

## **Feminism and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia: On the Politics of Gender and Ethnicity**

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This text follows the effects of the wars in former Yugoslavia (1991-1995) on Yugoslav feminist movement and examines notions of femininity and ethnicity in academic and activist texts produced during the war by feminists from the region. It argues that the conceptualization of the woman-victim stands central to both academic writing and the activism. The war violence - and especially sexual violence against women - may account for the focus on a woman as victim in the war. However, the author is concerned with theoretical and political consequences of invariably linking both femininity and ethnicity to victimization and violence.

When the war started, Yugoslavia became increasingly relevant for feminism around the world. There have been few events in history that have caused such a global feminist response among activists, lobbyist and academics alike and caused - or at least contributed to - defining gender and women-specific policies in major international organizations and agencies. Paradoxically, in all this feminist frenzy about Yugoslavia, Yugoslav feminism itself almost slipped out of sight. Everything else was studied - war, nationalism, violence, rapes, women's human rights, international law - but not Yugoslav feminism.

Logically, and necessarily, Yugoslav feminists were the first to reflect on how the wars of Yugoslav disintegration and partition influenced their identities and what the wars meant for them personally, and for their activism. And as the fighting progressed, slowly but surely analytical texts started appearing on how the wars affected feminist political activities and alliances in the region. However, there were few that asked how the wars affected feminist theoretical perspectives, or how the pre-existing theoretical perspectives affected feminist analysis of, and actions in the wars.

### **The Loss of a Common Ground**

It is worth noting that ethnicity became a feminist issue in socialist Yugoslavia only in late 1980s, with the rise of nationalism, and especially, with women becoming the focus of many nationalist debates. Thus, from the start, ethnicity was defined as being part and parcel of nationalism. Among the first debates in which feminist engaged were those on differences in demographic growth of different ethnic groups, and debates around changes in abortion and rape legislation (Dobnikar, 2000; Drezgic, 2000). This is not to say that there was no nationalism in Yugoslavia prior to the 1980s. In 1968, for example, while students in Ljubljana,

Zagreb and Belgrade demonstrated (and were beaten up by police and the military) in favour of political de-centralization and pluralism, Albanian students in Pristina demonstrated (and were beaten up by police and the military) in favour of Kosovo becoming another Yugoslav republic (instead of being an autonomous province of Serbia). In 1971, the Croatian nationalist movement proclaimed a 'Croatian Spring', a movement for an independent state of Croatia. Thus, Yugoslav socialist history after the World War II saw a good deal of openly nationalistic claims and struggles.

But the new Yugoslav feminism was much younger than Yugoslav nationalism. Its Second Wave appeared as a self-conscious and self-defined movement only in the late 1970s<sup>i</sup>. However, feminists never looked (back) at what nationalism meant for socialism, and what was the place of ethnicity in either of them, facing these questions for the first time only in the late 1980s. Before that, Yugoslav feminists debated issues of socialist theory and practice, and disputed many diverse theoretical and empirical aspects of the women's emancipation project. This group of feminists were excellent scholars, extremely critical and analytical, and very well-versed in the latest developments in international academic feminism, from philosophy to literature. Predominantly intellectuals, they were based in the academies and cultural institutions of three biggest urban centres: Ljubljana, Zagreb and Belgrade. Feminist organizing during this period was synonymous with academic debates, and feminist grass root activism was simply unknown. In the late 1980s however, new proposals for changes in legislation on rape, abortion and child subsidies brought feminist onto the streets as well as into the republican and federal parliaments. At that time, the lobbying and diverse street protests that occurred were a novelty in feminist activism in Yugoslavia.

In these public actions, Yugoslav feminists from different republics were acting not only in solidarity, but as a front. The differences in viewpoints that existed among them often did not follow republican or ethnic lines, nor were they seen as such. Indeed, at the very beginning, nationalism was seen as a common enemy. In the late 1980s, all feminists saw Serb nationalism as the main (if not the only) danger, and worked in accord against it. Later on they joined forces in criticising Croatian nationalism. Even in the early 1990s, at the outbreak of the wars, anti-nationalism was still a feminist common ground, although the views on which nationalism was (the most) dangerous started to differ. In her analysis of the state of Yugoslav feminism during the late 1980's and early 1990's, Jill Benderly (1997) asserted that the relationships built by women's groups from various Yugoslav republics endured longer than the Yugoslav federation itself. Calling Yugoslav feminism of the 1980s "a small beacon of opposition to nationalism", she concluded:

Women's solidarity above and beyond national identity made feminism a fairly unique social movement in the period when the most other movements had, to varying degrees, become nationalized by 1991. (Benderly, 1997, p. 70)

When the war started, hardly anyone in the former Yugoslavia could quite believe it was actually happening. Most of the people – feminists among them - thought that the so-called 'sporadic fighting' would soon stop, that the soldiers would be sent back to barracks and that some kind of loose confederation would be negotiated. Additionally, many feminists believed that the public demonstrations of thousands of women at the very beginning of the war in Slovenia, from Spring to Summer 1991, in which feminists were also passionately engaged, would be powerful enough to change the political tide.

