

REVIEW

of Dr. Valentina Mitkova's publications and academic activities

in connection with the competition for the position of associate professor in Professional Field 3.5 Public Communications and Information Studies (Studies of the book, Library Studies, Bibliography – History of the Book), announced by Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" in *State Gazette*, № 92/18 November 2022

by Prof. Dr. Krassimira Daskalova, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski",
member of the searching committee

About the candidate. Valentina Mitkova graduated from the English language high school in her native town Kjustendil in 1998 and got a BA (in 2003) and MA (in Contemporary Arts, 2008) degrees in Cultural Studies at the Department of "Theory and History of Culture", Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia with distinctions. Between 2009 and 2014 she was a PhD student in Book History at the Department of Library and Information Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridki University of Sofia under my supervision. In 2014 she defended her dissertation about the gender aspects of authorship in the Modern Bulgarian culture under the title "Authorship and Canon in the Bulgarian Literature (1878-1944).

Dr Mitkova knows English, German, Greek and Serbian languages - all of them important for the two theoretically informed comparative fields in which she works: history of the book and reading and women's and gender history.

In 2018 she started her academic career as a Lecturer in Book History at the Department of Library and Information Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, St. Kliment Ohridki University of Sofia. There she teaches mandatory courses on the history of manuscripts and printed books and on area studies - for BA students of the Departments of Library and Information Studies, Faculty of Philosophy and Department of Book Publishing, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications, both at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. At MA level Dr Mitkova teaches (in English) one mandatory ("Gender hierarchies in the field of intellectual activities: women and the literary canon") and one elective ("Gender and popular culture in comparative perspective: Eastern Europe and the West") course - for students of the First European Joint Degree in Women's and Gender History (MATILDA) within the Department of "Theory and History of Culture". Both MA courses are based on her own research.

Dr Mitkova also translated (from English into Bulgarian) 12 articles for the Reader on the history of the book and reading (published in 2021). For the needs of the University teaching (and the wider public) she has translated into Bulgarian the book of the American historian Maria Bucur *Gendering Modernism* and the greatest part of another gender history book - by Kristen Ghodsee - *Second World/Second Sex*. (Both books were published in Bulgarian in 2020.)

General characteristics of the scholarly production submitted for the competition. Dr Mitkova participate in the competition for the position of Associate Professor with the monograph/habilitation thesis *Пол, периодичен печат и модернизация в България (от края на XIX до 40-те г. на XX век)* [Gender, Periodical Press and Modernization in Bulgaria (the end of the 19th C to the 1940s)], published by St. Kliment Ohridski University Press at the end of 2022 and 12 other publications - articles, book chapters, book reviews; 8 of these are in English. Her research, published in Bulgarian appeared (in 2021) in journals *Литературна мисъл* [Literary Thought] и *LiterNet*. Dr Mitkova's texts in English are published in collective volumes and in two renowned English language periodicals 1) *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women's and Gender History* (6 materials, published in 2022, 2020, 2019, 2018, 2016, 2015) and 2) *Feminist Encounters. A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics* (1 article, in 2020). All of them in different degree analyze research aspects related to her already mentioned monography. 8 of these publications are included in editions which are referenced and indexed in international data bases such as Scopus and Web of Science. The noticed citations of Dr Mitkova's works appeared in referenced journals, in reviewed scholarly publications, collective volumes and teaching editions such as the already mentioned Reader in the history of the book.

The reviewed works of Dr Mitkova for this competition are dealing with topics different from the ones discussed in her PhD. They are in line with the national standards. Dr Mitkova submitted all the necessary documentation, listed in art. 107 of the Statute of Sofia University.

The Monograph: Dr Mitkova's book *Пол, периодичен печат и модернизация в България (от края на XIX до 40-те г. на XX в.)* is dedicated to an aspect which is studied by many book historians: how printed media helped changing the society, in this particular case - how "women's" periodicals supported the emancipation of the "second sex" (Simone de Beauvoir).

