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Mothers of the Nation, or how canonical women writers have been created

The ‘mother of the nation’ figure appears as a specifically East-Central European phenomenon.

In the nineteenth century, every nation within the great empires commenced the work of constructing its tradition, discovering vernacular language, and creating national literature. A similar process could then be observed: women writers who joined the national movements were granted an immediate critical recognition, not enjoyed to that extent by any female author in Western Europe or Russia. They also entered, without exception, the then-forming national literary canons. The example of Milica Stojadinović (1828-1878), who used the patriotic pseudonym ‘Srpkinja,’ i.e., Serb woman, can be cited as, in many ways, exemplary of the process.

The need for feminine writing, which would prove the maturity of a given language and transmit the ideals of the national revival, was sometimes so great that it led to mystifications. The Czech nationalists, unable to wait for a suitable figure, created one themselves, bringing into existence the fictional character of Žofie Jandová. The Illyrian movement turned to the legendary Cvijeta Zuzorić, a presumed woman writer of the 16th century Dubrovnik.

For real women, however, the process did not occur without pain. Becoming a national writer meant abandoning the hegemonic German – that within the Austro-Hungarian empire allowed for cultural exchange and facilitated participation in the international literary circulation – and opting for a minority language, which often had first to be learned. In Croatian literature, the figure of Dragojla Jarnević (1812-1875), who wrote solely in German before joining the national movement and repeatedly shared her difficulties in using the Croatian in a diary she had kept for forty years, remains particularly interesting.

What is more, their self-expression had to be subordinated to the nation-building task, meaning that in the literary works, the role of a woman as the one who transmits the national traditions and language in the family circle ought not to be contested. The status of, respectively, Maria Konopnicka (1842-1910) as the Polish national bard and Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913) as the most important Ukrainian poet next to Taras Shevchenko and Ivan Franko, have been paid with the price of erasure of their later modernist output and feminist sensibility.

In my presentation, I shall not only reconstruct the nineteenth-century processes of literary canonization of women writers from the Habsburg-Slavic area but also reflect upon their repercussions on the construction of national identities and local gender politics.

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