But as it became apparent that the fighting was something more than sporadic violence, the urge and the urgency to do something about it was such that, within the first two years of wars in Croatia and Bosnia, feminists engaged in a massive effort against the conflict: they established anti-war groups, centres for victims of war violence and (self-) help groups for refugee women in almost all the capitals of the former republics, and later on in other major cities and even small towns<sup>ii</sup>. As the violence began to also increase within the zones not directly hit by war, the first S.O.S lines (special telephone lines for counselling and support of victims of family and/or sexual violence, operated by women volunteers, and organised by women's NGOs) and shelters for women and children (who wished to leave abusive and violent partners and family situations) started operating. The first women's studies programmes were introduced at the beginning of the 1990s, accompanied by documentation and information centres<sup>iii</sup>. Feminist journals became more numerous and vocal. Through all that, feminist groups from different territories – now newly established states – persistently cooperated.

However, as the wars raged, another side of the feminist 'coin' seemed to become equally significant: sharp divisions, political confrontations and accusations. There were occasions when feminists from one territory refused angrily to sit in the same room with feminists from another territory. Sometimes, they refused to attend a meeting with feminists from their own territory who expressed a different political perspective. Sometimes, neither territory nor politics had to be different for a fallout. Having a different idea about a project or an action was enough. Feminists were starting to differ among themselves about how to define the wars and how to think about nationalism. Furthermore, principles that once supported a unity among feminists were not always very helpful for practice. This is because, feminist principles were rather old and belonged to a different time - time of peace and socialism, whereas the nationalist and war practices feminists faced on a daily basis were quite new to them. If at one point the Yugoslav National Army was easily identified by feminists from Serbia and Croatia alike as a patriarchal, masculinist and war waging institution, everything else seemed less clear:

Can a feminist be a nationalist chauvinist? Can a pacifist be a nationalist? Is a weapon an instrument of defence? Should the groups take clear attitude towards nationalist questions (and therefore the war) and in that way lose some

women? Should the groups avoid the issue of nationalism altogether?

(Mladjenovic & Litricin, 1993, p.117).

A feminist from Zagreb noted that the lack of clear answers to these questions often created either crises or silences. She remembered these early days of war when meeting women from Serbia was possible only on some 'neutral soil', mostly abroad. Reflecting upon her experience of such meetings from the beginning of the war, she told the author in a personal conversation:

Only now I understand what was happening in these meetings. We were so physical! We kissed and hugged and kept each other's hands, sat embraced all the time. We cried a lot, and laughed a lot. And we always brought each other presents. Little things, a chocolate, a soap, whatever. Something to hold. But, you see, we were afraid to talk. We actually talked a lot, but there were themes we never opened up. Who is guilty? Who started it all? Is everybody equally responsible? These things we never talked about. We hugged instead. It was too much, you know. There were too few of us left. We could not bear to lose one more with a wrong question. So we kept silent and hugged.

These silences point to one crucial impact of the war on feminism in former Yugoslavia: it shook a common ground which had developed in the course of the 1980s and still existed on the eve of disintegration – the common ground of shared anti-nationalist and anti-war perspectives. With the war in Croatia intensifying and especially after the war rapes in Bosnia were made public (in Summer 1992), *feminists in different territories started operating within rather different political contexts, each ridden with different internal contradictions*. Some Croatian feminists defined the context for Croatia as 'pacifism under the circumstances of defence' (Ivekovic, in Spasic 2000). But as Croatia engaged in a war against Bosnia, this definition was not necessarily sufficient. And there were those who simply refused both pacifism and anti-nationalism. Among Serbian feminists there were also different perceptions of the situation. Some saw it as dealing with "nationalism of [their] own people" (Korac, 1993). Others refuse to have anything in common with the nation, especially Serbian, and could not "even hear 's', (e) 'r' or 'b' (i.e. Serb) in one place without being angry" (Mladjenovic & Litricin, 1993, p. 113).

