

“Women’s Writing” and the NIN Literary Award

Introduction

The NIN Literary Award, one of the most prestigious literary accolades in the Serbian (formerly Yugoslav) literary scene, was established in 1954.¹ Over the 61 years of its history, it has honored only seven female authors. This statistic raises questions about the representation and status of women in contemporary Serbian literature, particularly regarding their recognition within the literary canon.² This research examines the construction of narrators and female characters in the works of these seven laureates: Dubravka Ugrešić, Svetlana Velmar Janković, Grozdana Olujić, Gordana Ćirjanić, Ivana Dimić, Milena Marković, and Danica Vukićević.³ The methodological approach includes both textual and contextual analysis of

¹ An examination of the available data on the past members of the NIN Award jury reveals that it has traditionally consisted of literary critics, historians, journalists, and writers. During the first decades of the award’s history, the jury composition remained relatively stable. Up until the 1980s, its members were predominantly from Serbia or professionally affiliated with Serbian literary and cultural institutions. From the 1980s onward, however, figures such as Milivoj Solar, Andrej Inkart, Velimir Visković, and Igor Mandić began to appear – representatives from Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Since the 1990s, the jury has once again been composed exclusively of members from Serbia (cf. <https://www.nin.rs/2001-01/04/15964.html>).

² Professor Vasilava Gordić Petković and writer Vida Ognjenović have reflected on the small number of women who have received the NIN Award. Their discussion was prompted by the fact that, in 2022, Milena Marković became only the sixth female recipient of this prestigious literary prize. For more details, see: <https://nova.rs/kultura/knjizevnice-ninova-nagrada/>.

³ Unfortunately, no comprehensive statistical data exist on how many female authors publish novels annually, which could have provided a more precise perspective on the low number of female NIN Award recipients. For instance, during the first two decades of the 21st century, over 3,000 novels were published in Serbia in total (Jerkov 2022:73), but there are no exact figures for female authors. Indicatively, in 2024, out of 185 titles, around fifty were written by women, while in 2023, out of 188, there were forty-six.

these novels, relying on the theoretical frameworks of *écriture féminine* and feminist literary criticism.

First, the study examines the narrative structure and construction of the narrator in each novel. Second, it analyzes the portrayal of female characters, their role in the narration, and their interaction with the historical and social contexts in which they are positioned. Special attention is given to how socio-historical contexts have influenced the construction of these characters and the extent to which patriarchal narratives and stereotypes are present. The goal of this approach is to gain insight into the representation of female characters in Serbian literature and their position within the canon.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this research is based on two key concepts: *écriture féminine* and feminist literary theory. These concepts enable a multidisciplinary analysis of how female characters and their narrative positions are constructed in the novels of NIN Award laureates, with a particular focus on the socio-historical and cultural contexts in which they were created.

The concept of *écriture féminine* in literary theory, often colloquially used to describe women writers' efforts to speak in an autonomous literary voice, has a very specific theoretical meaning. This concept is deeply rooted in feminist theory and the psychoanalytic ideas of Jacques Lacan, as well as in the works of French feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.

Hélène Cixous, in her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*, introduces the notion of *écriture féminine*, emphasizing that women must inscribe themselves into texts, history, and the world through their own movement, liberated from male dominance, producing writing that is nonlinear, fluid, and deeply connected to emotion, experience, and sexuality (Cixous 1976: 875). Writing thus becomes an act of liberation, both personal and political, enabling women to challenge patriarchal myths and structures. She calls on women to dismantle existing codes and norms through their texts, creating new spaces for female experience and identity (Cixous 1976: 880).

Through the myth of Medusa as a symbolic metaphor for various patriarchal myths and social constructs that have, over time, become unquestioned and widely accepted "truths," Hélène Cixous illustrates how such myths keep women in a state of repression and invisibility. By recalling the original myth – where Medusa is raped and Pegasus is born from her wound – she illustrates how patriarchal reinterpretations distort women's experiences, and urges women to confront these myths directly to reclaim their power and presence (Cixous 1976: 880–881).

Cixous also emphasizes the intrinsic connection between sexuality and language, particularly in the ways people communicate, critiquing patriarchal or phal-

logocentric discourse – a concept rooted in Lacan’s theory of the symbolic order, where the phallus functions as a central signifier of power (Maksić 2021: 23–24). Lacan positions language as a masculine structure in which subjects are defined through the “Name of the Father,” limiting women’s capacity for identity formation (Lacan 2006: 685–697). For Lacan, language is masculine and phallogocentric, which limits women’s capacity to find their identity within it (Lacan 1998: 39–50). Cixous opposes this system, advocating for writing that originates from the body, subverting the symbolic order, and creating new forms of expression beyond male-centered constraints (Cixous 1976: 886).

Julia Kristeva’s ideas on language and subjectivity expand this critique, particularly through her concept of the “semiotic,” which represents the aspect of language linked to the body and emotions, in contrast to the “symbolic,” which pertains to the structured, patriarchal dimension of language. The semiotic allows women to express experiences suppressed by patriarchal discourse, and it resonates with Cixous’s call to “write themselves” (Kristeva 2024: 61–66).

Luce Irigaray, also drawing inspiration from Lacan’s theory, develops a critique of phallogocentrism through an analysis of female sexuality and subjectivity. She argues that women can rearticulate their identity by exploring their multiple sexualities, which are not reduced to a single point as in male sexuality. Irigaray emphasizes the significance of female sexuality that is not confined to a singular focal point (as the phallus is in male sexuality). Her concept of the “two lips” symbolizes female plurality rather than closure, as well as the capacity for female sexuality and identity to be expressed in a nonlinear and fluid manner that defies male-centered models (Irigaray 1985:81).

Considering the ideas of Kristeva and Irigaray, Cixous’s argument that *écriture féminine* is an act of liberating both the body and language gains further depth. Her call for women to “write themselves” and express their bodies through text can be interpreted as an appeal for the reintegration of the semiotic (Kristeva) and an affirmation of the multiplicity of female sexual subjectivity (Irigaray). All three theorists base their critiques on the idea that patriarchal language is insufficient for articulating women’s experiences and that women must create new, nonlinear, and fluid forms of writing.

Unlike *écriture féminine*, which focuses on stylistic and linguistic strategies, the concept of “women’s literature” encompasses a broader body of works written by women or centering on female experiences. It draws on feminist theories that examine the positioning of female authors and characters within the patriarchal literary canon, with significant contributions from Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi.

Elaine Showalter develops the concept of gynocriticism, a feminist approach to studying women’s literature, emphasizing that women’s writing was historically marginalized and treated as secondary to the “great” male literary tradition. She proposes analyzing women’s literature in its own context, focusing on themes and experiences specific to women rather than adapting male literary models:

Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (Showalter 1985: 131)

Showalter identifies three phases in the development of women's literature: "the Feminine phase," in which women "write in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture;" "the Feminist phase," characterized by protest against male norms and advocacy for women's rights, where women "use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood;" and "the Female phase," focused on autonomous artistic expression, where women "reject both imitation and protest... and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art." This framework portrays women's literature as a gradual process of liberation from patriarchal structures (Showalter 1985: 137).

Toril Moi, influenced by poststructuralist feminism, takes a different approach, questioning fixed notions of female identity and language. She argues that categories such as "woman" and "women's writing" are socially constructed and warns that defining a singular "feminine" risks reinforcing stereotypes. As she notes, feminist struggle must

undo the patriarchal strategy that makes 'femininity' intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending women precisely *as* women. (Moi 2002: 81)

Moi is critical of any fixed concept of women's writing, believing that it leads to the reproduction of stereotypes. Her work is deeply rooted in the idea that identity is not stable but is always subject to change and reevaluation, a perspective that is also reflected in literature.

While Showalter emphasizes the historical development of women's literature, Moi problematizes the categories on which it is based. Together, their work highlights both the unique experiences and voices women bring to literature and the cultural and linguistic structures that shape the concept of "the feminine."

