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Turkish in Cyrillic: Deep Transgression in Jelena Dimitrijević's Writings¹

The paper points to the unique cultural project in the works of Serbian writer Jelena Dimitrijević (1862–1945), inspired by the imagery of Turkish harems and relations among women living in them. Dimitrijević distinctly oscillated between two cultural paradigms: that of the East (Orient) and that of the West (Occident). We can distinguish three stages of Dimitrijević's "Turkish project" – stage one is represented by her works *Letters from Niš on Harems* 1897, or a tame and hybrid world of the Turkish-Serbian province; stage two by *Letters from Salonika* (1908), or the fascination with the Young Turk revolution and the cover cloth controversy; and stage three by the novel *Nove* (1912), which speaks about the disappointment with the westernization of Turkish women. All these works were marked by *deep transgression*, the transforming process that reaches deep under the surface of normative societies. *Deep transgression* denotes the historical and geopolitical (also geopoetical) conjuncture in which a character, a group of characters, or a represented culture as a whole, cannot be designated by any single label. This means that he or she (or they) belongs to more than one established category, which makes them outsiders in all the cultural contexts they are attached to. In most of the cases, overcoming these differences is a utopian project, breeding conflicts the plot is based on, eventually yielding difficult situations and an unhappy outcome.

Keywords: Jelena Dimitrijević, women's writing, modernism, feminism, deep transgression, transculturalism, East, West

Jelena Dimitrijević (1862–1945)² was born in the Principality of Serbia, post Ottoman Empire, and died in the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. She spent most of her life in the Kingdom of Serbia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (since 1929, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). She was 16 when, at Berlin Congress, Serbia gained independence after almost 500 years under the Ottoman empire rule. She witnessed the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913 (involved as a nurse in them), lost her husband in World War I and died a month before the World War II ended. She travelled extensively, becoming familiar with Western and South-Eastern Europe, North America, North Africa and Asia. This experience induced Jelena Dimitrijević not simply to combine, but rather to merge the East-West categories, as well as

the discourse along the Orient-Occident axis, with reflection on other cultures and gender issues. Dimitrijević took up the challenge of bringing cultures that stemmed from different traditions (Slavic and non-Slavic) in profound dialogue and engaging “the pluralistic idea of transculturalism (seeing oneself in the other)”.³ This, in effect, produced a hybrid cultural identity, defying any precise demarcation between the familiar and the foreign and, thus, making for an exquisite example of transcultural narration.

One of the most important factors fostering the construction of such an extensive project was her **polyglotism**, which – after Rosi Braidotti – may be called a linguistic nomadism.⁴ Apart from her native Serbian, Dimitrijević taught herself Turkish and spoke fluent French, English, German, Russian and Greek. The command of these – both eastern and western – languages enabled her to engage directly and intensely with various cultures and, at the same time, facilitated an adoption of a transnational and transcultural perspective. That perspective did not surface in many other women-travelers from Western Europe journeying in the Orient, equipped only with the knowledge of English and/or French.

Another extremely important factor contributing to her transcultural perspective was the frontier quality inherently characteristic of her own country and culture. Hers was a complicated context, as she was a woman-writer from the Balkans. The position of her native culture, at the margins of Europe, meant that it had a relatively weak capacity to exert influence and was much more on the receiving end. It was a period of modernization and accelerated development of the culture⁵ for centuries entangled in the relations between empires – the Ottoman Empire in the East and the Habsburg Monarchy in the West, not to mention the influence of other European empires – Great Britain and France – which had their vested interests in the area. As emphasized by Maria Todorova in her book *Imagining the Balkans*, the Balkans are usually perceived as a “transition zone,” an area of “being-in-between,” a bridge between the West and the Orient, between Europe and Asia, and between Christianity and Islam.⁶

It is no wonder then that many works of Jelena Dimitrijević feature what may be usefully named *deep transgression*. *Deep transgression* denotes the historical and geopolitical (also geopoetical) conjuncture in which a character, a group of characters, or a represented culture as a whole, cannot be designated by any single label. This means that he or she (or they) belongs to more than one established category, which makes them outsiders in all the cultural contexts they are attached to. In order to “normalize” their lives, they seem to be compelled to go through a process of a political, ethnical and/or ethical adjustment, which is often not possible. It also means that what is perceived as a complete turnaround needed for

an individual outsider or a group of them, could most often be solved by proper education and by giving up the normative judgment of the dominant society. Deep transgression is best seen as a transformative process, which requires a deep transition of a society, rather than of an individual character or a group of characters, in order to acknowledge and accept those who are different. In most of the cases, it is a utopian project, breeding conflicts the plot is based on, eventually yielding difficult situations and an unhappy outcome. It should be understood that *deep transgression* does not only refer to situations portrayed in literary fictions. This is an essential point, because, in literature, even in its documentary and non-fictional genres, *deep transgression* is an expression of free imagination, a play of seemingly impossible combinations, an experiment that breaks up with tradition, normativity, stereotypes.

Yet, the motif is also entangled in actual experiences of the author or prototypes of literary characters. With her choice of topics, genres and specific language usages, Jelena Dimitrijević rendered processes of modernization which were taking place away from what are considered mainstream modernist loci. The specificities of the historical circumstances, of her personal life and education, as well as of her emotional and cultural involvements, all added up to produce works which defy any easy classification and description. In this paper, the works by Jelena Dimitrijević which feature *deep transgression* will be viewed from the point of view of their content and their generic build-up.

