

# WOMEN, NATION AND NARRATION IN BULGARIAN HISTORY OF 19<sup>TH</sup> C.

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There are several ways to study the connection between women and nationalism in the Ottoman 19<sup>th</sup> c. One of them is to integrate the story of the birth of the women's movements within the grand narrative of the evolvement of the national idea among the different communities in the Ottoman Empire. Another is to revise the existing narrations and figurations about "the woman" as a metonymy of the nation and to offer alternative sources, terms and approaches to the topic. Yet another way is to introduce a comparative historical perspective between the discourses on emancipation among the different communities in the late Ottoman period. The last strategy is a step towards enrichment of the field of Southeast European women's history, which until recently has been regarded only through the narrow scope of the lenses of the nationalist historiography.

In order to challenge the patriarchal matrix in the reproduction of the singular image of the woman as a devoted mother, a compassionate partner or a loyal daughter. In the title of this paper I suggest a plurality of the notion of "women". Beside the small group of Bulgarian women who took part in revolutionary activities in the years preceding the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878, there were women who performed other kinds of social activism –establishing women's organizations, taking part in philanthropic activities, contributing to the press. Still not much research is done in depicting the multifaceted activities of those women. Respectively, in the literary canon there are still a few names of recognized women writers. In what follows this paper will provide a general picture of the development of Bulgarian women's organization in the 19<sup>th</sup> c and as well as a brief overview of their forms of public presence, such as collecting donations for charity, writing, or acting in theatre performances.

By the conjunction of "nation and narration" in the title I express my agreement with the ambivalent nature of the historical narratives (Bhabha 1990:3) that create a nimbus of rationality over certain practices of exclusion of social groups from the mainstream national history. As for the selected historical period of this paper I discuss the events in Bulgarian society happening in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. but trace some of them until the *Fin de siècle* despite the usual division of that century into the Ottoman time (until the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878) and the post-Ottoman period (when Bulgaria was aiming at its consolidation and independence from the imperial regime). The Bulgarian historiography usually refers to that period amalgamating "Renaissance" with "Enlightenment" in the term "National revival". In

view of the current cultural debates on the adequacy of these terms and their functions for the creation of a grand narrative of national evolvement (Hranova 2011) the present paper tries to broaden its scope within the long-durée 19<sup>th</sup> c. in order to present some substantial results of the movement of emancipation of the Bulgarian women, such as the establishment of the Bulgarian women's union (1901) and its journal "Zhenski glas" (1898).

The women's participation in the Bulgarian society of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. was retold in a parallel with the major historical events in the national narrative. The same refrain about women's activism was repeated whenever the women appeared as characters in history textbooks or as special object of historical research (Voinikova-Pundeva 1940). Every generation of students had to remember that "the Bulgarian woman always cared for the wellbeing of the nation" (Paskaleva 1984:4). Despite the political changes that happened in Bulgaria in the 20<sup>th</sup> c –the participation in the First and the Second World Wars and then the Socialist Period (1945-1989) –this assumption served well all ideological doctrines. During socialism a special attention received those women who became collaborators to the revolutionary activities of the Bulgarians against the Ottoman power that led to the bloody April Revolt of 1876. Some of them gained legendary status and were regarded as "sisters" to the women who later took part in the Bulgarian anti-fascist movement of during the WWII.

Just recently more attention was focused on the public presence of Bulgarian women who not necessarily joined secret revolutionary circles but were involved in women's organizations and women's schools. Furthermore, the international contacts and philanthropic work of such women was perceived in view of its interconnectedness with the actions of women from other ethnic communities in the urban structure of the late-Ottoman state.<sup>2</sup> The present studies use the bibliographical premises of the past generations of scholars, but are more attentive to those events and personalities from the Bulgarian women's history, which were neglected from the major accord of the narrative of national independence.

The approaches to the Bulgarian women's history illustrate a significant methodological debate in the field of feminist and gender history. It is a critical confrontation between two standpoints. There are scholars who assume that the integration of the women's activism within the nationalistic project enhanced the general climate of cultural emancipation and contributed to a sufficient acknowledgement of gender difference. And there are others who contest the opportunities which women received as a result of collaborating to the creation of Bulgarian state because the national ideology imposed a number of limitations in order to acknowledge the women's public presence as legitimate. Her loyalty to the will of those who engaged with the protection of the fatherland and the cause for independence was unquestionably related to her moral virtues. On the contrary, her capacity of making a choice

in favor of her marriage or career, especially if marriage involved a man from different nationality, was proclaimed as sinful.