Serbian Scholarship: A Brief Note on the Margin, the Canon, and Literary History

In her essay "Umetnice, slovenske nomatkinje, tamo i ovde," Nina Živančević, reflecting on the status of "domestic" female visual artists – nomads in relation to the cultural center – argues that

despite decades of persistent attempts to expand and revalorize her role, the status of the woman artist in any environment remains highly marginalized. (Živančević 2016: 66)

Supporting this claim, the author cites the conclusion of Camille Morineau, the curator of an exhibition on 20th-century women artists at the Centre Pompidou, who observed:

Within the Pompidou Centre itself, the works of women artists constituted only 18% of the museum's entire collection. In a world where women hold approximately 18% of political and legal power and where members of the so-called 'weaker sex' earn about 7.5% less than their male counterparts, it is even more difficult for women to secure their place under the artistic sun. (Živančević 2016: 67)

In line with this, Živančević concludes that, given that the entire historical discourse has been founded on flawed premises and that the status of women artists has for centuries been systematically marginalized,

a certain degree of normative revalorization of their status imposes itself today as an urgent necessity (*ibid.*).

Such positions align with the efforts of feminist art historians in the 1970s, who sought to redefine the canon of high art

by drawing attention to forgotten, censored, neglected, and excluded women artists. (*ibid.*)

At this point, the question that arises is not only one of the "balance of power" between the margin and the center, and the potential for their reconfiguration, but also of the canon and the very discipline of art history. The challenges surrounding the Serbian literary canon were addressed at the *Second Interdepartmental Conference of Serbian Studies*, held in Tršić in 2021. The most extensive contribution to the conference proceedings was made by Aleksandar Jerkov, who offered an extensive analysis of the canon, its mechanisms of formation and transformation (Jerkov 2022: 15–105), and the conditions that sustain it. Throughout his study, Jerkov traces the ways in which certain works and authors have been canonized, as well as the circumstances under which such positions are contested. In defining what the canon actually represents, he writes:

Unlike literary history, which is expected to faithfully trace all its meanders (...). the canon contains only that which cannot be relinquished of because it is impossible to interrupt the reading, and some of that which is so highly esteemed that it must be read at any cost, regardless of any resistance in its reception. (Jerkov 2022: 84)

Following, as he claims, the inevitable paths of literary history, Jerkov identifies the "Holy Trinity" of the Serbian canon as oral (folk), medieval (aristocratic or monastic), and modern (bourgeois). literature. Whether this information is deemed crucial or not, it is certainly indicative that, when enumerating important authors who could or tend to become part of the canon in the second half of the 20th century, Jerkov lists around 85 writers, of whom only 16 are women (Jerkov 2022: 90).

Every artist, as he observes, creates his or her own canon, grounded in “ancestral figures,” determining what

we read, watch, listen to (...) and study in schools and universities. However, if artists are omitted or neglected in the cultural heritage because they are women or not Europeans, the canon becomes an impoverished filter that shapes the totality of cultural possibilities for new generations. (Đurić 2004/2005: 106–107)

Although literary history and the canon cannot be fully equated, they inevitably intersect and intertwine. Magdalena Koh, in her book *Kada sazremo kao kultura*, addressed the canon as a phenomenon of literary historiography. Providing a concise overview of Serbian literary historiography (from Vuk Karadžić, Stojan Novaković, through Jovan Grčić, Tihomir Ostojić, Pavle Popović, Jovan Skerlić, to Jovan Deretić), she concludes:

From the very overview and the outlined developmental lines of literary historiography, it is evident that literary-historical narration in Serbia was conducted exclusively by men, and that the fundamental problem in their conceptualizations was an ethnic and national-linguistic approach to domestic literature. It is therefore unsurprising that their literary-historical discourse is dominated by an androcentric and patriarchal mode of thinking, framed in the categories and in the name of a national, largely ethnic community. Questions of gender were not considered important, and such issues in Serbian literature were marginalized. This remains the case to this day. (Koh 2012: 89)

Although Koh focused primarily on the works of Serbian women writers at the beginning of the 20th century, she occasionally provides insights related to a broader period of Serbian literature and concludes that,

Serbian literature has been dominated – and still, unfortunately, is dominated – by an ideologized and strongly mythologized nationalist and folkloric paradigm. (Koh 2012: 90)

It is, as the author suggests, highly symptomatic that an alternative history of Serbian literature – a revision of its evolutionary processes focusing on women’s literature from the oral tradition to the 1990s – was produced not within Serbia but by an external scholar, Celia Hawkesworth (2000).

The question of the place of women in Serbian literary history was also addressed by Biljana Dojčinović Nešić in her article “Moje ime je nemogućnost: razmišljanja o drugoj književnoj istoriji” (Dojčinović Nešić 2000: 203–213), prompted by what remains the only textbook-type history of Serbian literature by Jovan Deretić. As Dojčinović Nešić notes, this work mentions around 20 women writers, and

in the historical span of six centuries, beginning with the nun Jefimija, the first Serbian poet, with the exception of Isidora Sekulić and Desanka Maksimović as the

main female figures, most women writers and poets are allotted at most one sentence, or are even mentioned collectively, in a single breath. (Dojčinović Nešić 2000: 203)

She supports this disproportion by drawing on interpretations by Western feminist critics, who argue that

literary history is itself a kind of fiction, a construct subject to social rather than “purely aesthetic” criteria, wherein the creation of literary connections – an entire social network of power – decisively influences who will be remembered. (*ibid.*)

Regarding literary awards, Vladislava Gordić Petković, in her reflections on the NIN and Booker Prizes, notes that

attempts at gender equalization have been as unsuccessful as those at national equalization: in 113 years, the Nobel Prize has been awarded to only 12 female laureates, with notable controversies – Harold Bloom fiercely condemned the decision to award the highest recognition to Doris Lessing as a consequence of political correctness; the prize given to Toni Morrison remained under the shadow of arguments of cultural relevance and somewhat illusory invocations of the author’s cult status; while the first Canadian woman awarded the Nobel was the short story writer Alice Munro, and not the far more famous and acclaimed novelist and essayist Margaret Atwood. (Gordić Petković 2014: 23)

Gordić Petković also addresses the problem of the moment when awards gain importance, arguing that this tends to occur

in moments of crisis of evaluation: given that works competing for an award today usually do not undergo prior evaluation by competent critics. At the threshold of positivism and historicism, Serbian criticism reduces the context of evaluation and the value poetics of literary criticism to a universalist presentation of the immanent laws of the work, while political, theoretical, cultural, and ideological contexts are often emphasized only to point out the shortcomings of the analyzed work. To the optimists and the uninformed, it may seem paradoxical that, in parallel with the uncontrolled expansion of publishing production in Serbia, the media space dedicated to literary criticism – an evaluative sphere that could serve as a compass for the award process – has been shrinking. (Gordić Petković 2014: 24)

An analysis of the literary works of the NIN Award-winning female authors within this theoretical framework offers crucial insights into the representation of women in Serbian and Yugoslav literature. Concepts developed by theorists such as Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray prove particularly useful in exploring the ways in which female characters and their narrative voices are constructed in these works, and how the NIN laureates have created unique literary spaces in which female characters are freed from stereotypes and repression.

This need to challenge structural exclusions resonates strongly with Serbian feminist scholarship, which has repeatedly pointed to the marginalization of wo-

men within both the literary canon and the broader cultural field. As Nina Živančević, Biljana Dojčinović Nešić, Magdalena Koh, and Vladislava Gordić Petković have demonstrated, the canon has long been shaped by androcentric premises, often excluding or minimizing women's contributions. Efforts to revise this history – whether through the creation of an alternative women's canon or through critical re-evaluations of existing canons – echo the call of *écriture féminine* to dismantle patriarchal structures and reclaim spaces for female creativity.