The basic issue we should start from is the modernization in the Balkans. At a major conference of the Women's Society in early 1901, Savka Subotić (1834–1918), a pioneer of Serbian women's movement, pointed out that in 1860 all the cities in Serbia, including Belgrade, were under the Turkish rule. "In the West there were not obstacles to modernization, at least not so many, because there was no rooted prejudice against women's autonomous and public work, while the prejudice thrived here and in the East."⁷ Savka Subotić thus foregrounded the main difference between the Balkan and Western processes of modernization as resulting from geopolitical factors. Similarly to some voices in the current debates, she also stressed that the status of woman was a measure of the emancipation of whole society. In the same year (1901) that Savka Subotić explained the specificities of the complicated Balkan modernization, Jelena Dimitrijević published a novella titled *Đul Marika's Story* (*Đul Marikina prikažnja*). The novella is written in a dialect – a local speech of the Serbian population of Niš at the turn of the century.⁸ Although the characters in the story all cherish hopes for the Ottomans' withdrawal and yearn for the Christian state (the child of Đul Marika is named Sotir, which means Saviour), their lives are indelibly marked by the conqueror's culture. This perspires at all the levels of *Đul Marika's story* the Serbian

language spoken by the narrator and the characters is full of Turkish words, their clothes attest to a similar mixture of influences, just as the very name of the main character is a combination of a Turkish word for “rose” and a Christian name “Marika”, that is, Maria. It shows emphatically the sheer impossibility of separating the East from the West, of restoring them to the state of purity. Serbia could be no “West” - its culture was so deeply imprinted and influenced by the culture of the conqueror that a fusion of opposites was produced, a typical trait of the Balkans.

Turkish culture occupies an important position in Jelena Dimitrijević’s writing, much as it was perceived from an unusual perspective. Dimitrijević was first and foremost interested in the world of Turkish women and the life of the harem. As many as five out of twelve works published in her lifetime addressed these issues, beginning with the volume of *Jelena’s Poems* (1894), *Letters from Niš on Harems* (1897), short stories *Fati-sultan*, *Safi-hanum*, *Mejrem-hanum* (1907), a reportage *Letters from Salonika* (1908, published as a book in 1918) to the novel *Nove* (1912), all of which were written during the first phase of her writing career which can be named a “Turkish period.”

The first “Turkish period” of Jelena Dimitrijević’s writing career spanned from the 1890s till 1912, and had a considerable impact on her subsequent work as a whole. Description of women in the harem exemplifies characteristic features of her transcultural dialogues which, by definition, are “based on the breaking down of boundaries”⁹. An important element in the transcultural common ground for communication is the fact that the binary division into the familiar and the foreign becomes almost unimportant, being replaced by the category of **closeness**. In this Welschian concept, the world is a non-dual entity existing in its continuous flowing movement, while **fascination** becomes the basic premise for the recognition of other cultures.¹⁰ It emerges when the other culture is perceived as meaningful, thus ceasing to be distant (and frequently hostile), becoming integrated with our own, yielding a new quality in the situation of cultural dialogue. Such a transcultural impulse rooted in fascination, closeness and openness to the world of harem and Turkish women may be identified in Jelena Dimitrijević’s works. However, in the context of the mainstream Serbian literature of that period, fascination with Turkish culture in general and the world of women in particular was branded as specific abuse.¹¹ The main reason for that was that in the official policy of the Kingdom of Serbia at the end of the 19th century – until the outbreak of

both Balkan wars in 1912 and 1913, aiming at the ultimate termination of Turkish influence in the Balkans – the Ottoman Empire was an enemy, while Turkish culture was perceived as hostile. Fascinated with Turkish women and the harem, the writer highlighted a new dimension of the Serbian-Turkish “transition zones,” in which she, so to speak, swam against the tide of the official discourse. We can distinguish three stages of Dimitrijević’s “Turkish project,” the works based on deep transgression, the transforming process that reaches deep under the surface of normative societies.

Stage one: *Letters from Niš on Harems 1897, or a tame and hybrid world of the Turkish-Serbian province*

Two works are characteristic of the first phase of this stage, covering the 1890s. The first is a debut volume of Dimitrijević’s early poetry *Jelena’s Poems* from 1894, which presents images of multicultural Istanbul/Constantinople, where two elements – the Ottoman and the Byzantine – intertwine and merge. In this way, the author combines culturally remote Oriental and Turkish components with the integral constituents of her own culture – the tradition of Orthodox Christianity, so dear to her. Therefore, apart from the name “Istanbul”, the poems evoke the image of Orthodox Christian “Carigrad”/Constantinople as the cradle of her faith. In the text, these two worlds engage in a relationship based on intercultural dialogue. The poems conjure up an image of the appealing and vibrant East redolent of the phantasms and traditions of the late 19th-century Serbian poetry. At first, it was speculated that the author was a Turkish woman – a fugitive from a harem who converted to Christianity¹². The Oriental elements predominate, even though from the start Dimitrijević subversively tries to dismantle the stereotypes in place: she explores the motif of a “forbidden” love between a Muslim woman and a “giaour” (a Christian man). Some poems declare love to the heterogeneous, multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious East represented by Istanbul and Bosphorus. However, in the context of Serbian culture of the 19th century the most subversive were her poems devoted to homoerotic love, openly thematizing lesbian love, which earned her the name of a “Serbian Sappho”¹³ and crystallized the motif which would later reappear in her prose.

The second phase is distinctly connected with the publication, in 1897, of Dimitrijević’s epistolary novel *Letters from Niš on Harems* in 1897, which presents in detail the world of Turkish women, residents of the city of Niš (Latin Naissus) recaptured by the Serbs from the Turks in 1878. Niš is one of the oldest cities in the Balkans and Europe, which

