

The Emancipation of Women in Interwar Belgrade and the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society

The interwar period in the Kingdom of the Serbs Croats and Slovenes (SCS/Yugoslavia) was marked by, besides other changes induced by European and world influences, the struggle for the affirmation of women in public work and their emancipation. Following the First World War, the “women’s question” gained momentum precisely in that direction. In a new country and altered social scene women also wanted a new role. During this period they demanded the right to vote, civil equality and the same rights of inheritance¹. In the First World War woman showed, within a global scope, “an unimagined surplus of energy, consciousness and ability, tenacity and vigour”, the very abilities denied to her². Encouraged by their “war” engagement, women in the interwar period, besides their involvement in humanitarian societies, began participating in a range of new feminist organizations, such as the Alliance of Feminist Societies in the SCS, The Female Student Union of Belgrade University, the Female Little Entente, the League of Women for Peace and Liberty, the Women’s Party, and the Union of University Educated Women...³ By their degree of organisation, these represent the first determined steps towards the essential aims of the struggle for equality, a long term struggle with varying results.

The society of friends of arts, “Cvijeta Zuzorić,” from its foundation in 1922 until its disappearance in 1941, played an important role in the emancipation of women. Its work proved true the thesis put forward by the advocates of women’s rights at the time, that a woman can do a lot more for herself and society outside her home, becoming involved in, among other things, an artistic society, such as was the Society “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, attracting Belgrade’s intellectual elite of the time.

No sooner had the Society been established than the periodical *Vreme* wrote of the crucial support Branislav Nušić, the founder of “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, received from the circles of eminent

¹ P. Marković, *Beograd i Evropa 1918-1941. Evropski uticaji na proces modernizacije Beograda.*, Beograd 1992, p. 51.

² S. Stefanović, *Žensko pitanje u beogradskoj štampi i periodici 1918-1941*, magistrade work, Beograd 2000, p. 100.

Belgrade ladies: “Among the intelligent women of ours exists a fortunate and contemporary initiative to establish a great and ample cultural organization which would be spread all over the Kingdom and with a task to promote interest for art and create conditions for its improvement and development, striving in particular to make the literature of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians a common achievement and the unique expression of the spirit of our people”⁴.

The Society took its name from a woman from Dubrovnik, Cvijeta Zuzorić, who gathered the intellectual elite of the time in her reception-room. She was, as Jorjo Tadić wrote “...a beautiful, educated and witty woman, the most prominent woman of Dubrovnik and one the first women poets. Her name, reputation and fame were preserved until the present day. Cvijeta’s virtues were recognized and praised by her contemporaries. She did not create any works of art herself, but with her stature, the beauty of her mind and body she influenced people around her. She knew how to make the lives of art workers more beautiful, and to their works she gave a piece of her spiritual glow and beauty; she was a real woman”⁵.

There existed therefore a long tradition of gathering the intellectual elite around certain influential women in their salons. However, the basic role models for respectable Belgrade ladies were undoubtedly the French salons of the 17th century. Marquis of Ramboyet’s “Blue Salon”, where France’s social and artistic elite of the time gathered, marked a turning point in the gathering of an elite. In this salon, people of both sexes had the opportunity to exchange thoughts, teachings and ideas from various fields, to be informed, but also to polemicize, and promote new ideas and present new art works⁶. Before the “Blue Salon” was established, women with artistic and intellectual flair were not able to express their views, except in their own homes. As soon as it was established, the “Blue Salon” began to expand throughout France, before spreading to the other European capitals. By the second half of the 19th century, these salons carried great influence and prestige across Europe⁷. In the SCS, the tradition of salons was picked up by Anka Konstantinović-Obrenović, daughter of Jevrem Obrenović, who made significant social and cultural use of it. Her salon, or as the Serbs called it, her “art gathering”, greatly influenced the spiritual rebirth of Serbian society in the 1860s. Following the example

³ N. Božinović, *Žensko pitanje u Srbiji u XIX i XX veku*, Beograd 1994, pp. 113-116.

⁴ *Vreme*, 5. February 1922.

⁵ J. Tadić, *Dubrovački portreti, I*, Beograd 1948, pp. 348.

⁶ B. S. Anderson, J. P. Zinsser, *A History of their own. Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. II, Oxford University Press 1999, pp. 104-105.

⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

and the enthusiasm of Cvijeta Zuzorić from Dubrovnik, Anka Konstantinović-Obrenović, having returned in 1859 after she emigrated, began creating various social circles in her home⁸. In an analysis of the emancipation of women through social engagement, the “artistic female gatherings” and “colourful artistic gatherings” that Konstantinović-Obrenović organized are of great significance. Along with the experiences of Cvijeta Zuzorić and the French salons, Anka’s gathering-salons influenced most the founding and creation of ways of acting in the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society, as a specific female focal point around which respectable intellectuals and artists gathered. “Distinguished and intelligent” women from Belgrade, and even wives of foreign diplomats, accredited by the Serbian Court, were invited to the “artistic female gatherings” of Anka Konstantinović-Obrenović⁹. Not dissimilar from the guest list, headlines appeared in the newspapers at the time of various drives by the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society in the interwar period. Anka’s “artistic female gatherings” involved concert performances – in accordance with the spirit of the time and the fact that Anka Konstantinović-Obrenović was one of the first “owners” of a piano in Serbia – poetry in French, Italian and German, as well as the verses of Serbian poets¹⁰. It was, as Poleksija Dimitrijević-Stošić wrote, a real intersection of two cultures: West European and pure Serbian. “Colourful artistic social gatherings” resembled the artistic events of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society even more. It was a place where respectable men and women read stories and poems, played the violin, the piano, the harp and the guitar, and occasionally even discussed politics¹¹. Evenings when Ljuba Nenadović would read one of his witty stories, Matija Ban would recount interesting moments in the social life of the Dubrovacka Republic, while Kornelije Stanković played music, and the young painter Steva Todorović spoke of contemporary German painting, differed little in a conceptual sense from the evenings of “Cvijeta Zuzorić” when Jorjo Tadić would bring the history of the Dubrovacka Republic to the Belgrade audience, Branislav Nušić would read one of his comedies, Miloje Milojević would play his latest composition, and Branko Popović would talk about contemporary French painting. This retrospect of the possible roots of intellectual gatherings around wise and influential women of our region is, besides proof of the active role women were beginning to assume in society,

⁸ P. Dimitrijević-Stošić, *Posela u starom Beogradu*, Beograd 1965. p. 68.

⁹ P. Dimitrijević-Stošić, *Posela u starom Beogradu*, Beograd 1965. pp. 70-71.

¹⁰ *ibid*, pp. 72.

¹¹ *ibid*, pp. 75.

proof of the tradition and continuity of interest among 19th and early 20th century Serbian elite for European issues and of a desire backed by concrete initiatives to become engaged in them.

Still, the question remains of whether or not the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society was a classic female society. In the period in question existed mainly humanitarian female societies (The Wheel of Serbian Sisters, Princess Ljubica’s Society, The Maternal Society, Serbian Mother, The Society of Housewives and Mothers...) and feminist societies (Female Movement, The Union of Female Students of Belgrade University, Female Little Entente, League of Women for Peace and Liberty, Women’s Party, The Union of University Educated Women...). In terms of its method of action, the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” society could not be classed among either of these groups. Still, female researchers dealing with the issue of women in Serbia (Jovanka Kecman, Neda Bozinović and Svetlana Stefanović) classified the society as a female one. Moreover, Jovanka Kecman stated that the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society was part of National Female Confederation of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians comprising all “women’s” parties in the Kingdom¹². In terms of membership of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society, in the Society Regulations of 1927, article 4 states that “any lover of art could be a full member”. Nevertheless, article 5 states that “the main board consisted of twenty-five female members” which, if not openly, then implicitly, suggests that the “managing bodies” of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society were intended for people of the female sex¹³. Indeed, in the 1922 Regulations, act 4 states that “any woman and girl regardless of age, that has love of our art, could be a full member of the Society”, but “woman and girl” was crossed out, leaving, “anyone, regardless of age, that has love of our art”¹⁴.

Over a period of almost two decades, women from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” contributed to the process of women’s emancipation in various ways. The ability to attract Belgrade artists of different creeds and opinion, and artists from across the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and to remain a serious institution for this period, is testimony not only to their perseverance and level of organization, but also to the diligence of the women. After a series of unsuccessful attempts by the authorities and individual artist groups, they became the only ones able to establish the much needed and longed for Art Pavilion. At the ceremony of laying the cornerstone, Bogdan Popović,

¹² J. Kecman, *Žene Jugoslavije u radničkom pokretu i ženskim organizacijama 1918-1941*, Beograd 1978, p. 167.

¹³ *Udruženje prijatelja umetnosti “Cvijeta Zuzorić”*. Pravila, Beograd 1927, pp.4-5.

¹⁴ *Udruženje prijatelja umetnosti “Cvijeta Zuzorić”*, Beograd 1922, p.4.

congratulating the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society, finished his speech with the French saying: “What woman wants, God wants as well”¹⁵.