On the other hand, the critiques of Toril Moi and Elaine Showalter on “women's literature” and gynocriticism open a productive space for understanding the position of women within the literary canon. Examining the works of these seven laureates through the lens of these concepts provides valuable insight into how they, as female authors, have been positioned within the historical and cultural context of Serbian and Yugoslav literature. The theoretical framework of women's literature not only encourages the analysis of narrative techniques and the representation of female characters but also questions the institutional structures that shape the visibility and valuation of women writers.

Feminine Literature

The categorization of women's writing, as articulated by Elaine Showalter in her tripartite model – *feminine, feminist, and female literature* – provides a valuable framework for analyzing the representation of female identity and narrative voice in Serbian literature.⁴ Showalter's concept of “feminine literature,” which encompasses works that internalize and adapt to the prevailing patriarchal literary norms, serves as a key lens through which the novels of Svetlana Velmar-Janković, Grozdana Olujić, and Gordana Ćirjanić can be examined. These texts, while authored by women, reflect varying degrees of masculinized narrative structures, cross-gender identification, and the subjugation or marginalization of female protagonists. Within the broader feminist literary discourse, theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva have argued that women's writing must subvert phallogocentric structures, yet many works by female authors remain enmeshed in traditional patriarchal aesthetics. This section explores how the selected novels exemplify the characteristics of “feminine literature” as defined by Showalter, while also

⁴ We have chosen this categorization despite the fact that, for instance, Vladislava Gordić Petković initially attempted to classify Serbian women's prose of the 1990s into three categories: “neo-realists,” “confessional prose,” and “postmodern experimenters” (Gordić Petković 200). However, in a later text, “Pismo ili kanon? Ženska proza u Srbiji posle dve hiljadite,” she herself re-examined these categories, asking: “for, can confession not disguise itself as a postmodern deceptive play of history, illusion, and truth, or can experimentation not serve the purpose of confession, with realist technique as its logical companion?” (Gordić Petković 2008: 1166).

considering their potential subversions and critiques of gendered literary conventions.

In her analysis of female characters in the novels of Svetlana Velmar-Janković, Tijana Tropin employs Elaine Showalter's periodization of women's literature, and argues that the novel *Bezдно* by Velmar-Janković falls into the first category, characterized by "the acceptance and internalization of artistic standards and perceptions of roles dictated by the dominant tradition" (Tropin 2008: 295–296). She further asserts that "the opus of this author serves as an excellent example of masculinization, the adoption – so to speak – of male characteristics in the construction of a literary identity" (Tropin 2008: 296).⁵

What does this mean in practical terms? The narrative voice explicitly declares itself as female only at the very beginning of the novel, in the "Note," where the reader is informed that the text consists of discovered and edited manuscripts. Only in this section does the narrator speak in the feminine grammatical form. Based on this, as well as the structure of the novel, Tropin concludes that, in addition to internalization, when it comes to female characters (of which the dominant one is Princess Julia Obrenović), the novel exhibits "a male-positioned narrative voice, a subtly positive valuation of patriarchal norms, and a negative connotation of feminism" (*ibid.*).

Tihomir Brajović similarly observes this phenomenon but problematizes the issue of the narrator's identity through the concept of "cross-gender identification" Analyzing the narrative voices – especially those in the first-person masculine form – he states:

In a laconic and almost unreflective manner, one could say that this fact alone sufficiently reveals the affinities of the local literary scene, which, in a certain traditional sense, remains hierarchically oriented toward a masculinist perspective as culturally unquestionable. (Brajović 2008: 279–280)

Regarding the narrator's grammatical gender, Brajović notes that although the narrator is initially defined as female, this identification later disappears, becoming grammatically masculinized and eventually transforming into "the author of these lines," the first-person plural, and grammatically neutral formulations (Brajović 2008: 280). Comparing Velmar-Janković's "spectacular gender crossing" with that of Marguerite Yourcenar in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Brajović, citing Yourcenar's notes on the novel, seeks to understand the rationale behind this gender shift in Velmar-Janković's work. He suggests that if one is writing about significant historical figures – men, great individuals – it becomes impossible for the central character to be a woman because "women's lives are too limited and too secretive." (Bra-

⁵ All the quotes from the novels and from the scholars (apart from Showalter, Kristeva, Irigaray, Lacan, and Moi) were translated into English by the author of this article.

jović 2008: 286). Consequently, Princess Julia does not become the central character, nor does the female compiler of the manuscripts maintain a consistent grammatical gender identity. However, does *Bezдно* truly undergo a complete masculinization in the name of historical accuracy? The following statement offers a possible answer:

In contemporary Serbian women's novels, the privileged male characters are most often depicted as physically and existentially 'weak' or incomplete subjects, 'transvestitely' disguised as figures whose sensual and corporeal masculinity is suspended in various ways. (Brajović 2008: 289)

Thus, although the character of Mihailo Obrenović aligns with Yourcenar's principles, he is portrayed as "sentimental and unisex," or as an "incomplete" man of his time (*ibid.*).

If we accept this perspective, then even when the narrators are male-identified, their sexuality and masculinity remain suspended. This suggests that female authors adopt a form of "symbolic (im) potency transvestism as a poetic strategy for a fictionally "disguised" conquest of literary power" (Brajović 2008: 291).

As for the female character in *Bezдно*, it has been mentioned that Princess Julia is the primary female figure. However, she is in a clearly subordinate position relative to the two dominant male characters, and she does not speak until page 300 of the novel.

For the first two-thirds of the novel, Julia is depicted only from the outside (...). From the outset, she occupies the position of the Other: a Catholic, a foreigner whose courtly position is further complicated by her inability to conceive. Gradually, she develops a negative stance toward Serbia, and this is ultimately articulated through rejection and alienation. (Tropin 2008: 300)

Princess Julia speaks a total of 15 times – 14 letters and one telegram. The recipient is always the same: her mother. The reader is deprived of the mother's voice, which is instead refracted through Julia's letters. Through her correspondence, we see how the relationship between these two women shifts depending on Julia's (un)acceptable behavior in her private life, which, in turn, has consequences for the prince's public and political standing. The mother-daughter relationship is conditioned by the expectation that the daughter, given her position, must serve as a ceremonial figure,⁶ dedicating her entire life to her social role while suppressing her own identity. The princess, as she reveals, loves her husband and experiences peri-

⁶ At one point, after several emotional departures and returns to the prince, Julia says: "I have returned to the Prince, who treats me with great respect, surrounds me with glory and honors, and, at the same time, considers me a statue – a marble statue, which serves as decoration at receptions, formal dinners, and balls. An ornament of the court" (Velmar-Janković 2021: 477).

ods in which she strives to love his state as well. However, for the most part, she is deeply unhappy – both due to the way people treat her as a foreigner and their cultural mentality, and because the prince, despite his love for her, always prioritizes his political position. Consequently, this leads to her need for infidelity. Julia struggles with the expectations placed upon her by her mother, society, and her husband, oscillating between the desire to assert her own will and the internalized belief that she is the greatest sinner. She frequently defines herself through self-images and meta-images:

You see me as the black sheep of our family, the sinful child dragging our name into disgrace just as it begins to ascend in society. (Velmar-Janković 2021: 366);

I admitted that for everything that has happened and is happening, I alone am to blame. He is not, by any means. He has done nothing to deserve the suffering I have caused him (Velmar-Janković 2021: 399);

Who have you given birth to? Who have I inherited? What kind of monster am I, created to atone for someone's ancient sins, now bringing great suffering to others? (Velmar-Janković 2021: 454)

According to Tijana Tropin:

all that the heroine herself can offer as an introspective judgment is a commonplace remark about the unpredictable nature of women, while also revealing her flirtatiousness, superficial curiosity, and stubbornness. (Tropin 2008: 301)

Furthermore:

Julija's voice – the voice of a woman who causes problems – is continuously muted, silenced, or altered. This results in a structural issue of multiple dimensions, stemming from the shallow portrayal of this crucial character. Her actions, at least within the framework of this novel, lead to a tragic ending, yet they remain insufficiently motivated, and the space dedicated to her is disproportionately small compared to her significance (*ibid.*)

Thus, despite the fact that the main male characters in the novel are portrayed as incomplete men, the central heroine appears to be constructed in accordance with stereotypical images of the foreign woman, the nonbeliever, and – following the spirit of Njegoš⁷ – the woman of the patriarchal era. This casts a different light on the consideration of female identity in the novel by Svetlana Velmar-Janković.

