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## IN SEARCH OF MATRIARCHAL UTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY SERBIAN WRITING

In *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), Eisler asserts that the Neolithic societies used to follow a “partnership model” of civilization that rested on egalitarian and matrifocal values. However, over time, it gave way to the current “dominator model” that focuses on masculine ideals of superiority and dominance. It is her genuine belief that a historical transition from earlier idyllic to more aggressive cultures can be reversed in order for the matriarchal society to be constructed again in the future. This theoretical framework will be employed in the comparative analysis of two modern Serbian books of prose that seek a vision of feminist utopia at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Novaković’s *The Danube’s Apocrypha* (1996) and Šalgo’s *The Road to Birobidzhan* (1997). Novaković’s two novellas joined in one book describe an uprising threatening to overturn the social order in near future and has a female narrator who shares with the reader the testimony concerning a secret community of women, which is “silently awaiting” its Goddess to appear. Šalgo’s posthumous, unfinished novel partly reads as a proclamation of a new religious doctrine about the female Christ figure named Messiana and her ardent acolytes who spread the word about a hideaway which would serve to rescue the vulnerable and the endangered. Though the original intention of both Šalgo and Novaković was to support the destitute and unprotected women of the Balkans by building the characters and the plots reminiscent of their plight, their writing turned into an unparalleled quest for the continent of the female, a very particular Utopia. The following analysis will also be based on the analytical approaches of Freud, Jung, Frye, Fromm and Hutcheon.

*Keywords:* partnership model, dominator model, feminist utopia, *The Danube’s Apocrypha*, *The Road to Birobidzhan*.

## 1. Introduction

In *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987), Riana Eisler, the main proponent of cultural transformation theory, asserts that the Neolithic societies used to follow a “partnership model” of civilization that rested on egalitarian, peaceful and matrifocal values (EISLER 1987: xvii). However, over time, it gave way to the current “dominator model” (EISLER 1987: xvii) that focuses on masculine ideals of superiority, dominance and hierarchy.

The successive historical appearance of the patriarchal social system can be related to the suppression of the matriarchal culture of prehistoric communities, or more precisely, to the suppression of the “effeminate” qualities, as Eisler calls them, such as “caring, compassion, and nonviolence” (EISLER 1987: xvi) which were highly valued in these Goddess-worshipping, equalitarian cultures (EISLER 1987: 7). In the aforementioned study, the author particularly pays attention to our prehistoric ancestors who imagined “the universe as an all-giving Mother from whose womb all life emerges and to which like the cycles of vegetation, it returns after death to be again reborn” (EISLER 1987: xvi). These Neolithic societies, that conceptualized the powers governing the universe in female form, represented the source of partnership, equality and tolerance among all of its members. Eisler describes these prehistoric communities as “the only known high civilization where the worship of the Goddess survived into historical times” (EISLER 1987: 15). She is particularly impressed with the Neolithic art that does not glorify war as is the case with patriarchal art.

There is no imagery idealizing armed might, cruelty and violence-based power. There are here no images of “noble warriors” or scenes of battles. Nor are there any signs of “heroic conquerors” dragging captives around in chains or other evidences of slavery... It is completely devoid of the ruler-ruled, master-subject imagery (so characteristic of dominator societies)... And everywhere- in murals, statues, and votive figurines – we find images of the Goddess. In the various incarnations of Maiden, Ancestress, or Creatrix, she is the Lady of the waters, the birds, and the underworld, or simply the divine Mother cradling her divine child in her arms (EISLER 1987: 17–18).

This kind of art, Eisler concludes, “seems to have reflected a social order in which women, first as heads of clans and priestesses and later on in other important roles, played a central part, and in which both men and women worked together in equal partnership for the common good” (EISLER 1987: 20).

An identical version of the Neolithic art that reflected a society “in which power is not equated with dominance, destruction, and oppression” (EISLER 1987: 36) was also present in the Cretan civilization from its emergence around 6000 BC until its fall brought about by the invasion of the Hellenic tribes at the end of the second millennium. Thus, what is remarkable about Crete is that there the Goddess of All Living was worshiped even during the Bronze Age, “a time when in the rest of the then civilized world the Goddess was steadily being displaced by

warlike male gods" (EISLER 1987: 30). The Cretan art, according to Eisler, did not idealize violence, destructive power and war, which "goes hand in hand with the fact that this was a society where peace endured for 1,500 years both at home and abroad in an age of incessant warfare" (EISLER 1987: 62). Above all, there was an equal distribution of wealth, and although women had a high social position in Crete, men were not subordinated. That is why Eisler does not even term the Cretan civilization matriarchal, because that would imply that women had some power over men. Instead, she proposes that at the core of this culture was "the partnership model of society" (EISLER 1987: xvii) in order to point to the fact that men and women were basically equal. In addition, she makes a difference between this model of society and the dominator model which is "what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the ranking of one half of humanity over the other" (EISLER 1987: xvii). As opposed to it, in the partnership model, "beginning with the most fundamental difference in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority" (EISLER 1987: xvii).

Thus, in Eisler's view, the degrading social shift towards non-equality which has been the cause of "chronic wars, social injustice and ecological imbalance" (EISLER 1987: xiv) happened with the patriarchal invasions of the Neolithic societies by nomadic peoples who "ruled by powerful priests and warriors, brought with them their male gods of war and mountains" in the second millennium BC (EISLER 1987: 44). The warrior tribes interrupted the cultural evolution of the Cretan society and similar societies that worshiped "the life-generating and nurturing powers of the universe" (EISLER 1987: xvii). According to an archaeologist Gimbutas whom Eisler quotes, these tribes "worshipped the lethal power of the blade – the power to take rather than give life that is the ultimate power to establish and enforce domination" (EISLER 1987: xvii).

