

**“Women’s Movements Are Active and Growing Stronger”**

**Interview with Jasmina Lukić conducted by Ana Kolarić**

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*You were one of the founders of the Women’s Studies Center in Belgrade. The first one-semester course started symbolically on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1992. Some of the publishing activities of the Centre included initiating the feminist (academic) journal Women’s Studies, and you were its editor-in-chief between 1995 and 2000. How and why did the Women’s Studies journal come to be? Why did the editorial board decide on such a title of the journal?*

The foundation of the Women’s Studies Center in Belgrade was for me one of the most important events at the beginning of the nineties, as opposed to wars that were going on, first in Croatia, then in Bosnia. At the end of the seventies and during the eighties, I wrote literary criticism professionally, and mostly wrote about contemporary Yugoslav poetry and prose. And during the eighties, I lived simultaneously in Zagreb and in Belgrade, trying to be active in both cultural spaces. However, working in the so-called literary “mainstream” was becoming more and more difficult due to growing nationalism on both sides. That is why the whole project of creating Women’s Studies for me personally was particularly significant: that was a space of a much needed alternative. I was not one of the lecturers in the first one-semester program, but I

was one of the attendants and I joined the group which, after the great success of this program got together to work towards founding the Center. That group consisted of many exceptional women. It included veterans of the feminist movement in Yugoslavia such as Sonja Drljević, who was the driving force of the entire project; Žarana Papić, who brought her vast theoretical knowledge and long-standing feminist activism to the Center; Lepa Mladenović, who connected great theoretical knowledge and long-standing feminist activism. There were also Daša Duhaček, who in the years to come would become the outstanding leader of the Center, Marina Blagojević, Neda Božinović, Biljana Dojčinović, Zorica Mršević, Slavica Stojanović and Jasmina Tešanović. Branka Arsić soon joined the Center, and many other associates followed. That was a time of great enthusiasm for us, when many women's groups were being founded in Belgrade. To all of us who gathered around the Center, that was a project created in spite of the predominant nationalism and state war propaganda. We all believed that it was necessary for academia to open towards women's studies, and we would have all worked towards such a goal in different circumstances as well. However, in the situation of the nationalist destructive, war, policy of Slobodan Milošević's regime, founding the Center was part of a wider opposition stance against such a political program. The situation in Zagreb, where the Women's Studies Center was founded in 1995, was similar and I was honored to be a part of that Center as well. Thus, in an attempt to live in two cities in the nineties as well, in spite of the war that was dividing them, Women's Studies Centers became my strongholds in both Belgrade and Zagreb. It is important to say that feminists in the region of Yugoslavia kept in touch throughout that time across all the borders that state politics and politicians were putting in front of them, and that their anti-war and anti-nationalist policy and activities were an extremely important, formative part of the civil scene.

The idea to start the *Women's Studies* journal can also be best understood in this context as well. The name of the journal, as well as the name of the Center, were part of the same feminist project, that we saw as being subversive in itself in the times as the nineties were; that is, in an age characterized by intense repatriarchalization of the society which was happening before our very eyes, as a part of newly created the nationalist and war climate in society. Žarana Papić dealt with the issue in her research at the time. Of course, from the very beginning, we emphasized that feminism(s) and feminist research of women's experience were not just a "women's issues," but that they necessarily concern all members of a society.

The Women's Studies Center developed following the development of gender studies as "an interdisciplinary discipline," introducing new theoretical approaches and new topics of research. However, it never changed its original name as a strong evidence of its history and its grounding in feminist theory, which makes me, personally, very happy. The name of the journal in the meantime has been changed to *Genero*, with the clear intention of connecting it with the notion of gender already in the title. However, as far as I can see, the purpose of the journal remained the same – to promote feminist and gender theories in the widest sense of the word, and to legitimize the domestic production of knowledge in those fields. That is extremely important because journals as a specific site of knowledge production are very important part of the continuous existence and development of an academic field, especially when it comes to a discipline such as gender studies.