Therefore the access of women to press or theater stage was approved usually if they declared their high moral intentions to serve the fatherland. For example when the first Bulgarian women actresses appeared in amateur theatre performances in the Romanian cities in the 60s of 19<sup>th</sup> c. (1868) they needed to clarify that “they have not searched for glory but have done it to fulfill their human duty for their community and peoples”.<sup>3</sup> Or, when women learned “embroidery” at school they were advised not to use their skills for sewing *a la franga* dresses but contribute to the national idea by preparing clothes and flags for the secret counter-state local organizations in the 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> c.

Those limits were preserved way beyond the creation of the Bulgarian state and even rigidified by new generations of men and women. The rhetorical matrix of the Bulgarian press from the 40s of 19<sup>th</sup> c. on was very successful in convincing both men and women that it is in the nature and social design of womanhood to be ready for sacrifice in the name of the nation or its people. This refrain served well other ideological regimes, such as the post-WWII Socialist regime, when “the fatal attraction” between state-socialism and state-controlled women’s activism lead to complete oblivion of achievements and international acknowledgements of the pre-1945 women’s (literary) and political organizations.

Speaking comparatively with regards to the Ottoman realm however, one might observe that the Bulgarian women were among the first ones to attend public schools, to establish women’s associations and to contribute to the press. On such basis many historians have claimed that in fact the Bulgarian style of women’s emancipation was so early and widespread because it was connected to the general climate of national awareness. But that climate was also influenced by the impact of the Tanzimat reforms and the growing possibility of travel and education of the Bulgarians within the empire or abroad. 35 primary schools for girls appeared until 1850 and until 1878 they became 90. 20 secondary schools for girls appeared until 1878 when the independent Bulgarian state was established (Cholakova 1994:143). The data really displays a progressive trend when it comes to quantity and regulation. But as far as the equality of curricula is concerned certain differences which were set already in the pre-1878 era remained and rigidified during the later period when Bulgaria had its own Ministry of Education.

Before 1878 the system of schools was functioning mostly on a principle of networking rather than on that of a hierarchy (Lilova 2003). In the Ottoman times there was no centralized body to unify the curricula and teaching materials for the Bulgarian schools. Although several efforts were made in this direction in the 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., basically the school council, the

women's organizations, and the local community ("obshtina") decided upon the governance and the curricula of the schools. A large variety of textbooks, translated from different languages, were used as teaching materials. The most significant element, enacting the networks of women's schools was the mobility of women-teachers. The most famous ones, who also left their memoirs, report a change in their workplace in the course of several years. So, depending on their educational background (Greek, Russian, Romanian, French, Czech or Austrian) they could introduce readings and courses, which would not be allowed in a more strictly governed system. In some cases, such as the towns of Stara Zagora, Roushuck, Plovdiv or Samokov there were women's schools funded also by Catholic or Protestant missions. In the bigger towns the Jewish community also introduced primary schools for girls. The influences and connections between the women's schools of the different ethnic or religious communities during that period still wait for new unprejudiced comparative research.

There are considerable changes in the control of the process of women's education in the post-Ottoman period when the Bulgarian Ministry of Education was established. Indeed, for the first time in the 80s of the 19<sup>th</sup> c the first high-schools for girls appeared in several big Bulgarian cities. But as far as the curricula is concerned the differences between the subjects remained and were legally strengthened. There is one big exception from this trend, and this is the democratic and widely acclaimed law of Ivan Shishmanov of 1904, but four years later the situation was retrieved to its old status and stayed so until the mid of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. The centralization of the educational system sustained the gender inequality principle reiterating the goal of women's education to prepare women for family life and for work in the social care sector.

### **The woman question and the women's press**

At a recent conference in Athens this year prof. Efi Kanner spoke about "a radicalization" of the Bulgarian and Armenian women's movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> c. compared to a later appearance of women's associations and journals for Greek and Turkish women within the Ottoman space. She explained this advancement of the women's emancipation for Bulgarians as a result of a strong nationalistic mobilization combined with a broader international concern for gender equality of access to education. If the analysis of the Bulgarian women's history follows the logic of the quotation "when a woman learned to read, the woman's question arose in the world" (Ebner-Echenbach quoted in Offen 2000:10), then it can be assumed that in the Bulgarian case the woman question was raised already in the 50s of 19<sup>th</sup> c.