In the documentary *Goddess Remembered* (1989), Read claims that "the conqueror has replaced the nurturer as a symbol to be respected" and, as a result, "the natural world we once revered, we now destroy" (READ 1989). In the same fashion, Eisler asserts that today nature seems to rebel with its "soil erosion, resource depletion, acid rain, and environmental pollution ... against the exploitive and destructive uses to which technology is put in a dominator society, in which men must keep conquering – be it nature, women, or other men" (EISLER 1987: 171). What they together emphasize is the sad fact that environmental problems and any kind of oppression nowadays, be it ethnic, economic, sexist or racial, go together and stem from disparaging of the life force, affiliation, connectedness with each other and with nature, all that which was once acknowledged and respected by the Goddess-worshipping societies. The interruption of this Goddess-worshipping tradition of the Neolithic communities caused the loss of "our ability to keep the spirit and the body whole, as well as the ability to keep our relationship between each other and the earth whole" (READ 1989).

In the same vein, Sagar rightly notices that in the Western civilization, "man wages war against his own wholeness and the wholeness of his world" (SAGAR 2001: 1). The core of the problem as Sagar perceives it is contained in the dualistic way

of thinking which “began in the ancient world as a philosophical and religious idea” and reached its peak in the Renaissance when “it became almost impossible for educated Europeans to think in any but a dualistic way” (1):

Dualism is the belief that everything in life can be divided into two opposing principles or constituents; but basically that matter and spirit are independent entities yoked together in life in violation of the essential nature of each. About two thousand five hundred years ago, a remarkable change took place in man’s concept of the gods, the movement towards monotheism, a single male godhead existing independently of the created universe as pure spirit. In its most extreme form this leads to the universal dichotomy of God on one side and the world, the flesh and the devil on the other. Dualism sunders god and nature. It also sunders male and female, encouraging man to frame concepts of militant heroism which ride roughshod over the female in all its manifestations. And it sunders mind from body. Dualism might not have been so disastrous had it not so often involved value judgments. That is, one of the artificially separated components is usually labelled good and to be fostered, the other bad, to be eliminated or suppressed. Thus man wages war against his own wholeness and the wholeness of his world, in the attempt to impose his own will, vain aspirations and blinkered vision on the world (SAGAR 2001: 1).

Sagar asserts that male and female have been perceived as separate entities of which the latter has been “labelled bad” and was doomed to elimination and suppression. More precisely, men were encouraged to suppress the characteristics of being “too soft” and “effeminate” in those social systems in which “the power of the Blade is idealized” and in which “both men and women are taught to equate true masculinity with violence and dominance,” as Eisler suggests (EISLER 1987: xviii).

Thus, from the rise of the patriarchy, men were encouraged to indulge in variants of belligerent bravery, as Sagar makes it clear. Accordingly, as is pointed out in Read’s film, in the ancient time, particularly in Greece, the history books such as *The Dawn of the Western Civilization*, *The Golden Age of Greece* marked the beginning of historical dominance for men, and the end of utopian existence for women:

The Greeks announced that history would now begin, and proceeded to obliterate or pervert the 25 000 years that had gone before. Athena was redefined, once the Goddess of Wisdom and Love, she became the Goddess of War, the violent and the erotic became linked as they never were before. Men, said men, had always been a natural master of the earth. He was now also the procreator, Athena sprang fully armed from the brow of Zeus, Eve was born from Adam’s rib. Female inferiority forever was proclaimed by the book of Geneses (READ 1989).

Therefore, in the ancient Greece, patriarchy was forged first by the rewriting of the previous Goddess-worshipping myths. At the theatre at Delphi, “the early

rituals and dramas that were performed were forgotten. Women and slaves were now brought to see the new plays of Aeschylus in which Apollo defines the woman as a mere nurse tending to the growth of the seed, planted by its true parent, male. In the final scene in *Oresteia's* Trilogy, the Goddess Athena, now born from the head of her father Zeus, was made to agree 'No mother gave me birth.'" (READ 1989) The myth of Athena's birth was completely changed and finally transformed into a potent record of a man's estrangement from Nature and the Female. The obvious alteration of the myth poignantly represents "a crisis in the history of Athens and in human consciousness" which will from then on lead to "the persistent polarization of the male psyche" (SAGAR 2001: 2).

Fromm is yet another cultural critic that vividly depicts the clash between matriarchy and patriarchy in *The Forgotten Language* (1951). He gives us an analysis of the Oedipus trilogy and its main theme – the struggle against paternal authority. The roots of that struggle go back to the ancient collision between the patriarchal and matriarchal systems of values:

Matriarchal culture is characterized by an emphasis on ties of blood, ties to the soil and a passive acceptance of all natural phenomena. Patriarchal society, in contrast, is characterized by respect for man-made law, by a predominance of rational thought, and by man's effort to change natural phenomena (FROMM 1951: 207).