from ancient times has been considered a gateway between the East and the West, the birthplace of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Emperor and the founder of Constantinople/Istanbul. Jelena Dimitrijević lived in the multicultural and multinational Niš with her husband, a Serbian officer, from her marriage in 1881 till 1898. There she made friends with Turkish Muslim women and learnt Turkish. The experience contributed to intensification and advancement of intercultural dialogue and induced her to relinquish the patronizing perspective and orientalizing prevalent at that time. Devoted to the description of the Turkish harems in Niš, the novel still lacks emancipation motifs, not to mention feminist aspects, but it does attest to anthropological curiosity and fascination with the transcultural character of the city as manifest in its languages, customs and religions. It presents a meticulous, if not just ethnographic, description of the women's part of a Turkish home, known as a harem. Dimitrijević devotes a lot of space to the wedding rites, preparations for the nuptial ceremony, descriptions of the clothes, the interior of the house and the intimate relations among women enclosed within the world of harem in isolation from the outside world. In the *Letters from Niš*, the writer focuses mainly on the relationship between the Serbian and Turkish cultures, adopting the **xenophilous** perspective, becoming a "Turkophile," as it were, and rejecting the xenophobic, hostile position typical of the official Serbian discourse on Turkish culture and the Ottoman Empire as an embodiment of all evil. The author views the Turkish culture of the Serbian Niš very favorably, showing a friendly interest and respecting dialogue involving cultural values. Seeing her as a guest in harems in Niš, we also realize that she remains aside, watching and recording the world she lives in, with great empathy for her "Muslim sisters", though the empathy does not eschew occasional detached critical commentary. The Serbian and Turkish worlds are brought together by specific linguistic techniques: Dimitrijević creates a peculiar, transculturally loaded idiom by beginning the narration in Serbian, but gradually introducing elements of the Turkish language into it. The Turkish insertions, however, are not rendered in their original form, but in the Cyrillic script conveying them phonetically and accompanied by translation, either in the main body of the text or in the footnotes. The further the reader progresses in reading the *Letters from Niš*, the more frequently Turkish phrases and whole sentences appear in the text, up to the point when it becomes hardly possible to understand the letters without a reference to the glossary of Turkish phrases appended to the book. In this way, a Serbian reader was steeped in the literary world created by a linguistic hybrid of the Turkish language in Cyrillic script. The technique aimed not only at enhancing the exotic local colour evoked by the atmosphere of the transcultural Niš, but also at "immersing" the reader in the language of the

harem and Turkish women. Jelena Dimitrijević purposefully employs the artistic technique of intertwining two languages – Turkish and Serbian – to convey the transcultural flavor characteristic of Niš.

Importantly, Turkish in Cyrillic demands more knowledge and interest than a “regular” language or script does. It is a linguistic and graphic concoction of two divergent traditions, a combination impossible to comprehend unless one speaks and reads both languages, be it with the help of the glossary. *Letters from Niš* provides thus a discursive example of deep transgression Jelena Dimitrijević was creating. One of multiple striking illustrations thereof is an episode in which an elderly Turkish woman admonishes the narrator, who does not want to have her eyebrows dyed. “I do not like it,” says the narrator, “I am a woman, but, I am old.” The Turkish woman tells her then that she should take care of herself and put some makeup on so as to be beautiful for her husband. In the excerpt quoted below, Turkish words are underlined to highlight the proportion of Serbian and Turkish, while the translations of Turkish words in parentheses are as in the original text:

Вала исла сулејс’н (вала добро збориш)! Како си се забатлија и припшеш (личиш) на старе жене. Куде ти акл’к (белило), па боја, ја (или) к’на... не ли видиш дек ти је коса бело? Немој, џан’м, такој. Ако иска жена да му муж бидне догри (прав, веран), треба да се мало дузленише к’д га чека на ручак ја на вечеру. Малко белилце, па веђице, па на очи сурме... ¹⁴

Letters from Niš about Harems clearly imply that Jelena Dimitrijević envisages herself as belonging to more than one society, while, if we think in terms of the mainstream, though superficial, perceptions of these societies, she does not belong anywhere. The letters could also be construed as a travelogue, although Dimitrijević did not exactly travel. The other world was there in the very city of Niš, where she actually lived in, yet that world was not accessible to everyone. In order to be let in and accepted in it, she needed to do more than simply move in space. It demanded also patience, knowledge, respect and empathy – much more than just a train ticket.

Stage two: *Letters from Salonika* (1908), or the fascination with the Young Turk revolution and the cover cloth controversy

The second stage in Jelena Dimitrijević’s Turkish literary project is constituted by

Letters from Salonika published in 1908 and openly devoted to feminist motifs, emancipation of Turkish women and attempts at modernizing their lives. Jelena Dimitrijević headed eastwards in order to check out the information that Turkish women had unveiled themselves published in Belgrade weekly *Politika* (21.07.1908)¹⁵. It is 1908, and the Young Turk revolution is in progress. Dimitrijević dates her first letter August 2, 1908 and the last, tenth one, September 11, 1908. All ten letters are addressed to her friend, Lujza Jakšić, Professor of English at the Women's High School in Belgrade.¹⁶ In the opening letter, Dimitrijević explains to her friend the motivation that prompted her enterprise:

You know that I was ready to go to Europe, well... You know why I turned around and departed for Asia. An article reporting that Turkish women unveiled, that they walked in the streets with men, wives and their husbands together, had made a great impression on me...¹⁷

Soon she will discover that the news is not true, that the revolution has only just started and that many things have remained unresolved yet. What she finds there is a big, oriental celebration with the sounds of „Marseillaise“ and shouts *Vive la Liberte*. Once again she describes the multi-ethnic Salonika, the enthusiasm following the declaration of the constitution, her visits in respected homes (primarily Turkish households, but also the homes of Salonika Greek and Jewish women (called Donme), their discussions on the advantages and disadvantages of the charshaf. While in her previous work (*Letters from Niš*) the voice of the Serbian narrator prevails, in this book Turkish women are given the right to articulate their ideas and concerns. The book also renders the local colour by introducing many Turkish words transcribed in Cyrillic, though their incidence is not as pronounced as in *Letters from Niš*. Additionally, numerous French phrases appear, which results from the fact that the Young Turk revolution was orchestrated in France (the Ottoman opposition collaborated with the French government). Young Turks (men and women alike) spoke French fluently.