The success of the women from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” in organizing numerous cultural events in Belgrade in the interwar period is proof of the power, authority and strength that Yugoslav and Serbian women acquired in being active outside their homes. Besides the “usual” cultural events (exhibitions, concerts, literary evenings, book fairs, numerous literary and music competitions), the ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, despite not formally either a female or feminist society, also informed the public of their wholehearted support for the fight for women’s rights, aiding a series of feminist drives, or initiatives in which women played a prominent role. Regardless of the fact that this was a period of expansion for feminism, it was neither the basic nor the declarative orientation of the ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić”. Although at this time a number of feminist activists, such as Julka Hlapec-Djordjević, Paulina Lebl-Albale or Ksenija Atanasijević, were prominent in the public fight for full female affirmation, no one from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was a member of a feminist party, or appeared in any of the feminist party papers, when the acquisition of women’s rights and liberties was a declarative fight. Still, their engagement in and support for certain feminist events are a clear sign of their affiliation and what their attitude was towards women’s rights and liberties.

Hence, the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society took the opportunity during the visit of Danish feminist Karen Michaelis to Belgrade, who held a series of lectures in January and February 1928 (“Love, Marriage and Divorce”, “Children, Parents and Morality”, “On Woman”¹⁶), to give a lecture on the establishment of the Art Pavilion¹⁷. In May 1931, “Cvijeta Zuzorić” granted use of the premises for performances organized by the Yugoslav Female Association, during the visit of the International Feminist Alliance to Belgrade¹⁸. Many other international feminists and representatives of female societies that visited Belgrade in those years were also guests of the Society “Cvijeta Zuzorić”. A group of Polish women journalists and writers, while visiting Belgrade, also paid a visit to “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, its Autumn exhibition and the exhibition of painter Milica Bešević¹⁹.

¹⁵ K. Djordjević, *Osnivanje i delatnosti Udruženja prijatelja umetnosti “Cvijeta Zuzorić”: Beograd u sećanjima 1919-1920*, Beograd 1980, pp.78-79.

¹⁶ *Politika*, 7 February 1928

¹⁷ *Politika*, 18 February 1928.

¹⁸ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 1, a.j. 78.

¹⁹ *Politika*, 25 October 1931.

As part of its female engagement, “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, in collaboration with the Union of University Educated Women, organized an Exhibition of the work of Yugoslav women writers in the Art Pavilion. The President of the Union of University Educated Women, Paulina Lebl-Albala, opened the exhibition²⁰. To complete the event, a series of literary evenings were organized over the period, the most important being “The Evening of Yugoslav Women Writers”, held on 17 March 1937, where Ljubica Marković, a University librarian, spoke on the subject of “Contemporary Serbian Lyrics”, writer Jovanka Hrvaćanin read her own poems, professor Danica Jovanović gave a lecture on “Women in Our National Games”, and finally Desanka Maksimović read her poetry²¹. Similar to the social gatherings of Anka Konstantinović-Obrenović, such evenings and exhibitions in the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society served to gather socially and artistically active women, but were also a sign of women’s emancipation and that women, in spite of the occasional announcements from the Conservatives, had succeeded in winning recognition in arts and science. Cooperation between “Cvijeta Zuzorić” and the Union of University Educated Women continued after the exhibition with the organization of the Exhibition of Bulgarian Women Painters in the Art Pavilion in December 1937, aimed at establishing and strengthening friendship with intellectual women from Bulgaria²². “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, apart from providing the premises for the exhibition, even organized an “intimate tea party” in honour of the Bulgarian painters, some of whom were, besides the administration of the Society and the University Educated Women, representatives of the Yugoslav-Bulgarian League in Belgrade, as well as various Belgrade painters, writers and artists²³. Already by 1931, during the Conference of Women for Peace and Disarmament, Bulgarian delegate Mrs. Patev pointed to the good relations of the Yugoslav-Bulgarian women, which was of special importance after the experiences of the First World War: ”... the future of the Balkan nations will be beneficially revealed only by compromise, harmony and mutual collaboration”, adding “that she is content that women are not to blame for the fatal division between Serbs and Bulgarians, for they were without political rights at the time when it broke out, the same as they do not have them today”²⁴.

²⁰ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 6, a.j. 413.

²¹ *Politika*, 17 March 1937.

²² IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 6, a.j. 423

²³ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 6, a.j. 424.

²⁴ Dr. Ksenija Atanasijević, *Konferencija žena za mir i razoružanje, Život i rad*, book VII, n.b 43, 1 June 1931, p.504.