Indeed, by means of a number of Bulgarian periodicals, published in Istanbul, Novi Sad, Bucharest or Braila the parameters of “the woman question” were settled around the issue of overcoming illiteracy among women. The debate echoed concepts such as “progress”, “peoples”, “equality” presented in an eclectic and diverse way, and implying identification of the Bulgarians with the notion of europeanness. The newspapers and magazines functioned as arenas for public debates between intellectuals with different political convictions. For them the debate about women’s emancipation was another subject for presenting themselves in public and for attacking their political rival. The debate on ‘the woman question’ can be regarded as a self-emancipatory strategy for promotion of certain public figures as leaders and policy-makers.

The novelty of the idea required an appropriate translation of the term, such as to sustain the traditional modes of domination. Such translation was adopted by Petko Slavejkov who was the editor of the first women’s magazine “Ruzhitzia” (1871) published in Istanbul:

*“The woman question is raised when women feel humiliated and disadvantaged by men, who seem to have deprived women of any rights, providing them unwanted protection instead. Therefore women want to liberate from this slavery and unwanted protection and create women's organizations that can secure their claims and actions”.*

The article insisted on the inadequacy of the term to the local context. Petko Slavejkov’s warning was that there is a real danger for the society if Bulgarian women decide to act against their nature. He was convinced that the press should take good care to diminish any dangerous meanings of the “woman question”. That Bulgarian intellectual was very much in favor of women’s emancipation and often invited women to write in his newspapers. But usually the male intellectuals thought that the enthusiasm of the women who established women’s organization among Bulgarians had to be cooled and controlled. The data shows that since the first women’s organization was founded in the Danube city of Lom in 1857 Bulgarians were able to establish 61 organizations, of which 46 was spread across Ottoman territory on both sides of the Balkan mountain, and 7 were outside the Ottoman empire –in Romania, Russia, Serbia. During the 50s and 60s the preoccupation of those organizations was to support women’s education, to raise funds for philanthropic causes, to organize public lectures and to negotiate their existence with the local leaders of the Bulgarian community. Later, during the 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> c., the impact of the organizations developed internationally. They took part in different campaigns for charity and provided medical assistance during the events of 1876 and the Russian-Turkish war of 1878.

Despite the unstoppable critiques about the lack of coordination and abundance of intrigues among the members of women’s organizations, the Bulgarian periodicals provide data about

the initiatives of the women's organizations. The biggest initiative which displays the capacity for action of the organizations is the campaign for gathering funds for the educational and cultural life of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul. Throughout one year a representative of the Bulgarian community "Enlightenment" in Istanbul met with representatives of the Bulgarian communities in a number of cities both on the north and south of the Balkan mountain. The representative received the warmest welcome from the local women's organizations. Sixteen organizations donated a total number of 300 embroideries and other textile objects for the exhibition and the lottery, arranged by the female representatives of the Bulgarian community in the Ottoman capital. The auction was opened on 29 June 1873 in the communal building of the Bulgarian Exarchate. Several of the most popular Bulgarian journalists and merchants gave speeches. It was announced as the "first industrial fair of Bulgarians" and evoked hopes for other similar campaigns.<sup>4</sup> This initiative shows the communication between the provincial women's organizations with the Bulgarian community in the Ottoman capital.

Another example can display the developing relations between the women from territories on the North of the Balkan mountain and those organizations, which were established in Romania. There were five Bulgarian women's organizations in different Southeast Romanian cities – in Tulcea, Braila, Guirgui and two in Bucharest. These organizations consisted mainly of first and second generations of immigrants from the cities of Yambol and Sliven who experienced greater turmoil during the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829. That is why the philanthropic activities of the women's organizations were initially focused on helping the women's education of Bulgarians in their native cities. There was also a good communication between the organizations from the towns on the South of the Danube basin and the north of it.

Especially in the 70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. some of the Bulgarian women's organizations were able to establish international contacts for the sake of charity or for that of fund raising for educational purposes. The effort of one of the most energetic representatives of this stage of the women's movement was Evgenia Kisimova (1835-1886). She was the head of the women's organization in the town of Turnovo, established in 1869. She energetically created a network among men and women intellectuals who were in favour of the idea of women's emancipation and kept correspondence with some of the most distinguished intellectuals of her time. Evgenia Kisimova initiated campaigns for collecting donations for the women's school. Her proficiency in needlework was recognized and she gained confidence to use her skills to send a symbolic gift and ask for fellowships for young girls to study abroad. On behalf of the women's organization of Turnovo "Milosardie" she wrote a letter to the Romanian queen Karmen Silva, sending a boutique dress as a present. In the letter Evgenia

Kisimova requested support for the education of two Bulgarian girls in one very famous lyceum in Bucharest. The queen gave a positive response to Kisimova's letter and soon after that two Bulgarian girls were sent to "Azil Elena Domna" in the Romanian capital.