Obviously, as the war raged, the meanings of ethnicity, nation and nationalism started changing for feminists in Serbia and Croatia in a very different way. Inevitably, they were linked to the definition of the war - is it civil, ethnic, occupying, liberating - and to the questions of who are the victims and who the aggressors. As many authors pointed out (Benderly,1997; Boric,1997; Huges,1995; Milic,1993; Supek,1994), these were the questions that finally split feminist groups of Serbia and Croatia within, and contributed to the establishment of nationalist feminist groups in Croatia

These internal differences were further exasperated by doubts, suspicions and patronising attitudes from abroad. There were enough American and European feminists who

declared themselves capable of "teaching women from Yugoslavia democracy" (a German speaker at a conference in Zagreb, 1993; information from a personal contact with the author). Furthermore, feminists from Serbia and Croatia often faced differential treatment abroad, with the former being systematically asked to prove that they are truly anti-nationalist, or being wondered upon if the proof seemed convincing enough. A (drastic) example of the distrust towards Serbian feminists is given by Benderly (1997:67) who quotes a question of a (in)famous American feminist, MacKinnon, to a feminist from Belgrade: "If you are in opposition to the regime in Serbia, why aren't you already dead?". An example of a rather patronizing wondering upon Serbian feminists was given to the author. A feminist from Belgrade had gone to a conference somewhere in Western Europe, and has spoken about the struggle against nationalism by feminists from Serbia. After her presentation, one woman approached her to say how delightful it was to see that although she was from Serbia, she was still so democratic, so anti-nationalist, so feminist. How was it possible? She answered: "I am a mistake of the system". Sadly enough, this is exactly how feminists from Serbia have often been perceived, because the assumption that in Serbia, *everybody* is undemocratic, nationalistic and anti-feminist, and that *only by mistake* do people turn out to be different, was all too powerful.

### **Feminists, Feminisms**

In October 1992 an international feminist conference was organized in Zagreb by a few feminist groups, and almost every feminist and woman's group existing in Croatia at the time, took part in it. This was the conference in which the conflict between anti-nationalist and nationalist feminists in Croatia came out into the open. The conflict centered around the question: who is the victim? The organizers of the meeting (the groups Kareta and Women's Help Now) emphasized "the necessity of naming the aggressor and the victim" and distinguished themselves from the so-called "neutral position of some feminist, pacifist and other alternative circles in and outside Croatia" (*Working Programme* of the group Women's Help Now, dated December 10, 1992, Zagreb). The 'naming' here, however, meant naming Muslim and Croat women as *the only victims*, and Serb men as *the only perpetrators*.

In February 1993 a big international 'Solidarity Meeting' was organized in Zagreb, sponsored by a German women's group. The meeting was supposed to bring together all women and women's groups, feminists and feminist groups from the former Yugoslav territories and from abroad concerned with war violence against women in Bosnia and Croatia. However, when a few women from Serbia who were invited and finally got visas to enter Croatia attempted to address the audience, Croatian nationalist women created an uproar. It did not help that the women from Serbia were condemning rapes of Muslim and Croat women by Serb forces. For they also mentioned rape of Serb women by Croat and Bosnian forces - and nationalist feminists from Croatia were unwilling to accept this account.

As a result, many anti-nationalist feminists and groups pulled out of the meeting, and continued their work not only independent of the work of the nationalist women's and feminist groups, but often in direct opposition to them.

Nationalist feminists continued to insist that only Croat and Muslim women were victims and only Serb men the perpetrators. Furthermore, for nationalist feminists, the woman was also a metaphor of the nation-state. They talked about 'rape of Bosnia and Croatia' as much as about 'rape of Muslim and Croat women'. Nevertheless, they continued working on other aspects of their feminist agenda: from recovering women in Croatian national history to addressing the issue of domestic violence, from publishing feminist journals to lobbying in the Parliament for passing legislation that protects women's rights. Furthermore, feminists in Kareta, defined themselves as a radical feminist group. They systematically accused Croat men of oppressing Croat women. Interestingly, their radical feminism did not appear to give them a negative public image in Croatian media, otherwise so sensitive to the word 'feminism'. On the contrary, their work received a positive reception in the press, they were invited to be guests on different radio programmes and finally, appeared on the national television, prime time. Through these appearances, their work, as well as their perspectives received, in their own words, "an important public legitimacy" (*Program Statement*, O-ZONA: Assistance to Women in Crisis, i.e. an S.O.S. hot-line, Kareta, 1994).

Public legitimacy is obviously an important aspect of the work in which nationalist feminists were engaged. Acceptance into the newly created nation-state was not always an easy thing. Many anti-nationalist feminists were publicly excluded through media campaigns. Croatian weekly *Globus*, for example, conducted an actual "witch-hunt" in December 1992, calling five outspoken women critics of Croatian nationalism "witches" and "feminists", and accusing them of "raping Croatia", while at the same time praising nationalist feminists (*Globus*, 10 December 1992, cover page). One of the accused was Slavenka Drakulic. The shifts in her writing and attitudes towards the newly established Croatian state show some of the internal contradictions and dilemmas that feminists from Croatia faced. In her book about war in former Yugoslavia, *Balkan Express*, Drakulic defines the nation in ways quite similar to definitions given by nationalist feminists - as a personified (albeit not directly feminized), suffering victim:

So, right now, in the new state of Croatia, no one is allowed not to be a Croat.

