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Jelena Veselinović

University of Belgrade

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2851-1390>

Women Intellectual Mentors

(Magdalena Koch, *Mistrzynie myślenia: Serbski esej feministyczny (XIX–XXI wiek)*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 2019, 259 pages)

Magdalena Koch's book *Mistrzynie myślenia Serbski esej feministyczny (XIX–XXI wiek)* [*Women Intellectual Mentors: The Serbian Feminist Essay (From 19th to the 20th Century)*]; Koch, 2019] was published in 2019 in Poznań by Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. This book can be perceived as a continuation of the author's previous research on women's writing in the Serbian language.

Magdalena Koch is a professor of Serbian and Croatian literature at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. She specializes in Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian literature of the 20th and 21st century, gender studies, the cultural history of women, feminist literary criticism, Serbian feminist essays, and contemporary Serbian and Croatian drama ("Magdalena Koch", 2013). She gained her Ph.D. in 1997 with the work *Podróże w czasie i przestrzeni. Proza Isidory*

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Sekulić (Journeys in Space and Time. Prose of Isidora Sekulić). Since then, she has continued researching less-known female modernist authors from the same period, and in 2007 she published the book *Kiedy dojrzujemy 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)*), which was masterfully translated into the Serbian language by Jelena Jović, translator and lecturer of Polish studies at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. In the book, Koch tried to shed light on the works of four modernist female authors “who benefited their culture greatly, and in return have been unjustly neglected by it” (Jović, 2011).¹ The book focuses on the fiction of Isidora Sekulić, Jelena Dimitrijević, Milica Janković, and the poetry of Danica Marković, exploring how their work influenced the literary canon, the literary genre, and the reception of gender in literature. These four women were the only women Jovan Skerlić, one of the most influential literary critics of early 20th century Serbia, included in his anthology *Istorija nove srpske književnosti (History of the New Serbian Literature)* in 1914. It is worth mentioning that when *Kiedy dojrzujemy jako kultura...* was translated into Serbian, there was no published history of Serbian women's writings in the Serbian language. Although Celia Hawkesworth (a lecturer of Serbian and Croatian Language at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London from 1971 to 2002) published in 2000 the book *Voices in the Shadows. Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia*, in which she addressed the absence of women from traditional cultural history, the book was not translated into Serbian until 2017. Interestingly, the only two anthologies of Serbian women's writing at the time were written by foreign authors, which shows a shocking lack of interest from local authors and academia, especially professors who teach Serbian literature.

In November 2020, in an interview with Cezary Łasiczka (2020) for the podcast OFF Czarek, Magdalena Koch explained how, during her research for the book *Kiedy dojrzujemy jako kultura...*, she came across quite a lot of non-fiction materials that did not fit the form of the book. That gave her an idea for a new book in which she would cover the materials she accumulated during her research.

The main focus of the book *Mistrzynie myślenia*, as the author herself puts it, “is to systematize and complete the knowledge of Serbian essays written

¹ All quotations and titles are translated by the author.

by women, although the criteria for selection of the texts, apart from the genre, were also thematic (emancipation and feminism)” (Koch, 2019, p. 10). Narrowing her field of studies, the author starts with the first published female writer, Eustahija Arsić, who was the first female member of Matica Srpska². Strongly influenced by Dositej Obradović, Arsić started writing what can be described as protofeminist protoessays. In the book, Koch covers seven more female writers who continued the thought of Eustahija Arsić and contributed to the development of the essay as well as feminist thought in Serbia. Coincidentally, the last author she covers bears the same surname as the first.

