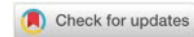


NARRATIVE FORMS OF MILKA ALEKSIĆ GRGUROVA

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Abstract: The paper will highlight the main creative forms in the short stories of Milka Aleksić Grgurova, a marginal Serbian writer from the late 19th and early 20th century. These are primarily reflected in the blend of the realist method and the oral fairy tale model, which also contributed to typified characters in the author's short stories. The dominant theme of Milka Aleksić Grgurova's short stories relates to family relations and emphasizing the figure of a woman as a self-sacrificing and loyal wife, mother, sister, or daughter, as well as family destabilization through different plots. The central motifs in the story plot include jealousy (Tit for Tat, Two Sisters, Vera, Pretty Tatijana) and infidelity (Temptation, Family Court, Dangerous Girlfriend), taken child (Gypsy Woman, Stolen Child) and orphan motif (Poor Mother, The Painter and his Family, The Smiljić Family), prodigal father repentance (Before the Icon, Christmas Eve). The characters are built in black and white technique, and their nature transformation comes only with changes in life circumstances through the topos of temptation as an essential attribute of the author's prose. The happy ending, characterizing most of Milka Aleksić Grgurova's short stories, represents a kind of implicit message about the victory of family values, and the ethical comments in the exposition of the short stories have a similar tendency. The third-person narration is the dominant form, often alternating with dialogue. A minor part of Milka Aleksić Grgurova's story-telling oeuvre comprises humorous short stories based on a novel twist and disappointed expectations, which are the source of the humorous effect. Better known as an actress, Milka Aleksić Grgurova was also successful in literary work, for which, however, she did not receive particular affirmation from critics during her lifetime. Hence, a new reading of her oeuvre brings a new insight into the overall artistic work of this versatile woman.

Keywords: Milka Aleksić Grgurova, short stories, family motifs, typified characters, family destabilization, humorous short stories.

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

Milka Aleksić Grgurova was a versatile artist and altruist. She was an actress, writer, translator, medic in the Serbian-Turkish War, and member of the Women's Society of Belgrade. Still, despite her great merits on the social scene of Serbia in the late 19th and early 20th century, her character and feats were long forgotten or even unknown. She was born in Sombor on February 15, 1840. Her real name on the baptismal certificate was Milica, and the name Milka, as she always signed herself, was most likely a nickname (Tomić, 2014a, pp. 176-177). Milka got married for the first time when she was only sixteen years old, forced by her impoverished parents, but since she was not happy with merchant Matić, she left him with their daughter Evica already after two years of marriage. Afterward, Milka joined the Female High School in Belgrade and became a member of the Serbian National Theater in Novi Sad. She was an active member of the Women's Society of Belgrade since its foundation in 1875. This brave woman spent six months as a medic during the Serbian-Turkish war, and a few years later, she married the captain Konstantin Aleksić. It was not until her second marriage in her later years that Milka found happiness; Konstantin Aleksić was her selfless support and encouraged her to actively publish short stories alongside her fruitful acting career. "She was, without a doubt, our greatest actress in the 19th century" (Mihailović, 2011, p. 175).

Milka Aleksić Grgurova published texts in the Women's Society of Belgrade magazine *Domaćica* (eng. Housewife), in *Cetinje's Luča* (eng. Illumination), Sarajevo's *Bosanska vila* (eng. Bosnian fairy), *Mostar's Zora* (eng. Dawn) and other literary magazines. She published her collection of short stories in 1897 under the title *Short Stories by Milka Aleksić-Grgurova*, volume one. *Vera. A Pearl Necklace*, and dedicated this edition to her husband, who passed away a year earlier. She published a longer short story *Ilka the Assassin* separately in 1911. Her translation work should not go unmentioned. She translated Adolphe d'Ennery's *Marie De Mancini* play, Edmond About's short story *Les Mariages De Paris* from French, and Poly Henrion's play *Für nervöse Frauen* from German. In solitude and poverty, Milka Grgurova died on March 25, 1924, in Belgrade, as a retired actress. She was awarded the Order of the White Eagle two days before her death.