Here we need to provide an additional explanation for those who do not follow the field. We started talking about women's studies, and we came here to gender studies. We can go on now and talk about masculinity studies, sexuality studies and, of course, queer studies as a separate discipline. In doing so, we have already moved away from the original idea of women's studies. The issue of naming has become in the meantime quite complex. Many departments across the world were renamed in the eighties from women's studies to gender studies; many were founded as gender studies, only to be renamed later on to gender and sexuality studies. My department at the Central European University has the concept of gender in its name since its foundation in 1994, and that remains its crucial determinant: initially, it was the Program on Gender and Culture, to become the Department of Gender Studies in 2000. Generally speaking, there is no doubt that there are differences in approach and theoretical positioning among various departments, which are reflected in the politics of naming, but we are not talking about that at the moment. Therefore, I will use "gender studies" broadly here as a term referring to an all-inclusive area of women's studies research, as well as gender and sexuality studies.

*Both the Women's Studies Center and the Women's Studies journal were founded at the time of the disintegration of SFRY and armed conflicts in the territory of Yugoslavia. How did you, as lecturers, editors/authors, feminists, position yourself against those events?*

As I have already said, the Center was seen by all of us a part of the anti-war movement, which at the beginning of the nineties meant that it was closely connected to other women's and activist groups on the civil scene. I have to stress that some other groups, such as Women in Black, were far more prominent in the anti-war movement. However, it is important to say that roles at that time were not strictly defined and divided. Many women on the feminist scene were connected with a certain group, but they also cooperated with other groups at the same time, public events were often prepared together, it was important to react and persistently oppose war and violence again and again. The nineties were pivotal years for the development of the feminist movement in Serbia and in the entire former Yugoslavia. Even though Yugoslavia was the only socialist country that had been open to the second-wave feminism since mid-seventies, and had a whole generation of prominent feminist intellectuals already in socialist times, that could hardly be perceived as a movement, because feminism remained in a relatively narrow circle. It is only with the social crisis at the end of the eighties and with the wars of the nineties that that women became aware of the new level of gender-based endangerment that such a situation has brought, and of an urgent need to react to that. Feminism was the logical response. At the beginning of the nineties, numerous women's groups were being founded, groups that cover a whole range of activities – from SOS telephones, the Women's Center and the Girls' Center to Women's Studies and, somewhat later, the Women's Network. If someone wants to understand the history there, it is important to take a look at Lepa Mladenović's text "Beginnings of Feminism – The Women's Movement in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana," which can be found online. That is also a very significant text in opposing the ongoing processes of forgetting, which are, for example, supported by the institutions of the current Serbian Government when they talk about their gender related initiatives, like establishing the SOS telephone, while completely disregarding/erasing the history and experiences of the women's movement.

When it comes to Women's Studies, I wish to stress that we at the Center saw teaching as a part of activism, which is something I believe in to this day. Teaching feminist theory and affirming feminist epistemology which undermined "unquestionable" knowledge and problematized academic authorities at a time and in a country obsessed with national values, war goals and control over the public sphere, certainly held activist component in our view. In our lectures, students had the opportunity to critically reevaluate what most of the media, as well as a significant part of the traditional academia promoted as undeniable truths about identity, nation,

history, gender regimes and current politics. They got the opportunity to question the authority of those who “possess knowledge,” that is, who “possess truth” and the theoretical tools to ponder on the particularities of their own experience. And they also received quite specific knowledge from the field of women’s studies, which was available at the University only within subjects of certain professors, such as Anđelka Milić, Žarana Papić or Marina Blagojević.