In the post-Ottoman period by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> c. the process of creating a network across the Bulgarian territory continued and in 1901 the Bulgarian women's union was established. The first regular journal, edited by women from the union – "Zhenski glas"/"Woman's voice", appeared in 1898. Soon after the establishment of the union several internal conflicts arose among its members. In 1903 Vela Blagoeva (1858-1921) who was a socialist feminist, a graduate of the famous Bestuzhev courses in St. Petersburg and a partner of the leader of the Bulgarian socialist party, was the first to resign. She accused the union of not actively defending the rights of the working women and soon after her withdrawal she started a new journal - "Women's labor"(1904-1905). Another former leader of the Union - Anna Karima (1871–1949) also expressed her reluctance that the women's union does not take serious steps for suffrage. In 1908 she started the organization Ravnopravie/"Equal rights" and a journal under the same name.

### **Names to faces: Bulgarian women authors**

Switching to the topic of women writers it was exactly Anna Karima –also an author of several collections of short stories– who blamed other quite prolific women authors of the time, such as Evgenia Mars (1877-1945) to be dependent to the mentorship of men in order to get a promotion. It seems that such a sensitivity of the autonomous style of an author was already developed by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. whereas for the earlier period –between the 40s and 70s of 19<sup>th</sup> c. the same asymmetrical power structure between men of letters and their protégés was not perceived as a problem.

Retrieving the context of Bulgarian literature of 19<sup>th</sup> c it can be said that it was a period when there were very few educated women and even fewer women writers or translators, so it was the male writers toward who promoted women to write. Although some feminist historians call such men "male feminists", I do not agree with that label as there was always a price that the woman writer needed to pay to get a promotion. Sometimes it was related to some kind of dependency on the opinion of the male mentor, and in other cases the figure of the male writer overshadowed the creative potential of the woman who was always regarded as a protégé and not as a real talented author. The promotion of women writers was possible only if they have learned well *the pedagogical exercise* to serve their community and family. That is why when the contemporary literary criticism discusses the lack "of feminist tradition in Bulgarian literature" (Kirova 2009, Nikolchina 2002) one of the major reasons for it is that women writers usually combined the roles of muse and a life companion for some of the

major male authors. They assumed that they have to pass a period of literary infancy in order to be acknowledged as poets or novelists of a unique style. Some of them really succeeded and managed to shape their life story throughout almost one age in literary history. Others, just like the above-mentioned Ana Karima and Evgenia Mars, were not so successful in entering the literary canon. The critics still accuse of too much or too less feminine style in writing –which combined with a suspiciousness of being a protégé of a male writer, always puts forward their biography rather than their writing.

So, that is why Judith Butler's approach of critical rethinking of such emancipatory strategies needs to be taken into account (Butler 1990). Instead of just listing the names and works the first Bulgarian women writers from the 40s of 19<sup>th</sup> c on, I will also try to make a typology of their profiles, a brief sketch of their critical representations so far. I do this in order to explain why the narration of national literary history contained so few women's names, despite the already suggested argument of a lively and comparatively early process of women's emancipation of Bulgarians.

There are two women in the 40s of 19<sup>th</sup> c who are recognized as the first poets and translators because their texts have been published and their life has been comparatively well documented by their relatives. These are Stanka Nikoliza Spasso-Elenina (1835-1920) and Elena Muteva (1825-1854) are writers and translators of very significant texts whose reception in Bulgarian culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> produced powerful imagery linked also with the struggle for independence from the Ottoman rule. Both of them have a love relationship/marriage with educators and poets who support and help them in their work. It is not so much the case of Stanka Nikolitza, who lived a long life, than about E. Muteva, that her contribution was always overshadowed by that of the male poet – a very distinguished author Nayden Gerov.

Towards the 60-s of 19<sup>th</sup> c women appeared mostly as contributors to periodicals. Sometimes they wrote their own articles usually on the question of education, but mainly they were invited to translate articles, novels, dramas from French, Czech, Russian or German. The Greek or Ottoman influence on such translations is still not researched very much and I hope that my stay here and this lecture can be a start of solving this gap in the comparative mode of research. Occasionally several works of George Sand, Mme de Stael, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Bozhana Nemcova, Leprince de Baumond appeared translated by male authors. But just one year after its European release the John Stewart Mills's book "On the Subjection of Women" was reviewed in Bulgarian by the translator Ivanka Zolotivic.