Grozdana Olujić's novel *Glasovi na vetru* can also be categorized as “feminine literature” Although it follows the history of a single family and the personal

⁷ At one point in *Gorski vijenac*, it is stated: “A woman's whim is a laughable thing! A woman does not know what faith she holds; she will change a hundred faiths to do what her heart desires” (Njegoš 1847: 25). The quote was translated into English by the authors of this article.

dramas of its members, it also explores “times of great social upheaval, in which individual dramas absorb the undeniable tragic potential that emerges from the socio-historical sphere” (Mikić 2018: 310).

The novel is narrated in the third person and follows the fate of the protagonist, Danilo Aracki, alongside the decades-long history of his family. Consequently, the narrative perspective is shaped through his vision. Excluding contemporary female characters who appear sporadically,⁸ the novel predominantly features women from the past, constructed within a distinctly patriarchal framework.⁹ These are Danilo’s female ancestors, none of whom were ordinary women. That they follow the matrix of Serbian traditional culture is evident in the following passage:

In the home near Jasenak, Danilo Aracki thought he could see his grandfather walking straight to him on a path made of moonlight, saying, “The Eye of God is all-seeing. The only thing it cannot see is women’s souls. Made out of mud and evil, women carry two devils in their souls. Not even they know when one of them will wake up. A woman hiding an angel in her soul is rarer than a dog that doesn’t bark and a cat that doesn’t meow. Even then, a devil is always somewhere close, crouching and waiting. You’ll discover that one day... (Olujčić 2009: 149)

The association between women and the devil¹⁰ appears again in a discussion about the rebellious adulteress Petrana: “Even eternity is not long enough to get to know a woman and the devil!” (Olujčić 2009: 45). This theme also emerges in the story of the enigmatic Natalija, the wife of Stevan and Danilo’s mother, who, according to Danilo’s grandmother, was entirely unsuitable for him – plain in appearance and of unknown origin. The novel recounts a myth about her:

Natalia, following in her mother Simka Galičanka’s steps, had gone to the rise above the cemetery and waited for the devil in order to snatch his red cap, the one that gives whoever holds it the power to see and hear what others do not see and hear. (Olujčić 2009: 47)

It remained unclear how this small, silent girl had managed to win over the son of a distinguished family – unless, of course, she had received aid from unclean forces. Many of her traits and skills were inherited from her mother, Simka, but it was said that she had even surpassed her. Both women were silent, possessed unusual eyes, and exhibited all the hallmarks of witches.

⁸ Aside from the unknown, nameless woman by whom Danilo wakes, who will, amidst the glow of advertisements, serve as a kind of leitmotif, and his former wife, who has transformed from a beloved figure in his youth into a female demon, Ruža Rašula, a psychiatric patient, and the American Georgie West, there are almost no representations of women from the contemporary era.

⁹ All the negative quotations about women reflect prevailing social attitudes and stereotypes embedded in the Serbian patriarchal context.

¹⁰ Luka Aracki said to his son Stevan: “Every woman carries a devil within her. The beautiful ones, even more than one. What is not for their ears, it’s better that it never reaches them!” (250–251).

Wasn't she able to tame a wild horse by laying her hands on him, lure a fox with her eyes, drive death away from the dying? Couldn't she diagnose disease faster than her mother, who had come from the south and never gotten used to Karanovo, and neither had the town gotten used to her? (*ibid.*)¹¹

The people of Karanovo admired and feared Simka in equal measure, as she was gifted with the ability to find medicinal herbs, interpret dreams, and foresee the future. She could enchant fish and birds. The only person unafraid of her was her daughter-in-law, Petrana. By all accounts, Petrana was exceptionally beautiful, seemingly ageless, strong-willed, and independent, with characteristics that some described as outright demonic. Rumors claimed that she was "the seed of the devil, a descendant of a werewolf, a disguised witch's daughter" Contrary to the expectations of her time and place, Petrana abandoned her family, traveled to European cities, and had numerous lovers. Yet, paradoxically, her husband tolerated all of this, allowing her to return whenever she wished. The most unusual event linked to Petrana became the stuff of legend:

On the third day, when Petrana got up to go, on the table behind her she left an untouched glass of wine and a yellow rose, its fragrance causing the citizens of Karanovo to suffer for weeks. They maintained that Petrana was a witch; she put spells not only on Luka Aracki and the crazy Hungarian, but any male she came into contact with. (Olujčić 2009: 43)

The novel also explores the notion of a familial curse associated with "demonic beauties" like Petrana, suggesting that her lineage produced only short-lived individuals with physical deformities, a limited number of descendants, and a disproportionate prevalence of mental illness and suicide. The mysterious disappearance and death of Natalija Aracki, along with that of her daughter Veta – who, according to her grandfather, was destined to be both beautiful and doomed – further reinforce this idea. Veta, too, met an ambiguous end, prompting an anonymous chronicler of the *Karanovo Chronicle* to remark that "beauty in the Aracki family is equivalent to a curse, perhaps even madness" (Olujčić 2009: 30). However, if we set aside these mystical interpretations and the folk narratives attempting to rationalize these women's fates, it becomes evident that they were simply ahead of their time and societal constraints:

Natalia did not follow anyone, Petrana even less. They were their own person and lived for themselves in a world of their own without letting anyone in, whether out of fear or pride, Danilo did not know. (Olujčić 2009: 163)

¹¹ Danilo himself often pondered about his mother and grandmother: "Leaning over the reports from the archives, Danilo Aracki shuddered: Simka Galičanka, like his mother Natalija Aracki, had white hair and blue eyes. Which of the two of them were the subject of stories claiming they were residents of Vilinstan, miracle workers?" (102).

The third novel belonging to this category is *Ono što oduvek želiš* by Gordana Ćirjanić in which the protagonist is a man and simultaneously the narrator – Slobodan. In her critical text, Aleksandra Đuričić states:

By choosing a man as the main character, the author takes on another challenge – a kind of gender transposition that borders on travesty (...). Slobodan speaks from both a male and female perspective, experiencing a forbidden relationship where he is hurt, humiliated, and abandoned in a manner typically associated with female experiences. He also feels guilt in a similar way. Thus, by skillfully playing with the categories of male and female perceptions of the world, the author aligns herself with a long tradition of writers who have engaged in similar reflections, fictionally reversing gender markers. (Đuričić 2015: 196–197)

Although the protagonist speaks about his romantic experiences, we argue that Brajović's concept of suspended masculinity, or the travesty of symbolic (im)potency, can be applied to him to a certain extent. Although Slobodan is not constructed as a feminized subject and self-consciously situates his identity in relation to the feminine domain (Đuričić 2015: 197), his figure could readily be re-inscribed as a female character whose experience of existential failure is mediated through television narratives. While such a claim may risk reiterating a gender stereotype, this mode of escapism and gendered identification with televisual heroines is culturally coded as a predominantly feminine practice. Slobodan is, in a sense, an exile from reality, a superfluous man burdened by a sense of sin, often exaggerated, even to the point of a Cain-like guilt, for having been in a three-year affair with his sister-in-law, Olga. As a result, he seeks refuge and becomes addicted to television programs.

The women depicted in the narrative could almost be categorized as patriarchal stereotypes. Slobodan's life with his wife, Marta, was "filled with laughter and companionship," and her struggle and death profoundly "shaped him as a husband and widower" (Ćirjanić 2012: 101).