In the Oedipus trilogy, Oedipus, Haemon and Antigone are representatives of the matriarchal principle, whereas Laius and Creon represent the patriarchal codes of behavior. The idea of the universal brotherhood is rooted in the matriarchal principle. Quite the contrary, the patriarchal principle includes a hierarchical order in the society and obedience to the male figure. These are Creon's words that Fromm cites in his study:

Yea, this, my son, should be thy heart's fixed law – in all things to obey thy father's will. 'Tis for this that men pray to see dutiful children grow up around them in their homes...But disobedience is the worst of evils...Therefore, we must support the cause of order and in no wise suffer a woman to worst us. Better to fall from power, if we must, by a man's hand; than we should be called weaker than a woman (FROMM 1951: 224–225).

The female was thus, according to Fromm, systematically linked with disorder, weakness, even malaise. Mother was no longer seen as a nurturing parent, but, as in Eisler's book, had a rather sporadic role of merely giving birth whereas children were properly nurtured by their fathers that maintained the superiority of the patriarchal system of values.

Fromm finds examples of a destructive shift to patriarchy in different periods and in geographically different locations. In the aforementioned study, he also mentions the Babylonian myth of Creation where sons challenge the Great Mother and finally defeat her. Then, he also emphasizes that the assertion of alleged

male superiority continued to the period of Christianity as well – Eve was born from Adam’s rib and woman turned out to be just a mere product of man, the way Athena was born from Zeus’s head. The problem as Fromm perceives is that people are falsely and systematically made to believe that the first social structure has been patriarchal and that it coincides with the beginning of Western history.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up, there is a whole group of intellectuals, Read, Gimbutas, Eisler among others, who have warned against imposed patriarchal restrictions. For instance, Eisler postulates a veritable golden age of feminism prior to what we usually know as written history. She particularly asserts that the patriarchal social system is built on the reversal of the system of values – the Great Mother, a primary symbol of the divine source of being, associated with peace and compassion, is marginalized and then entirely discarded, while a masculine war god usurps her place.

Thus Eisler purposefully chooses the opposed symbols of chalice and blade in order to point to two different sets of values and models of society. Whereas the chalice is linked to the partnership model of society, the blade is a symbol of the dominator model of society that is based on patterns of supremacy and is at

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<sup>1</sup> In “Symbolic Language in Myth, Fairy Tale, Ritual and the Novel”, he wrote about the Oedipus myth as one that offers a study of “the attitude toward authority” (FROMM in PETROVIĆ 2004: 239) which is its central theme and not sexual desires, as Freud wrongly interpreted it. Freud saw Oedipus, the protagonist of Sophocle’s tragedy *King Oedipus*, as a man with unconscious incestuous drives and hatred toward father-rival, because, in the tragedy, he kills his father and marries his mother. However, it is important to point out that he did not know that he killed his father and married his mother, because he was abandoned by his father, king Laius, to whom an oracle told that he would be killed by his son, and then adopted by another man, king of Corinth. After being told by the oracle in Delphi that he will kill his father, Oedipus decides never to return to his alleged parents and on his way back from Delphi, he kills a man in an argument not knowing that the man was his father Laius. Fromm disapproves of Freud’s analysis of *King Oedipus* and says that, only by taking into account the two other parts of the trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, it can be concluded that “the myth can be understood as a symbol not of incestuous love between mother and son but of the rebellion of the son against the authority of the father in the patriarchal family” (FROMM 2004: 242). He states that the common theme of all three tragedies is the conflict between father and son and further agrees with Bachofen that another Greek myth, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is “a symbolic representation of a last fight between maternal goddess and the victorious paternal god” (FROMM 2004: 244). According to Bachoven, in *Oresteia*, we find out that to Olympian gods “the murder of the mother is no crime if it is carried out as revenge for the father’s death” (FROMM 2004: 244). The son’s love for the father was proclaimed as his paramount duty, it was not seen as natural and sacred as was the case with the tie of mother and child in the matriarchal world. In Sophocle’s *Antigone*, “authority in the family and authority in the state are the two interrelated supreme values for which Creon stands. Sons are the property of their fathers and their function is to be serviceable to the father” (FROMM 2004: 252) and thus the main conflict in this part of trilogy is the rebellion of Antigone and Haemon, “the representatives of the old principles of matriarchy, those of equality and democracy,” against Creon who “represents patriarchal domination and obedience” (FROMM 2004: 253) Fromm concludes that Sophocles expressed in his trilogy sympathy for the old, non-Olympian religious ideas and warned against the patriarchal principle of authoritarianism and men’s domination over men and women.



its core belligerent and hierarchical. The chalice thus points to nurturing values, while the blade implies a certain hierarchical order that ranks individuals according to their sex, race and class. This order is further maintained under the threat of violence, as Eisler informs us, and is linked with a male god and the glorification of the ability to take life, in contrast to the partnership model's sacralization of women's capacity to give life through birth. Eisler sincerely believes that since partnership societies existed in the past, they might be developed again in the future.

The shift in social structure was apparently accompanied by a change in the types of technologies developed, from life-sustaining to war-related, from the chalice to the blade. Eisler opts for the advantages of the matriarchal society and enthusiastically asserts that our society can be hopefully transformed back to the partnership model. In other words, it is her genuine belief that a historical transition from earlier idyllic to more aggressive cultures can be reversed in order for the matriarchal society to be constructed again in the future.

