

The cursed foreign bride in Serbian literature: An evolution or a dissolution of a stereotype?

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Long subjugated and brutalized by the Ottomans, the Serbian community dispersed across the Balkan Peninsula had, over almost five centuries of the Ottoman reign, tried to alleviate the pains of subjugation and suffering by (re)constructing the traumatic pre-Ottoman past in such a way that some meaning, or at least causation, be attributed to the suffering. The victimized and the oppressed tried to (re)create a past (culprit) that would be accountable for the intolerable present. Communal memory thus became communal re-memory and the sins of the past had to be unearthed so as to attach some meaning to the present retribution. The community developed collective defensive mechanisms: they could come to terms with the defeat only by tracing its causes to something (or someone) external to the community. It is not uncommon that royals marry outside their community – on the contrary, exogamous marriages are more of a rule than an exception in aristocratic circles. Serbian emperors, princes and other royals thus married foreign princesses and noble women in order to form or strengthen alliances. The folk tradition shows in a rather negative light those foreign royal consorts who lived in the times immediately after the battle of Kosovo, when small and disunited Serbian principalities were gasping their last breath: Irene Kantakouzene known as Despotess Jerina, the wife of Serbian Despot Đurađ Branković, and the Venetian-born wife of Đurađ Crnojević, the ruler of Zeta, the unnamed “Venetian maiden” of the folk epic *The Wedding of Maksim Crnojević*, called Jelisaveta in the later Romantic rendition by the Serbian Romantic poet, Đura Jakšić. In the narrative of communal (re)memory, they are marked as antagonists and culprits and not much could have been done to repair their ruined historical reputation. The subtle workings of the collective memory were at play here just as they were in the popular, historically inaccurate representations of the Hero (Marko Kraljević, sharing almost nothing but a name with a 14th century Serbian nobleman) and the Traitor (Vuk Branković, another Serbian nobleman from the same period blamed for the demise of the last Serbian principality ruled by Prince Lazar; the principality has grown into an Empire in popular imagination and the Prince into a Tsar). Social anthropologists claim that resorting to such past precedents does not have to mean that the community “is mired in its own past and is unable to face up to present imperatives” (Cohen 2013, 99). Rather, the past is invoked “as a resource” and reconstructed so as to “resonate with contemporary influences” and confer legitimacy on contemporary action:

Myth confers “rightness” on a course of action by extending to it the sanctity which enshrouds tradition and lore. Mythological distance lends enchantment to an otherwise murky contemporary view (99–100).

The “contemporary action[s]” that needed causation, legitimization and justification in the face of the dire prospects of brutal Ottoman retaliation were the early 19th century Karađorđe-led (First Serbian) Rebellion (1804) and the Obrenovići-led Second Serbian Rebellion.

It, therefore, comes as no surprise that the Romantic authors of the 19th century, uncritically and enthusiastically, built upon the folk tradition and this is why the Venetian-born Montenegrin princess is such a diabolic character in Đura Jakšić’s play. It may also be argued that the stereotype survived into 20th century realistic and modernist narratives which borrowed abundantly from the stock of women stereotypes encoded in the communal memory. Some stereotypes were given an added ironic quality in the 20th century narratives, but were not completely subverted.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The recognition of certain common traits in the characterization of foreign female characters in Serbian literature and the possibility of delineating a certain trajectory of this representation to the Serbian folklore and epic tradition motivated the present authors to examine the outline of the image that informed this characterization (and, as we will see later, vice versa).

The representation of foreign women in literature has aroused most interest in the studies of the Bible. Thus, Bradley L. Crowell notices that scholars have rarely explicitly studied the characterization patterns of foreign women despite their significant role in the writings of ancient Israel. His insights are of interest for our own study since he claims that “there was indeed a pattern to how the Deuteronomistic authors understood foreign women and that their literary construction of foreign women added to their attempt to formulate a specific identity for ancient Israel” (2013, 2).

Marilyn D. Button and Toni Reed have noticed an increasing critical attention that foreign women received in recent years but as a psychological and sociological phenomenon, not as a prominent literary figure and that it is mostly cultural-studies theorists or even literary theorists such as that “deal with the foreign woman primarily in the broad context of the construction of female or racial identity” (1999, xiv). However, they either do not address the foreign woman’s presence in specific literary texts or do so only in passing. Except for cultural theorists, feminist theorists have also emphasized the significance of the literary representation of foreign women, relating this foreignness to the marginality of women in society and politics. They attribute the unknowability of the foreign woman to repression stemming from restrictive patriarchal systems and see the *femme fatale* appearing in the literature of many cultures as connected with colonized foreign lands (xiv).

The popularity of memory studies in recent decades propelled an interest in identity understood as a discursive construct (auto-image) against a network of inextricable diachronic links which establish a firm(er) sense of self across time. Such

a climate reclaimed the terrain of literary studies for imagology, which will serve as the theoretical foundation for our study. It is beyond doubt that imagology, although a specialism now used in many disciplines, stemmed from literary history as a study of representations and images of foreigners.

As is evident from the two highly informative recent Joep Leerssen's two highly informative recent papers on the development of imagology, from its historical background and outlook, as well as from the papers by other significant scholars in this reemerging field and the recent monographs published in the Netherlands and Croatia, the history of imagology started with non-analytical, descriptive and naively essentialist "factual inventories of foreign characters and of characterizations of foreigners in a given literary corpus" (2016, 14). To put it simply, the assumption was that there was such a thing as national character and different characteristics, moods and tempers were attributed to a whole nation or ethnicity. It was taken for granted that these attributes, already existing in reality, were simply more or less successfully transposed and presented in literature.