And even if this is not what one would really call freedom, perhaps it would be *morally unjust* to tear off the shirt of the *suffering nation*. (Drakulic, 1993a, p. 52; emphasis added).

Through such a statement, any criticism is morally discredited because the state of Croatia and the (Croat) nation are defined as the suffering war victims, and the victim-status is transformed into the ultimate moral status. Drakulic proceeds to state that she feels "a new kind of pride"

despite the fact that she was "robbed of [her] past", for, now at last, she reiterates, when she says she is from Croatia, everybody knows where it is (Drakulic, 1993b, p. 58).

The thing is: everybody knows where Serbia is, too. But no Serbian feminist could ever utter the same sentence. In Serbia, there was no feminist flirting with nationalism. There were *only* anti-nationalist feminists. This is because, first, nationalist women's groups distanced themselves very explicitly from feminism, and second, because Serbian feminists could not afford such a link. For them, the war brought no pride, only "separation, guilt and identity crisis", as Mladjenovic and Litricin (1993) reiterate in the title of their article. Feminists from Serbia never ever dared writing about their 'suffering nation', only about "nationalism of [their] own people" (Korac, 1993). They would never even think about putting together words 'love' and 'blood' the way Drakulic (1993b, p. 59) did when writing about Croatia's independence:

Croatia is getting its independence simply because millions of people loved it enough to fight and to shed their blood for it, practically to the death.

For feminists in Serbia, this patriotic romanticization of the war deaths was unimaginable. For them, there was no independence to celebrate, only a bloody disintegration to mourn. They could never hope to "love [their] new country" as Drakulic (1993b, p. 58) did, for their country was not the 'new' one, it was a 'remnant' or the 'left-over', the 'former', the 'ex-'. And, it was, in the words of some of them, "fascist" and "totalitarian" (see the Annual Reports of Autonomous Women's Center Against Violence, Belgrade, from 1994/5 and 1997/8, and the opening quotation in Huges et al, 1995, p. 509).

The differences of the internal contexts that feminists from Serbia and Croatia faced are also apparent in the differences that can be found in the manner in which the two territories can be talked about. In the edited publication by Funk & Mueller (1993) Slavenka Drakulic and Andjelka Milic (a feminist from Serbia) write about women in former Yugoslavia. The Croatian feminist Drakulic writes about women and the new democracy in Croatia (Drakulic, 1993b); the Serbian feminist Milic writes about women and nationalism in Serbia (Milic, 1993). Both texts are about nationalism and women's actions against it. Reading them, one comes to the same, depressing conclusion that, in both places, nationalism, not feminism, is the winning force. The difference is that, 'new democracy' is the vocabulary that describes Croatia, whereas 'nationalism' is the vocabulary for Serbia. These words define the two states, as much as the people who live in them. And, on the surface, it seems to be an accurate description. However, not every feminist in Croatia believed that democracy had come and that she has anything to be proud of in her new country. Many were, actually, appalled with their new country and the way it had come about. In addition, they were also disappointed in Drakulic, who, after braving public opinion in 1992 by stating that Croat soldiers were rapists too, had become ever less critical of Croatian nationalism. Similarly, not every feminist in Serbia thought that she had to feel guilty and ashamed solely on the basis of her Serbian origin or residence, or that she had to

be blind to the atrocities against Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia, or that her comments should be limited to condemnation of 'her own' nationalism, people, state or government. Nevertheless, these differences were significant, and they influenced the manner in which anti-nationalist feminist from Serbia and Croatia operated and cooperated.