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2. LITERARY OEUVRE OF MILKA ALEKSIĆ

In literature, Milka Aleksić Grgurova appeared during the dominance of the short story genre, on the realism to modernism transition between 1894 and 1914. The Milka Aleksić's short stories publication period coincides with the last phase in the development of Serbian realism. It's the phase of small-town mentality-themed prose (Vučenov, 1981, pp. 5, 25-42). The previous phase of rustic prose, with its idyllic or satirical-social perspective, was replaced by a turn to the city and small-town life, with its beauty and reverse. As noted by Goran Maksimović (2023, pp. 36-37), the bourgeois chronotope was shaped in realistic texts through artistic topos such as bourgeois heroes, bourgeois families, city squares and taverns, suburbs, bourgeois stories, and the city/village opposition. It is possible to reconstruct the image of Belgrade through reading the short stories of Milka Aleksić, particularly highlighting artisan concerns (A Pearl Necklace), the appearance of Terazije buildings (Tit for Tat), the poverty of people from Skadarska Street (The Smiljić Family) and the attempted assassination of King Milan in 1882 (Ilka the Assassin) (Tomić, 2014b, p. 442).

Following the literary and artistic impulse of her contemporaries (realists and modernists), in her urban short stories, Milka Aleksić Grgurova depicts an artistic world rooted in "the image of bourgeois ideals: honest family life and moral virtues [...] of the bourgeois class of Serbian society in Austria-Hungary" (Garonja Radovanac, 2015, p. 203). Her preoccupation is urban families and their relationships, and her underlying tone is idyllic. The family life idyll is disturbed by the motives of jealousy, infidelity, vices, and all kinds of individuals going astray. Hence, the main plot follows precisely the development line of such events until the straying individual returns to the family and the story resolves. Here, sentimentality stands out as an essential stylistic feature and appears as an influence of German literature but also Serbian writers who wrote under its influence, such as Bogoboj Atanacković and others (Tomić, 2014b, p. 431).

3. TOPOS OF THE HERO'S JOURNEY

Hero's journey is one of the most common topos in Milka Grgurova's short stories and it is colored with sentimentality (Bahtin, 1989, p. 153). The two heroes fall in love, but it takes overcoming certain obstacles over a number of years in order for them to be together. This motif is treated differently in Grgurova's short stories, depending on what kind of temptation and developmental path the heroes have to go through to reach well-deserved happiness. Thus, in the short story Vera, the title character needs to spend years looking for the culprit for slandering of her parents. Along the way, she becomes a famous opera singer, and years of separation have not affected her and young Jasminić's feelings. Having restored the honor of her parents, Vera marries her beloved young man.

The hero's journey concept in the story Christmas Eve is treated through the transformation of gullible doctor Ivan and his wife Jelena overcoming adversities of poverty. The two get married and have a daughter, Ivanka, but Ivan decides to run away upon succumbing to gambling vice and witnessing a murder. After several years of separation, little Ivanka falls very ill, and it is Ivan who comes to treat her. The spouses recognize each other and happily reunite. In the short story Out of spite, the young spouses part due to their stubbornness. Separation and difficult life as a type of trial leads to their inner transformation and repentance, that is, to both of them valuing their love more when they meet again.

The temptation in the short story An Unfortunate Event is based on forbidden love due to hatred between two families. However, the temptation in the form of forbidden love is overcome after the young doctor Vladan saves the life of ill Živana. Love forbidden by parents as a form of temptation is also overcome by the young heroes in the short story Love of a Noble Girl. Here, the ban is motivated by the poverty of girl Bosiljka, and the temptation is even greater when Miladin goes to the war front. Bosiljka wholeheartedly nurses Miladin, wounded in the Serbian-Turkish war, in the hospital in Kragujevac. Touched by her love and care, Miladin's parents allow their wedding after his recovery. Through this and previous short stories with the hero's journey concept, Milka Grgurova conveys a message that love will overcome all trials and temptations, just like in a fairy tale. The short stories Vera and A Pearl Necklace also contain the structure and motifs of fairy tales (Garonja Radovanac, 2015, p. 202). As Jovana Veselinović (2022, p. 58) rightly observes, one of the main poetic principles of Milka Grgurova's short stories is didacticism, which is achieved through the stereotyping of characters and plot.