In the fourth letter of *Letters from Salonika*, Jelena Dimitrijević transcribes for her friend Lujza Jakšić a full length interview with Gülistan İsmet Hanım – a woman educated at the Robert College in Istanbul and a polyglot speaking six languages (in addition to her mother tongue, she spoke also French, English, German, Greek and Armenian), who worked for the Committee of Union and Progress in Salonika. The Turkish intellectual was interested in the participation of educated women in the Ottoman Women Movement, such as Emine Semiye Önasya (1864–1944) and Fatma Aliye Topuz (1862–1936). In the interview, Gülistan

İsmet discusses the effects of modernization/Europeanization on the upbringing of Turkish girls and the education they received from their French or English governesses. To some extent, the interview comes across as a draft for the novel *Nove*, published four years later. At one moment, Gülistan İsmet expresses her reservations about the cultural confusion experienced by young Turkish women under the influence of their French teachers, which is exactly the subject of the novel *Nove*. Gulistan Ismet says that she would enroll her daughters in a French school, but that she would teach them to love everything Turkish “in order never to feel unhappy.” She continues: “Even now, I describe to them all the advantages of our prison, especially of our upper garment, the charshaf”.¹⁸ The passage exemplifies the failure of attempts at drawing a safe line between the East and the West. The issue of education is tackled indeed, but superficially only and education-related problems are seen in an almost individual perspective. It is implied that if the French ladies who educated young Turkish women had been better, no confusion would have been produced. The French and the Turkish are separated in Gülistan İsmet’s intention to properly educate her own children in a blend of French teaching and Turkophile upbringing.

Finally, as expected, the sartorial issues make their way to the foreground, as clothing has its both symbolic and very practical roles to play. This seems to be the central point of the interview, because the conservative attitude of Gulistan Ismet, a young and educated woman whose daughters wear “little empire dresses,” reveals her hypocrisy, fear, or dishonesty when the Ottoman women’s position is at stake. She also quotes various opinions concerning the charshaf, which gestures at a multiplicity of distinct points of view on the subject endorsed by the Young Turk women. She ironically names the cover “a prison” only to produce a tirade on its benefits, both practical and ideological. She concludes: “Madame, the Constitution is not for us to show our faces, but to set our spirit free...”¹⁹.

After leaving Gülistan İsmet’s home, Jelena Dimitrijević encounters three covered women who ask her where she is coming from and whether her hostess spoke in favor of the charshaf. Then they criticize Gulistan Ismet, saying that she only did not want to upset her good husband. The three women in black conclude that it is their husbands’ egoism, and not their religion, that holds them in captivity. The authenticity of this scene is highly questionable. It is very likely that it serves as a comment of Jelena Dimitrijević herself, disguised as disappointed women’s utterances. Seeing that revolution has not really effected a significant change for women, she may have wanted to stage this little drama to assert that a “next revolution” was necessary. If a young and educated woman who plays piano, reads *Review of Review*, and deliberates with political awareness who should be the next sultan,

says simply “For us, women, the charshaf is good,” the work has not been finished yet apparently. A micro-essay on the covering cloths which takes up one of the letters enumerates a whole catalogue of such pieces– from a thin muslin scarf to a fully enveloping charshaf. For Jelena Dimitrijević, the various interlocutors’ attitude to these covering cloths serves as a touchstone of their progressiveness. Frequently disappointed, sometimes nicely surprised, she repeatedly asserts that it is not Islam that covers women, but the „jealousy of their husbands.“²⁰

Letters from Salonika seek first of all to depict women’s positioning and ideas, capture the hybrid integration of Turkish and French values as well as reveal the old-new divide within the culture, a rift between the Ottoman and the Young Turk components. However, the most important aim was to describe the cultural community of women, allowing them to speak and articulate their stand on the current events. In Jelena Dimitrijević’s book the silence of the harem is exploded from within.

In that respect, the passages devoted to a large community of Jewish women of Islamic creed make up the most interesting part of *Letters from Salonika*. The women, pejoratively called Donme, embodied a hybrid identity which Jelena Dimitrijević found irresistibly fascinating. She wrote to her friend that these women combined Muslim religion and European conduct („like us,“ she wrote to Lujza Jakšić, which could not have meant only „Serbian women“). In her seventh letter, dated 3 September, she wrote to Louise:

Nobody interested me so much as these poor Donme. People here do not blame their men, on the contrary, they praise them; but women... Everybody blames them and scolds them; they are threatened by many, as every religious and even social blame is ascribed to them.²¹

Dönme are the sacrificial objects of the transition, they are *the* deep transgressors – everything that is seemingly unacceptable in clothes and mores is blamed on them. A Greek woman named Maria Paskalides explains the specificities of Donme to Jelena Dimitrijević. They live only in Salonika, and they are completely different from Turkish women – they speak loudly, talk a lot, are very curious and do not hide their curiosity. In the street, they do not cover their heads. They marry within the community, and Ottoman men do not marry them. Tuberculosis is very frequent and fatal among them since they marry their close kin, as Paskalides informs Dimitrijević. They are divided in two religious sects, and in general they

do go to mosques but pray in privacy. Jelena Dimitrijević notes that although their windows are open, nobody glances into their rooms from the street.

Jelena Dimitrijević then goes to a wedding and notes the differences and similarities between Donme and Turkish women. Just like in Turkish weddings, men and women are strictly separated, and she spends time in the exclusively female company. Girls “resemble European ones,” which probably refers to the clothes they wear, windows are open, there is no fence, and the languages spoken are Turkish and French. Clearly, Donme are not only more open on the subject of uncovering – Jelena Dimitrijević sees their hybridity as a very real source of strength and liberation: “Young Donme walk bravely, raise their heads high and look ahead freely”.²²

Dönme are the very embodiment of deep transgression and exemplification of the price paid for being different. Paradoxically, the norm by which they are judged is provided by Muslim women, who are already excluded from the mainstream on the basis of their gender. Yet, normativity is based on hierarchy (or vice versa), which in the case of Donme, scapegoats of both Ottoman society and Ottoman women subculture, becomes patently absurd. This may be the key factor in their openness and freedom, which proved so absorbing to Jelena Dimitrijević.