The form of the book helps readers understand the historical background and the evolution of both the essay as a genre and the writing of women in Serbia. The book is divided into five sections in which Koch diachronically examines feminist essays over the last two centuries. The first chapter is methodological and explains how the essay, as a form devoid of the genealogical tradition and academic restrictions, allowed women to express their gendered experiences. This part is particularly important since it traces the evolution of the genre as it “changes its literary, social, and political function” (Koch, 2019, p. 9). In the next section, by examining the work of four authors (Eustahija Arsić, Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, Draga Dejanović, and Draga Gavrilović), Koch shows how the essay as a form began to gain relevance in Serbian cultural circles, as well as how feminist thought started to take form during the 19th century (1814–1898). The third section examines modernist authors of the early 20th century, mainly Jelica Belović Bernadžikovska and Isidora Sekulić (whom Koch studied in depth in her previous work). The author also studies the role journals played in the evolution and spread of women’s thought and writings. The tradition of Serbian periodicals for women or edited by women started in 1847 with the journal *Ženski Vospitatelj* (Women’s tutor), which prepared young women to be good mothers, wives, and housewives. Journals such as *Domaćica* (The Housewife), *Srpkinja* (The Serbian Woman), *Žena* (The Woman), *Ženski pokret* (The Women’s Movement), and others were a space where women wrote for women, and they were some of the few places where women’s writing, especially essays, were published. The main role of these journals was to educate Serbian women and to raise their emancipatory and feminist awareness (Koch, 2019, p. 95). The fourth part is ded-

² Matica Srpska is the oldest non-governmental cultural-scientific national institution in Serbia.

icated to the interwar years, or the “golden era of the feminist essay”, and the authors who “initiated a new, active feminist discourse in Serbian culture, and treated the essay with passion and commitment as a medium of expression” (Koch, 2019, p. 153). Koch shows how female authors from this period, chiefly Jela Spiridonović-Savić, Anica Savić-Rebac, Ksenija Atanasijević, and Julka Hlapec-Đorđević, revisited the work of their predecessors and tried to re-establish matrilinear genealogy, which was clearly present in Serbia from the beginning of the essay as a genre. The fifth and last chapter examines the post-war period, the censorship that followed World War II in communist Yugoslavia³, the new development of feminism that came with the conference *Drug-ca Žena. Žensko pitanje, novi pristup?* (*Comrade Woman – the women’s question, a new approach?*) and the final intensification of feminist activities in the last decade of the 20th century. The breakup of Yugoslavia and armed conflict in the 1990s once again brought upon questions of national identity. On one hand, this helped rediscover female writers who had been neglected in the past; on the other hand, it united contemporary feminists from the Balkans who had the same goal: to fight nationalism in the region ever more strongly. Although Koch acknowledges the role of numerous authors from this period, such as Žarana Papić, Dunja Blažević, Nada Ler-Sofronić, Neda Božinović, Biljana Dojčinović, Jasmina Lukić, and many others, she chooses to focus on two writers, Svetlana Slapšak, who wrote anthropological essays, and Branka Arsić, who wrote philosophical essays, as their works offer “sufficient exemplification in the context of the latest trends” (Koch, 2019, p. 200).

By organizing the book in this way, Koch tries to draw a literary map of female work in order to delineate the space women occupied in the culture and uncover the processes that contributed to the emergence of feminist thought in Serbia. In the making of this map, the author had in mind the lesser-known geographical term ‘isochime’, i.e., lines on a map that connect places with the same winter temperatures. This term was proposed by Isidora Sekulić in her article published in 1924, *Izohimene u književnosti* (*Izochimes in Literature*), as a way to “capture the transformations of literary processes in space and time” (Koch, 2019, p. 230). Connecting points that are geographically culturally and chronologically distant, the author tries to form a coherent genealogical and thematic whole using Sekulić’s idea of isochimes to show that “none

³ Formal pre-publication censorship was instituted in Yugoslavia in 1946 and lasted throughout the initial years of communist rule.

of the analyzed essayists worked in isolation and that only the reconstruction of a specific network of connections gives us a full insight into the story of Serbian feminist essays” (Kaniecka, 2020, p. 159). The lines also have symbolic meaning, as it was always winter for female authors in Serbia who chose the essay as their literary form.