## 2. Contemporary Serbian Echoes of Matriarchal Utopia in Novaković's *The Danube's Apocrypha* (1996) and Šalgo's *The Road to Birobidzhan* (1997)

The debate of the literary canon never ceases to provoke controversy or at least disquietude, as the ongoing battle to reshape literary heritage has been fought on many fronts. Symbolically, the building of the canon and fighting for it evokes a scene in *Hamlet* where we are told that Fortinbras goes to war for a plot of ground which is not big enough to bury the soldiers who are killed in the battle fought for it. The issues of order and stability that building of the literary canon introduces cannot hide the fact that the canon we have known for ages is predominantly dealing with dead men, past values and the cemeteries. Nevertheless, this past is needed to invest into the future battlefields and playgrounds, which is something that young Fortinbras must have hoped for.

Women's literature in Serbia has not reached the laudatory reception its courageous scope and intriguing topics deserve, being overshadowed not just by the predominantly masculine literary canon which has not always been hospitable to achievement of best women writers, but also by the continuous effort to reshape literary heritage. Some of the most remarkable women writers in Serbia, yet unrecognized, are Judita Šalgo (1941–1996) and Mirjana Novaković (1966). Their fiction focuses upon some narratives and motifs largely ignored by male writers: they deal with a broad range of feminine interests such as maternal body, matrilineal heritage and the politics of women's resistance to the oppressive society.

Novaković's first published book, *The Danube Apocrypha* (1996), encompasses two novellas dealing with the outcomes of the divine miracle. *The Thunderbolt Legion* is set in the last days of Roman Empire, while *The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman* recounts the social and cultural changes in the year 2000 provoked by the sudden revelation of a new divinity, an imperfect woman whose appearance provokes an unquenchable desire to explore and explain. The

characters in *The Thunderbolt Legion* are commanders and warriors in the Roman army, affronting adversity, military defeat and the unexpected miraculous rescue. While the first novella is narrated by a flat, deadpan omniscient voice which keenly elaborates on Christian and Barbaric concepts of fate which are altogether male-centered, *The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman* is narrated by a female voice of both a witness and a survivor who keeps her faith in spreading the everlasting myth of a secret female society. Her recollections take us to a bleak and windy city with no name but once called Belgrade, whose residents are not allowed to refer to personal and proper names. Apparently, everybody is obsessed with change, not the spiritual upheaval but rather a string of superficial corrections which include plastic surgery and genetic modification, and the strong societal pressure to achieve faultless physique and anesthetized mind in the dictatorial rule of Open Society gradually leads to estrangement and the dissolution of family ties: the citizens are encouraged to live happily in self-sufficiency and detachment, without friends and relatives, without proper education or any chance to engage in creative work. Thus *The Gospel According to A Thirsty Woman* slowly transforms into a bleak and disheartening dystopian narrative about a society which advocates equality in consumption and utter stupor at the cost of the mindless dissipation of chances for personal growth.

Such an allegedly egalitarian but ruthlessly controlling society turns education into a pedagogical nightmare: for instance, students are encouraged to abundantly use their right to press charges against the professors if they are strict or demanding. Equipped with handy arm-joint computers that perform basic mathematical operations for them, youngsters are allowed to pursue a daily routine of much leisure and little work. They bask in bliss and oblivion induced by the drug called “hyperextasythree”, at the “rage” parties. The motifs of intellectual laziness, listlessness and overindulgence obviously aim at criticizing a culture of uniformity which subdues individuals without offering an alternative, but also hint at the apathy induced in the Serbian “lost generation of the nineties” (GORDIĆ PETKOVIĆ 2005: 170).<sup>2</sup> “Although Open Society advocates full implementation of

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<sup>2</sup> The culture of uniformity that systematically subdues any individual attempt at creating valid living alternatives is well depicted in Golding’s depiction of the downfall of modern education. In his essay “On the Crest of the Wave” (1974), he claims that modern education lost its primary function of enabling people to make value judgments, the capacity to develop one’s creative potentials and to create one’s critical appreciation of the modern world, and became a sort of training, conditioning similar to the one Pavlov used to train dogs. (GOLDING 1974: 128)

On the other hand, C.P. Snow in “Two Cultures and Scientific Revolution” (1959) depicted the lack of humanistic ideals and exclusive focus on material prosperity as a logical consequence of the modern concept of education, clearly portrayed in Novaković’s novel. He claimed that we live in two cultures – science and arts – which are separated. The superior one is science because it is scientists, and not poets, who have future in their bones since they can increase production, improve our standards of living etc. F.R. Leavis analyzed Snow’s ideas and his response to them is formulated in his essay “Two Cultures? The Significance of Lord Snow” (1972). For Leavis, Snow’s essay represented a glaring example of spiritual blindness, in which the author was not



human rights, it severely punishes civil disobedience, allegedly to prevent the regression to the chaos and anarchy of the past. The first attempt at disobedience, quite feeble and ineffectual, took place before the story begins: the narrator's class has been temporarily forbidden to use their arm-joint computers because an infected disk had been inserted into the computer network. The punishment clearly aims at taking the disobedient back into the technological past, but it unintentionally points at the soft spot of a control-obsessed society: there is always a virus threatening to change it irrevocably" (GORDIĆ PETKOVIĆ 2005: 170).