Stage three: *Nove* (1912), or on the disappointment with westernization of Turkish women

Jelena Dimitrijević compellingly revisits the motifs of women’s emancipation and attempts to combine two cultural models of female upbringing (eastern and western, old and new, traditional and modern, national and cosmopolitan, familiar and foreign) in the novel *Nove* (*New Young Turk Women*) from 1912. The eponymous “nove” denotes the Young Turk women brought up in the harem, but enacting a modern pattern transplanted onto the Turkish soil from Western-European cultures (and literatures) – primarily French, but also English and German – and forming a special transcultural space. The protagonists are Turkish women from affluent families which make up the elite of Salonika – two eighteen-year-old cousins Emir-Fatma and Zehra Mersyie, who were educated by governesses from London, Paris and Vienna, speak European languages fluently, read western literature in the original, play the piano, sing opera arias in Italian and dream of living in Paris. Brought up mainly on French literature (Chateaubriand, de Lamartine, Flaubert, Maupassant, Musset, Loti), they construct their Eastern dream of the West, which is subjected here to verifying scrutiny. After many

twists and turns of life, the protagonist Emir-Fatma escapes with her husband, a “new” Turk, from Salonika to Paris, where after a period of initial fascination, she descends into loneliness only to die feeling uprooted and disappointed. Before her death, she sends her newly-born daughter back to Turkey, pleading her father to bring his granddaughter up in the old tradition. Her cousin Zehra Mersyie remains in Turkey, but dying young, she still dreams of France. The attempts the “new Turks” undertake to adjust their identities to European models, to “westernize” or “culturally modernize” them, to build them upon the destabilizing act of hybridization are presented as a failure and a disillusionment²³. The pervasive argument of the novel is that the split between the East and the West in the conditions of the harem can not be successfully integrated in one personal experience, unless all girls in that society receive proper education.

The novel also offers a panoramic view of the harem, a secluded circle of women.²⁴ The writer sketches an appealing picture of the concealed, invisible part of society, hidden from the world: she surveys its inner, intimate relationships from an ethnographic, anthropological point of view, describing its customs, education, rites, relations among women, their friendships and rivalries, until she finally thematizes lesbian love. She approaches this world, yet new and unfamiliar to her, adopting the contemporary point of view characterized by anthropological curiosity.

Presumably, Jelena Dimitrijević drew on three main sources of inspiration while writing *Nove*. The first was her own experience from a stay in Salonika in 1908 and conversations she had with the women involved with the Young Turk movement. The second, offering opportunities of intertextual and transcultural dialogue, was in all likelihood a 1906 novel titled *Disenchanted (Les Désenchantées)* by the French writer Pierre Loti (Louis Marie Julien Viaud, 1850-1923). In the *Letters from Salonika* Dimitrijević mentions the author and explicitly refers to this very book, which she must have read in French. Ample similarities and thematic parallels imply that the Serbian novel was affected not only by the world of harem and Turkish women but also by the intertextual dialogue with Pierre Loti’s rendering of the world of Turkish Muslim women from the harem in his novel, which was actually extremely popular in the West. Both writers knew and probably followed the story of two sisters, Zennour and Nurye de Chateaufort, who escaped from Istanbul to Paris²⁵. Their fortunes were extensively covered by the French press in 1906. While that material was deployed by Pierre Loti in his book, with the sisters serving as the models for the protagonists of *Disenchanted* – i.e. Zeynep Hanım and Melek Hanım – the accounts could have become the third source of inspiration for the Serbian writer²⁶. For both Loti and Dimitrijević, literary fiction provides

information about Turkish harems and presents them in the context of native culture. However, the difference in the writers' attitudes is fundamental, with a simple disparity of the male (Loti) and female (Dimitrijević) perceptions of the harem constituting only one point of divergence. Pierre Loti is primarily a representative of a great, dominating literature and language, an author seeking the exotic Other to be colonized and orientalized, interested in creating Oriental fantasies, focusing mainly on the past and preserving the ancient mysterious aura of the Orient, the essence of the old Istanbul. He represents French culture, which provided a formative mould for many cultures, "colonizing" them intellectually, forcing them to emulate it, becoming a pattern to be imitated. Jelena Dimitrijević, even if she does engage with Loti's novel intertextually and absorbs elements of his text, takes a different position and adopts a different, transnational perspective. Firstly, she is interested in contemporary and future situation of Turkish women, viewing the relations among women from a feminist point of view. Secondly, hers is an attitude of a minority language writer who, additionally, epitomizes the culture colonized by the Turks and subjected to the Ottoman rule for several centuries, which conjuncture has in a sense generated a close transcultural and transnational dialogue-fostering relationship (as she proved earlier in the example of Niš). Dimitrijević confines the hermetic world of the Turkish harem to the Serbian Cyrillic, thus making it accessible only to a narrow circle of readers, users of a minority language. Her aim is not to colonize but to discover, present, and introduce the world of Muslim women and demystify their stereotypical (mostly negative) image in her own culture, refusing to surrender to the memory made up of fears and anxieties concerning Turkish culture.

Deep transgression and genres

Transition, trespass, transgression, hybridity are ubiquitous in these works – historically, the time was ripe for it, and the generic build-up of the texts also confirmed plurality as a way of liberation, as a gate to the freedom of choice. Jelena Dimitrijević's *Letters from Salonica* and *Nove* transgress many of the generic categorizations, yet, the roots of this trespass are evident as early as in *Letters from Niš* in her private-public transgression. The book features an episode in which a woman cries because Niš does not belong to Turks any more. What first sounds almost like a political declaration ultimately turns out to be something different.

– “Oh, Niš! Our beautiful Niš!”

