmarried aunt who entirely devotes herself to her brother's children (“Moja teta Elizabet” / “My Aunt Elizabet”); a description of a woman who cannot forgive infidelity, even to her disadvantage (“Zimska priča” / “Winter Tale”); a description of a woman who marries for money and leads a secluded life due to the lack of love (“Snaša Terza” / “The Newly-Married Terza”); and a presentation of the woman-mother (“Mati” / “Mother”) who is entirely devoted to her three children, even to the extent of her own physical exhaustion. She also shows the customs in a rural co-operative — where one works constantly and long hours — while a pregnant woman has no moment of rest. In their modernity, the most outstanding are the short stories “Epizoda” (“Episode”), where a married woman wrestles with her lust for the forbidden man, and the short story “Rankin grijeh” (“Ranka's Sin”), in which an inexperienced young woman has to face her abortion and its consequences. The dazzling quality of Mara Švel's writing lies precisely in

her honest identification with the characters. While identifying she does not — as an omniscient story writer — judge any character, let alone her female protagonists. When she justifiably bears a grudge, she finds good reasons for their actions, and there is not one character in the story whose behaviour she does not explain. In her writing, it is noticeable that she is well-read and that she carefully considers what she writes. Mara Švel represents a style that could well create inheritors, but she was unjustifiably erased from school readers. Her books are scarce in cities' libraries still today, therefore it seems that she has never existed.

The English writer VIRGINIA WOOLF once said that an entirely male or an entirely female mind could not create. It takes either a male-female or a female-male mind to create. The same could be also applied to Croatian literature. As long as female writers do not confront their more or less successful work with that of male writers, we shall not have sexless literature that would promote only sexless ideals. It is important to know which role models should be read and which should be avoided in the new century's writing. It is exactly the role of the history of literature to — even belatedly — accept both male and female writers who in their own time — used modern themes — which made them the pioneers of their time. ]]