Hence, not surprisingly, anti-nationalist feminists in Croatia and Serbia were not all that unified in definitions of victims and aggressors. On the one hand, they did assume that women were the main victims, and that women of any ethnic background could become a victim. Consequently, they explicitly included women of different ethnic and national affiliations as target groups of their work, especially when working with rape victims. They often deliberately chose to work with, and search for women from ethnic groups that were on the receiving end of violence by their own governments. Croatian anti-nationalist feminists, for example, were the first to explicitly accuse Croatian forces of raping Serb and Muslim women, and to condemn national and international demonization of Serb men and the Serb nation, be it by mainstream politicians or by American feminists such as MacKinnon. They were also first to aid Serb refugees and (a few) returnees and to criticize the Croatian government's nationalist politics within Croatia, and expansionist politics in Bosnia. For all of this they received hostile public reactions, with few, if any, other civic and anti-nationalist groups or individuals coming to their aid. Seen as traitors within their own nation-states, they turned to other anti-nationalist feminist groups of ex-Yugoslavia and to international feminist and civil-society networks, in all of which they were well received. Serbian anti-nationalist feminists also directed their activities towards all women, regardless of their ethnic background. They were among the few to establish links with Albanian women from Kosovo, for example. They, too, were treated as traitors in their own territory, and after the initial rejection, they were eventually embraced by the international feminist networks, albeit as one of the 'good' faces of Serbia. The negative aspect of such positioning of Serbian feminists notwithstanding, it is worth noting that the presence of Croatian and Serbian feminists in the international arena actually showed how non-exceptional, far from unique and truly global, was the drama happening in Yugoslavia. By being related to the past and present dramas in Algeria, Korea, Ireland, Israel or South Africa, the Yugoslav conflict showed how relevant it is both to learn from others' experiences and to teach others about one's own<sup>iv</sup>.

On the other hand, the notion of a woman as the main victim of war and nationalism did not always and everywhere have the same meaning. Faced with very different contexts of war and nationalism within their states, as well as with very different personal, professional and feminist histories that pre-dated nationalism and war, anti-nationalist feminists and groups in Croatia and Serbia often attached very different meanings to the notion of a woman-victim. For example, in Serbia anti-nationalist feminists split precisely over the definition of a woman-victim. A small but influential group of radical feminist, led by Mladjenovic initially



refused to acknowledge any relevance of ethnicity or nation, when talking about war rapes, and reduced them to the "male violence against women" (Annual Report 1994/1995, AWC Belgrade, p.1). They asserted that "rape is not a nationalist but a gender issue" and that nation, state, militaries, patriotism and wars are all products of patriarchy, conceived in, and sustained through, male violence against women, and male hatred of everything female and feminine (Mladjenovic & Litricin, 1993, p. 113). This assumption that all women are victims of all men, defines a woman as an ultimate metaphor of a victim and adopts the dominant patriarchal notions of gender - with aggressive masculinity and violable femininity. At the same time, it is extracting both masculinity and femininity from other social relations of power, notably - relations of ethnicity. The latter stance is not necessarily radical, and is shared by many anti-nationalist feminists who assume that no difference *among* women matters as much as difference *between* men and women, and that feminism replaces all other identities. One anti-nationalist Croatian feminist expressed that belief very clearly:

It is impossible to merge nation and gender - they are different understandings of human nature and human essence. It is therefore impossible to be equally of one's nation and of one's gender. (Cullen, 1992, p. 414).

For many anti-nationalist feminists from Serbia and Croatia who operated within heated nationalist discourses and realities increasingly reduced to ethnicity, denial of national and ethnic identities created a powerful starting point in communication. Their refusal of their own ethnic identities came to symbolize their refusal of nationalism. The problem is that Belgrade's radical feminists took this position to its extreme: women who did not refuse to acknowledge their own ethnic identities were simply declared nationalists. In a radical agenda, ethnicity and anti-nationalist feminism came to be regarded as incompatible. If ethnicity was introduced into the rhetoric it was only to declare the Serb government, Serb people and especially Serb men, as the ultimate war villains. There were feminists in Serbia, however, who were wary of the demonization of 'the Serbs' as much as of Serbian nationalism and who disagreed strongly with radical feminist views (Milic, 1993; Duhacek, 1993; Blagojevic, 1994; Korac, 1996). Yet, as Duhacek (1993, p. 136) noted, unlike Croatian feminists who criticised the nationalism of their own government as well as that of others, feminists in Serbia limited their analyses to Serbian nationalism only. Because Serbian nationalism was already an almost exclusive topic in studies of nationalism in former Yugoslavia, in both feminist and non-feminist analyses, and by both foreign and domestic authors, academic feminists in Serbia were in a peculiar position. While these feminists showed that Serbia has had a feminist 'face' as well as a nationalist one, they sometimes, unwittingly, reinforced the very discourses they wanted to subvert.

Another difference among feminists in Serbia was in their attitudes towards political involvement. While some tried to engage in the domain of official politics through lobbying, creating women's parties or joining existing opposition, others refused any contact with the

official political parties. Mladjenovic and Litricin express a rather commonly held feminist viewpoint when they says that "the `Serbian nation', as the present government creates it, certainly has nothing in common with a `Woman's nation'" (Mladjenovic & Litricin, 1993, p. 119). However, they and the circle around them seldom differentiated between the government and oppositional political forces, and often denounced all opposition forces in Serbia as nationalists, chauvinist and patriarchal "street-crowds" (Mladjenovic & Litricin, 1993, p. 119). Furthermore, they systematically called the Serbian government fascist, which was more an ideological labelling than a good analysis of particular political processes and power (see especially Mladjenovic and Litricin 1993, Mladjenovic 2001, and Huges et al, 1995).