As part of the attempt to bring together women artists from the Balkans and Central Europe, in January 1938 an Exhibition of women artists of the Little Entente was held in the Art Pavilion²⁵. The patrons were the Yugoslav Queen Marija, Romanian Queen Marija and Hanna Benesh, wife of the president of Czechoslovakia. The exhibition marked a continuation of what the Women's Little Entente²⁶ had begun back in 1923 – the mutual connection and close collaboration between countries related by common interest and the work of strengthening the influence of the International Feminist Organization²⁷. The event comprised two hundred art works: paintings, sculptures and architecture of the most eminent women artists of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. In the smaller showroom of the Art Pavilion was a retrospective exhibition of Serbian women painters, Andjelija Lazarević, Polaksija Todorović, Katarina Ivanović, Mina Vukomanović, Nadezda Petrović...²⁸ These exhibitions were of great importance, since the role of women and their activities in the creation of our culture were on show, an encouragement and stimulus to other women slowly plucking up the courage to become active outside the home.

Over time, the participation of women in all forms of public life became more important and drew greater attention. On the one hand, women became more engaged in occupations that were previously the exclusive domain of men. On the other, they even became involved in artistic works. Already in 1930, the Second Spring Exhibition, held in the Art Pavilion, featured a number of “women painters” – Zora Petrović, Roksanda Zurunić, Milica Bešević, Jelisaveta Petrović, Milica Čadjević, Anka Krizman-Paulić, Elda Piskanec, Anica Zupanec, Mira Pregel and Lina Crnčić-Virant – who were granted special space in *Politika*'s “Women's World” page²⁹. Just ten years later, weekly *Vreme* gave a special retrospective on women's participation in the Spring Exhibition, pointing out that of the 132 artists taking part, 21 were women (out of 313 works, 40 were by women), “more than ever in our country”³⁰. Even if this degree of women's participation in the art world does not appear striking today, it was seen at the time as highly significant since women, for many years tied solely to the house and housework, had succeeded only, if allowed, to contribute through literature, and not until the 19th century by

²⁵ *Politika*, 19 January 1938.

²⁶ About women's Little Entente in more detail in J. Hlapec-Djordjević, *Ženska Mala Antanta, Život i rad*, book IV, n.b. 24 December 1929, pp.910-913.

²⁷ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 6, a.j. 428

²⁸ *BON*, No. 1, 1 January 1938, p.46.

²⁹ *Politika*, 25 May 1930.

music or painting. Only half a century later, this shift was considered revolutionary even in European contexts. In the 19th century, it was easiest for a woman to combine writing with housework, while music and painting were difficult to conceal, which in terms of women, made the century one of women novelists and poets, not women painters and musicians³¹. Hence, the institutional appearance of women artists in “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was important for the affirmation of this aspect of women’s engagement in the interwar period.

Besides this “institutional” engagement, the ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” addressed the public when it should stand up against false morality, and defended those creative people attacked by false moralists, conservatives, or by those not ready to face the fact that Belgrade was abandoning patriarchal scopes and adopting European perspectives that, among other things, implicitly included the full affirmation of women. Besides actions according to their Regulations that determined the direction of their work, this was how the women reacted beyond their usual activities in dealing with wider social phenomena.

In the struggle for affirmation and bringing contemporary art closer to Belgrade men, ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” spoke up during a huge campaign in 1927, launched by the conservative section of Belgraders against the raising of Meštrović’s monument - “The Victor”. When the statue’s nakedness became an issue, Belgrade women entered the debate. This was of great importance – the women generally defended Ivan Meštrović, his monument and his art, and stood against false morality, prompting conservatives to claim that the “modern woman” had shown that she is led “more by her passions, than reason”. Among the most passionate defenders of Meštrović and “The Victor” were the ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić”. Jelisaveta Ibrovac, a member of the Society’s managing board, saw the defence of “The Victor” as the defense of art in general, and that Belgrade, being a town “whose soul is open to everything that is beautiful and noble”, cannot allow the victory of conservatism and conservatives, especially when art is in question. The vice-president of the Society, Krista Djordjević, expressed similar opinions³².

Ladies from “Cvijeta Zuzorić” joined the debate concerning Ksenija Atanasijević who lost the title of a senior lecturer at the Philosophy Faculty 26 October 1935. Among those who signed the petition against the decision of the Belgrade University were members of the

³⁰ *Vreme*, 9 June 1940.

³¹ B. S. Anderson, J. P. Zinsser, *A History of their own. Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. II, Oxford University Press 1999, pp. 172-173.

managing board of the Society, Stana Djordjević and Milica Spiridonović, “ordinary” members of the Society, Gita Predić and Angelina Odavić, as well as the secretary of the Society, Vidosava Jevremović³³.

It could well be that their “active” struggles for women’s rights and against conservatism, patriarchal ways and false morality was so influential that one of their harshest critics, though “indirect”, was their founder, Branislav Nušić, himself known for his conservative views.