An interesting development in the understanding of the concepts of "nation" and "character" began in the 17th century. "Character" was now understood more or less in today's sense of an "inherent personality blueprint that offers a psychological underpinning and causation (and hence an interpretative frame of reference) for behavior" (Leerssen 2000, 272), that is, as "motivating essence". The concept of nation started to develop around the same time. The Enlightenment's idea of national characters was half-seriously grounded in clichéd commonplaces as is evident from the *Encyclopedia* by Diderot and d'Alembert (273). The 19th century's philosophical idealism added a new idealistic understanding to national characters; they were promoted to "the ontological status of a Platonic Idea, an informing Geist" (274). Although they belong more to the wider province of humanities, particularly to the philosophy of ideas, history, and sociology, the 19th century developments which established and reinforced the concepts of *Volksgeist* and the nation-state had a significant impact on the developments which would become crucial to imagological studies. The 19th century's notion of literature was that of the very mouthpiece of the spirit of the nation.

Although the concept of national character was predominately present(ed) in literature, it was sociologists and social psychologists in France, and American social scientists who questioned its ontology in the mid-20th century. This skepticism as to the very ontology of the concept brought about the idea of the national/ethnic character as being a dynamic construct(ion) and an interplay between how a certain community sees itself and how it perceives those who fall outside the borders (and scope) of the community (the Others). The concepts of prejudice, stereotype and ethnocentrism developed by American social scientists subverted the firm belief in national characters (Leerssen 2016, 15).

The hectic optimism of the post-1945 world ushered in different theoretical approaches and fields of interest for humanist scholars and, in this favorable and encouraging scholarly environment, literary scholars were encouraged to articulate that national characterizations were part of "an oppositional discursive economy of

other national characterizations, most fundamentally along an axis of Self vs. Other (soon termed ‘auto-image’ vs. ‘hetero-image’)” (16).

The most influential names among those who developed what Leerssen terms anti-essentialist imagology, are those of Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Franz Stanzel, and Hugo Dyserinck. Dyserinck’s cornerstone contribution to imagological research was in highlighting the dynamics between auto-image and hetero-image, i.e., the way a community sees itself and the way community is seen from outside. Dyserinck argued that national stereotyping was crucial not only as regards characterization of actions and actors within literary narratives and poetics but also in the diffusion and reception of texts worldwide.

The variability of national stereotypes is, according to imagologists, “determined not by empirical reality (how people purportedly or allegedly ‘really are’) but rather by the way in which the discourse regarding them is constructed” (Leerssen 2000, 275). Ethnotypes are therefore, discursive construct(ion)s generated and surviving in a dynamic interplay between an auto-image and a hetero-image; they have no invariable objective realities to draw from, and they stem from a multitude of different “commonplaces,” being part of a nations’ repository of cultural texts. They belong to the realm of discursive and cannot be empirically measured against an objectively existing *signifié*; they are oppositional (auto-image vs. hetero-images; ethnocentrism vs. exoticism or xenophobia) and presented against the implied backdrop of their differences from other national characters. Ethnotypes are not historical constants but heavily vacillating concepts: they range within a bandwidth of images and counter-images and can be valorised positively or negatively depending on the context. Certain valorising constants transcend the national stereotype.

An ethnotype is established and examined in a threefold procedure: intertextual, contextual, and textual, and these are interdependent. Any individual instance of stereotype appears against a huge backdrop of a host of established, often dormant intertextual commonplaces. The historical ethnotypes have seen oscillations over time occurring at historical watersheds.

An important new notion introduced in imagological research by Hercules Millas (2009) is that of “meta-images”: these would simply be the images of ourselves as we believe they are in the eyes of the Other. Millas and Leerssen find these to be a source of intense antagonism and triggered increasingly in the times of simmering or open conflicts, as well as in ironical deployment.

As of late, imagology has borrowed from cognitive psychology:

[W]e carry in our mental repertoire a set of “frames”, schemata of the plausible connections between situations and what we believe to be their underlying patterns, and that these “frames” can be activated by actual stimuli, “triggers”; these can arise from real-world encounters and experiences, or from cultural processes such as following the twists and turns of a narrative (Leerssen 2016, 24).

Interestingly enough, a plethora of different potentially conflicting ethnotypes can coexist in our minds without ever colliding – by the way of active frames pushing the potential, non-triggered ones “a state of latency” (24).

Based on different insights both in imagology “proper” and the useful “borrow-

ings” from other, tangential, fields, it can be claimed that different imagemes (bandwidths) of stereotypes and ethnotypes (co)exist in our cognition consciously or not. Leerssen also believes that they should not be treated as incessantly active and present at all times. Ideologemes/stereotypes are, thus, triggered – called into existence – in and by different contexts. Another important point to make is that ethnotypes are not operative in isolation and that “literary stock characters are always triangulated on the intersection between ethnotype, gender and sociotype” (26). In Leerssen’s view, one of the possible future challenges for imagology is to identify how certain ethnotypes gravitate towards certain sociotypes.