The seemingly minor offence serves to announce a much more serious threat to the community: a secret resistance movement comes into the lime-light after the nonidentifiable woman who lives to tell the story we are reading has met the tribe of the thirsty and heard of their nameless goddess. While taking a nap in the classroom, the nameless narrator suddenly hears a voice telling her that "the one who calls Her name will become thirsty", "so thirsty that nothing will ever be able to quench that thirst" (NOVAKOVIĆ 1996: 51). At first, thirst occurs as nothing but an inverted parallel of the Biblical motif, indicating that, as opposed to the followers of Jesus Christ who will never be thirsty again after having tasted his creed, the goddess appearing in Mirjana Novaković's novella sets a goal to cause an everlasting thirst. Unlike the Christians, the followers of the unnamed goddess are not meant to reach the harmony and bliss once they have joined her cult. The Female Christ can be seen by her followers, but is never within their reach: she is either a distant whisper or a gentle immaterial touch. This Messiana works miracles and walks on water, but otherwise she is an embodiment of imperfection: she appears to her congregation in the image of an inconspicuous young woman in shabby clothes; unlike the citizens of the Open Society, She has never been subjected to any change, either genetic modification or plastic surgery. The narrator even feels sorry for Her, thinking that she is "so tragically ruined before her life even begun", and refusing to accept "that there is someone who has less, who is worse off, doomed to inherit all of her parents' inadequacies" (NOVAKOVIĆ 1996: 59). The fact that the narrator shows sadness and grief turns out to be the very first human emotion she has ever felt. Although she rushes to blame some not very successful genetic modifications for this lament, her emotional awakening clearly indicates that the dominance of societal values has been seriously shaken.

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able to distinguish between wealth and well-being. Snow's ideas all boil down to "more jam tomorrow" policy, which gives primacy to one's generic needs and productivity that must be kept on the rise at whatever cost. By posing the question – what do men live for? – Leavis insists on the fact that the kind of life in which intellect is separated from intuition lacks a dimension. Therefore, Snow's opinion that although our individual condition is tragic (we die alone), there is social hope, is naïve. This belief, claims Leavis, is the product of the inadequate knowledge of the self – an individual need to be in full intelligent possession of its humanity (and possession here does not stand for "ownership", but for a basic living deference towards that, though unknown and immeasurable, we know we belong). Otherwise, the future will not be bright. Obviously, Novaković depicts the way this warning has been disregarded and describes its severe consequences through the portrayal of a modern Serbian Utopia.

The emotional resurrection induced by the divine influence helps the heroine recollect her childhood memories and embark on the adventure of her spiritual growth. In the society of the nameless, such an awakening is a long process which must start with knowing your own name and sharing it with others. This process starts unexpectedly and suddenly, and the narrator is shocked when one of the thirsty women introduces herself:

No one has ever told me his or her name before. I have never been that close to anyone. I have never believed the rumours saying that some people revealed their names to the others. Supposedly, when you love someone very much, and that person loves you too, the two of you can learn each other's name. But nobody I knew has ever experienced that. The rumours spread, and that's about it (NOVAKOVIĆ 1996: 93).

It will take some time and several traumatic scenes for the narrator to share her name with us. Bitterly struggling to articulate her true feelings and wishes, the heroine also desperately tries to overcome the fear of opening up: thus she uses a succinct language and a matter-of-fact style which appear clumsy and unconvincing. Her idiom is borrowed from her oppressive surroundings, which implies that she may have embraced the world she unwillingly inherited. Her transformation will take a more turbulent course than she or the reader expected, and the narrative will demonstrate a double intention: the narrator's objective account of the past events will become juxtaposed with a story about subjective past she has to atone for. The seemingly reliable narrator will become a traitor whose greatest pain comes from the fact that she abandoned her goddess and her creed. However, there is yet another plot twist: she will turn a Judas in order to become a better Peter to her Christ. This becomes evident after she has faced the grim prosecutors called the Human Rights Representatives: the all-male death squad almost succeeds in eradicating the thirsty tribe, but their creed persists, owing to Catherine. We learn the name of the narrator at the very end, when her wrestling the demons within and without earned her the privilege to spread the word of the Thirsty Woman. Instead of a guided suicide which should be a punishment for having betrayed her goddess, Catherine decides to live and tell: "It seems it makes no sense to take a leave without leaving an explanation or a message behind" (NOVAKOVIĆ 1996: 48). The story she starts telling in the end is actually the one we have been listening at all along, both a fable and a testimony.

The Open Society serves as a metaphor of the oppression against women and their feminine gospel: while destroying family bonds, eradicating marriage, advocating rational thinking and an unnatural equality, this Orwellesque world also rushes to annul gender differences. Thus the feminine social construct of love, compassion and commitment has to work in secret, through imperfect individuals struggling to make the world safe for all the differences. One could easily recognize the prevalent features of Eisler's dominator model of society in Novaković's depiction of the Open Society in her novel. The craved reversal to

the values of partnership model of society has still remained a pipe dream, at least in Novaković's version of modern (Serbian) feminist Utopia.

However, it is rather debatable whether the betrayal of the goddess is tragic, although it is undoubtedly alluded to as a great tragedy in the novel. In his influential study *The Educated Imagination* (1963), Frye says claims that "the important categories in life are what you have to do and what you want to do— in other words, necessity and freedom" (FRYE 1963: 25).<sup>3</sup> Catherine is a strong individual who despite the omnipresent influence of the community has not suppressed her natural urges and, ultimately, does not let anyone take her freedom away. Once she is urged to succumb to social norms, she willingly opposes them simply by making the decision to live and tell the proper truth about omnipresent female marginalization. Though it ultimately ends in failure, the mere attempt at raising a lonely voice against the crippling patriarchal order serves the purpose of closely approaching a desired reversal to Eisler's matriarchal ideal.