In tune with the appeal (*livre et societe*) of the "father" of the academic field of book history Henri-Jean Martin for more research of the impact of the books/texts on the society, many present-day historians in the field support Elisabeth Eisenstein's thesis about "printing press as agent of changes" and Robert Darnton's idea that books and texts revolutionize its readers and lead to social changes. The analysis suggested by Dr Mitkova about the founding and the history of periodicals, oriented towards female reading public in the Bulgarian nation state up to 1944 is one of the few theoretically informed and more encompassing attempts for bringing together the fields of history of the book and reading and women's history, for a gender sensitive history of the literary culture.

The book contains introduction, three chapters, concluding notes and list of the used primary and secondary sources. In the **Introduction (pp. 9-22)** - the author outlines the aim and the object of her research, defines the major categories of her historical analysis such as "modern time", "modernization", "modernism", "emancipation", "feminism" and explains the structure of the book.

Chapter One (pp. 23-66) - „Women’s periodicals in the context of contemporary feminist research” - deals with theoretical and methodological questions and comparative aspects of women’s book culture in the Balkans. Mitkova presents some of the major debates on women-authors (as the one on *Geschlechtsvormundschaft*, i.e. “gender tutelage”) and shows how feminist literary criticism led to the creation of the women’s tradition in the literary history. The next accent is on “the state of the art” and Bulgarian historiography on women’s writing (*écriture féminine*) from the end of the 19th century up until 1940s. How Western tradition deals with women’s periodicals and how feminist research in the Balkans (Greek, Serbian and Turkish) participate in this research paradigm Dr Mitkova analyzes in the last part of this chapter.

The text contains references and enter into dialogue with some major authors and publications from 19th and 20th C, which outline the evolution of opinions related to “the woman question”, *écriture féminine* and women-authors in the West - from Goethe, Fichte and Mary Wollstonecraft through Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir to more contemporary researchers and authors of feminist criticism such as Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Mary Eagleton, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Patricia A. Meyers Sparks, Elaine Showalter, Judith Fetterley. Mitkova also pays attention to an important debate about *écriture féminine* in (still) the only journal of women’s and gender history in Eastern Europe *ASPASIA. The International Yearbook of Central, Eastern and Southeastern European Women’s and Gender History*, published already sixteen years by Berghahn Books in New York. Among the participants in this debate are the Bulgarian authors Kristin Dimitrova and Milena Kirova. The presentation of the research on the Bulgarian women’s literary tradition - of the well-known scholars such as Milena Kirova, Miglena Nikolchina, Inna Peleva, Biljana Kurtasheva, Albena Vacheva, Ludmila Malinova, Nadezhda Alexandrova - informs well about the most authoritative criticisms towards the androcentricity of the Bulgarian literary canon and the lack of real dialogue between the feminist literary criticism and the literary scholars and literary critics of the mainstream.

The outlined feminist narrative within the media studies in the West shows how the periodical press has been instrumentalized for social and political changes, related to the role and place of “the second sex” in modern societies and cultures. Dr Mitkova pays attention to the alternative (feminist) “counter publicity” (Nancy Fraser) of feminist periodicals, an approach which give a good frame for studying the historical marginalization of women.

Lastly, this chapter discusses “the competing ideological narratives” of women’s press in modern Greece, Serbia and Turkey, the researchers and the projects in these Balkan academic contexts.

Chapter Two (pp. 67-108) - “Bulgarian women’s periodicals in the context of modernization of the nation state” outlines “the woman question” in a *longue-durée* perspective (during the National revival and after 1878 up to 1944). It begins with the publication of the first “women’s” periodical *Ружица или ред книжки за жените* (*Ruzhitsa* or books about women),

published by Petko R. Slaveikov who “imagines” and “normalizes” his “implicit female readers, their attitudes and interests from a male point of view” (p. 81). Dr Mitkova includes information about a similar strategies used by English publishers and editors during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The modernizing impulses of the Bulgarian nation-state in the realms of education, establishing of scientific (University, libraries, academy of sciences) and cultural (national theater, opera, museums) institutions, urbanization, etc. are the logical context in which Mitkova positions the gender asymmetries in the spheres of education, professional realization and political citizenship of women. The author introduces some of the major women’s organizations (“bourgeois” and socialist), established during the first four decades of the 20th C, organizations which create and propagate emancipatory discourse in the women’s periodicals.