Needless to say, these attitudes and strategies brought self-isolation to the Belgrade radical feminists within Serbia, making them more dependent – emotionally as well as financially - on links with the feminist groups abroad. The fact that they were praised in feminist circles abroad, probably in part comes because their extreme separatism made them less ambiguous and thus easier to accept in those international feminist circles that had trouble dealing with feminists from Serbia (the same way they had trouble acknowledging the rape of Serb women during the war<sup>v</sup>). But they had few friends among other feminists and feminist groups in Serbia, and also largely marginalized themselves from political debates of the day.

Self-imposed isolationism, although carried to its extreme by the radical feminists, seems to characterise feminism in Serbia in general. In a recently conducted study on the women's movement in Serbia and Montenegro Milic (2002) concludes that women's groups are turned inwards, separated from local communities and each other, perceived in a very negative light by their surroundings and "politically completely uninfluential and ineffective" (Milic 2002, p. 123).

While the radicalization of feminist activism in Serbia potentially had many problematic aspects it made at least two significant contributions to the theory and practice of feminism in general, and in the region. The close and direct contact with women survivors of war in combination with the radical feminist definition of victim as exclusively female (and not female and ethnic at the same time) resulted in one extremely significant insight, which was quickly turned into both a political and theoretical point. Feminist activists from both Belgrade and Zagreb refused the "cynical quantification and hierarchization" of women's suffering in war" (AWC, Annual Report, 1994/1995, p.5). They refused to make the rape the single most important issue for their activism and stood firmly behind the statement that "many women have survived more than one type of violence, and if they come for one problem, many other different kinds of pains come out later on" (AWC, Annual Report, 1994/1995, p.5). These insights were later carried out from the wars in Bosnia and Croatia to the war in Kosovo (Mladjenovic 2001). At times when both nationalists in former Yugoslavia

and many feminists across the globe rallied almost exclusively only around the issue of the war rapes, this was an extremely brave political position. Theoretically, it was a welcome opening to a possibility of situating rape *within*, and not *above*, feminist conceptualizations of violence against women in war.

Further, radicalized feminism in Serbia had another positive effect: making homosexuality visible. Not only was it the case that lesbian feminists received attention and were embraced as feminist sisters, but hetero- and homosexuality became legitimate political and theoretical issues (see for example Mrsevic 2000), and lesbian sexuality became a topic in the existing Women's Studies programs. While this did not do much to make a lesbian visible in the wider society, it did address almost total invisibility of homosexuality within Serbian feminism in the previous decades.

### **Theorizing Gender and Ethnicity in War**

There are a few assumptions about femininity and ethnicity, and their relationships, underpinning feminist activism during the war in former Yugoslavia. Obviously, nationalist feminists collapsed femininity and ethnicity, and assumed that woman is of her nation only. Anti-nationalist feminists sometimes separated the two completely, in other times placed themselves within the national terms of reference, but basically adopted what Supek (1994, p. 9) called an internationalist, universalistic and individualistic stance. However, a close reading of the documents of various anti-nationalist women's groups and feminist texts suggests that these assumptions of relationships between femininity and ethnicity rest on one rather crucial assumption - of a woman-victim.

Imagining women exclusively as victims of (sexual) violence informed both the practices and the discourses of nationalism. But it also informed practices and discourses of feminism in Yugoslavia. While mending the effects of the violent gendered practices of nationalism and war, many feminists in Serbia and Croatia have adopted the ultimate gendered discourse of the woman (rape) victim, assuming rather same and fatal link between femininity and victimhood.

Few were those who actually theorized and challenged the association of femininity to victimization, or investigated its function in both feminist and nationalist discourses. In Serbia, Nikolic-Ristanovic et al (1995) start their research by problematizing the notion of a victim and using multiple and diversified definitions of victimization given by the refugee women themselves. In Croatia, Jambresic Kirin & Povrzanovic (1996) use critical approach in their ethnographic study of everyday life of refugees and exiles in Croatia. In their recent work these authors offer sharp criticism of academic and literary representations of the victimization of women. Nikolic-Ristanovic (2000, p. 153) criticizes "trafficking in women's suffering" in academic writing. Jambresic-Kirin (2000) offers a poignant study of the

seductive power of the victim status, and the slippery realm of empathy with the victim in three well-known feminist writers from Croatia (Ivekovic, Drakulic and Ugresic):

Skillful sliding of autobiographical discourse instances between first person singular and plural makes it possible to establish an empathic identification with the people who suffered most [...] What anthropologists take issue with in this kind of emphatic reflection is the neglect of the fact that clearly separates the writer in temporary exile from the masses of anonymous, unfortunate people who [...] do not have the opportunity to choose (Jambresic-Kirin, 2000, p. 311).