*You obtained your undergraduate degree and PhD in comparative literature in Belgrade, and then you taught literature from the angle of feminist theory and criticism at the Women’s Study Center. You also chose the translations of theoretical and critical texts, as well as domestic texts about literature which were to be published in Women’s Studies. Could you tell us how the knowledge from women’s/gender studies affected your reading and interpretation of literature?*

Personally, the turn towards feminist literary criticism literally changed my relationship towards literature and the work I do. I encountered feminism for the first time during my MA studies in Ottawa at the end of the seventies, when I read some early analyses of the social position of women in North America. Judging with an arrogance of someone who came from Yugoslav “soft” socialism that was on the rise, I concluded that their situation did not concern us very much. The problem of suppressing women from the work sphere, or the issue of lower wages for women than for men (something unthinkable for me at the time) was not characteristic of Yugoslavia. Aside from that, I was at the time a vocal advocate of formalist approaches to literature; therefore, I did not find early gynocriticism, which was available to me in Canada back then, particularly interesting. I resisted it with the same argument that students from transition countries would later, in the early nineties, present to me during my classes in feminist literary criticism at the CEU – an argument that gynocriticism is excessively ideologized.

I started delving into feminist criticism only in the eighties, when I had a chance to spend more time with feminist authors and to read the new, gender-conscious prose in Zagreb. Before that, I mostly dealt with contemporary poetry, and formalist ideas about the autonomy of literature are much easier to retain when you deal with poetry and not prose. However, a whole series of new books appeared in Yugoslavia in mid-eighties, and it became clear to me that they

could not be interpreted with critical tools I was relying on at the time. Those were books that required feminist reading. For example, if you exclude gender perspective, it is very difficult to explain the particular value of Milica Mičić Dimovska's prose within the corpus of the so-called "hard-boiled fiction" (*stvarnosna proza*), a style of writing prevalent during the seventies; or the significance of the autobiographical discourse of Irena Vrkljan in the novels "The Silk, the Shears," and "Marina; or, About Autobiography." Without the feminist perspective, I could not have understood the complexity of the rebellious novels of Biljana Jovanović, or evaluate the importance of the early prose of Dubravka Ugrešić. I also needed feminist critical tools to read poetry of Radmila Lazić. Looking back, when I try to evaluate the significance of the seventies and the eighties, I am convinced that literary texts that stylistically and thematically conjured gender-conscious criticism are among the most relevant works from that time. But that image could hardly be seen from the perspective of the eighties, when these works were actually published. Editors-visionaries such as Nenad Popović in Zagreb saw it. He published the most important Croatian women writers in the then Graphic Institute of Croatia (Grafički zavod Hrvatske), thus contributing to the shaping of the "wave of women's literature" in Croatian prose of the eighties.

From a wider perspective, the seventies and the eighties were highly important for feminist literary criticism, developing as a subdiscipline within the broader field of literary studies in those years. During the seventies, feminist literary criticism was divided between two traditions, the French one, grounded in deconstruction and Lacanian psychoanalysis; and the Anglo-American one, aiming to establish a theoretical basis for disciplinization of the field through gynocriticism. At the same time, this was a period in which the formative role of literary criticism in shaping feminist theory was particularly visible. In later decades, it opened up towards other approaches, mostly towards post-colonial theories and globalization theories, and in recent times, towards affect theory in particular. This, of course, represents quite a condensed picture, but I want to emphasize how feminist literary criticism remains an open and, in a positive meaning of the word, eclectic discipline which operates within a broader, interdisciplinary field of women's studies/gender studies, connecting different approaches and offering interpretations of literary and other cultural texts which are not necessarily closely connected with literary studies. Feminist literary criticism is inevitably political in the same sense in which other forms of dealing with feminism and feminist theory must be political.

Regardless of the specific methods of analysis to be used, it deals critically with the questions of gender identities and gender regimes and their consequences. Such an analysis can equally refer to texts grounded on recognizable experience, and to possible worlds of science fiction. In this respect, it is indicative that speculative fiction has proven to be a particularly important area of gender-conscious literature, because it enables critical reflection on alternatives to existing gender regimes. At the same time, through literary texts, we can understand and explain better the repressive effects of the existing social relations, whether in the current or in the past times, and not through the gender lens only, but also by perceiving the category of gender in relation with other identity categories and other regimes of social oppression, such as race, class, ethnicity, as well as education, old age, etc. In that sense, I wish to emphasize the significance the intersectional approach has for literary studies. And on the other hand, within an interdisciplinary framework, there is an important link to be established between transnational feminism and transnational feminist criticism.

