To Serbian mothers

Draga Dejanović

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About the author

Draga Dejanovic [1840, Stara Kanjiza (Hun. Magyarkanizsa), Vojvodina – 1871, Obese (Srb. Stari Becej)]: actress and writer. She was born into an upper middle class family. Her father Zivojin Dimitrijević was a lawyer, while her mother Sofia came from the aristocratic Medanski family. Draga attended secondary school in Temesvar (Rom. Timisoara), but due to serious health problems she was forced to withdraw from school. Shortly afterwards, the family moved to Obese (Srb. Stari Becej). She was briefly married to a teacher named Dejanović. Accompanying her sister to Pest, she met the prominent activists of the ‘United Serbian Youth,’ an event that would significantly influence her future work and life. She was politically engaged in the ‘United Serbian Youth,’ and promoted ideas about the liberation and emancipation of women. She cooperated with young poets and intellectuals who were gathered in the 1860s around the magazine Preodnica (Predecessor) in Pest. Draga Dejanović was also an actress, performing in Ujvidék (Srb. Novi Sad) and in Belgrade. She died during childbirth at the age of 31. Still today she represents an important point of reference for any attempt to write and interpret the history of women’s movements and feminist thought in Serbia. She is appreciated both in feminist academic circles and in the field of feminist and gender oriented activism, with full critical awareness of her specific position between emancipation and nationalism.

Main works: Emancipacija ženskinja [The emancipation of women] (1869); Dve tri reči Srpskim [A few words to Serbian women] (1870); Srpskim majkama [To Serbian mothers] (1871).
Context

The end of the 1860s and the beginning of the 1870s were times of particular national and cultural fermentation in Serbia and among the Serbs in Vojvodina. Both in Újvidék, then part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Belgrade, circles of enthusiastic young people, students and intellectuals were organizing themselves, with the aim of promoting Serbian national culture as well as the liberation and unification of all Serbs. Thus on 27 August 1866 in Újvidék, grown out of the alliance of 16 student, high school and cultural groups, the ‘United Serbian Youth’ (Ujedinjena omladina srpska, or simply Omladina) was established (see Jevrem Grujić and Milovan Janković, South Slavs, or the Serbian nation with the Croats and the Bulgarians). Omladina was formed in the wake of the reconstitution of the Habsburg Empire into Austria-Hungary (1867), which was followed by the Hungarian-Croatian Compromise of 1868. The Serbian political elite in Hungary felt that the new political arrangement did not promise a successful solution to the minority question of Slavic peoples, which included the Serbs. Svetozar Miletić was the main political figure opposing the policy of the Hungarian-Croatian Compromise, and was actively engaged both in Omladina and in his own political party, the ‘Serbian People’s Freeminded Party’ (Srpska narodna slobodnoumna stranka). Miletić and other prominent members of Omladina (Vladimir Jovanović, Jevrem Grujić, Svetozar Marković) articulated and promoted ideas related to the liberation and unification of all Serbs, therefore creating a political platform that combined liberalism and nationalism. The motto of Omladina was Srbi svi i svuda (The Serbs—altogether and everywhere), and the organization became the strongest and most influential romantic national movement in the history of modern Serbia. According to Jovan Skerlić, Omladina’s main goal was to “awaken national life in its many aspects and to teach the people the ways in which life conditions of the Serbian people could be improved.” Nevertheless, Omladina’s role was more extensive than that, including a political program that promoted the liberation and unification of all Serbs. What it proposed was a nationalist program that proved to be long-lasting in Serbian political history, even informing the modes of political organization and rising territorial claims at the end of the twentieth century.

Eventually Omladina split into conflicting groups with diverse ideological backgrounds and influences (Western liberal democracy versus Russian narodnik socialism), holding on to different visions of democracy and its institutions. The line of division was set between the liberalism of Jovanović
and Grujić and the socialism of Marković. Exhausted by internal strife and polemics, *Omladina* was dissolved in 1871. Still, the majority of its prominent figures continued their political work, thus turning *Omladina* into the common original nexus of many subsequent political options and modernist trends. The ‘Youth movement’ also functioned as a ‘nursery’ for influential figures in Serbian public life for the 30-odd years following its foundation.