Spasic (2000) exposes the links between the analyses of the victim status in Yugoslav feminism and moral arguments. She asserts that the rape victims and other victims of war are perceived as good *because* they are victims. Thus victimization defines the "quality of the victim" (Spasic, 2000, p. 352). This would mean that women (who are perceived as the ultimate victims) are somehow better than men (who are perceived as ultimate aggressors), or that some women (who are granted victim-status) are better than other women (who are not granted victim-status). Spasic seeks to assert that "the 'quality' of the victim remains what it is, even if she/he is victimized" (p. 352). In other words, violence is never justified, and collapsing victimhood with morality inevitably results in an oppositional imagination, be it gendered (good women/bad men) or ethnic (good Croats/bad Serbs). The same oppositional logic works in separating ethnicity and feminism, by morally disregarding the former and uplifting the latter.

Yugoslav war of disintegration was infamous for the use of sexual violence and rape against women as one of its most systematic gendered weapon of war. Thus, the fact that feminists (Yugoslav and international) largely defined women as victims, and especially as victims of rape, may be seen as simply corresponding to the actual situation. Nevertheless, many women refugees have become feminist activists in their new places of residence. Some women rape-camp survivors have been among those most active in collecting and giving testimonies for the tribunals. And, obviously, many women, feminists included, have been outspoken nationalist activist. Thus, seeing women simply as victims is not just a matter of reflecting the empirical situation. Furthermore, feminist theory has given us the concepts of agency and subjectivity, not only that of victimization, precisely because in the gravest of times women, not only feminists, have had the stamina to act. Still, woman-victim seems to have been not only the most visible of all women in Yugoslav wars, but the very base of feminist activism and conceptualization.

Even women who are by every possible criteria activists - nationalist feminists/women - are described as "manipulated" and "trapped" (Boric, 1997, p. 41), as "succumbing to nationalism" (Milic 1993) or the word activism is placed under inverted commas when referring to them (Korac 1993, p. 109). Thus, they are basically seen as non-

agents. There are few feminists who, like Dobnikar (2000, p. 361), insist that women's "collaboration with the aggressor" and "involvement [...] in armed conflict" needs urgent investigation. In general, nationalist actions of women received very limited feminist academic attention (Zarkov 2000). The same happened to women voluntary soldiers. They are simply invisible. So is the suffering of men. Seeing men (all of them or only men of specific ethnicity) as the ultimate villains of the war is certainly one strong feature of feminist activism and analysis of war in Yugoslavia (Jones, 1994). Few are those who even mention, in passing, that men do not appear in wars - and certainly not in Balkan wars - only as aggressors and soldiers, and that even when soldiering, they may be still exposed to victimization (Korac, 1993, p.110, and Boric 1997, p. 47; see also Zarkov 2001). This is not incidental. This is a direct consequence of granting the woman-victim the central place in feminist theoretical and political strategies.

This centrality of women's victimization has consequences for feminist conceptualization of war violence, of gender and ethnicity, as well as of their relationship. By imagining women almost exclusively as victims of violence Yugoslav feminists (and for that matter, many others who analysed wars in former Yugoslavia) largely continued to assume powerlessness of women and omnipotence of men. Theoretically this meant that they *continued to define masculinity through power and femininity through violability, and thus to reproduce the gendered narrative of war that they strive to subvert*. Empirically it meant that they remained blind for the powers of women - including powers to perpetrate and condone violence - and powerlessness and suffering of men.

Such a conceptualization of femininity affected conceptualization of ethnicity. Instead of asking why and how all the politics in the region was reduced to the identity politics (in this case - nationalism), and how ethnicity gained the privileged place therein, many feminists simply surrendered ethnicity to nationalism. Consequently, ethnicity and femininity were either collapsed into each other or totally separated. This further meant that ethnicity was granted meaning *only in the context of hatred and violence, and only as a collective identity*, (which is in many ways surprising considering feminist general concern with personal experiences). All the very profound personal meanings of ethnicity were lost (Hidovic Harper, 1993). All the everyday-life manifestations of ethnic identities past and present, and the "trauma of change" (Devic, 2000, p. 202) brought about by the war, were erased. This loss and erasure further meant that feminists were losing an opportunity to understand that nation, ethnicity and womanhood are not mutually exclusive realms in women's experiences and that women - feminists or not - do claim not only an ethnic identity but also nationalism as their own project. They do so not as manipulated victims, but as informed agents.