– My heart aches for Niš, and for Belgrade, both soul and heart” – she is joined by some other mourner.²⁷

It is soon revealed that the woman is brought to the verge of despair by unresponsiveness of a woman she is in love with. However, the prevalence of the private meaning over the public one is not a rule for Jelena Dimitrijević²⁸. On the contrary, Dimitrijević warns her addressee, a female friend of hers, that the secrets revealed in her letters are to remain known only to her. Yet, Dimitrijević publishes these letters almost instantly. This generic trespass is also one of features recurring in her other works, such as *Letters from Salonika* and *Nove*.

The fact is, however, that already *Letters from Salonika* encapsulate the impossibility of finding a “pure” intimate genre, as the letters were written upon two opposite impulses – of intimate communication with a close friend and of publishing intent. This means that even as she was writing letters, dated and addressed as common epistles, Jelena Dimitrijević was creating a text comprised of many generic traits divergent from intimate writing forms.

Letters from Salonika is a multi-generic text in which we can trace such forms as letters, travelogue, micro-essay, epistolary novel, historical record, anthropological record, reportage, interview, apology, dramolette. If approached with the intention of the text, rather than the intention of the author, on one’s mind, *Letters from Salonika* can be read as an epistolary novel. The collection seems then to be arranged in a plot unfolding toward a kind of conclusion with all the varied – humorous, poetical, anthropological and dramatic – components having their proper function and place in it. Yet, it is also a travelogue, a text which relates on rather unfamiliar landscapes and/or situations from a subjective point of view.

Produced initially as a private text, *Letters from Salonika* became a public text when printed in newspapers and published in a book form. Written (actually or ostensibly) for one addressee, the letters attracted a much wider audience. Their appeal to a broader readership is bound up with their affinity to journalistic genres. We could legitimately posit that Jelena Dimitrijević’s basic idea was to undertake a journalist investigation, and, consequently, what she sent to her friend were reports on the issue she had set out to research. The historic events are both the background of the things she was interested in and the impetus of that interest.

Apart from reports, the collection of letters contains also an interview – one with Guli Gülistan İsmet. That interview reveals how a private and intimate space may actually turn public and political. It starts when Jelena Dimitrijević asks her hostess about two objects:

– And what is this on the piano?, I asked and stood up in order to take a closer look: on the white surface (the color of their revolution) decorated as if by needlework in big red Turkish letters (and this was framed in gold).

– This is to gratify my work, she said modestly.

– What about the picture of this young man above the gratification?

– That is Medjid-ephendy, the son of Abdülaziz... We want him for the sultan.

– Where were the meetings held?

– Here, in my home, with men; we helped them, we worked what they could not, so that our State can have Constitution, our Country Freedom. This is why the meetings were held in my home, I did not have a servant, so that she could not spy on us and betray us. We were afraid of the spies and traitors all the time; and there were many of them. And, besides, I am alone, and have children.

Two beautiful girls, as pretty as dolls could be, entered the room. They were dressed in empire dresses, with ribbons in their hair.²⁹

The scene abounds in multiple meanings – it speaks about genre, politics, and literature. While in the novel *Nove*, interviews will expand into oral histories, story-telling about private lives, here the interview reveals there is no non-political space, that each of secluded location is invested with public, political meanings and activity.

Nove is another example of a generic mixture. Its anthropological import is so considerable that it probably weighed on assigning a label of a realistic work to it. Actually, *Nove* has a much stronger modernist than realist potential. Not to say things completely, to select, to choose what to express – the mores of Islamic culture with its emphasis on evasion and indirectness are stricter than the control-and-suppression based customs of society which Henry James depicts. A glance, instead of a direct stare into one's eyes, speaks more than tacit scenes in the novels of the father of the anglophone Modernism. However, while restraining speech was not a major problem, providing an insight into intimacy within this culture proved a real challenge. In the omniscient, „objective“ narration of the novel, letters and diary entries serve as a gate to intimate, first-person accounts. Letters may be named an intimate genre here, because they remain enclosed within the novel's world. As a parallel to interview, there are women's confessions, oral histories they tell to each other in the privacy of harems.

Interestingly, the novel contains also a poem, albeit one which is not at all lyrical. This is a pamphlet-like text which describes the position of women at that moment. An excerpt of

the poem was later used in the publication *Srpkinja*, 1913, to illustrate Jelena Dimitrijević's attitude, although it was actually composed by a character in her novel. This maneuver implies yet another type of generic transformation depending on the reception of a text. At the same time, the title *Poem* is given to the diary notes of the protagonist, a young woman named Fatma, as this is a lyrical account of her feelings when far away from home.

There are numerous parallels between the scenes and events in the *Letters* and *Nove*. In these two works on rebellion and transition, not only borders of fiction and fact, poetry and historiography are transgressed. Therefore, their primary generic classifications – letters and novel – should be treated rather tentatively. Their reception, by the readers and publishers also has an effect on our understanding of the private, intimate and public elements in them. The works, as complete entities and in their particular parts, insist on inadequacy of any definite classification since transition, transgression, even impurity, contamination and infection by *other* genres, cultures, religions, and customs, are pervasive in them. This is expressive of *deep transgression*, a transforming process and its artistic result – diversity, multiplicity, variety, ambivalence, polyvalence.

Conclusion

Constructing her concept of feminism in the first phase of her writing career, Jelena Dimitrijević was inspired by the imagery of Turkish harems and relations among women living in them. She distinctly oscillated between two cultural paradigms: that of the East (Orient) and that of the West (Occident), though she finds the Balkan, Turkish East (Niš, Istanbul, Salonika) the most familiar. In her writing, it is represented by the Ottoman Empire, Turkish women and the harem. Within Serbian culture, she created a unique project connected with Turkish culture.