Pageux, on the other hand, recognizes and reiterates the importance of ideology for imagological studies, since the image we create about foreign countries may, on the metaphorical level, transpose indirect notions on foreign countries that stem from different ideologies. According to him, studying the formation of images about foreign countries means actually studying the ideological foundations and mechanisms on which both the Otherness and the speech on Otherness are based. The image of the Other is part of culture and has its place and function within a symbolical universe called the “imaginary”, which is inseparable from culture and society. A society sees itself, writes (about) itself, thinks and dreams within the “imaginary”. Pageaux insists that the word image here should by no means be understood as a direct representation – an icon, but as an idea, a symbol, a sign, or even a simple signal (2009, 130). In other words, stereotypes are carriers of the minimum possible information for the maximum possible communication. Pageaux reconciles myth and stereotype, since a stereotype placed within a story or a set of consecutive images may be the beginning of a myth (142).

Leerssen’s concepts and precise definitions proved extremely useful in establishing the intertext of the analyzed stereotype, while Pageaux insights proved invaluable in textual analysis of the most recent of the analyzed narratives.

THE TRADITION AND THE FALL OF THE ROYAL HOUSES: IRENE KANTAKOUZENE AND THE VENETIAN MAIDEN – THE SERBIAN JEZEBEL AND THE CURSED BRIDE

The Serbian folk tradition, in an unprecedented way, and, virtually without exception, “remembers” Irene, the Greek wife to the last Serbian prince Đurađ Branković, as a diabolic seductress, malicious and prone to all vices, the binary opposite to what a proper, decent, Serbian woman should be like.

Since the stereotypes of the Serbian woman and that of the Serbian man (“auto-image”) in the Slavic patriarchal tradition are complementary, the tension between the two is reduced to a minimum and a smooth functioning of the family unit and, consequently, the community is ensured. It should be noted that gender roles are encoded within a firmly systematized and branched network of Serbian patriarchal culture. Building upon the old Slavic paradigm, the Serbian list of binary opposites features mutually related and interdependent spatial and gender binaries. The gender opposition male-female is, thus, mapped against a spatial reference system (male: upper, frontal, anterior, frontward, east, entrance, longitudinal, home, and female:

lower, hinder, hindmost, rearward, west, exit, forest). The female, according to this nomenclature, corresponds to the reverse, the underside, the least and last, the lowest, and, ultimately, the Other. According to the traditional role distribution, that of woman is to follow and not to act (Đerić 2007, 59–60).

The patriarchal repository of desirable auto-images offers the image of the “stopanica” (an archaic term for one who follows close by, literally and metaphorically treading in someone’s footsteps, the noun has only one gender – feminine) as a role-model. She is a humble but strong woman who subdues her will to that of her husband and the community. It is in this Christ-like sacrifice for the survival of the family and the community that her strength lies. Therefore, a foreign bride represents double otherness. She is perceived as the Other in terms of her (f)actual otherness – ethnic, religious, socio-cultural in general, but she is also a stranger to the Slavic patriarchal code as a female who raises her voice in a patriarchal context and stands up to her beliefs, different from those held by the community.

The polarity between the foreign wife and the Serbian man is intensified when negotiations over power are at play. Irene is part of a communally constructed hetero-image on the grounds of her very ethnic background. Although she is of the same religion (Greek-Orthodox), she belongs to a different ethnic group. She “enters” a new, highly patriarchal community and defies all standards of acceptable behavior. She pushes the boundaries which are a symbolic way to (re)create a distinct community (Cohen 2013, 13).

In the oral folk tradition recorded by Vuk Karadžić, Irene is represented as a wicked, malicious woman. She strongly deviates from the notion of propriety, as viewed by the Serbian community: she is a bad mother, an adulteress and, ultimately, the culprit for the final crumbling of the medieval Serbian state. Although none of the severe accusations against Irene Branković have any historical grounds (Pešikan-Ljuštanović 2002, 61), the negative image of the Byzantine princess has remained entrenched in the collective memory. Suffice it to say that Vuk recorded the folk epic poems in the first half of the 19th century and Irene lived in the 15th century; the stereotype survived throughout the four centuries of Ottoman rule and was probably even intensified as the freedom from the cruel conquerors was nowhere in sight.

This Serbian Jezebel was, then, duly equipped with the traits usually attributed to powerful women, seductresses and sorceresses within a wider mythological context (Hecate, Freya, Morgan le Fey, Aya, Circe) (Samardžija 2008, 228). Vain, wanton, wilful and cruel, Irene is to blame for almost everything: her daughter’s contracted marriage to the Ottoman Sultan (epic poems: “Đuro Smederevac’s Sons”, “Đurđe’s Jerina”), her sons’ tragic faith – the Sultan blinded them – (“Mother Anđelija and Despot Jovan”), and her own brothers’ death (“Todor of Stalač’s Wedding”). She condemns to death the best knights in the principality (“Oblak Radosav”), and, on top of all that, the epic tradition questions even her conjugal fidelity accusing her of adultery (“Lady Jerina’s Walk”). The alleged licentiousness of women of another religious background emphasized strongly in folklore is yet another way of creating a vocal, self-promotional stereotype with a view to establish a clear-cut boundary between the self (auto-image) and the Other (Đerić 2007, 64). Serbian folk tradition

has never recorded a worse female character: Irene is no companion, no nurturer and has no compassion. She stands as the binary opposite to the stereotype of the Serbian women epitomized by the Kosovo Maiden (*Kosovka djevojka*) or Jugovići's Mother (*Majka Jugovića*) and fails miserably at all female "duties" encoded in the Slavic/Serbian set of patriarchal values.