Conservative views of women’s emancipation were not, however, just the heritage of Yugoslav society, which was considered rather patriarchal, but was also a trend in more developed European countries³⁴. The struggle for the right to vote, right to education, new sexual liberties, as well as changes in fashion, were a slap in the face for many conservatives who could not accept the fact that women had abandoned the traditional role of housewife and mother and therefore gained a greater and more important role in the society. Hence, the new social engagement of a woman, as well as the whole process of women’s emancipation, often came in for unfair criticism, and sometimes the unconcealed cynicism or ridicule of certain conservatives and traditionalists. The famous “Braná’s Theatre” in those days included in its repertoire plays that merely in their title implied an attitude towards women: “School for Marriageable Girls”, “Killer of a Wife”, “Woman, Forgive Me”, “Modern Divorce”...

The negative attitude towards women at the time prompted Paulina Lebl-Albala in 1938 to write in the Papers of Yugoslav Women’s Party: “... Not only humorous papers, but also big, serious daily press are ready at any opportunity, especially filing reports from Court discussions or sessions and meetings of female societies, to style their reporting in such a way as to provoke sneering and contempt for the mentality and activities of women. Altogether it maintains a constant belief within the broader public that women should not be taken seriously, that they are vain, lightheaded creatures, inconsistent and moody, faithless and artificial, endlessly curious and superficial, at best only quack educated and quasi-emancipated, incapable of approaching

³² In detail: R. Vučetić-Mladenović, “Pobedjeni “Pobednik”. Polemika uoči postavljanja Meštrovićevo spomenika”, in: *Godišnjak za društvenu istoriju*, VI-2, Beograd 1999, pp.110-123.

³³ “Izjava žena slobodnih profesija i javnih radnica povodom slučaja gđjice Dr Ksenije Atanasijević”, in: *Život i rad*, n.b. 145, 1 November 1935, p. 572.

³⁴ B. S. Anderson, J. P. Zinsser, *A History of their own. Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. II, Oxford University Press 1999, p. 207.

any business thoroughly and rationally, and that they could be profoundly interested only in makeup rules and fashion shows, or at best, good cooking recipes”³⁵.

For the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society, probably the most significant was the attitude its founder Branislav Nušić, the defender of tradition and old values, took regarding this problem. Although Nušić himself established two female societies, and his wife, Darinka Nušić, and daughter, Gita Predić, were active members of “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, he did not flinch from offering his own judgment on women’s emancipation and the social engagement of a woman from his patriarchal viewpoint. Nušić did this, suitably as a comedian, by writing the comedy “Ujež” in 1935³⁶. The title of the comedy itself, being an abbreviation for “Udruženje jugoslovenskih emancipovanih žena” (The Society of Yugoslav Emancipated Women), implied the course of the plot.

The year it was written, 1935, was marked by intense discussion of women’s right to vote. It also proved “critical” for women’s issues and emancipation as illustrated by the case of Ksenija Atanasijević, who lost the title of senior lecturer at the Philosophy Faculty in the same year. In October 1935, while Nušić’s “Ujež” was on stage, meetings calling for women’s right to vote were held all over the country. In Belgrade alone, on 20 October 1935, 2500 attended a meeting³⁷. Just four days after the opening night of “Ujež”, *Politika* conducted a “Survey on women’s right to vote”, in which Dragoljub Jovanović and Živko Topalović demanded that all political rights be given to women, while Dimitrije Ljotic was explicitly against it³⁸.

Seeking public popularity, Branislav Nušić constructed a plot for his comedy around the issue of woman’s participation in public work and the way this separated a woman from her family. Nušić drew on all the patriarchal arguments typical of that time, that by attending various conferences she neglects, and even destroys her family.

In the preface to “Ujež” Nušić stated that an article from *Pravda*, published on 14 July 1935, combined with the photography - “Emancipation of Women in image and word” - prompted him to write this play. In the first “inspirational” photo Nušić notes, “several elegant ladies in front of Hotel ‘Moskva’ drinking refreshing drinks and letting out plumes of smoke

³⁵ Quoted according to: S. Stefanović, *Žensko pitanje u beogradskoj štampi i periodici 1918-1941*, magistrate work, Beograd 2000, pp.127-128.

³⁶ The opening night of “Ujež” was on 4 September 1935.

³⁷ P. Marković, *Beograd i Evropa 1918-1941. Evropski uticaji na proces modernizacije Beograda*, Beograd, 1992, p.54.