Although remaining in large portions of narrative which the author did not have time to integrate in a neatly composed form resembling a novel, *The Road to Birobidzhan*, Judita Šalgo's posthumously published novel, succeeds in its ambition to outline a plot of the gospel according to women. The female Christ figure named Messiana has a most unusual flock of followers who spread the word about a Utopian refuge for all the weak and defeated:

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<sup>3</sup> Frye's initial idea was to identify an archetype behind the creation of myth and literature, as well as to dwell on the relevance of imaginative ability in the process of cultivating the threatening natural world and transforming it into modern civilization, or, better to say, humanizing it.

In order to find valid answers to the aforementioned issues, he tells us a story about a man, shipwrecked on an unidentified and uninhabited island in the South Seas, the sole survivor who, due to a rationally inconceivable natural catastrophe, finds himself on an intimidating quest to recreate the lost civilization. Constantly wavering between reason and emotions, reality and desire, Frye's shipwrecked outcast ultimately experiences three indispensable levels in his cultivating activity. The most primitive level is that of consciousness and awareness, in which a difference between man and nature is most vividly present, whereby the language of self-expression is primarily used. Then, there is the level of social participation that coincides with the occurrence of the language of practical sense and the last is the level of imagination that actually produces literary language. Frye insightfully claims that "they're not really different languages, but three different reasons for using words" (Frye 1963: 22–23).

Therefore, unfortunately prompted by the unexpected loss of his world and creatively guided by the imaginative vision of a desirable, future civilization, Frye's exile gradually transforms the outside alien environment into a home. However, the fortunate movement from an initial state of insufficiency and frustration to a subsequent condition of fulfilled desire is only possible if all three levels of human activity exist. Frye emphasizes the paramount importance of the third level of the human mind in which the final reconciliation between desire and reality is successfully achieved with the indispensable guidance of the imagination that ultimately results in the creation of works of art. He indirectly suggests that it is a regrettable fact that nowadays modern civilization abounds in examples of a supreme imaginative faculty reduced to its crude adversary – the imaginary and its commercial trivialities. Thus Frye focuses not on material progress but on personal imaginative visions that have the power to reconnect us with the surroundings. It is precisely the state that the narrator in Novaković's novel, Catherine, ultimately reaches.

(...) a utopia of a great, global refuge for women, a Female continent, a country of women and female messianism – a messiah-woman who in the very near future will arrive from somewhere, from Egypt, and lead their people into an unpromised but well-deserved land. These mostly simple uneducated women and girls announced and prophesied the arrival of the messiah this time, but among them were also heirs to women-utopians such as Suzanne Voilquin, and even a few men; they were prostitutes, unmarried and single mothers, women swollen with venereal disease and tuberculosis, women born out of wedlock, orphans, pregnant minors and, in general, women and children from the street, as well as women and children bought or sold for the needs of Balkan brothels or Turkish public houses and harems. Some of these persons, through whom the arrival of the Egyptian was announced, remembered the unusual German lady traveler – who descended on brothels and boarding houses, asked questions of the people there and engaged in real conversations (ŠALGO 2021: 102).

The “German lady traveler” is Freud’s former patient Bertha Pappenheim, whom Šalgo borrows from the psychoanalyst’s opus and endows with a mission in order to create a proper catalyst for the plot of *The Road to Birobidzhan*. What at first seemed to be an ordinary field project investigating the position of the socially deprived Balkan women turns into a quest for the female continent. Bertha is both confused and encouraged by the tribe of destitute, either pregnant or ailing women who rant about the promised land of plenty and the advent of a female deity. This strange lot suffers from a strange side-effect of their therapy called “syphilitic messianism” (ŠALGO 2021: 131). A Hungarian expert for venereal diseases offers a unique explanation of the symptom: he tells Bertha that “prostitutes, especially ones with syphilis, believe that they are called upon to save the world. Or at least women’s part of the world. You know, the circumstance that one does not have to die immediately, in the nastiest way, that for a certain amount of time one can delay death and avoid the nastiest variant of it, has utterly confused these unfortunates. As you might suppose, their savior is supposed to come from Egypt in the form of the Great Mother” (ŠALGO 2021: 131). Miss A., Bertha’s companion, has her own opinion of the matter: “If the Messiah is a woman, she would probably be here. If a man came, he would only bring them syphilis, children out of wedlock, misery, and death” (ŠALGO 2021: 132). The male and female interpreters of the symptom both recognize the expectations of the raving tribe even if they do not fully understand them. What the destitute women desperately need to postpone the tragic demise is both divine miracle and divine justice.

The search for the feminine continent is associated both with syphilis and hysteria, the latter taken to be a poor substitute for the adventure: “Travelling around the world on ships, men discover worlds. With women, the womb can, if it is not destined to give birth, decouple from their insides wander unhappily around the world of the body” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). The womb “that is *afraid of fruit and flies from it* roams about and upsets body and soul, the brain, sowing turmoil, rebellion and fear” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). Bertha feels the same way: “like

a uterus that is wandering through a body” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). “Hysteria was an evil, sick substitute for pregnancy, birth. Hysteria as alternative, unsuccessful exchange” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). Hysteria is thus a missing effect, a signal that women’s growth is aborted or unfinished.

Faced with both the reiterated references to the female exile and her own inexplicable emotional turmoil, Bertha comes up with her own idea of the Herland: “If women are not able to fight successfully for their rights and a full life here, they need to *leave for some other place*. To found a new world, a state, in which they can set things up as they should have been from the very beginning” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). Bertha identifies the feminine continent with the archetypal female symbols, the moon and the water: “Instead of a male CITY OF THE SUN, they will establish the CITY OF THE MOON, of the amazing moonlight of the Far East. That aquatic city, *INSTEAD OF AN ISLAND IN THE WATER*, will be the world OF WATER that rules the islands” (ŠALGO 2021: 162). The clear reference to More’s *Utopia* suggests that the promised world should be a dynamic contrast to the vision of power and authority masculinity resides in.