While Irene Kantakouzene Branković is a corrupt married woman, the Venetian (Latin) maiden is a chaste fiancée to a Montenegrin prince. At first glance, she has nothing in common with the power-hungry Byzantine princess. Nevertheless, it is precisely the self-willfulness, the stubborn determination to have it her own way, that makes the Latin maiden similar to Irene. The Latin maiden is, at first, morally superior since she despises lies and deceit and, when her father-in-law reveals the truth to her, finds no fault with her betrothed despite his smallpox-scared face. The epic poem begins by revealing that Ivan Crnojević's son, Maksim, has a long-time fiancée (for almost ten years) in Venice, whom he has never seen. When, after a long time, the wedding party reaches her homeland, another man poses for Maksim, since Maksim's face has deep smallpox scars and his father is ashamed of the son's appearance (He boasted of his son's handsomeness when he first visited the girl's father).

The Latin maiden's moral superiority soon gives way to her vanity since she wants back the gold-threaded garment she has knitted and woven for three years to the point of losing her eyesight. The imposter does not want to return the gift he believes he rightfully deserves, the father-in-law does not mind, but the maiden, in popular imagination remembered as unfortunate, damned, and cursed, insists that the garment be returned. The deeply offended bridegroom kills the young man who impersonated him, takes the gifts back and initiates the mass slaughter that ensues among the members of the wedding party. The damage is irreparable, many noblemen are killed and the noble families are practically at war. Maksim, the groom, leaves for Turkey to convert to Islam, the bride is to be shipped back home and the narrative ends in disaster for all involved. The foreign woman is at fault again and seems almost even more so than the hasty, conflict-prone Maksim.

We can trace the source of this attitude to the auto-image of the community again. Serbian young women are obedient, humble and modest. They do not boast of their achievements and consider what they do their moral duty to the family and to the community (the garment belongs to the new family now and the girl should have obeyed her father-in-law and let go of it). The Venetian maiden is not vile and unchaste, she is not deceitful either, and, finally, she herself has been tricked, but she does sin against the moral code and will not fit the image of the good Serbian maiden – she is too proud, too self-conscious, too self-willed, and ultimately selfish and unwilling to sacrifice her caprices for the greater good – the family and the community. As the Venetian maiden is part of the intertext on the foreign women stereotype, we believe that it is important to note here that the hetero-image is not entirely negative. The foreign noble woman is not perceived as wicked and scheming, she is not evil. We would rather argue that the folk tradition remembers her as a tragic character herself, her tragic flaw being her self-willfulness and stubborn persistence to hold on to what she holds dear despite the potentially catastrophic consequences

of her actions. This particular character from the folk epic might be even regarded an exception to the “rule” of the stereotypical representation of female characters in the Middle Ages, emphasized also by the Serbian scholar of medieval literature, Svetlana Tomin, who reiterates that “it has long been noticed that woman in the Middle Ages is most often shown as a symbol of absolute evil, very rarely as a symbol of the absolute good, with no middle ground in-between” (2007, 5). Paradoxically enough, the Serbian folk intertext that, due to its patriarchal nature, might be looked upon as a repository of gender stereotypes, has given rise to a woman character that belongs precisely to the “middle ground in-between”. In this particular instance, the two opposite traits could be found in the same female character. The fear of female power which had to be contained and restrained at all costs, typical of medieval society (8) is in the folk epic represented alongside the female qualities recognized as desirable in the Byzantine Christian tradition which accepts three categories of women as models of feminine virtue: virgins, saintly matrons and widows. The Venetian maiden is virginal, constant and obedient to her father’s will (engaged for nine years and patiently waiting for her betrothed), but she still unleashes chaos among the Montenegrin noblemen and precipitates the fall of the Crnojevići royal house.

THE UNLIFTED CURSE OF THE FOREIGN WIFE: ROMANTICISM’S VENETIAN BRIDE AND JELISAVETA, MONTENEGRIN PRINCESS

In line with the Romantic paradigm, patriotism and passion are placed at the forefront, and the stereotype of the foreign woman (hetero-image) in 19th century drama emerges from the collective repository of different conflating hetero-images resurfaced by the revolutionary 19th century’s burgeoning nationalism.

The 19th century, from its very onset, represented a significant turning point for the history of Serbia and Montenegro, culminating in the formal independence of both countries, which gained international recognition at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The second half of the 19th century was of crucial importance since the Obrenovići-ruled principality of Serbia was expanding its territory at the expense of the soon-to-be-defeated Ottoman Empire to encompass other Serb-populated Ottoman provinces. The brutality of the retreating Ottoman forces against the subjugated population and the passivity (and later, open hostility, since the Austro-Hungarians occupied Bosnia and Hercegovina and the Sanjak of Novi Pazar) of the Western Christian nations triggered the image of foreign nations as untrustworthy, deceptive, hypocritical and destructive.