Analyzing the works of the chosen authors, Koch successfully manages to outline the historical framework in which they emerged. Starting with the early authors, she does not fail to mention details from their personal lives that allowed them to write and take an active role in society (all four women whose work Koch examines were either from wealthy and influential families, or married into them, and only one had children). With the same meticulousness, Koch delves into the social and political climate of the 20th century and elucidates the factors that paved the way for women’s liberation and, consequentially, the further development of the feminist essay. She traces the public reception of the aforementioned authors’ work at the time of publishing, as well as later publications by more recent authors who studied them. Koch provides an insight into the current state of the field of literary studies in Serbia, whilst the footnotes contain a copious amount of useful information and links that allow curious readers to broaden their knowledge on the subject. Although she concentrates on eight authors, Koch also relies on the work of other contemporary authors, Serbian as well as Polish, therefore her study’s bibliography can serve as an excellent source for further research.

Magdalena Koch teaches students in Poznań and around Poland about Serbian feminist essayists, whose names are rarely mentioned in courses of Serbian literature in Serbian universities. The few exceptions are mostly female professors who have worked with the Knjiženstvo project⁴, which aims to shed light on the history of women’s literature in the Serbian language. This is why M. Koch’s book bears exceptional relevance for those who want to learn about the important role women had in literature. Although the book is written in the Polish language and is primarily intended for a Polish audience, there is hope that a translation will soon be available to the Serbian audience, hopefully of the same quality as the previous one.

⁴ The project was led by professor Biljana Dojčinović. Numerous other professors, some of whom work at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, participated in the project (<http://www.knjizenstvo.rs/#gsc.tab=0>; *Књиженство теорија и историја женске књижевности на српском језику до 1915. године*, 2021).

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Mistrzynie myślenia

Niniejsza recenzja dotyczy książki *Mistrzynie myślenia. Serbski esej feministyczny (XIX–XXI wiek)* (2019), autorstwa polskiej profesor literatury serbskiej i chorwackiej, Magdaleny Koch. W swojej książce stara się rzucić światło na twórczość ośmiu serbskich autorek, które przez 200 lat używały eseju jako formy literackiego wyrazu. Koch diachronicznie analizuje rolę kobiet w historii literatury serbskiej, a także znaczenie eseju w rozwoju myśli emancypacyjnej i feministycznej w Serbii.

Słowa kluczowe: recenzja, *Mistrzynie myślenia*, serbska literatura, autorki, esej, feminizm

Women intellectual mentors

This review studies the book *Mistrzynie myślenia. Serbski esej feministyczny (XIX–XXI wiek)* [*Women Intellectual Mentors: The Serbian Feminist Essay (From 19th to the 20th Century)*, 2019], written by the Polish author and professor of Serbian and Croatian literature, Magdalena Koch. In her book, Koch tries to shed light on the work of eight Serbian female authors who, over a period of 200 years, used the essay as their literary form of choice. Koch diachronically examines the role women played in the history of Serbian literature, as well as the significance of the essay in the development of emancipatory and feminist thought in Serbia.

Keywords: review, *Mistrzynie myślenia*, Serbian literature, female authors, essay, feminism

Jelena Veselinović (veselinovicjln@gmail.com) – studentka studiów magisterskich na kierunku język, literatura i kultura na Wydziale Filologicznym Uniwersytetu w Belgradzie. W 2016 roku ukończyła studia licencjackie z polonistyki na tym samym Wydziale. Od 2020 roku pracuje w Katedrze Polonistyki na Wydziale Filologicznym. Obecnie przedmiotem jej badań są gender studies.

Jelena Veselinović (veselinovicjln@gmail.com) – master's student of the Language, Literature and Culture course at the Faculty of Philology, University

of Belgrade. In 2016 she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Polish studies from the same faculty. Since 2020, she has worked as a demonstrator at the Department of Polish Studies at the Faculty of Philology. Currently, the focus of her research is gender studies.