From the historical data, there are the names of many other women- teachers or well-educated graduates from schools in Istanbul, Bucharest, Odessa, Moskow or Prague. Perhaps many of them have kept a written record which in some cases may be hidden in the archive of their famous husbands or their family. In other cases such records have just disappeared so what we can rely on are just published accounts.<sup>5</sup>

Sometimes women did not sign their contributions, or put initials or a more general description, such as “a woman from Eski Zağara”, or “a Bulgarian woman”. The reason that could be that usually the editor took the responsibility of the whole volume and it was upon his decision that would appear by its name, under a pseudonym, or simply without any reference to name and location.

In the history of 19<sup>th</sup> c women’s literature there also the opposite cases - when we have a name – a signature, but no any other reference to biography. Sometimes, there are hypothesis of mystification– of a disguise of a man under the name of a woman. Karamfila Stefanova’s case is clearly fitting into the first and the third methodological problem. She published eleven poems and two essays in several Bulgarian periodicals. The poems and a proposal for publishing of a poetry book deposited to the Bulgarian library society in Constantinople provide facts for the female identity of this writer who was apparently part of the Bulgarian community in Romania. It is believed that she was born in Tulcea, and when she graduated the local Bulgarian school she was for a while a student in the Tabor – a town presently in the Czech republic. It is strange however, that there is no information about her in any of the archives left from the women’s organization, school or other information about Tulcea. Her name might be a mystification for a male author Anton Frangya, a graduate from the Galata saray lyceum in Constantinople, because beside the public versions some of her texts were only found in his archives (Malinova 2005). The lack of biographical information makes her authorship vulnerable.

Another difficulty for integration of those early authors to the grand historical narrative of literature is their bilingual writing identity. The case of Ekaterina Vassileva displays this problem. She was born in Braila in a family of immigrants from Sliven, married a merchant from the Bulgarian community in Braila. Later the family re-emigrated to Paris, where she wrote her memoirs. Almost all of her work however is written either in Romanian, or in French. When she published her opinion on the debatable topics of fashion and civilization she clearly expressed her lack of confidence to write poetry in her mother tongue. Perhaps she is just one of the many Bulgarian women, who gradually adapted linguistically to the new environment and were not able to write in Bulgarian.

In regard to these methodological problems there are several steps to be taken. The first one is to try to find a compromise between the position of those historians who do not question the emancipatory stance of the first 'male feminists' and those ones who find reassertion of patriarchy in every case. It can be reached when researchers bring to the fore such examples of women's writing, which not always comply with the general nationalistic narrative but perhaps reveal a subject position. The challenge to this step comes from the official history of literature in which the concept of "high literature" fail to recognize as prestigious many of the genres and modes of feminine writing.

The second step is to investigate biographies of women activist and writers. It involves new research of already existing archives, familial archives, letters, church and school records, if reachable. It could also require linguistic skills in the languages of the neighboring countries to be able to read any works, written in the language of instruction or that of the majority. Sometimes this research can come to a dead end because of the lack of primary sources.

The last step that has been recently put in practice is the creation of international networks of researchers who deal with similar investigations and methodological riddles. Due to the specific cross-influences in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman context I am sure that new discoveries can be made. This is valid not only for hard-to-prove informal connections between individuals and organization who participated in the general trend of emancipation but also for the textual production left from the late-Ottoman period. Being aware of the differences in the national narratives the researchers in such comparative studies can embrace the similarities in discourses, genres, and styles that reveal the legacy of a common Ottoman cultural belonging.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Francisca de Hahn, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loutfi. *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms*. Budapest New York: CEU press, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Women actresses appeared for the first time on stage in the amateur theatre cast of Dobri Voinikov since 1866 in the Romanian cities of Tulcea, Braila and Bucharest. One of the plays caused a debate on the literary value of the play and two women-actresses Ekaterina Vassileva and Anika Kostovich wrote their opinion on their self-perception as actresses. See. St.

<sup>4</sup> A special appendix of the newspaper "Pravo" 18 June 1873, published in Istanbul, included a description of the event and the speeches of all distinguished guest of the exhibition. See. *Pravo* (priturka) Komisia po izlozhenieto. Bulgarsko rykodelno izlozhenie/Organizational committee. Bulgarian Embroidery Fair, vol. 14 from 18 June 1873.

<sup>5</sup> For instance Elena Muteva has lived as an immigrant in Odessa and has died very young. That is how much of her archives are lost for the present generations of scholars.