Šalgo adds a touch of complicity to the concept of the female Saviour, since the tribe of the deprived needs justice, patience and perseverance in order to keep silently awaiting their kingdom, but also the utmost secrecy and strict confidentiality, otherwise their miserable lives would end long before they reach the bliss of the new homeland. Their creed is adopted by the sick and the destitute, but also harboured in the collective unconscious memory; although Bertha desires to give voice to the rejects of the society, she, along with the author, also wants to articulate the feminine unconsciousness. Šalgo’s 1987 novel *Skid Marks* is also a study of the unconscious inspired by Sigmund Freud, centered around two Jewish sisters who are – as most of Šalgo’s characters – greater than life and yet lesser than it. Freud’s history of the unconscious, being at the same time a story, becomes a relevant literary topic. Freud’s theory is taken by Šalgo as a legitimate imagination’s territory: thus she reads his case studies as if they were a literary text, using them both as a source of information and invention. Similarly, the structure of *The Road to Birobidzhan* resembles the work of the unconscious: the narrative holds against the dominant motives of an unknown country, the female Savior, the weak and the sick.

It is important to see that the Utopian imagining of the Female continent bears close resemblance to the original Jewish myth of a yet undiscovered safe haven, since the auctorial voice describes Birobidzhan as “a homeland in reserve” (ŠALGO 2021: 97). Nevertheless, the promised territory safe for destitute women also comes to be associated with bedlam, due to the fact that the visions and reveries of the female community are labeled not only as a figment of imagination but also as a recurring symptom of an epidemic outbreak of mental disorder, because it is of crucial importance to indicate how far the shared fantasy is from the societal male-oriented values.<sup>4</sup> Addressing the genre of picaresque novel and

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<sup>4</sup> In “Civilization and Its Discontents”, first published in German in 1930, Freud focuses on an important clash between the desire for individuality and social expectations. One of its most

often openly mocking it, *The Road to Birobidzhan* plays with its conventions with the intention to build an allegory which boldly dramatizes the painful issue of physical abuse and sex trafficking by offering a surreal and miraculous escape to the suffering instead of eternal deprivation and injustice. On a more personal level of interpretation, Šalgo's unfinished novel turns out to be a discontinued, wholly postmodern attempt at jotting down the confessions of a social worker who appeases her dread of a new bout of mental illness by offering care and protection to the women in need and urging the people she meets during her journey to follow her suit. Being a fascinating concoction of self-care, reverie, complicity, and worship, Bertha Pappenheim's equally mysterious and dubious quest for a land of Cockaigne cannot be traced back to a similar motive or parallel in Serbian literature.

Following in the footsteps of Freud, Jung claimed that dream analysis is the primary way to gain knowledge of the unconscious mind or, as he claimed, the hidden part of the mind. Since Jung claims that dreams originate in the unconscious, it is also important to mention that he regards them as naturally occurring phenomena, arising spontaneously and autonomously into the conscious mind. Thus, Jung claims, dreams are a way of communicating and acquainting yourself with the unconscious. Dreams are not attempts to conceal one's true feelings from the waking mind, but, as a window to one's unconscious, their initial purpose is to guide the waking self to achieve wholeness and offer a solution to a problem one is facing in one's waking life (JUNG 1964: 55). In Šalgo's novel, dreams are depicted as long-lasting female fantasies that ultimately end as hallucinations. Though this daydreaming resonates with nightmarish voices, they do expose the hidden, even unconscious, dissatisfaction with female deprivation and, in Jungian fashion, can guide women to consciously acknowledge their inferior social status and finally urge them to act against it.

Jung explains the phenomenon of dreaming by saying that the psyche regulates itself by a process of compensation. He developed a theory which claimed that, when there is an imbalance between the conscious and unconscious minds, a neurosis or psychosis occurs. In *The Road to Birobidzhan*, it is depicted as hysteria. This is a fragmentation of the personality, in the sense that the psyche is split into two opposing energies which refuse to be reconciled. Hysteria is indeed a good example of such a conflict. It is based on the dissociation of the intellectual

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significant variants is reflected in the split between the individual's quest for instinctive freedom and civilization's contrary demand for conformity and repression of instincts as portrayed in *The Road to Birobidzhan*. Since many primitive instincts are clearly harmful to the well-being of a human community, men create laws that prohibit crimes such as killing, rape, and adultery, and implement severe punishments if these rules are broken. Freud argues that human possibilities for happiness are restricted by the law which causes perpetual feelings of discontent among its citizens. In Šalgo's novel, the feelings of discontent on the part of the female members of society are further intensified since their genuine desires and aspirations are purposefully interpreted as symptomatic signs of lunacy or disease (probably due to their potential destabilizing and harmful effect on the patriarchal society).



faculties and the affective elements of the personality, i.e., there is a split between the rational elements and the emotional elements. As a sort of a compensation for the imbalance, Jung claims, the psyche will attempt to right itself by providing clues, or possible solutions to the problem through dreams (JUNG 1964: 56). Jung also states that if the dreamer can understand and apply the meaning and significance of the dreams, this imbalance may be corrected. Whether Šalgo's female characters are able to achieve this mental state has remained a matter of dispute among readers and literary critics since the novel remained unfinished. Thus, the lack of a proper ending serves as a reader's personal projection of the female Utopia that can both be viewed as a vision of heaven or hell depending on individual attitudes towards this female quest.