On the other hand, there is Olga, the adulteress who, due to the monotony of her marriage to Slobodan's brother, seduced another brother, only to ultimately discard him. This stark polarization of female characters resembles those in Serbian oral epic poetry – the faithful wife and the unfaithful woman. However, the narrator challenges this traditional dichotomy and, to some extent, "rehabilitates" certain women:

After everything, I regretted that she had understood me so poorly; perhaps that suffocated me more than her betrayal. If she could have betrayed you, my brother, why wouldn't she betray me as well? I did not succumb to the temptation of attributing her tendency to betray trust to the fact that she was a woman, because, fortunately, I had known different women – for some, concepts of loyalty, trust, and honor are sacred, just as they were for Dumas's musketeers. What I mean to say is that chivalry has no gender, but the absence of chivalry is, by inertia, attributed to the female principle. (Ćirjanić 2012: 152–153)

It seems that Slobodan is in pursuit of chivalry, immersing himself in films and television series, identifying with honorable and heroic figures. And although Gordana Ćirjanić's novel is far from those of the Yourcenar type, as the author does not write about a great man, Slobodan is nonetheless a hero of a new age, constructed through the lens of "spectacular gender crossing".

The novels discussed within this section illustrate the complexities of female authorship within a literary tradition that has historically privileged male-centered narratives. As Showalter's framework suggests, the persistence of internalized patriarchal norms in "feminine literature" often results in the marginalization or silencing of female voices, as seen in the depiction of Princess Julija in *Bezдно*, the mythologization of female figures in *Glasovi na vetru*, and the gender transposition in *Ono što oduvek želiš*. However, the nuanced portrayals of female characters in these texts also reveal potential moments of resistance – instances where the narrative strategies destabilize rigid gender binaries. Ultimately, while these works may not fully align with the radical ambitions of *écriture féminine*, they offer critical insights into the evolving negotiation of female literary identity within Serbian literature.

The Second Section Feminist Literature

The concept of "feminist literature" extends beyond female authorship to encompass narratives that actively interrogate and challenge patriarchal structures. In feminist literary theory, scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Julia Kristeva have outlined how women's writing can resist male-dominated literary traditions. Showalter's gynocriticism emphasizes the transition from imitation to self-definition, while Cixous's *écriture féminine* advocates for a disruptive, body-centered mode of expression that breaks away from phallogentric discourse. Kristeva's notion of the semiotic underscores the fluid, nonlinear nature of female subjectivity in language. The novels analyzed in this section – *Unutrašnje more* by Danica Vukićević, *Deca* by Milena Marković, and *Forsiranje romana reke* by Dubravka Ugrešić – engage with feminist concerns at multiple levels, from narrative experimentation to the explicit thematization of gender, power, and the subversion of traditional literary forms. These works oscillate between resistance and compliance with dominant literary norms, demonstrating the multifaceted ways in which feminist literature negotiates the tensions between language, subjectivity, and social structures.

At the beginning of this segment, we focus on an intriguing critique *Krivo je (unutrašnje) more* by Vladan Bajčeta of the novel *Unutrašnje more* by Danica Vukićević, which offers a perspective that challenges the novel's themes and intentions. Referring to Milena Marković's award-winning novel, which he argues does not merit the accolade, Bajčeta signals his intent to question the laureate's success

through the very title of his critique. He characterizes the novel's writing style as "disheveled and careless," neither anti-novel nor anti-literature, and goes on to claim:

The book consists of spontaneous notes with arbitrary titles and even more arbitrary content, somewhere on the border between diary entries and stylistic exercises; verbal associations and pseudo-poetic variations on spontaneously emerging themes and other private content in microtextual form, presented in an easily imaginable sequence. The author, as if posing lexical questions to herself on each page, then answers them with the full extravagance of her excessive belief in the literariness of everything she writes, and her absolute disregard for the reader. (Bajčeta 2023: 905)

Without engaging in polemics with this author, we must acknowledge that he is correct on one point – Danica Vukićević's novel could indeed be considered a lexicon-novel. Without glorification or comparison to Pavić's structuring of this genre, we find that this designation most accurately describes *Unutrašnje more*. The novel can be read at one's own pace, placing the reader in the position of co-author. It contains numerous thematic nuclei, but we will focus on those concerning women and men.

The novel presents women of various ages, depicted in both first- and third-person narratives. The narrator identifies as a feminist and, through this perspective, interprets the fates of other women: girls, wives, mothers, victims of abuse, subordinates in the workplace. In this way, two concepts emerge – the emancipated feminist woman and the subjugated woman of traditional patriarchal culture. Her feminism, embraced in youth but externally unaccepted, is defined in her maturity as intersecting with faith. What remains of feminism for her is anti-fascism, embraced through faith. However, as she states, this identity is not accepted by either feminists or religious people (Vukićević 2022: 41).

This declaration is juxtaposed with segments addressing women's/self-creation, its strengths, and weaknesses. As a kind of autopoetic statement, the narrator declares:

My job is to make things exciting or more exciting than they are. But such devotion is harmful to one's health, all that living through my body into the body of the text. And the insecurity of the private/public membrane makes me extremely exposed and vulnerable, which is paradoxically my extreme strength. (Vukićević 2022: 61)

At this juncture, Hélène Cixous's thesis on "writing the self" and women's writing as the liberation of body and language is applicable. The act of writing, according to Vukićević, represents "an immediate and momentary emancipation," as conveyed in a segment titled "Genesis" (Vukićević 2022: 216). From this idea emerges her stance on male and female writing, concluding that the difference between them is immense:

Writing about nothing, and writing around a core that fills. Writing with ignorance and futility, and writing in the form of world creation. Writing on one's knees and writing in an office. (Vukićević 2022: 87)

Furthermore, she discusses the taboo of female power and the fear women have of their own creativity, driven by the belief that:

They do not deserve it, it does not belong to them, they will not be rewarded, respected, or treated as exceptional for it; on the contrary, they will be expelled from the marketplace of social power and acceptability, perhaps even punished. That power is both terrifying and wonderful, and everyone fears it. (Vukićević 2022: 168)

The second category of women in the novel comprises those who have accepted subjugation, undoubtedly conditioned not only by Serbian patriarchal culture. These women willingly sacrifice themselves for men – whether for the “greater cause” of brilliant artists (Vukićević 2022: 151), for a man's career, even if he is not their own (Vukićević 2022: 159), or for a superior whose servitude is “anti-feminist, anti-dignified” (*ibid.*). This category also includes those who lived only until they were married, such as the narrator's mother, who was the perfect homemaker and listened to opera “before marriage” (Vukićević 2022: 70). It includes women convinced that survival without a man is impossible,¹² mothers of deceased children whom they bore as teenagers (Vukićević 2022: 45), and all those who, unlike Madame Bovary, conform to societal expectations:

The life that was rightfully meant for her – luxurious, operatic – did not come to fruition. She did not marry in time, nor the right person; yet, she married, for the sake of salvation. And since this was not the life meant for her, she did what she could – she made magical confections, raised children, and withdrew into the home. She simply stopped going out; the life meant for her never materialized. (Vukićević 2022: 51–52)

Two of the most extensive segments in the novel consist of catalogues of women: the first is a faction/group of nine heterosexual women of mature age, each observing all other categories from a certain height, believing that their choices place them in a privileged position over other mortal women (Vukićević 2022: 177). The second comprises those who are becoming increasingly numerous, a product of some new carnivalized era – creative women, advocates of healthy living, users of cosmetic procedures, women who live “online,” high-end prostitutes, women who seemingly achieve everything. Yet, this is merely an illusion of emancipation and freedom, for ultimately:

¹² “Whatever he does, no matter how unpleasant or aggressive it may be toward her, she will find a justification and understand him. She will invent reasons, convincing herself that he helped her in difficult times and stood by her side. Without him, she would have surely fallen – he was there to catch her at the very brink of ruin. Simply because he is a man” (11).