The discussion of the dominant androcentric periodicals is followed by presentation of the two main types women’s journals and newspapers (*explicitly feminist* and *household/relational feminist*, according to the typology of feminist argumentation developed by the well-known American historian of European feminisms Karen Offen) which outline the alternative public space, an object of the next part of the monography.

Chapter Three (pp. 109-217) demonstrates the strategies of the above-mentioned two types of periodicals to modernize and emancipate Bulgarian women. Mitkova’s analysis begins with the *explicitly feminist* periodicals - the “bourgeois” “Zhenskii sviat” (Women’s world), “Zhenski glas” (Women’s voice) (the publication of the major national feminist organization - the Bulgarian Women’s Union in which editing participate several leaders of the women’s movement in the country, among them Ana Karima, Julia Malinova, Dimitrana Ivanova), “Ravnopravie” (Equal rights) (Ana Karima), “Grazhdanka” (Woman-citizen) (edited by Zheni Bozhilova-Pateva) and continues with the socialist women’s press - “Zhenski trud” (Women’s work) of Vela Blagoeva, “Blagodenstvie” (Prosperity) and “Nedovolnata” (The dissatisfied) of the Women’s Social-democratic Union - seven periodicals, published between 1890s and 1944. I would like to mention here the extremely long (for the Bulgarian standards) life of the publication of the Bulgarian Women’s Union - the newspaper “Zhenski glas” (1899/1901-1944) which dominates the feminist counter publicity during the whole period covered in Mitkova’s book. [Only the party newspaper “Mir” (Peace) has a longer life, 1894-1944.] The author pays attention to the duration, to the female (and male) publishers and editors, to the dominant topics and emancipatory ideas they propagate, to the economic aspects of the publication and circulation of the periodicals, to their (according to W. Iser) “implicit” and “real” readers. Except “Zhenskii sviat” (where there is male participation), all other periodicals from this groups are created for women by women, i.e. they are truly women’s periodicals. Most of the questions discussed by the feminists during this period are common for all such periodicals: the role and place of women in the society and family, gender discrimination within the nation-state, girls’ high school and University education, history of the

international and national women's movements, the meaning of the feminism/feminisms, the political representation of women, the defense of peace, women's work (of middle class women, women-workers and peasants), the differences between socialist and bourgeois-feminist visions of women's emancipation.

The part about *household/relational feminist periodicals* analyzes four of them. The period before World War I is represented by the more traditional "oscillating between patriarchal stereotypes and modern visions about women" (p. 157) journal "Bulgarka" (Bulgarian woman) (of Alice and Panayot Kurshovski) and "Moda I domakinstvo" (Fashion and household) (published by Elena Usheva), an emblematic journal of the time. The two most popular interwar women's periodicals "Ikonomia I domakinstvo" (Economy and household) (of Theodora and Stefan Peykovi) and "Vestnik na zhenata" (Women's newspaper) (of Penka and Hristo Cholchevi) are analyzed by Dr Mitkova in the last part of the monograph. From the outlined content of these periodicals it becomes clear why they are qualified as feminist editions: the materials published on their pages contest the traditional ideas about women's social roles and place; they criticize the ban to women's university education in the country and insist for professional education of women; inform the women readers about the tendencies in the Western fashion and esthetics of European modernity; propagate the rational organization of everyday life. "Moda I domakinstvo" of Usheva had also the ambitious goal to raise intellectual capacity of its readers by publishing some of the best examples of the Bulgarian and world literatures. In order to contextualize women's periodical press in Interwar Bulgaria Mitkova discusses and some European tendencies and entanglements in the feminist agendas after World War I. On one hand, she reports the subversivity of the war time for changing of pre-war gender regimes, on the other - pays attention to the regressive tendencies in formulating women's identities and the boom of women's household periodicals in the Interwar Bulgaria. Its declared profile nevertheless, the household periodicals publish on explicitly feminist issues such as the discrimination of professional women with education in law, on "white collar women's question", on the initiatives of the Bulgarian Women's Union, on the intellectual potential of women, etc.