From the very beginning, women found their way into the activities of *Omladina*. Nevertheless, although they were accepted as allies and collaborators, it took time for them to win formal recognition within the organization and gain full membership. This question was debated during several gatherings of *Omladina*, and the key point was whether women were equal to men, and whether women should join the political and cultural activities of *Omladina*. The debate, in which different ideas on women’s nature, “natural abilities” and social and cultural roles clashed, ended with a proclamation made at the ‘Third Youth Assembly’ held in Beeskerek (present-day Zrenjanin, in Vojvodina) in 1868. Article 4 of the organization’s statute was reformulated to include women as equal members of the organization. The most persistent supporter of the idea to include women as equal members was Ilija Vučetić who worked for the magazine *Preodnica*, and it is due to his fervent arguments in favor of women’s active participation in the work of the organization that their engagement was in the end formally recognized and put into the official documents of *Omladina*. One of the women involved in the activities of *Omladina* was Draga Dejanović. Being influenced by the Serbian student community in Pest and deeply committed to patriotism and the progress of her nation, Draga Dejanović brought into *Omladina* new ideas relating to the emancipation of women. Instead of dwelling on more general ideas related to emancipation, she concretely elaborated on the ways in which women in Vojvodina, the place where she lived and worked, had to act in order to free themselves of social constraints, thus contributing to the advancement of national life. She insisted on what she called “economic emancipation,” which would lead to women’s independence, saving them from their confinement to domestic roles as wives and mothers. She argued that the emancipation of the Serbian woman was not just a women’s issue, but a national one of particular importance. Her most famous articles treated issues of the economic and educational liberation of women, and the relations between womanhood and nationhood. These articles were first delivered as public lectures, and were later published. Dejanović claimed that Serbian mothers were responsible for the upbringing of the children, and thus played a crucial role in the sustenance and symbolic reproduction of the na-
tion. The text 'To Serbian mothers' treats the role of the mother as one of a 'national worker.' Drag a Dejanović criticized those women who did not have children, claiming it was their duty to inspire in children's hearts the greatest and deepest national feeling. She elevated national feeling above all other sentiments, including those toward the immediate family. She claimed that it was only thanks to mothers' dedication that the nation had been maintained, and declared that the future of the nation lay in their hands.

Although the text illustrates the fusion of positivist concerns with the romantic glorification of the nation, in the following decades, particularly in the inter-war period, it was interpreted as playing a major part in the founding of feminist thought in Serbia. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the dominant political and social context in which the issue of women's rights was brought up in the second part of nineteenth century determined the limits of the so-called emancipatory activity. It should be underscored that the first and foremost concern governing women's active participation to social and political life was the nation, and that their main role was thought to comprise the shaping and maintenance of the national character. Up to the first decades of the twentieth century, with the establishment of women's alliances and their contact with international women's organizations and suffrage initiatives, the issue of women's rights was dominated by the agenda of equal access to education. This concern was also related to the process of nation-building, whereby women were seen as the nurses of patriots and the healers of the "wounds" the nation suffered in wars "of liberation," as well as being transmitters of both tradition and progress.

To Serbian mothers. A public lecture

Dear sisters! If you allow me, I shall utter but a few additional words on education, women's education to be precise, words without which our mothers could not receive all the attention necessary on this occasion.

A Serbian mother should be like a clear spring, clear because any taint must be removed from its path.

The element of her life is love, but not the tainted love that many of our sisters nurture in their bosom, but love in its most magnificent beauty, love for her progeny, kin and national progress. That love, when perfect, becomes divine in a human being, it becomes a religion!

Love can be expressed just as beautifully in the form of a child's love, a mother's and a sister's, and also the love for one's husband. But above all
these virtues, in all its wonderful majesty, is the love for one’s people. A woman who has no love for her people cannot have motherly, sisterly or spousal love. In such a woman love rules not, but bare instinct does!