All ascension happens by male grace; oh, male grace toward women is merciful – the pacification of latent misogynistic evil, and so on. (Vukićević 2022: 199)

Showalter's gynocriticism, which outlines the evolution of women's literature from imitation to resistance and ultimately to the creation of an independent female aesthetic, is relevant here. The novel resists traditional linear storytelling, positioning the reader as a co-author and reinforcing the idea that female identity is not static but continually reshaped by socio-cultural forces. *The Inner Sea* critiques the internalization of patriarchal values, portraying women who either conform to or challenge oppressive norms. The narrator's assertion that "female power is both terrifying and wonderful, and everyone fears it" (Vukićević 2022: 168), reflects broader feminist debates on women's agency and marginalization.

Milena Marković, in her novel (lyrical novel, novel in verse, novel-poem). *Deca (Children)*, explores the coming-of-age and life experiences of her protagonist, while also sketching the lives of her parents and her own children – thus depicting the maturation of multiple generations within a single country that is gradually shrinking, spanning from the Second World War to the post-Yugoslav era. Miljenko Jergović observes about the novel the following:

Deca is a novel about childhood, about children giving birth to other children, about family – dysfunctional, because who, apart from priests and pedagogues, knows what a functional family looks like? *Deca* is a poem about thwarted, eternally unfinished growth, a powerful and unparalleled work in our languages, the greatest book on femininity, on motherhood, daughterhood, and sonhood, a perilous novel about history – the history most crucial and traumatic for us, beginning with the Second World War, continuing through the 1980s, the decade of our coming-of-age, and ultimately overwhelming us in the 1990s. (Jergović 2021)

The life of the protagonist-narrator is shaped by familial, societal, and personal choices and ruptures. She speaks of them in a torrential, uninterrupted flow – without capital letters, without any punctuation marks except for a single period at the end. Her style is colloquial, sharp, brutal, often vulgar, as she calls things by their true names, disregarding puritanism and political correctness (thus, she refers to her autistic, mentally impaired son as a "moron"). She speaks through every part of her body:¹³

The map of the world is inscribed onto this protagonist's body, and she literally feels it on her own skin. (Milovančević 2021:75)

Milena Marković's text is an anatomical map of a woman's life, and, as Jergović observes,

¹³ "Mother never experienced anything with her eyes, ears, or fingers – only with her heart and stomach" (Marković 2023: 152).

She does not complain, does not lament, does not scandalize. There is none of that cheap engagement, no “women’s writing,” no gender, class, or nation. (Jergović 2021)

The protagonist-narrator is closely aligned with the author herself,

making the confessional dimension of the novel highly permeable and significantly shifting the thresholds of fictionality. (Milovančević 2021:75)

She frequently refers to herself by the name Milena, which can be seen as “a metanarrative gesture” (*ibid.*).

In Marković’s work, we can also observe two categories of women: older women, such as her mother and aunt, and the generation to which the narrator belongs. The first category conforms to the patriarchal framework, which is at times described with mere detachment and at other times condemned from the perspective of a rebellious, urban girl. These women were part of the protagonist’s upbringing and identity formation. The novel opens with a passage about her aunt, her father’s sister, who:

was not allowed to marry the man she loved from the village but was given instead to an engineer. Before that, she worked in Belgrade for wealthy relatives, who did all sorts of things and said whatever they wanted in front of her as if she didn’t exist. (*ibid.*)

The aunt would often say: “If a girl has more than one man, that’s already a brothel” (Marković 2023: 7).

The novel’s segments describing trips to the countryside every Friday construct an image of family life that, despite being set in the twentieth century, seems to belong to a much earlier era – almost barbaric in its conception. For example, the young protagonist is forced to spend the night at the home of her great-aunt, who, after a traffic accident, was left with only one grandson – “a bad boy who was allowed to do anything.” The girl is made to bathe in the middle of the room, while her relative calls for the grandson to come and watch (Marković 2023: 14–15). During a scene of bathing in the river, as well as the obsessive discussion of “lazy, big-bottomed girls” by the protagonist’s sisters, who are constantly talking about “that,” the narrator observes: “In the water, there was a cousin and another boy in the tree – they have knives, they all have knives, all of them in their underwear” (Marković 2023: 15).

The novel frequently recounts episodes of raw sexuality, particularly regarding young girls in the city and, even more so, those in rural settings. One striking scene involves the girls who work as servants at the grandfather’s summer house, where an emphasis is placed on their sexuality. The scene culminates in the revelation that: “Behind the fig trees, near the house, grandfather would grab each of us by the breasts and crotch” (Marković 2023: 24–25).

As counterpoints to such brutal experiences – not only within the family but also in other unbearable situations – the narrator constructs “mythopoetic visions” (Milovančević 2021:75). In these, she sees herself as beautiful, powerful, and strong, akin to ancient rulers and goddesses (Marković 2023: 13), yet she also, as a little girl, dreams of a princely figure (Marković 2023: 11).

At times, the protagonist speaks of herself as an outsider, someone who does not belong – whether to her family or any other form of community. She attempts to imagine herself as a girl or woman who is elevated, deserving of a much better world. Yet, in reality, she sees herself as ugly, rebellious, and inherently different, but also as “trash, a whore, a traitor, filth,” a coward and a degenerate, undeserving of comfort, filth from a long line of filth (Marković 2023: 32–33). She also carries a sense of guilt, stemming from decades of self-examination, particularly regarding her son Ognjen’s developmental disorder and the burden this places on his younger brother, Jovan, who was born late in her life: “All the other children have their own friends – only he has an old mother and a moron for a brother” (Marković 2023: 115).

Despite *Deca* being a novel about growing up, about mothers and children, the protagonist, even in later years, still longs for the peace of the prenatal state (Marković 2023: 64). Speaking of her fears, she recognizes that all people are:

fragile human children (...). everyone wants everything – screaming, human children – everyone wants to be somewhere else, and everyone believes they deserve it (*ibid.*);

The earth has turned so many times, so many of our people have entered graves, and yet we are still not fully human – we are some terrible children. (Marković 2023: 134)

Ultimately, what remains after all is just children – children who, if they are lucky, leave and forget (Marković 2023: 135). The protagonist of Marković’s novel, Milena, is a woman-child.

Dubravka Ugrešić’s novel *Forsiranje romana reke* (*Fording the Stream of Consciousness*). became the first work by a female author to receive the NIN Award in 1988. Considering both the sociopolitical climate of that year and the context of the still-unified SFRY – a society profoundly marked by masculine structures – this recognition may, in retrospect, be regarded as a quiet revolution.¹⁴ Perhaps the controversy surrounding the novel’s content, its language, and the

¹⁴ Very valuable insights relevant to this topic can be found in the book *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia* by Celia Hawkesworth (2000). The author provides a comprehensive overview of the cultural, social, and political milieu of these regions and examines the position and role of women from the period of oral literary tradition up to the 1990s. The recurring thread throughout the study is that, regardless of greater or lesser societal changes, women in Serbia have lived, if not under the direct influence of classical patriarchy, then at least in its lingering shadow.

gender of its author played a decisive role at the time. Throughout the novel, which revolves around writers, literary critics, their relationships, contemporary political themes, and the state of cultural affairs, there is a pervasive use of obscene language, descriptions of sexual encounters, and a distinctive portrayal of women. Although the narrator is female and her personal story frames the novel, she constructs female characters that, at first glance, are camouflaged by a masculine perspective. Women are frequently reduced to mere bodies, potential or unwanted sexual objects. Not only do men perceive them this way, but many of the women themselves conform to this image, their role being, more or less, to serve men and cater solely to their pleasures. Women are referred to as “kittens,” “dolls,” “airplanes” ... At the international literary gathering, which serves as the novel's chronotope,

there were slightly fewer women, and they were mostly young and attractive. They were students of language programs at the Faculty of Philosophy, hired to assist foreign guests as translators. They do not belong to the animal kingdom, concluded Pipo; they are smooth, shiny, metallic, with perfect aerodynamic shapes. (Ugrešić 2023: 35)

In contrast, female children's authors are depicted as “frail old women, thin, with sparse gray hair and eyes faded by age,” nodding their heads as if pecking, reminiscent of hens: “They regularly lay their good-natured lyrical works, colored Easter eggs” (Ugrešić 2023: 34). Among the more vividly portrayed female characters is Wanda, the minister's mistress, who, despite some faint character contours, is almost entirely reduced to a body and the role of a female counterpart. Women are blamed for the loss of many male manuscripts and valuable collector's editions, destroying them out of ignorance or revenge (Ugrešić 2023: 81–82). The gathering itself, traditionally, serves as a space for sexual encounters, which are described in the novel, with women portrayed as affectionate and yielding. Based on this, one might conclude that “the author herself hates women, or at least the kind of women she describes” (Krnjajić Cekić 2007: 79). However, as previously stated, we argue that this represents a mimetic masculine perspective in narration, and that the author's intention is entirely contrary to what is being conveyed. In fact, Ugrešić employs a kaleidoscopic technique to expose women from such a perspective, ironizing the entire system of societal, and especially gender, stereotypes, as well as the centuries-old construction of male and female roles.