As a Christian (a member of the Orthodox church), Jelena Dimitrijević remained outside the Muslim culture, which she could approach from two distinct points of view. Firstly, she could adopt the point of view of an enlightened Western woman exercising the energy of a colonizer (initially she adopted this attitude in the *Letters from Niš on Harems* only to relinquish the stance soon). Secondly, as a woman from the Balkans, an “intermediary” mediating between the East and the West, between Christianity and Islam, she was able to perceive the world of the Orient from the position of a local, Balkan expert. She saw Muslim Turkish women as an element of the Balkan culture and thus, with her books, she

could – emphasized by Svetlana Slapšak – perform a Balkan expert examination³⁰ of the worlds of the Orient and the West from the Serbian perspective.

The two categories – women (feminism) and the Orient (especially Turkish) – which she found the most fascinating were the reason why Serbian culture, and especially its official canon, renounced her. In all likelihood, it was prompted by the state and national programme of denying Turkish culture³¹ and erasing the vestiges of the Orient in the local culture that began at in the early 19th century. Thus, right from the start, her efforts aiming at stirring the readers' interest in the harem and Turkish women were doomed to marginalization. The subject of women and the Orient opened for her a very interesting complex of issues, but for many years it proved only a niche in her native culture. Her position is only seemingly similar to that of the “white sisters” from the countries with an established colonial tradition – in contrast to them, Jelena Dimitrijević (possibly like women travelers from other Balkan countries, e.g. Bulgaria, Greece) has nowhere to go back to in a symbolic sense, as in her culture there is no one who is interested in her story of harems, there are no positively predisposed male recipients of her prose, there is no tradition of fashionable exoticism and colonialism, which would constitute a framework for the reception of her writing. Perhaps the situation of women travelers (such as Britain's Grace Ellison³²) and men travelers (such as France's Pierre Loti) from Western Europe was different, as on publishing the accounts of their journeys in the East after their return, their works were favourably received due to the prevalence of fashionable interest in the Orient and the exotic in their own cultures and a recognition of their effort at familiarizing the public with the colonial images or participating in literary/textual colonization of the Other.

One more remark in conclusion. The process of reclaiming Jelena Dimitrijević's writing in Serbian culture began in the 1980s. In 1913, Zeynep Hanım wrote in her book *The Turkish Woman's European Impressions* (1913, London):

How I wish that nine out of the ten books written on Turkey could be burned! [...] Every book I have read has been in some way unfair to the Turkish women. Not one woman has credited us with possession of a heart, a mind, or a soul.³³

Evidently, she did not know the books by her contemporary Jelena Dimitrijević, who carried out her literary and cultural project devoted to Turkish women with passion, love and conscientiousness implementing it with Serbian Cyrillic – a tool unavailable for Zeynep Hanım. Perhaps now the time is ripe for Turkish culture, and especially for the circle of local

feminists, to familiarize themselves with the writings of a Serbian woman writer who was certainly devoted to Turkish women with her heart, mind and soul.

¹ This text has been written within the COST Action IS0901, *Women Writers in History*, as well as within the project *Knjiženstvo, Theory and History of Women's Writing in Serbia until 1915* (No. 178029) of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

² More information about this author one can find on <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/sr> and <http://www.womenwriters.nl/>.

³ Donald Cuccioletta, 'Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship', *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, 2001/2002, 17, pp. 1–11 (p. 1).

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subject: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York, 1994. See also: Svetlana Slapšak, 'Harems, Nomads: Jelena Dimitrijević', <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/izdavastvo/elektronska-izdanja/istrazivanja/zavera-necitanja/62-harems-nomads-jelena-dimitrijevic> [accessed 24 July 2014].

⁵ Magdalena Koch, ...kiedy dojrzejemy jako kultura. Twórczość pisarek serbskich na początku XX wieku (kanon – genre – gender) [...when we mature as a culture... Early 20th-century Serbian Women's Writings (canon – genre – gender)], Wrocław, 2007, p. 11.

⁶ See: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, New York 1997, especially p. 57–60.

⁷ *Domaćica*, XXIV, Beograd, 1901, 12. See also: Slobodanka Peković, 'Ženski časopisi u Srbiji na početku 20. veka' [Women's magazines in Serbia at the beginning of 20th century], *Slavica Tergesina*, Trieste, 2004, 11–12, pp. 123–137 (p. 114).

⁸ Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, 'Стварност, језик и пол у Бул-Марикиној приказњи Јелене Димитријевић' [Reality, language and gender in Gul-Marika's Story], *Научни састанак слависта у Вукове дане*, 37/2, MSC, Beograd, 2008, pp. 261–266.

⁹ Donald Cuccioletta, 'Multiculturalism or Transculturalism: Towards a Cosmopolitan Citizenship', *London Journal of Canadian Studies*, 2001/2002, 17, pp. 1–11 (p. 8).

¹⁰ Wolfgang Welsch, 'Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today' *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, ed. by Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, London: Sage 1999, 194–213. This text available also <http://www2.uni-jena.de/welsch/> [accessed 14 February 2013].

¹¹ Svetlana Slapšak, 'Haremi, nomadi: Jelena Dimitrijević' [Harems, Nomads: Jelena Dimitrijević], *Pro Femina*, Beograd, 15/16, 1998, jesen–zima, pp. 137–149 (p. 141).

¹² Biljana Dojčinović / Биљана Дојчиновић, 'Хронолошки преглед живота и дела Јелене Димитријевић' [Chronology of Jelena Dimitrijević's life] [in:] Jelena Димитријевић, *Нове*, Београд, 2012, pp. 259–266 (p. 260).

¹³ Celia Hawkesworth, *Voices in the Shadows. Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia*, Budapest, 2000, p. 141.

¹⁴ Jelena Dimitrijević, *Писма из Ниша о харемима* [Letters from Nis on Harems], Београд, 1897, p. 66.