The interplay of history and fiction in the novels by Šalgo and Novaković positions their respective characters in a continuum that defies logic and common sense, and yet is not entirely fantastic. The analysis of fictional works covering different historical ages points out that female characters have something in common. Affected by history, they are nevertheless strong enough to stand up to it and turn it into a metafictional mockery. Furthermore, Novaković's and Šalgo's novels can be read as valid examples of what Hutcheon termed "historiographic metafiction" (HUTCHEON 1989: 3).

The literary works of "historiographic metafiction" prove that historical events are transformed into facts by relying on the interpretation of documents that are merely representations of the past and subject to the attitudes of the person that recorded them. Since factual characters and documented incidents are as a rule distorted and fictionalized in literary works, the idea of history as an objective science is completely demystified (HUTCHEON 1989: 6). Thus, the ultimate goal of the works of "historiographic metafiction" is to plausibly demonstrate that the past itself is a variant of fiction since our knowledge of it is completely based on diverse forms of representation or of narrative which gives credit to Eisler's theory discussed at the beginning of this article.

According to Hutcheon, historiographic metafiction rejects projecting present beliefs onto the past, undermining the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations. The ultimate aim of offering alternatives to real history is a creative artistic reconsideration and relativization of official history by creating an awareness of the process of representation. Thus, in the works of "historiographic metafiction", the official version of history is constantly subverted and different variants are offered in order to relativize the problematic concept of uniformed, unequivocal established truth. Often, historiographic metafiction refers to the loss of the feminine voice in history and therefore looks for the way to empower the characters of women (HUTCHEON 1989: 30). Thus, the quest for the Utopian female continent represents not only an attempt of both Novaković and Šalgo to describe deprived position of contemporary Serbian women, but also to awaken them from their imposed historical slumber and spur them to concrete action.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

The theoreticians mentioned in this paper emphasize in their respective works that the first phase in the development of civilization was related to the matriarchal period of natural abundance and peace and that warfare appeared at some later stages. Namely, the matriarchal society was egalitarian – it worshipped the Great Goddess and oneness with nature; on the contrary, the patriarchal society directly opposes nature and imposes rules – it uproots people, disconnects them from their natural surroundings, culture and system of values they represent, they are aggressively squeezed out of their humanness. As a result, the vital bond between man and nature is irretrievably lost. Instead of the sanctity of natural bonds, the obedience to destructive patriarchal authorities has become the norm and every kind of disobedience against social norms is punished in diverse ways. In the prehistoric matriarchal period, power originally had the meaning of the power of love, power of creative imagination; now it has the meaning of force, progressing toward destruction, as Read validly claims in her documentary *God-goddess Remembered* and defines it as a “progress that threatens all life” (READ 1989).

Being aware of the harmful consequences of modern culture’s material aggrandizement, both Novaković and Šalgo insightfully opt for the ending which recaptures the lost bond with matriarchal values by portraying the contemporary quest for the female continent. Thus, the authors here focus not on material progress but on their personal creative alternative. They unquestioningly show that imagination has “the power of constructing possible models of human experience” (FRYE 1963: 22) that help us “recapture, in full consciousness, the original lost sense of identity with our surroundings” (FRYE 1963: 29).

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#### У ПОТРАЗИ ЗА МАТРИЈАРХАЛНОМ УТОПИЈОМ У САВРЕМЕНОЈ СРПСКОЈ КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ

#### Резиме

У делу *Пуџир и сечиво: наџа исџијорија, наџа будућности* (1987), Ријана Ајслер тврди да су неолитска друштва некада следила „партнерски модел“ цивилизације који је почивао на егалитарним и матрифокалним вредностима. Међутим, временом су ове вредности уступиле место садашњем „моделу доминације“ који почиња на мушким идеалима супериорности и надмоћи. Ајслерова се залаже за идеју рекреирања некадашњег матријархалног друштва. Њени теоријски увиди се у раду примењују у упоредној анализи два дела из корпуса савремене српске прозе која описују визију феминистичке утопије на крају 20. века: *Дунавски ајокрифи* (1996) Мирјане Новаковић и *Пуџ у Биробиџан* (1997) Јудите Шалго. У роману *Дунавски ајокрифи* приказује се устанак који прети да преокрене друштвени поредак у блиској будућности; нараторка са читаоцима дели сведочанство о тајној заједници жена које „тихо чека“ да се појави богиња. Постхумни, недовршени роман Јудите Шалго делимично се чита као проглас нове верске доктрине о женском Христу по имену Месијана и њеним ватреним следбеницима који проносе глас о уточишту, земљи где би се настанили рањиви и угрожени. Иако је првобитна намера обе ауторке била да подрже сиромашне и незаштићене жене Балкана градећи ликове и заплете који осликавају њихов тежак друштвени положај, оба дела обликују до сада незабележену утопијску потрагу за женским континентом. Анализа

прозних дела Мирјане Новаковић и Јудите Шалго заснива се и на аналитичким приступима Фројда, Јунга, Фраја, Фрома и Линде Хачеон.

*Кључне речи:* модел партнерства, модел доминације, феминистичка утопија, Дунавски ајокрифи, Пуџ у Биробиџан.

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