A unique group of Amazonian women – Dunja, Cecilija, Tanja, and the Danish woman – assume the role of avengers, though unfortunately only on behalf of humiliated female writers. In their act of revenge against the critic Ljuština, they initially resort to an archetypically male weapon – rape – followed by various forms of psychological and physical torture and humiliation. They ensnare Ljuština according to a masculine script:

First, we had a few drinks at the hotel bar. I pretended to be interested in his opinion on women's literature," the Danish woman recounted lively, nervously sipping her wine. "He started talking about how women's literature belongs in the kitchen, then something about clitoral writing, you know, the typical male-chauvinistic drive!

[...]

In bed, I immediately suggested sadomasochistic games, justifying my choice by his fear of women. I told him that his negative critical stance on female writers could be interpreted as a textbook example of sublimation of an exhibitionist-masochistic syndrome. Constantly provoking and insulting women is nothing more than a masochist's desire to be thoroughly beaten by those same women. (Ugrešić 2023: 187)

Thus, they weaponize multiple forms of traditionally male violence. Ljuština is lured, seduced, and raped, the news spreads throughout the hotel, and he is taken to the hospital. The revenge scene spans five pages (141-146); beyond being tied to the bed with his mouth gagged, fearing the auction of torture methods – reminiscent of a terrifying female court – he even faints:

Did he declare our literature as kitchen literature?! Did he write that no woman can be a novelist because her peculiar, gossipy imagination prevents her from transcending gossip as a biological category?!" "He did!" Dunja shouted. "Confess, you scum!" she shot a piercing glance at the literary critic. "Did he write that the birthplace of gossip is the kitchen and that gossip constitutes the essence of women's worldview? Did he claim that our books echo that terrible chatter that erupts from all kitchens in the world like lava?!" Tanja mercilessly quoted. "See, he insulted you too." Dunja addressed Cecilija. "Did he say that women take up writing as they do a ladle?!" "He did!" "Then we will torture him with compatible means!" Tanja concluded. The girls stared at Tanja. "And what would those compatible means be?!" "Kitchen utensils!" Tanja explained calmly. "If you agree, I'll just run to my apartment, it's no trouble

[...]

Meat grinder, meat tenderizer, mixer, forks, ladles, knives. (Ugrešić 2023: 142–143)

As the critic, stripped of autonomy, lies in fear, the women encircle him, debating their methods: gluing his body with carpenters' glue, stitching his flesh with thread, and finally tying a balloon to his genitals as a grotesque marker of their triumph. The narrator notes:

Cecilija put out her cigarette and, without hurrying, unbuttoned her blouse. From the pile of soft white feathers, a large, dusky pink stalk slowly and timidly emerged

[...]

"Carefully, she cut open the pillows, and feathers burst out... 'Monster! Truly a monster!' Dunja burst out laughing"

[...]

Now let's blow!' Dunja cried gleefully. All three blew hard, and the balloon lifted up, tightening the string. From the feathers protruded the critic's dangling flesh. The girls clapped. The critic Ljuština turned red, closed his eyes, and groaned in pain. (Ugrešić 2023: 144–145)

Although the threat of castration is ultimately not carried out, the victim is both literally and symbolically tarred and feathered, subjected to a grotesque ritual of emasculation. The entire episode, oscillating between parody and violence, evokes a disturbing inversion of gendered power: the traditionally male-coded act of rape is here performed by women, while kitchen utensils and domestic symbols become tools of degradation. Given all the above, a rhetorical question arises: is *Forsiranje romana reke* a feminist or a misogynistic novel? Perhaps it is neither one nor the other, but rather a *roman-fleuve* constructed upon the foundations of an ironic model, brought to its ultimate point when it comes to the works of this author.¹⁵

The novels examined in this section illustrate the diverse ways in which feminist literature can manifest – whether through radical linguistic play, confessional poetics, or metatextual irony. Vukićević's *Unutrašnje more* aligns with Cixous's call for women to “write themselves,” engaging in a self-reflexive act of textual embodiment that foregrounds the vulnerability and power of female authorship. Marković's *Deca* disrupts traditional narrative structures through a raw, corporeal poetics that captures the generational trauma and struggles of womanhood, echoing Kristeva's theory of the semiotic's disruptive force within language. Ugrešić's *Forsiranje romana reke*, in its ironic deconstruction of literary misogyny, simultaneously mimics and critiques the patriarchal gaze, raising the question of whether subverting male discourse from within ultimately reinforces or dismantles it. In engaging with these texts, feminist literary theory provides a critical lens for understanding how contemporary women's writing negotiates the balance between transgression and constraint, autonomy and systemic conditioning.

Female Literature

In the “female phase,” women's writing moves beyond imitation and resistance to establish an autonomous literary expression rooted in female experience. Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine* further reinforces this idea, arguing

¹⁵ Writing about the use of irony in the novels of Dubravka Ugrešić, Mihajlo Spasojević states that this novel “retains the formal elements of the *roman-fleuve*, albeit treated ironically” (92), and that “its metatextual layer is achieved through the construction of this form by employing elements of various literary, artistic, and pseudo-artistic forms: diary entries, crime fiction, romance novels, epistolary prose, newspaper reports, as well as excerpts from classical works (once again Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*). This, of course, points to the possibility of reading the text against the background of camp, reflecting Ugrešić's tendency to blend elements of so-called high art with forms that verge on kitsch” (Spasojević 2001: 92–93).

that women's voices must be inscribed into literature through nonlinear, embodied narratives that disrupt patriarchal linguistic structures. Ivana Dimić's novel *Arzamas* exemplifies these theoretical positions through its intimate exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, the use of fragmented and poetic language, and the invocation of Emily Dickinson as a symbol of female artistic perseverance. The novel does not merely depict women's experiences but constructs a distinctly feminine mode of storytelling, where memory, grief, and self-discovery intertwine in a deeply personal and yet universally resonant narrative.

Arzamas explores the mother-daughter relationship, framed by the mother's illness and death. Thematic engagement with this type of familial relationship is rare in the history of Serbian literature.¹⁶ The novel consists of prose-essayistic segments, narrated by a first-person storyteller, and dramatic sections featuring an omniscient narrator, whose characters include the mother, daughter, and occasional external figures (doctor, handyman, etc.). Each segment has its own title. The novel's backbone is the story of the mother's descent into dementia and the daughter's care for her. Based on the provided information, we conclude that during the narrator's upbringing, the mother-daughter relationship was not ideal, as the mother was dominant while the daughter was, in a way, submissive.

Jasmina Vrbavac identifies the Electra complex in this depiction, outlining three developmental phases: pre-Oedipal (absolute maternal love), Electra's phase of conflict, and the phase of return to unconditional love. Paradoxically, the mother's illness and the reversal of caregiving roles become a cathartic process of healing their relationship (Vrbavac 2017: 229).