These are all great topics, which indicate the scope of an area in which feminist criticism operates. At the same time, they make it clear why it is so difficult to exclude gender perspective, especially while reading contemporary texts, which oftentimes “call” for concepts from feminist theory to be used in interpretation. Literary texts are usually “faster” than their interpreters; we are not just talking about the simple logic that literary texts precede critical reading, but also about the fact that literature – just like other forms of artistic practices – in its complex way recognizes and articulates social changes, while theory often manages to offer interpretations of the same phenomena only later on. The literary production of the second half of the twentieth century clearly shows that gender consciousness has become one of the important characteristics of the world we live in, just like literary production from the beginning of the twenty-first century shows us that the notion of (hu)man in the world we created with our destructive behavior requires rethinking of the concept of humanity which cannot exclude gender perspective.

To put it simply, the notion of gender is one of those categories which profoundly change the theoretical perspective, both in literature as well as in other research fields. After Freud, you have to think about sexuality in a different way than before him, and after Foucault, you have to think about power differently. Similarly, introducing the notion of gender changes the way we think about the relations among people, not just in social reality, but in literature, as well. Of

course, that does not mean that everyone has to engage with psychoanalysis and that everyone has to become Foucault's follower, or that everyone has to deal with feminist criticism. But everyone who wishes to understand contemporary theory has to be aware of the significance of the concept of gender, and of the far-reaching implications of its theoretical application.

*In the last ten years, the conservative revolution and populism, both in the USA and in Europe, have called into question elementary values of universities: the idea of democracy, academic liberty and social justice. A good example is the recent and still ongoing attack of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán against the Central European University in Budapest. Could you tell us something more about it from the perspective of a full professor there and a feminist?*

The Central European University (CEU) was founded in 1991 as a regional university. In the meantime, it has developed into a globally-oriented academic institution which promotes academic freedom and the ideas of the open society. In my view the attack on CEU is a part of a broader project of illiberal democracy to place under control the university as a place where the critical thinking is generated. Recently, the accreditation of gender studies as a discipline has been annulled in Hungary, which basically means that all existing gender studies programs at the universities in Hungary have been canceled. Mid-August this year, the Government initiated some type of consultations about the status of gender studies at Hungarian universities with the clear intent of questioning the accreditation of existing programs from that field. Even though the negative reactions to the initiative were numerous, the list of fields in which you can get an academic degree in Hungary in 2019/20 was published in October without Gender Studies. This decision has affected two universities: ELTE, which is one of the largest and the most reputable Hungarian universities, which actually enrolled the first generation of masters' students in the field of gender studies last year; and the CEU, which had its two-year programs accredited in Hungary and in the USA. For ELTE University, this regulation means the cancellation of gender studies. For CEU, the situation is quite different. Since all our programs have American accreditation, the Department of Gender Studies will continue to teach its MA and PhD



programs. I can therefore invite all interested students to apply to the CEU, because we are currently in the process of receiving applications for 2019/20.

*A representative of Viktor Orbán's government explained the cancellation of accreditation of gender studies programs at state universities by claiming that there is no need for such studies on the job market, that the taxpayers' money should be directed at more lucrative programs, and by presenting the argument that gender studies are not "a serious academic discipline". Since you teach precisely at the Department of Gender Studies, how do you perceive this attack on gender equality, and the effects of the women's and the feminist movement in general?*

What is happening now with gender studies in Hungary is an extreme situation and an example of a broader attack on gender studies brought to an extreme; once again, we are talking about a very comprehensive meaning of the notion of gender studies. These attacks are going on for some time in public spheres of various countries, mostly as some form of defamation of the so-called "gender ideology." Such attacks mainly come from conservative and populist circles. The expression "gender ideology" has no grounds in any theory and its use is mostly connected with warping and openly underestimating the production of knowledge which stems from the notion of gender as one of the basic critical concepts. The expression emerged in Latin America and soon spread across Europe, supported by populist media. And it is evident that, in post-socialist context an additional layer of manipulation is achieved by connecting gender and ideology thus implicitly mobilizing the militant anti-socialist propaganda from the early nineties and implying that the concept of gender is a serious social threat. And according to public reactions, it seems that the strategy is quite successful, because people are being mobilized against the Istanbul Convention or against women's reproductive rights in the name of the defense against "gender ideology."