The concluding remarks (pp. 219-235) extend the topic of women's periodical press by crossing the frame of "the bourgeois Bulgaria" and entering the period of the "state socialism". I read this part as a good beginning and example of left feminism in the East European women's actions during the period of the Cold War. And although the lack of a traditional conclusion about the previous period might seem strange for some readers of this book, I myself welcome such concluding remarks which - with the analysis of the women's journals "Zhenata dnes" (Woman today) and "Lada" (Lada) - continue the tradition of women's periodicals from the pre-World War II time and enter a wider international debate of the contemporary academic feminism.

The scholarly apparatus of the book is in line with the standards in the humanities and social sciences. The list of the used sources (pp. 237-261) contains more than 500 titles: 375 - in Bulgarian (both primary and secondary sources) and 152 - in foreign languages, mostly English but also Greek and Serbian. The sources cited are properly used and entangled in the argumentation of the author. They reflect *the state of the art* in the fields of book history and women's and gender history.

The contributions of the habilitation thesis and the other publications: The contributions of Dr Mitkova's research are in several interconnected aspects of Bulgarian women's literary culture after 1878. *While applying appropriate feminist typology (based on individualist and relational feminist argumentation) - for the first time in the Bulgarian historiography - Dr Mitkova presents theoretically informed research on women's periodical press of "bourgeois" Bulgaria. The applied comparative approach and the presentation of similar gender sensitive aspects of social and cultural history of the Balkans - of the women's periodicals and literary culture including - are among the few such examples in South Eastern Europe. With the publishing of her articles, book chapters, and reviews in English language, with her participation in the editorial board of the (English language) journal ASPASIA and her numerous translations of academic works in the interdisciplinary fields of history of the book and reading and women's/gender history Dr Valentina Mitkova is without any doubt joins the leading names in the field of gender sensitive history of literary culture in the Southeastern Europe.*

Critical (technical) comments: 1) It would have been better if the presentations of the Western and Balkan research traditions were placed at the beginning of the First Chapter, and only after that the Bulgarian case was presented; 2) Fichte's title (p. 24) should have been cited in original, in German, not in English; 3) While speaking about Betty Friedan's *The feminine mystique* (pp. 30-31) it should have been made more explicit that her book concerns American middle class women and not all American women at the time; 4) Some of the English language publications of Ana Kolaric and Serpil Cakir would have been useful, as well, etc.

And here come **a few questions:** All of us who study the book culture and the history of reading are well aware how difficult it is to find appropriate primary sources for the history of readers and readings, to overcome the talk about "ideal" and "implicit" readers (Iser). After your detailed research on women's periodicals, is it possible to build a more accurate sociological profile of women-readers of all presented newspapers and journals? Is it possible to say more about the "real" readers of women's periodicals during that period?

The concluding remarks (p. 225) say that after 1944 г. „explicitly feminist periodicals disappear” but there is a curtsy to the journal “Zhenata dnes” which uses relational feminist rhetoric. Although it is not the aim of this monograph, I have the following question: Taking into consideration the cited (Western and local, East European) publications on the “gender contract” in Eastern Europe

and especially Francisca de Haan's research on "left feminism" around the world after World War II and the entangled histories of feminisms - with all caution for the ideological context and realities of the state socialism - is it possible to claim that there has been actions of "state feminism" in Bulgaria and Eastern Europe during the Cold War period?

In conclusion: based on the already mentioned merits of the research, publications and academic activities of Dr Valentina Mitkova, I convincingly support her application for the position of Associate Professor in Professional Field 3.5 Public Communications and Information Studies (Studies of the book, Library Studies, Bibliography – History of the Book).

I declare that I have no co-authored publications with the applicant, I have no conflict of interest and I have found no plagiarism in her work.

Sofia, 25 March 2023

Reviewer:

(Prof. Dr Krassimira Daskalova)