In Laza Kostić’s three-act Romantic tragedy, *Maksim Crnojević*, Ivo Crnojević tries to comfort Maksim and prevent the bloodshed by juxtaposing the charms of the licentious and devilish Latin girl and the chastity of the Serbian maiden, albeit in vain. The folk epic, on the other hand, does not dwell on the seductiveness and sensuality of the foreigner and represents her as chaste/virginal, her beauty being of an angelic rather than of a demonic kind. What is not voiced explicitly in the epic poem – that Ivo does not take the blame for the tragedy – is expounded more explicitly in Kostić’s rendition. The epic poem, however, does reproach the prince for foolishly setting out for far-off lands to find the bride for his heir. It is Ivo’s wife who

voices the concern regarding the union between Maxim and the Venetian princess: she believes that it was an unnecessary and dangerous exhibition, but the ruler is unmoved and first stubbornly refuses to hear any mention of the marriage and, then, when he receives a letter from the bride's father, decides to resort to an elaborate fraud so as to hide Maksim's unfortunate circumstances. In the play, however, it is Ivo who tries to comfort Maksim by invoking the same stereotype he has tried to subvert by finding a foreign bride for his heir – he promises to find a young Serbian bride for him who conforms to the patriarchal code, since the Venetian maiden is the Other, both in terms of ethnicity and religion. Nevertheless, it is too late. Ivo will not admit to having caused the trouble himself first by his own vain and boastful character and then by the imprudent decision to make Maksim switch places with Miloš, the most handsome wedding guest. The blame is, thus, projected onto the Other perceived in bad light – a foreigner and a woman combined.

Đura Jakšić, another Serbian Romantic poet, sheds a brighter light on the stereotype of the foreign woman in his tragedy *Jelisaveta (Elisabeth), Montenegrin Princess* (1868), based on the same narrative. The character of the historical Venetian noblewoman married to Đurađ Crnojević, Ivan's son, is conflated with that of the unnamed Venetian bride from the oral epic tradition. The hermetic social and cultural context of the 15th century Montenegro provides an arena for playing out a powerful dynamics between the two cultures and two worldviews in Jakšić's tragedy. The tragedy uncovers an unbridgeable gap between what was perceived as the pliable ethics of the powerful coastal republic and the strict heroic-patriarchal code of Montenegrins.

The unnamed Venetian maiden from the folk epic transforms into a voluptuous seductress who breaches the patriarchal code severely by seducing the married captain of the guard. Jelisaveta manipulates men with her beauty and influences the decisions of her husband and her father-in-law. She refuses to show humility as required by the tradition of her husband's people; she sets him against his brother and, motivated by deep contempt for the in-laws and their culture, plants discord among Montenegrin warriors. She boasts of the opulence and power of her homeland, makes false promises and demands "a thousand of Montenegrin souls" (Jakšić 1906, 14–96) to help Venice against the Sultan Bayezid. She is not simply evil, she is a demonic creature, and even a disheveled lunatic in Part IV, bursting into hysteric laughter when she understands that Montenegrins kill each other as a result of her scheming. She gloats when her brother-in-law, Stanisha, converts to Islam, because she knows only too well that, by doing so, he has irreparably severed all ties with the core values of the family and national tradition. The play clearly states that the people of Montenegro perceive Jelisaveta as an evil sorceress bringing suffering, discord and demise upon the state and themselves.

The hetero-image relying primarily on the dubious ethics of the Venetians is further strengthened in the play by the fact that the Other is a female. The auto-image not only favours honesty, modesty and respect for hierarchy in both men and women, but emphasizes passivity and obedience in women particularly. Jelisaveta's character is delineated in the exact same way as the Damned Irene's, as a destructive

and demonic foreign wife to a ruler. Nevertheless, Jelisaveta's wickedness is paired with her exquisite, otherworldly beauty and not only is Jelisaveta an evil foreign princess married to a ruler, but also a Romantic femme fatale, which makes her infinitely more dangerous.

FATHERS AND FOREFATHERS: ANOTHER ELISABETH, THE SAME CURSE – THE FALL OF A FAMILY

Slobodan Selenić's novel lends itself readily to an imagological analysis. We may, without hesitation, say that the novel deservingly claims the position of a textbook imagological narrative. Stevan Medaković, the protagonist, is a Serbian intellectual, the son of a sturdy merchant from Slavonia, Milutin (today's Croatia, then the Austro-Hungarian Empire with a significant Serb population), who, at the turn of the 20th century, moves to the Kingdom of Serbia in order to raise his family in the Serbian Piedmont. When his wife dies in childbirth, he decides to entrust his children's upbringing to a widowed schoolteacher from the heart of Serbia (Ranka/Nanka), who has just lost a child of her own. When his little sister Cveta is killed by an Austrian grenade, Stevan is left alone with Nanka and Milutin.

Milutin chooses Nanka for two reasons: he wants to help his old friend's impoverished widow and he wants an upbringing rooted in the best epic tradition for his son, since he felt inadequate to raise him this way on his own. After WWI, Stevan is sent to Bristol to study law and there he meets Elisabeth Blake, a beautiful young Englishwoman, whom he marries soon after. Elisabeth and Stevan and their only child Mihajlo live a comfortable upper-middle class life in Belgrade between the two world wars. Nevertheless, WWII brings tragedy and the eventual dissolution of their little family. Their son, Mihajlo, in his desperate endeavors to fit in (he inherits his mother's ginger hair as a striking feature of his foreignness/otherness), joins the communist youth and is killed in the twilight of the war.