Vala isla sulejs'n (yes, you are right)! You have so zabatlija - neglected yourself – that you pripšeš (look like) an old woman. Where is your akl'k (white powder), and the dye, ja (or) k'na –henna- ... don't you see your hair is white? Don't, džanm – my dear -, do not do it that way. If a woman wants her husband to be dogri (right, faithful), she needs to duzleniše a little – to make herself up – when she is expecting him for lunch or supper. A little white powder, eyebrows, and to put surme – some color (black or silver) – on the eyelids...

¹⁵ Svetlana Tomić, 'Dve vrste Pisama iz Soluna: feminističko istraživačko novinarstvo Jelene J. Dimitrijević naspram nepouzdanog izveštavanja Branislava Nušića o feminizmu' [Two kinds of *Letters from Salonika*: Jelena J. Dimitrijević's feminist research journalism contrary to Branislav Nušić's unreliable reporting about feminism], *Зборник Матице српске за књижевност и језик*, Нови Сад, 2011, књига 59, свеска 3, страна 621–639. Full text: [http://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0543-1220/2011/0543-12201103621T.pdf#search="svetlana tomic"](http://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0543-1220/2011/0543-12201103621T.pdf#search=)

¹⁶ Lujza Jakšić was the author of the book *English Grammar for the Students of the Women's High School*, Beograd: Kraljevsko-srpska književna štamparija, 1900.

¹⁷ Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Soluna* [Letters from Salonika], dvojezično izdanje (srpsko-grčko), preveli Dimostenis Stratigopoulos i Vladimir Bošković, Loznica, Karpos, 2008, p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²⁰ In the novel *Nove* women use the upper cover cloth – charshaf – to transfer political messages between man in the preparation of the revolution. There, the symbolic and practical meanings of the charshaf are mixed.

²¹ Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Soluna*, p. 59.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 63.

²³ For more details see Zorica Bečanović Nikolić, 'Paradoxes of Hybridity, Orientalism (Balkanism) and the Subaltern Status of Women in Jelena Dimitrijević's Novel *The New Women*' 1, *Knjiženstvo*, 1, 2011 <http://www.knjiženstvo.rs/magazine.php?text=14> [accessed 14 July 2014].

²⁴ Slavica Garonja Radovanac, 'Роман *Нове* Јелене Димитријевић као парадигма трагичне побуне жене у оријенталном друштву' [The Novel *Nove* by Jelena Dimitrijević as Paradigm of Tragic Rebellion in an Oriental Society], 1, *Knjiženstvo*, 1, 2011. <http://www.knjiženstvo.rs/magazine.php?text=13> [accessed 14 July 2014].

²⁵ The inspiration for doing the research on the connection of Jelena Dimitrijević's novel *Nove*, Pierre Loti's *Disenchanted* and Zennour and Nurye de Chateaufort's lifestory was a paper by Senem Timuroğlu (Ozyegin University, Istanbul) presented at the international workshop organized within COST Action IS 0901 in Bucharest 26–28. 04. 2012 (<http://www.womenwriters.nl/>).

²⁶ Magdalena Koch, '...када сазремо као култура... Стваралаштво српских списатељица на почетку 20. века (какон-жанр-род)' [...when we mature as a culture... Early 20th-century Serbian Women's Writings (canon – genre – gender)], превела Јелена Јовић, Београд 2012, p. 200.

²⁷ Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Niša o haremima*, Beograd 1897, p. 106.

²⁸ http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=242&Itemid=45

²⁹ Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Soluna*, p. 41.

³⁰ Svetlana Slapšak, 'Harems, Nomads: Jelena Dimitrijević', <http://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/izdavastvo/elektronska-izdanja/istrzivanja/zavera-necitanja/62-harems-nomads-jelena-dimitrijevic> [accessed 14 February 2014].

³¹ Svetlana Slapšak, 'Haremi, nomadi: Jelena Dimitrijević', p. 141.

³² Who published in London in 1915 a book: Grace Ellison, *An Englishwoman in a Turkish Harem* with an introduction by E.G. Browne, London 1915. See <http://archive.org/details/englishwomanintu00ellirich> [accessed 15 February 2014].

³³ Zeyneb Hanoum, *A Turkish Woman's European Impressions*, ed. by Grace Ellison, J.B. Lippincott Co., Philadelphia, London 1913, p. 178. <http://archive.org/details/aturkishwomanse00elligoog> [accessed 14 February 2014].

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Магдалена КОХ

Универзитет „Адам Мицкјевич“
Познањ

Оригинални научни чланак

Турски на ћирилици: дубока трансгресија у делу Јелене Димитријевић

Рад указује на јединствени културни пројекат у делима српске књижевнице Јелене Димитријевић (1862–1945), инспирисан сликама турских харема и односа међу женама које су живе у њима. Јелена Ј. Димитријевић је изразито осцилирала између две културне парадигме: источне и западне. Можемо разликовати три фазе њеног „турског пројекта“ – прву фазу представљају *Писма из Ниша о харемима* из 1897. године о питомом и хибридном свету турско-српске провинције; другу фазу чине *Писма из Солуна* (1908), или фасцинација Младотурском револуцијом и контроверзама у вези са покривком; а трећу роман *Нове* (1912) који говори о разочарању европеизацијом турских жена. Сви ови радови обележени су *дубоком трансгресијом*, процесом трансформације који досеже дубоко испод површине нормативних друштава. *Дубока трансгресија* имплицира историјски и геополитички (такође и геопоетички) стицај прилика у којима се појединац, група или представљена култура у целини не могу сврстати ни под једну ознаку. То значи да он или она (или они) припада већем броју утврђених категорија, што их чини странцима у свим културним контекстима са којим су повезани. У већини случајева, превазилажење ових разлика јесте утопијски пројекат, умножавање сукоба на којима се заснива заплет, и на крају препуштање конфликтним ситуацијама и несрећном исходу.

Кључне речи: Јелена Димитријевић, женска књижевност, модернизам, феминизам, дубока трансгресија, транскултуралност, исток, запад