³⁸ *Politika*, 8 September 1935.

through their flushing nostrils and having meaningless conversations, the ones usually led on coffee-house porches. Above that picture, an elegantly dressed gentleman, possibly husband of one of the ladies, pushing a pram with a child through the Belgrade streets”³⁹. Following the trail left by Nušić and wishing to see what made the conservative comedian so angry, we came across three photos and one (malicious) text on the social engagement of women, signed by Br. S: “1. While daddies are walking their daughters through town (a picture of father and daughter in a walk – orig. auth.) 2. pushing the pram down the street (father, escorted by the wife, pushing the pram – orig. auth.) 3. ...while emancipated mums are killing time with a glass of beer”⁴⁰. What is interesting is that it is perfectly visible in the photo that women were most probably drinking water, since the glasses in front of them contained transparent liquid (there was even apparently a coffee pot). Neither were there any cigarettes as mentioned by Nušić, and as for whether the conversations they led were meaningless or not, we cannot tell. The text itself is based on images the comedian subsequently seeks to “improve” in his “anti-woman” comedy: “In women’s societies, as it is generally known, apart from taking photos, making statements for journalist youngsters and printing of expensive memorials, which are supposed to save memory on the selfless work of a so and so administration for younger generations, hardly anything else is done. Things in the homes are rather sloppy. If we considered conducting a survey among women, it would not succeed for two reasons. Firstly, because it has been proven that women are too occupied, in these happy times, by visits they have to make to tailors, shoemakers, hairdressers and other similar beneficiaries of human kind; and secondly, when they find time, by no means can they find a prudent word, since they left all their wisdom in scientific and exhausting debates with hairdressers, who cannot comprehend that the whole fate of, let’s say, a beautiful woman could depend solely on a bad curl, or with a tailor, who is so retarded not to perceive all the fatal consequences that could be brought by one wrinkle on a lady’s dress”⁴¹.

“Inspired” by the text from *Pravda*, Nušić locates his comedy in the home of professor Lazić. A wife and mother, Mrs. Lazić is the president of “Ujež” and spends all her time in the affairs of the society. The result of her engagement is that her husband is missing a button on his coat, which, according to Nušić, represents complete neglect on the part of the wife and an image of the fall of a happy family life, where one daughter gives birth to an illegitimate child, the other

³⁹ B. Nušić, *Ujež, Svinja*, Beograd 1935, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁰ *Pravda*, 14 July 1935.

is in love correspondence even though she is still twelve years old, and where a son, whose role model is Al Capone, gets expelled from school and becomes a member of a shady gang. The very work of the female society “Ujež,” Nušić presents as a complete caricature. Hence, during the meetings of the management, tea is drunk, biscuits eaten and the missing members talked of, along with discussions of current scandals (who cheated on whom, who left whom, whose husband has been arrested, where new materials and dresses appeared...). In order to picture as convincingly as possible those meetings as places where nothing is done, it is conveyed through the ladies:

Mrs. Lazić: “Mrs. Janković, have you completed the report from last week?”

Mrs. Janković: “I haven’t!”

Mrs. Lazić: “Goodness why?”

Mrs. Janković: “Well, how can I put it: I didn’t have anything to write down. Last week, as a matter of fact, we didn’t accomplish anything. The whole meeting we were talking about novelties, I couldn’t write that, now could I”⁴².

Even Zanka Stokic, one of Nušić’s favourite actresses, who also played in “Ujež”, could not resist complaining about the comedian’s attitude towards women. Earlier, in 1924, Stokic said that in his writings Nušić “assumes light-minded women as heavy-minded, which stems from the fact that in real life he took light-minded women for the other” (which certainly could not have made Mrs. Darinka Nušić happy)⁴³.

Nušić’s attitude was probably influenced by some light-minded actions of certain women in various female societies which the press regularly picked up on, as well as the occasional scandals that took place in the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society. Still, those were not the real reasons for caricaturing women’s social engagement. The time in question was one of stirred emotions, a time when, almost daily, there were crimes of passion or suicides due to unhappy love. This would suggest that all the incidents were, partly due to certain dimensions of the female psychology, reflexes of the atmosphere of the time, and not exclusively a “women’s” thing.

Aside from conflicts between members of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society themselves (there is a document on Stana Djordjević’s leaving the management of the Society due to insult

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² B. Nušić, *Ujež, Svinja*, Beograd 1935, p. 88.