Elisabeth Blake Medaković is mostly focalized through her husband's eyes but is given a voice of her own in the letters she sends regularly (even after her death) to her friend and confidant Rachel, the Belgrade-born Jewish wife of her cousin Archibald. Stevan sees Elisabeth as a tragic heroine who falls victim to what he sometimes wants to believe is sheer destiny, only not to have to acknowledge his involvement in her and his own tragic fate. The novel does not dwell that much on the stereotype of Britishness (except somewhat ironically, at times) and the focus is mainly on the auto-image (the way professor Medaković sees his fellow countrymen) and meta-image (the way he believes foreigners and, most importantly, his English wife see his people, and by extension, himself). It is interesting to note that the novel features specific references to some of the analyzed narratives, particularly in the part of the novel when Stevan is in England (the retrospectively revisited Bristol tea-house internal monologue) and makes the life-changing decision to take Elisabeth home, to Serbia, to Milutin and Nanka. Nevertheless, it is not Serbia, not Milutin, and not even Nanka that Stevan is worried about (and rightly so as it will become clearer as the narrative develops): it is himself and Elisabeth and the impossibility of understanding between the two:

The destructiveness of this discovery lay in the fact that I – indeed prophetically, in a sudden epiphany, which dawned on me as clear as a day – discovered that I loved a woman whom I did not understand, and whom, in all probability, I never would understand, because I would never penetrate the first defense wall of her personal reserve, nor the second, composed of customs and rules patiently built in for hundreds of years by the parochial islanders, people with one foot on the killed Bengal tiger, and the other on the cultivated lawn turf of their stone castle. Should my whole life be spent in frozen discomfort, like these ten minutes in an empty tea room? (Selenić 2009, 75)

Selenić's novel confirms Pageaux's insights on the often unilateral nature of the "exchange" which influences the formation of the "hetero-image" (142), and, by its very nature, the "meta-image". The Other, who according to Pageaux is not only observed but also forced into silence, in *Fathers and Forefathers* is not silenced but focalized through a man's eyes and, thus, heavily mediated except for in the most private environment of the epistolary exchange with cousin Rachel. The depth of the spousal misunderstanding is reflected in the fact that it is easier for Elisabeth to confide with the dead cousin than with the living husband.

The misunderstanding between the spouses is, paradoxically, partly based on Stevan's Anglophilia, or even covert Anglomania (in Pageaux's understanding of the terms) and the subsequent creation of the meta-image of his fellow-countrymen as unsophisticated, uncivilised and incorrigibly barbaric. When in England, Stevan is at the same time painfully aware of his people's and his own lack of refinement and the people's unparalleled bravery and heroism. Constantly vigilant not to renounce his roots, Stevan is terrified of alienation and "betrayal": "panicking over the possibility that I could not even reject but only look with a foreign and unbiased eye at some of our sacred customs" (Selenić 2009, 73).

This misunderstanding is and will be, as young Stevan predicts, caused by the fundamentally different contexts he and his English wife belong to, and not even Stevan's great learning and English education could mediate between the two. As the passage below suggests, even though Stevan was probably better acquainted with Shakespeare's oeuvre than Elisabeth and most of her compatriots, it will never yield any shared meaning for him and his wife:

After thirty years of passionate work on the language and opus of the Swan of Avon and delving deep into his verses and prose, I am certainly better acquainted with Shakespeare than my wife, or the vast majority of the English, but still, I realize that my understanding of him differs from theirs. By translating him, I actually Serbianise him, adapting him to the way I see the world; I do not look at him with an eye that first saw the world, natural phenomena, or people, in England, as Elizabeth and Will did, but in Serbia, like myself, my father Milutin, or the barefoot Milomilj from Mount Rudnik. The word "sea", both in Will and Laza, means the sea, but sea means one thing to an islander, a compatriot of Beowulf or Sir Walter Raleigh, and completely another to a man from the Bačva Region, a compatriot of Maksim Crnojević and Lenka Dundjerski (73).

Stevan Medaković's English wife is, for most of the novel, only an unfortunate catalyst for her husband's mixed feelings for his people just as she is an apt narrative springboard for Stevan's revelations about his heavily mediated auto-image (meta-image). The pathos of the older Stevan's ruminations reveals him as a "dreamer [at the

life's close] between nightmarish images" (147). And although "his love towards his country and his people increased with a raising awareness of their shortcomings [and] these two concepts complemented one another in a strange way to build an undefinable but wholesome national feeling", Stevan admits that:

For forty years now, I have not been able to look around myself without putting on the malevolently unbiased Elizabeth's glasses. When I pass beside a crippled beggar on a dirty sidewalk with a *šajkača* in his extended hand — not anger, but deep resentment, fills me when I compare him with Nanka's descriptions of Zeka Buljubaša or the heroes from Čelopek, Velika Hoča, Petraljica, but then my inner little oculist, alert and ready, swiftly changes the glass and I look at the cripple with the green English eye to which the multitude of meanings behind the scene remains impenetrable, the misery laid bare before the ice-cold scrutiny of a stranger's insensitivity (147–148).