Together with the hero's journey, the topos of the bourgeois family occupies a central place in the urban narrative prose of Milka Grgurova. Family relationships are most often disturbed by jealousy of a spouse, sister, stepmother, or girlfriend. Also, marital infidelity or succumbing to vices leads to the destabilization of family relations, but in each of these cases, the figure of a woman (wife, sister, or daughter) appears as the key to restoring the family to a normal life path.

The short stories *Two Sisters* and *Pretty Tatijana* are built on the motif of sisterly jealousy. The sisters' characters are built in black and white technique, with one sister being rather kind, selfless, and beautiful, and the other developing jealousy towards the first due to not having such qualities in herself. The good sister is ready to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of her sister. In *Two Sisters*, Milica is ready to renounce her love for Žarko, realizing that Bosiljka is also in love with him, and Tatijana in *Pretty Tatijana* patiently waits for her older sister Marta to get married first. The denouement in these two stories differs significantly, as Tatijana will lose the young man she sincerely loves while waiting, but Milica ends up happily married to Žarko.

Jealousy is a motif that leads to family destabilization even when its bearer is a third person who tries to disrupt the marital and family harmony of the main characters. The short story *Out of Jealousy* suggests this already in the very title: Milica's cousin Marina manipulates her daughter Zorana against her mother and stepfather out of jealousy. The second moment of trial for this family comes with Zorana's sudden death. The motif of the spouse's jealousy is treated in the short stories *Tit for Tat*, *Dangerous Girlfriend* and *Family Court*. The humorous short story of family life in *Tit for Tat* is based on an anecdote about how a husband took revenge on his wife for her jealousy and gullibility in a humorous fashion. In this story, Milka Grgurova shows the reverse of Belgrade life, superstition, and palmistry in Matavulj style. Unfounded jealousy is also the recurring motif in the short story *Jealousy*, but here it is about a jealous husband and through two narrative threads, the current and the virtual world of the story.

While in the above examples, marital infidelity is given in the form of a virtual narration and equates with unfounded jealousy, the short stories *Dangerous Girlfriend* and *Family Court* treat this motif in the actual world of the story. In *Dangerous Girlfriend*, it leads not only to destabilization but also to the complete decline of the family. As the bearer of a negative image of femininity, Bosiljka's supposed friend Simka tactically seduces her husband and leads him astray to adultery. Hurt by the knowledge, Bosiljka takes her own life, and Sreten does the same after her, orphaning their newborn daughter. The narrator points to the fatality of possible human mistakes in marriage at the very beginning of the text, at the same time announcing the issue and giving a lesson the reader will reach with the example of the hero:

"The fate of some families is strange. We see very often that the unhappy married life of parents affects even their children - one would say that this misfortune passes from father to son and from mother to daughter. And when we look for the cause of misfortune, we see it is us who create it. Especially where we have all the conditions to be completely happy" (Aleksić Grgurova, 2014, p. 191).

A significantly different denouement is found in *Family Court* in which, thanks to the woman's composure and tact, the family manages to return to a normal life path. Despa is the embodiment of stability and inner strength to forgive her husband's attempted infidelity, but above all, to point out his guilt and arouse in him repentance without embarrassing him in front of others.

In the prose of Milka Grgurova, the woman, as seen above, appears as a pillar of the family, as a rock, especially when the father, as the head of the family, sinks into vice. In this placement of women at the center of the narrative, among other things, is a significant contribution of women's genres (Milinković, 2022b, p. 459), one of the representatives of which is the short story by Milka Grgurova. In *Before the Icon*, it is about gambling, so the motifs of hunger, cold, and winter appear to emphasize the atmosphere of the difficult social circumstances this family faces. Instead of Mladen, his wife Perka goes out at night in a blizzard to sell her handiwork and bring firewood and food for the children. With nothing to feed the children, Mladen realizes the weight of his going astray and Perka's sacrifice. The wind blows the old icon of Saint Stephen off the wall, revealing the money Mladen's late father hid there for rainy days. Coming to senses and unexpected joy lead to Mladen's transformation, repentance and determination to return to faith and family.