⁴³ *Politika*, 9 November 1924.

inflicted by Teofanija Bodi)⁴⁴, as invalid reasoning for the caricature of women's engagement, there were cases for reasonable criticism, especially when ladies allowed themselves, occasionally, to place themselves above artists. At the opening of the First Spring Exhibition, the president of the Society, Olga Stanojević, put sculptor Sreten Stojanović in an uncomfortable situation. As the guests began arriving at the exhibition, she took down his works, placed there by the jury, in order to hang a portrait of Cvijeta Zuzorić, by Marko Murat, and a gift of Prince Pavle. To this great tactlessness, especially in the presence of an audience, "a large number of painters wanted to take off their works and take them home". The situation was worse due to the fact that Sreten Stojanović was always there for the Society "Cvijeta Zuzorić", and was even their donor, contributing a sum of 3000 dinars for the construction of the Art Pavilion⁴⁵.

A similar thing happened to Jovan Bijelić when Stana Djordjević, secretary of the painting section at the time, allowed herself, though by Jovan Bijelic's judgment completely incompetent, to discuss purely artistic questions with him. The Society considered it to be a personal thing between the two of them, and everything ended with Jovan Bijelic's apology to Stana Djordjević for the offence⁴⁶. Both cases, followed by harsh words and offensive letters ended eventually, for the benefit of culture and the Society, in great reconciliation.

Stana Djordjević, whose name was most frequently mentioned in the "incidents", showed her temper, but also female vanity, typical of a great number of women gathered in one place, by yet another of her exploits. Upon the reconstruction of the Art Pavilion, she received a letter from Mr. Ljubinković, the superintendent of the building, in which she was required, ordered by Olga Stanojević, to remove her possessions temporarily from the Pavilion. Shortly after she replied: "Next time beware not to write in that manner. No one has the right to order me around (underlined by Stana Djordjević). The Pavilion belongs to all of us, not just the president. And you are to listen to all of us equally"⁴⁷.

The most dramatic was, of course, the conflict with Branislav Nušić. Although the result of slight carelessness, its importance was greater since Nušić was the founder of the Society and affiliated to it until his death. In early 1932, Nušić could not be found to be given an invitation to a dinner in Goethe's honor. Nušić was offended since he took it as deliberate negligence.

⁴⁴ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 1, a.j. 26.

⁴⁵ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 1, a.j. 55.

⁴⁶ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 1, a.j. 62.

⁴⁷ IAB, fond UPU CZ, F. 1, a.j. 90.

Embittered, he wrote a letter rebuking those responsible: “I implore you, dear Mrs. Stanojević, not to take it against me for disturbing you like this, however I cannot permit anyone such an indelicate offence of honor against a writer of age, who might not be of liking to someone, but should still be paid the simplest consideration”⁴⁸. Of course, this incident, as a consequence of the carelessness of women, but also the vanity of an old artist, was soon formally reconciled. Still, it is possible that in recalling this incident, Nušić took revenge on the ladies of “Cvijeta Zuzorić” with the sharp stings of “Ujež”.

Regardless of the apparent enmity towards women’s social engagement, Branislav Nušić used the voice of professor Lazić to secure himself from the theory that all women in such activity were the same as those he caricatured in his play: “There are two types of women public workers. The first are those that enter public work with a certain honest and regular apprehension of general social or human needs. These women with worthy perseverance, dignified belief and advantage execute the roles of public workers and gain achievements us men could not reach. To those women honor and respect. That is the first kind. The second kind follows them like trailers. Those are the ones that do not serve society, but society serves to them; those who do not serve the aims of society, but put those aims to their own service. Those are the women that cannot settle down in their own homes; who need society just so they could have a reason to go out, who take satisfaction in being called members of management, in organizing concerts, attending festivities as delegates, going from office to office, having their photos taken, attending banquets, expecting medals...”⁴⁹. It appears that this was the means to justify the contradiction in his action – on one hand the founder of two women’s societies, and on the other a ruthless critic of women’s involvement, who, in portraying that involvement as a stereotype, with Lazić’s monologue about the first type of women, that should be praised, he tried to alleviate his generally negative attitude, clear in every line of the comedy “Ujež”.

Bosko Tokin supported the stereotype of members of various female societies in his novel “Terazije”, saying of one of his heroines, Olivera, the wife of a member of parliament, that she was so “sexually insatiable,” that she sought temporary remedy in this social engagement: “To entertain herself she joined the ‘Cvijeta Zuzorić’ Society, attended literary salons, still looking for a man,” fortunately though, he added the crucially comment: “She could not talk of

⁴⁸ V. Kolaković, “Branislav Nušić kao kulturni radnik u ‘Stankoviću’ i ‘Cvijeti Zuzorić’”, in: *Zbornik pozorišnog muzeja “Branislav Nušić 1864-1964”*, Beograd 1965, p. 353-354.

artistic and literary things and did not feel comfortable in those circles”⁵⁰. On one hand, this description of Olivera’s “search” for a man, suggests that women’s engagement in these societies was interpreted in this way by some men. On the other hand, at least where “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was concerned, this extract allows one to conclude that “sexual discontent” pastime, or a desire for entertainment were not enough for engagement in this artistic society, and what was necessary was a certain refinement. Still, in this sense the question of membership of “Cvijeta Zuzorić” remained open, since the Society Regulations of 1922 and 1927 did not determine how one was to become a member of this Society, but merely stated the duties of those already members. Therefore, at least formally, certain newspaper announcements, especially in the late thirties, that “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was a fashionable society, do not have any formal basis, although it is possible to assume that this Society was in a way closed for women and girls “from the streets”, as it was only entered with some kind of recommendation, either by origin or social status.