Finally, *when a woman is seen only as a victim - or as the victim - of nationalism and war, violence against a woman (and in this case specifically sexual violence and rape) is given power to produce woman's relationship to ethnicity, nation and the state, empirically and conceptually.* This is potentially the most damaging consequence of feminist conceptualizations of gender, ethnicity and war in the region. During the war, violence has already been granted power to produce so much - the 'Serb rapist' and the 'Muslim victim', 'good' and 'bad' feminists, 'sissies' and 'heroes', 'mothers' and 'witches' ... This power was not only discursive. It was mortal. The 'ethnic war' in the Balkans should not even be conceptualized as a *war between ethnic groups*, but rather as a *war that produced ethnic groups*. This was the war in which violence was granted power to define women and men as much as villages and cities, histories and traditions, in exclusively ethnic terms. Should the violence still have this power now? Is it possible to deconstruct this productive power of violence, without jeopardising the plight and the rights of those whose lives it once altered?

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This text is a result of a doctoral study conducted between 1994 and 1999, at the Centre for Women's Studies of the Nijmegen University (The Netherlands) sponsored by Dutch Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). I kindly thank Mieke Verloo and the staff of the GO ADMIRA from Utrecht (The Netherlands) for providing me with the most of documentation about women's groups in ex-Yugoslavia, and especially documentation from women's groups from Zagreb (Croatia) and Belgrade (Serbia) - annual reports, public statements, programs and pamphlets - which I reviewed for this article. I am also grateful to Rada Drezgic and Anissa Helie on comments on an earlier version of the paper, and to Mary Ellen Kondrat for editorial suggestions and for polishing my English.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> For early women's movement (prior to the World War I) in regions that would after the WW I become Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and for the First Wave of feminism (between World War I and II) see Slapsak (2000). For the Second Wave - 1970s and 1980s - see Papic (1994).

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that the newly established groups were not only feminist. Many women-centred groups were created, often engaged in similar kind of work as the feminist groups: aid and support for refugees, work with victims of sexual violence, lobbying. Although the number of new feminist groups formed during the war is impressive, it is still considerably smaller than that of women's groups. Benderly (1997:71; note 3) for instance mentions that only in Bosnia-Herzegovina there were about 54 women's groups, but only four of these defined themselves explicitly as feminist. The Union of Women's Organizations of the Republic of Macedonia (established in 1994) for instance, is formed out of 25 women's groups and organizations (with 23.000 registered members). Most of them are called women's NGO's, a few are named as organizations of 'mothers', some are defined ethnically (Serb women's organization; organization of Albanian women in Macedonia). None of these claim to be feminist. In Kosovo, where the forming of women's groups is still at its beginning, the few that exist do not define themselves as feminist. Some of these groups were nationalists, and many of them are women's wings of various political or religious groups. Others continue traditions of socialist women's organizations concerned with issues defined through the notions of emancipation of women and changes in traditional, patriarchal values. Some of the groups were explicitly anti-feminist, others saw feminism as one of the ways of doing things for women, not necessarily their way, but nevertheless relevant.

<sup>iii</sup> Within only a couple of years these activities - including women's studies programmes - ceased being the exclusive preserve of the capital cities. Today, almost every middle-sized town in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia has at least one feminist group, usually with a range of different activities: from humanitarian to S.O.S. hot-lines and women's crisis centres against sexual violence. One S.O.S. hot-line also exists in Skopje, capital of Macedonia. A Centre for Protection of Women and Children also operates in the capital of Kosovo. For good overviews and analyses of various feminist groups and their activities just prior to, and during the war, in different territories of ex-Yugoslavia, see Benderly (1997), Cockburn (1991, for Serbia; 1998, & 2000, for Bosnia), Devic (2000), Huges et al (1995), Mladjenovic & Litricin (1993), Renner (1996, for Slovenia), Slapsak (2000). For Croatia see also journal *Kruh & Ruze* nos. 5/6 (1995/6) and no. 9 (1998) (all with English summary). *Directory of Women's Groups in Croatia* (1998) lists about 40 feminist groups. For Serbia see *Politički Adresar* (Political Addressbook, 1995), which, although incomplete, lists 15 groups, seven in Belgrade and eight in other big cities in Serbia.

<sup>iv</sup> A rare example of detailed comparative analysis and - even more rare - translating analysis into practice - is to be seen in academic-cum-activist work of Cynthia Cockburn (1998). She conducted comparative analysis of women's activism in Bosnia, Northern Ireland and Israel/Palestine and assisted in the establishment of cooperation networks between the activist groups from these three regions.

<sup>v</sup> For a variety of approaches to rape, and for criticism of international feminist writing on rape, by Yugoslav feminists, see Korac (1994), Zarkov (1997), Nikolic-Ristanovic (1998; 2000), Kasic (2000).