The story *The Painter and his Family*, in which the daughters forgive their father for leaving them and their mother with no words, shows that a woman's strength lies in her ability to forgive. They find him as a beggar and an outcast, but upon recognition, this errant father sincerely repents, and his kind daughters forgive him. The same motif is treated in the short story *The Smiljić Family*, in which a young teacher Nada recognizes her father Jovan Smiljić after many years and forgives him for abandoning her as a baby, giving her up to some good people for adoption.

The death of a parent is a moment that destabilizes the family and has a decisive influence on the further course of life of the characters of children, orphans, as shown in stories: *Vera*, *Poor Mother*, *Transient Dream*. The death of parents in *Vera* leads to nine-year-old Vera being adopted by her uncle and aunt, and the course of her life being significantly shaped by the influence of the evil aunt, who becomes the counterpart of the evil stepmother in fairytales. In *Transient Dream*, Monika becomes an orphan, but eventually also a famous painter thanks to an old lady and her patronage abroad. *Poor Mother*, on the other hand, depicts a heroine who, after the death of her mother, returns to her grandmother, a great

benefactor, and finds love there.

Just as the death of a parent, the motif of taken child is equally destabilizing to the family. Due to great sadness for the child, the life course of the parents, but also of the young hero changes. This is depicted in the short stories *Stolen Child* and *Gypsy Woman*. Separation from the family leads heroine Ružica and heroine Toda to a life path that is significantly different than it would have been if they had not been taken away in childhood. Ružica became a circus artist, and Toda fell in love with a gypsy and lived a free, nomadic life with him. And while the taken child, as an adult individual, lives a new life, its primary family was destabilized with his departure and its restoration to a normal life path is only apparent.

4. HUMOROUS SHORT STORIES BY MILKA GRGUROVA

Although the prose of Milka Grgurova most often treats the family theme, with various motifs of destabilization, it is also important to single out her humorous short stories *Savings of Young Officers* and *Two Women*, which can be joined by *My beautiful companion* because of its unusual plot twist. The wit in these stories is very peculiar and stems from an unexpected, almost novelistic twist. In *Two Women*, a comical confusion results in the hero-narrator marrying two women. The twist in *My Beautiful Companion* is based on an unexpected act of theft when it comes to a beautiful girl with whom the hero-narrator is traveling by train. It is a picture of city life, its reverse, just like the financial difficulties of the young officers in *Savings of Young Officers*, but the social motifs in this story are imbued with humor and cheerfulness through the young men's reckless and lazy nature. Milka Grgurova had a great gift of telling stories about ordinary people and their incidents and accidents, so it is such a pity that she did not leave more humorous stories. These stories are characterized by drama, which contributes to the beauty of the text much more than the sentimentality characteristic of most of Milka's short stories.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the analyzed oeuvre, it can be concluded that the recurring theme of Milka Aleksić Grgurova's stories are family relationships, with parenthood and marriage as essential aspects. Milka Grgurova's heroes are urban heroes created in black and white technique and often characterized by naming (Mrs. Dobrička (Goody) in *Poor Mother*, Zliković (Malevolent) in *A Pearl Necklace*, etc.). The characters of women as bearers of family values were built with particular attention, as opposed to supporting female characters-bearers of a negative image of femininity: women prone to envy, jealousy and seduction of other people's husbands. The latter have an important role in the plot, as deviation from the normal family life course happens due to motifs of jealousy and infidelity, as well as the vices of fathers. The return to the normal path of family life takes place on account of stability, inner strength, the power of forgiveness, and the kindness of husbands, sisters, and daughters. Through the hero's actions and the final denouement, but often also through the narrator's didactic comments, the permeating didacticism conveys a message about the importance of nurturing family values. The heroes must overcome a temptation to restore the disturbed family peace or gain personal happiness.

Milka Grgurova herself went through many trials during her life, just like her heroes. She received recognitions and enjoyed respect as an actress but was also forgotten and insulted many times despite her great merits. This is also evidenced by the fact that she celebrated her jubilee, twenty-five years of theater work, in her apartment instead of the National Theater and spent the last days of her life in solitude and difficult living conditions. Furthermore, in support of her marginalization is the fact that the concept of the canon most often does not recognize women's literature as culturally visible and sufficiently valuable (Milinković, 2022a, p. 26). This injustice is remedied, at least partially, by remembering this great artist of the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, re-reading her literary oeuvre, and considering the importance of her acting engagement.

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