Vrbavac also draws on feminist gender theorists, reflecting on the potential mimicry involved in addressing an exclusively female theme through a male discourse (Luce Irigaray), as well as on the fundamental connection between *écriture féminine* and the mother as the source of the voice that must be heard in all women's texts, since "through the female voice speaks the Voice of the Mother, the key figure from the child's pre-Oedipal phase, the voice of unconditional maternal love" (Hélène Cixous). Based on these theses, the author argues that the dramatic structure privileges the voice, that is, femininity in writing – the femininity of the mother and daughter, who shape that voice (*ibid.*).

In the prose segments, the narrator devotes attention to dreams and to details from the lives of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer, and Shklovsky. However, in the final quarter of the text, as the mother's health deteriorates, these segments focus exclusively on the life of Emily Dickinson.¹⁷ Vrbavac interprets this

¹⁶ See: Vrbavac 2017: 227; Pantić 2017:127-128.

¹⁷ The author engages in a kind of poetic dialogue with Emily, while simultaneously presenting her as both an alter ego and a literary character. These sections could each be read as distinct, self-contained units.

shift toward Dickinson as stemming from the poet's lifelong illness, which "instills hope and confidence that life and love persist both alongside and in spite of illness" (Vrbavac 2017: 229);

Mihajlo Pantić further observes:

The approach of her mother's death so thoroughly consumes all of her time, emotions, and thoughts that she gradually constructs a kind of parallel existence, retreating into dreams, fiction, and writing about history, philosophy, nature, and poetry. Particularly with the looming presence of her mother's impending death, she turns to the fate of Emily Dickinson – not identifying with her, yet finding in her some form of solace and, ultimately, a means of rediscovering herself. (Pantić 2017: 129)

By following Dickinson's life and her dedication to artistic creation despite illness, engaging in a kind of dialogue with her, and intertwining these segments with the dramatic structure, the narrative creates a counterpoint to the narrator's own circumstances. Ultimately, the very act of writing *Arzamas* becomes a "necessary condition":

There comes a moment when one realizes that there is nothing left to hope for," the poet thought. "A moment when everything is over: when every opportunity has passed, when all possibilities have been exhausted or abandoned, the moment when the gates have closed. / That is when it is time to give up. One cannot dwell indefinitely in a place where reciprocity is a necessary condition for existence. / Or perhaps one can? One more day... and another... and another. (Dimić 2017: 184)

The "female" phase of literature, with its emphasis on self-definition and the articulation of female subjectivity beyond male-imposed categories, manifests in *Arzamas* through the novel's introspective structure, its engagement with themes of care, loss, and artistic survival, and its alignment with Cixous's *écriture féminine* – where the maternal voice is both a presence and an absence shaping the protagonist's selfhood. The intertextual dialogue with Emily Dickinson further positions the novel within a lineage of women's writing that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries, emphasizing the endurance of female creativity in the face of suffering. Ultimately, *Arzamas* exemplifies the literary strategies of "female" literature by foregrounding the complexity of women's emotional and intellectual lives, challenging traditional narrative forms, and affirming the necessity of women's voices in literature.

Conclusion

The analysis of NIN Award-winning novels has demonstrated the complexity and diversity of female character construction and narrative voices in contemporary Serbian and Yugoslav literature.¹⁸ The theoretical frameworks of *écriture féminine* and women's literature have provided a multidisciplinary perspective on the ways in which female authors have shaped narrative structures and female protagonists while simultaneously challenging patriarchal norms and literary canons.

The concept of *écriture féminine*, as developed in the theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, has highlighted the specific linguistic strategies and subversive poetics through which female authors have distanced themselves from traditional, phallogentric, and logocentric discourse. In *Deca*, Milena Marković employs poetic discourse and fragmentation to deconstruct traditional female narratives, whereas Danica Vukićević, in *Unutrašnje more*, relies on introspective notes and fragmented microstructures that undermine the stability of the male literary canon. These strategies align with the concept of *écriture féminine* as a practice of resistance, where language is not merely a means of expression but also a space of political struggle.

Furthermore, the analysis has illuminated the different positions of women's literature within the literary canon, following the theoretical frameworks of Elaine Showalter and Toril Moi. Showalter's categorization of women's literature into "feminine," "feminist," and "female" has helped map the distinctions between works that internalize patriarchal models and those that openly deconstruct them. Svetlana Velmar Janković in *Bezдно* and Grozdana Olujić in *Glasovi u vetru* partially retain masculinized narrative voices, while Dubravka Ugrešić in *Forsiranje romana reke* and Ivana Dimić in *Arzamas* interrogate traditional narrative models through self-reflexive and metanarrative techniques.

The application of feminist literary theory and Showalter's *gynocriticism* further illuminates the position of these authors within the Serbian and Yugoslav literary canon. Their novels reflect various stages in the development of women's literature – from the acceptance of patriarchal norms to the open deconstruction of male discourse. At the same time, Toril Moi challenges the very concept of women's literature and its potential beyond the binary opposition of masculine and feminine, further complicating the status of these novels within the dominant literary canon.

Although female authors who have won the NIN Award remain significantly underrepresented compared to their male counterparts, their works offer a substan-

¹⁸ This paper has focused solely on female authors, whereas a more comprehensive picture could be achieved by comparing them with male authors – a demanding task that may be undertaken in future research.

tial portrayal of alternative female identities and narrative strategies. Their reception, institutional status, and role within the literary canon remain subjects of ongoing academic debates and further research. While this study does not provide definitive answers, it opens the space for a deeper consideration not only of women's literature but also of the broader issue of the representation and valuation of female authorship in contemporary Serbian and Yugoslav culture.

In this regard, future research could focus on a more in-depth analysis of the reception of these novels, as well as a comparative analysis with other national literatures within the framework of global feminist literary criticism. Such an approach would further illuminate issues of gender inequality in the literary field while also opening new perspectives for interpreting and reevaluating female authorship in both regional and international contexts.

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SAŽETAK

”ŽENSKO PISMO” I NIN-OVA KNJIŽEVNA NAGRADA

NIN-ova književna nagrada, ustanovljena 1954. godine, jedno je od najvažnijih priznanja za roman na srpskom jeziku. Unatoč njezinu kanonskom statusu, u više od sedam desetljeća postojanja nagradu je dobilo samo sedam autorica: Dubravka Ugrešić za roman *Forsiranje romana reke* (1988), Svetlana Velmar Janković za *Bezdn* (1995), Grozdana Olujić za *Glasove u vetru* (2009), Gordana Ćirjanić za *Ono što oduvek želiš* (2010), Ivana Dimić za *Arzamas* (2017), Milena Marković za roman *Deca* (2021) te Danica Vukićević za *Unutrašnje more* (2023). Polazeći od teorijsko-metodoloških postavki feminističke književne kritike, ponajprije koncepta ”ženskoga pisma” i ”ženske književnosti”, u radu se analiziraju pripovjedačke instance te oblikovanje ženskih likova u navedenim romanima. Uzimajući u obzir širok vremenski raspon njihova nastanka, kao i njihovu poetološku i tematsku raznolikost, istražuje se na koji su način protagonistice pozicionirane unutar navedenoga interpretativnog okvira. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje odnosu između reprezentacije ženskih likova i društveno-povijesnog konteksta, s ciljem utvrđivanja u kojoj su mjeri njihove književne konstrukcije definirane suvremenim društvenim promjenama, a u kojoj reproduciraju obrasce patrijarhalnog diskursa i rodni stereotipa. Iako je riječ o razmjerno ograničenom korpusu, cilj ovoga istraživanja jest pridonijeti raspravi o položaju književnica u srpskom, odnosno jugoslavenskom književnom kanonu te o njihovoj književnoj i institucionalnoj valorizaciji u drugoj polovici 20. i prvoj četvrtini 21. stoljeća. Umjesto konačnih zaključaka, cilj je ponuditi analitički okvir i istraživačke smjernice za buduća, opsežnija istraživanja odnosa između književnog kanona, rodne reprezentacije i književnih nagrada.

Ključne riječi: feministička književna teorija, *écriture féminine*, srpski/jugoslavenski književni kanon, ženski likovi, NIN-ova nagrada