The growing uneasiness between the husband and wife seems to be, at least indirectly, linked to Stevan's need to explain his people to Elisabeth and his feeling somehow accountable for some of his people's less favorable traits. It is reiterated throughout the novel that Stevan's image of his people is neither stable nor static. This image, initially formed against the mythic-epic background of Nanka's stories, is mediated by another's (the Other's) perspective. Stevan repeatedly mentions the unbiased green (Elisabeth's) eyes through which he is only able to see his people. Bespectacled now with these foreign "glasses," Steven feels guilt, remorse and the urgent need to explain to Elisabeth, albeit indirectly, "those base phenomena [among my people] that I somehow feel personally responsible for" (149). Elisabeth, on her part, did not feel the same towards her people, but, interestingly enough, she corroborates her attitude with Dr Johnson's well-known sentence on patriotism, confirming the "Englishness" of her stance:

There are a lot of English people I like, and a lot I despise, but neither sentiment is because they're English. How can I consider myself fully responsible for what I am, how can I possibly feel responsible for any English trickster's misbehaviour? Patriotism is a form of annihilation of the individual. Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel (150).

By the repetitive usage of the color green, the green eyes, the unbiased English glasses/eyes, even *Elisabeth's* eyes, whenever the image of his people is dark and embarrassing, Stevan inadvertently admits that it is Elisabeth who influences his view of (and attitude towards) his people when it is less favorable. These are not Elisabeth's eyes, however, as is clear from Elisabeth's letters to Rachel, but what Stevan thinks her eyes must be (meta-image). Stevan's perception of his people (as intense as it is false) through what he believes are his wife's foreign eyes blinds him, tragically, to the intensity of a more immediate spectacle – that of Elisabeth's passionate but futile attempt at adapting to the new environment and raising Mihajlo as a typical Serbian boy who will never notice his difference from his peers.

The repeated insistence on Elisabeth's essential difference resulting from her "Englishness", that is, a completely different understanding of the world, might well be Stevan's excuse for bad parenting. Piling analogy upon analogy to corroborate his Bristol tea-house epiphany on the fundamental, final and fatal impossibility of understanding, Stevan will look for opportunities to highlight Elisabeth's fundamental otherness. Using the expressions such as "I noticed perfectly what others, possibly,

did not”, “what I prophetically sensed was confirmed” (139), Stevan deepens the stereotype/ethnotype, proving the very nature of reality to be mediated by one’s ethnic background:

Just as the word “sea” does not mean the same to an islander, Elizabeth, and me, born and raised deep in the continent, as the Sun does not shine in the same way on one raised in the humid air just off the Atlantic coast and one raised under the southern Mediterranean skies, so the royal family cannot arouse the same feelings in the people from the land of the Tudors and Plantagenet and the Balkan-born people, whose king Milan, so recently that it feels like yesterday, gambled away the state railroad (138).

Stevan, as the focalizer, would present the reader with an image of yet another mysterious foreign beauty, another *femme fatale* if it were not for Elisabeth’s letters in which her fears, her apprehensions, and her disillusionment with her husband burst open. It is not the environment that intensifies her feeling of foreignness, not even the first years in the country with the father-in-law who hands out pieces of bread over the dinner table or the hostile governess Nanka – it is the complacent misunderstanding of her husband.

The retrospective insistence on destiny-cum-misunderstanding might reveal Stevan’s careful rationalization of the subsequent failure of their marriage. Elisabeth has much to resent in her husband but none of this has to do with his nationality – these traits are personal and individual, not communal and collective. Presenting Elisabeth as irreparably foreign to even the closest person to her and pairing the foreignness with destiny, Stevan desperately tries to find something to account for the subsequent family tragedy. Elisabeth’s eyes through which Stevan believes himself to see his country and his people’s ineptitude, as her letters will show later, scrutinize almost exclusively his own ineptitude, inefficiency and complacency, which he either does not see or refuses to see.

Elisabeth Blake is, just like her namesake in Jakšić’s tragedy, beautiful, seductive and extremely sensual. Nevertheless, there is nothing evil in her and there was no resentment towards the English in the first decades of the 20th century or the mid-1980s when the novel was written. On the contrary, a pronounced Anglophilia or even Anglomania could be said to have been present among both the rising Serbian intellectual bourgeois elite of the 1920s and in the Serbian writer, himself a descendent of the pre-war bourgeoisie, in the twilight of the communist era.

Nevertheless, something of the destructive foreign woman stereotype persisted. The seemingly innocuous references to Laza Lazarević’s *Ana Gutjer*, and the epic poem’s and Laza Kostić’s *Maksim Crnojević* seem to be an early premonition of bad luck.

Foreign women may be detrimental for the community even when it is not (at all) their fault. It matters little if their inadaptability and the resulting misunderstanding are real or counterfeit. Elisabeth, as inevitably and fatally as Irene or Jelisaveta, brings misfortune upon the family. Giving a painful account of the elderly couple’s late years, Stevan leaves an unanswered question lingering: Is Mihajlo dead because he wanted to sever ties with his foreign mother whose entire people were the “class enemy” now? Did he hurry into his death because he felt he should atone for his unpardonable otherness, for the English ginger of his hair?

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, after outlining the most influential cultural-studies and feminist insights on the foreign woman, Marilyn D. Button concludes:

The full extent of this foreign woman's powers is not only unknown, it is also to be feared. Retaining what de Beauvoir considers to be the most fundamental of male myths about women – that of her essential mystery – the foreign woman herself becomes a foreign country: alien because of the mystery of her physical self, her marginalized social and political position, and her unleashed strength, and, in the context of this volume, because she is literally from a foreign country. Like the uncharted territory with which she is often associated, she is a world to be explored, colonized, inhabited perhaps, and probably subdued (Button – Reed 1999, xiv).