We must admit, my sisters, that these days part of our upbringing, education and women’s dignity has been much neglected.

Our hearts must ache when we look at our young girls, who are as innocent and harmless as little doves, as they embroider their handkerchiefs singing or sit by the loom without anyone to tell them what role they will play in the world. Mothers do not wish to prepare them for the future, to tell them that the future and happiness of our entire people lies on their shoulders.

It is true that women’s education must, first of all, focus on domestic life, but let us think: the home is just a tiny part of our entire people. Its happiness relies on one caring woman. We must therefore tend to our nation just as we tend to our homes, for if our people are beset with evil, if our people begin to waste away, it is impossible for our families to remain happy. People and families depend on each other so much so that if one falters, the other will surely fall too.

Members of our families must put up a brave fight against today’s worldwide attacks, and are the mothers not those who play the most important part in those families of ours?

A mother who is unable to comprehend or feel anything with her heart beyond her home is a slave and a slave can raise nothing but slaves and ignorant people.

Let us look back on the history of our people. In it one can see that a mother of great spirit raises like children. This example can be seen in the mother of the nine Jugović brothers, Prince Marko’s mother, Princess Milica, the mother of Petar Mrkonjić¹ and many others.

A wife or a mother cannot do much to help her people with a sword, but she can do so with her heart, but, this heart must be full of noble love and self-sacrifice. A mother’s heart must bind her husband and son tightly to their people, and she herself must safeguard the spirit of her people faithfully. A

¹ All the characters and deeds mentioned in this line belong to the so called Kosovo cycle, consisting of epic poems dedicated to the battle fought between the Serbian and Ottoman armies at Kosovo in 1389. The mothers exemplified are the mothers of the important participants of the battle on the Serbian side, in a legend and in epic poetry pictured as heroes (though historical facts indicate a rather different role of the prince Marko Kraljević). What Draga Dejanović wanted to emphasize by listing these names was that only brave mothers, willing to sacrifice what was the most important to them, their sons, husbands and brothers, can give a great example of bravery that their sons will inevitably follow.
husband, brother and a son must from his wife’s heart, his sister’s bosom, his mother’s arms receive the strength to fulfill any duty to his people with dignity and a forceful will. But where can we find such virtues in our sisters today, when their hearts, which should be filled with true virtue and humanity, that our people’s needs require these today, when those hearts are oftentimes utterly devoid of those virtues, or if not exactly devoid, then filled with all sorts of empty wishes, desires for worldly pleasures, flowers and ribbons. We, dear sisters, do not see this; we shall not lament the backwardness of our people into which we ourselves have been leading it.

Our people do not have enough institutions of higher education for women. Women’s primary school is all the means we have to learn to read and write, but our mothers must assume the role of higher education. Nature itself makes it their duty to do so.

Our womankind usually thinks that women’s education need not be cared for half as much as men’s. Our mothers believe that their daughters need not know anything but how to sew, cook, wash and so on, and if they do know anything more then it is too much and unnecessary. Why, there are so many occasions when we can hear a mother say about her daughter: “What does she need all that school and all that education for? My daughter will be neither priest nor lawyer.” Such questions are common with our foolish sisters, who are willing to raise and educate their daughters in an unreasonable manner, but they are mistaken in their unreasonable opinions. A girl needs knowledge as much as a boy does, for even if she will become neither priest nor lawyer, a girl must be fortified with knowledge. A girl will in time become a mother. Every mother is the educator of her family, and considering our people’s current dire need for education, educational sciences far outweigh both law and theology. Dear sisters! Our sons are not the only ones who belong to our people; so do our daughters, to the same extent, for just as the insignificant linden seed will eventually grow into a shady tree full of sweet-smelling blossoms, so will the heart of a noble and wise woman produce members of a fine family, who are the pride and joy of that family, as well as the treasure and progress of our people, the source of our forthcoming freedom.

Translated by Linda Krstajić, Krištof Bodrič and Vedran Dronjić