Moreover, and it is particularly worrisome, that type of completely ungrounded and wrongly set criticism lately seems to spill out of its initial domain of political and media discourses, where discreditation of the notion of gender obviously supports current attempts to renew certain models of patriarchal social relations and to (re)establish social control of women's bodies and women's labor. Taking away the accreditation from gender studies in

Hungary shows that such criticism is also trying to gain some form of legitimacy, which should not be underestimated. In the last half a century the area of knowledge production that we broadly name here as gender studies went through all phases of academic disciplinization, and produced some of the most important theoretical achievements as well as whole libraries of books that transformed the way of thinking in humanities and social sciences, so it is hard to believe that all of it is being challenged with a more or less organized negative media campaign and one problematic platitude.

And yet, the negative effects of that campaign are clearly visible. This is not an innocuous occurrence and it should be opposed, because attacks on gender studies are actually attacks on basic academic freedom which should be defended by the entire academic community. At the same time, it is important to understand that every attack on women's rights always means an attack on the rights minorities, primarily the rights of the LGBT population. When it comes to gender studies and the production of gender-conscious knowledge, I would say that that this is an unusual, and, at the same time, extremely important moment of great contrasts that need to be observed. On the one hand, women's movements are growing stronger, women's self-consciousness and the self-consciousness of minority groups is extremely strong, and it seems that in that respect in the past half a century deep changes have occurred in the societies we live in. Many of the prejudices that in the fifties and in the sixties were normalized to the extent that they remained unnoticed, especially when it comes to discrimination against women and minorities, racism or sexual violence, are simply unacceptable today. However, on the other hand, we see that the wave of retraditionalization is simultaneously growing in many societies and that many of those gained rights are being questioned. The role of women in these processes is a topic in itself and I will not open it here. But as a woman from the former Yugoslavia, I just want to say that we have already experienced how certain rights can easily be lost; like, for example, the right to equal pay for the same work. It is precisely why we must be aware that positive impacts of feminism will not be sustained unless we fight for them again and again. Women cannot allow for their history to be repeatedly brought back to its beginnings.

I would like to conclude with a literary example. In the documentary *The Poetess* (2017), the Saudi poetess Hissa Hilal speaks about her participation in the extremely popular competition "Millions' Poet" in Abu Dhabi, where she was the first woman to reach the finals and end up in the third place. This is a television program in which contemporary poets recite their poetry and

they are being judged by a professional jury and a jury of viewers. The program is extremely popular and it is followed by 75 million viewers, which in itself would be strong enough reason to speak about it. However, the program is not women-friendly, so Hissa Hilal, a poetess that performs in a hijab as “the voice behind the veil,” as she is referred to in the announcements of the film, clearly undermines some very strict discriminatory gender relations. I could talk volumes about the film now, but I will simply say just two things instead of a conclusion. One, the victory of Hissa Hilal is not just a *happy end*; she got the highest marks from the judges but not the viewers, hence she remained third in the competition. As she says herself, she knew from the beginning that they would not let a woman “take the flag,” which is the right of the winner. While everyone else celebrated in a warm atmosphere of togetherness, she left the competition quietly, followed by one woman, her cousin or friend, I am not sure. Her goal to change something is far away, and there are many phases and many victories and defeats on that road. But Hissa Hilal draws the strength to embark on that journey partly from her gender memory, for instance, of Bedouin women from her family having some liberties a few generations ago that are now forgotten. Hissa Hilal won her victory in the “Millions’ Poet” competition by reciting her poetry in the genre of Bedouin poetry. If you think this hasn’t got much to do with us, because our women are emancipated, think again. Even plastic surgery can be a veil, and a prominent position in the government followed by accepting the male model of power can hardly be considered true emancipation. You can read more about that from our Balkan and post-Yugoslav perspective in Tena Štivičić’s *Three Winters*.

Translated by Radojka Jevtić