Our imagology-based analysis has led us to similar conclusions. The narratives on foreign women originating over a long timespan allow for an interpretation of the foreign woman characterization against an imagological background, with both auto-images and hetero-images generated, established and strengthened through a discursive construction of stereotypes. These stereotypes, although discursive and fictional in their origin and character, are informative of their respective socio-historical contexts.

The foreign woman is a foreign territory to the folk tradition, it is a foreign territory to the 19th century Romanticists and remains such in some modernist narratives as well. The underlying “message” informing the formation of the analyzed representation/stereotype resonates across centuries as a warning: the foreign territory is full of perils, it can be quicksand, and an attempt at exogamous unions might end in disaster for both parties.

The foreign woman has over time lost much of her real political power and thus the real power to spell disaster for the whole nation, but some awareness of the possible danger has persisted. We argue that the intricately intertwined accounts of oral tradition and official history on foreign female consorts to Serbian rulers have engendered a stereotypical representation of the foreign woman in Serbian literature. As stated explicitly in Leerssen, a number of different, potentially conflicting ethnotypes can coexist in our minds without ever colliding (2016, 24). We have traced one such trajectory and concluded that the stereotype of the destructive foreign woman has retained its power and semantic potential for centuries. This particular set of traits pertaining to the stereotype, as we have tried to show, owes its persistence to the communal trauma experienced after the demise of the Serbian medieval state and throughout the subsequent brutal Ottoman reign. In Serbian folk tradition, the community's system of values and code of conduct was perceived as superior to hard facts. The complicated geo-strategic dynamics that led to the fall of the ruling dynasties and enslavement of the people, was understated, while the role of the foreign women in power was overemphasized.

With the advent of Romanticism, which used the patterns of oral tradition with both vigour and excitement, the demonized stereotype of the foreign woman was re-triggered from the collective memory. The foreign female is perceived as a disrupt-

tive factor, the cause of instability, and a kind of an alibi (justification) for a turmoil or a catastrophe, that would have ensued even if the female consort had not been on the throne. As an extremely powerful catalyst for the ruling families' demise, she is, by extension, the nemesis of the whole community. The community thus reconstructed the communal past against the symbolic and mythopoetic backdrop of the collective memory.

Our analysis of Selenić's novel has shown that the stereotype of the dangerous foreign woman/bride has lost some of its attributes over time (most prominently, the possibility to exert real political power), but that her position is still defined by her non-belonging: she is an individual irreconcilably at odds with the community. Selenić's Elisabeth as much as Jakšić's Jelisaveta exists in an "in-between space" (Bhabha 1994), in a "no-man's land" between her own and the socio-cultural context of the marital other.

If an exogamous marriage does occur, the women will not adjust to the customs and tradition of the country they come to – most of them unwilling, others unsuccessful or not even given a chance – stating explicitly or implicitly the implied dominance of their own culture (Selenić's Elisabeth desperately tries to adapt, but despite her ardent desire to bring up her child as a proper Serbian boy, it is only the English notions of propriety that she can instill in her offspring).

It can be argued that the activation of such a stereotype derives from the "fatal" women's country of origin having territorial pretensions to Serb-populated lands or its being otherwise inimical (hypocritical, unhelpful, betraying allies or those trying to make the people convert) to the Serbian people or culture and not from any inherent xenophobia. Serbian folk tradition is no more misogynist than other patriarchal traditions. If gender inequality is present, it affects Serbian and foreign women alike. The more sharp-witted, willful and determined a woman is, the more dangerous she is, since she presents a challenge to the patriarchal, male-dominated world. The woman's traditionally complementary, nurturing role is thus heavily compromised. Challenging the established patriarchal roles, the foreigner challenges the very foundations of the world-view held by the community, the "God-given" order is disrupted (the auto-image corrupted) and the community faces divine punishment (loss of freedom, depopulation, loss of children).

The stereotype has, over time, lost its sharpness but it can be argued that even the perceived fatality and the inescapable tragedy surrounding the marriage of the protagonists of the 20th century novel drew its power from this stereotypical representation of the foreign female. The foreign female is a powerful force to be reckoned with. Her impact on the community, small and large alike, can be detrimental.

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The cursed foreign bride in Serbian literature: An evolution or a dissolution of a stereotype?

Stereotypes. Foreign women. Imagology. Serbian literature.

The paper traces both the trajectory of and possible reasons for the survival of the destructive foreign bride stereotype in Serbian literature. The authors focus on two prominent epic narratives, that of Irene Kantakouzene, the wife of Serbian Despot Đurađ Branković and that of Venetian born wife to Đurađ Crnojević, the ruler of Zeta, in different renditions, both folk and authorial. In the (pre)Romantic narratives foreign women are power-hungry lawful wives to Serbian princes and the imminent fall of the dissolved Empire is wrongly attributed to them. The popular (re)construction of the traumatic was unquestioningly transferred into authorial narratives by Romantic Serbian poets: foreign ladies ruined their Serbian royal husbands and, consequently, the people. Born and raised in this tradition, Slobodan Selenić's Stevan Medaković disregards the patriarchal code and marries his English sweetheart. However, despite her spirited character, both Elisabeth's actual otherness and her husband's notions of it, will prove an insurmountable obstacle to domestic happiness of the daring young couple. The authors touched upon complex discursive mechanisms which (re-)produce otherness and tried to identify textual chronotopes and elements of cultural anthropology that govern the symbolical characterization of the foreign woman.

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