Unfortunately, we do not know the reactions of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society to Nušić’s comedy “Ujež”. Attempting to preserve dignity and largely shaken by this comedy, none of the ladies from any society made any official announcements, nor defended themselves against Nušić’s writing. The silence itself after such an assault on women’s integrity was proof of the clear attitude women had towards Nušić’s “Ujež”. Very harsh criticism of his comedy and his conservatism, however, was not missed⁵¹. Even better for the emancipation of women, it came mostly from men with liberal views, aware of the fact that the time when a woman played solely the role of wife and mother was long gone, to which Rasa Tomic had already pointed to in 1918: “The value of a woman in the world and the community is no longer one sided. Her value is no longer solely maternal, in raising and bringing up children, nor is it by the fireside. Her value is no longer primary in her bringing the poetry to this ruthless life. ...There is a great cultural value in her, for her mind is not retarded, it works on the improvement of human kind whenever it

⁴⁹ B. Nušić, *Ujež, Svinja*, Beograd 1935, p. 40-41.

⁵⁰ B. Tokin, *Terazije*, Beograd 1988, reprinted edition from 1932, p. 74.

⁵¹ Reaction to Nušić’s “Ujež” was strong, to what testifies a large number of mostly negative critics: V. Gligorić, “Gresi emancipovanih”, in: *Politika*, 6 December 1935; D. Aleksić, *Vreme*, 6 September 1935; S. Vinaver, “Ujež”, in: *SKG*, book 46, No. 2, 16 September 1935, pp. 146-150; Semper idem, “Ujež”, in: *Život i rad*, n.b. 144, 15 October 1935, pp. 509-510; T. Manojlović, “Ujež od Branislava Nušića”, in: *BON*, No. 11-12, December 1935, pp. 715-716.

finds an opportunity. There is a great economic value in her, for she is capable of many works, necessary to the human community...”⁵².

Reactions to “Ujež”, such as that of Stanislav Vinaver: “The new Nušić, in his later days, Nušić who moralizes a lot and blames, not institutions or society, but specifically chosen victims, as an antique moody god – appears to be insufficiently dedicated and insufficiently convincing,”⁵³ or those signed Semper idem: “This is why he (Nušić) watched the problem of the present day from the perspective of his generation, and provided a corresponding solution. He watched women of his age. Today’s societies of women are different. We will not mention them all, but they are in the social and, if you will, in the whole public life a very important factor, that must be thanked and honored for their deeds”⁵⁴, to the most negative critique by Velibor Gligorić: “He took one example of women’s idleness in high society and wanted to pour all the rage of a patriarchal, conservative man and towards a realistic emancipation of women from the rule of a husband in the house, to an intellectual narrow-mindedness where an “old fashioned” would leave her,”⁵⁵ provoked a counter reaction from Nušić.

In the preface of the published edition of “Ujež”, written after the first performance, Nušić had to provide additional explanations as to why he had written this comedy, obviously influenced by various negative critiques of the performance. It is not known how women reacted in the National Theatre itself, watching this play, but that the reaction was different from what Nušić had expected possibly verifies an extract from the mentioned preface to the comedy, in which he compared the circumstance in which he had written “Ujež” to those in which Moliere wrote “Funny Precisions,” ridiculing the French elite surrounding the Marquis of Ramboyet: “...It is a known fact that after this play, Madame Ramboyet and her friends gave the biggest applause to Moliere. Neither Madame Ramboyet nor her friends thought that the satire was against the whole movement, but only dealt with the twisted parts of it”.⁵⁶ In the case of “Ujež” and the Engaged ladies of Belgrade, at least according to Nušić’s comment, it is apparent that they either had no compassion for Nušić’s talk of morality and the implications of certain

⁵² J. Tomić, *Šta je bila žena i šta će biti. Istorijsko-društvena rasprava*, Ujvidek 1918, p.109.

⁵³ S. Vinaver, “Ujež”, in: *SKG*, book 46, No. 2, 16 September 1935, p. 149.

⁵⁴ Semper idem, “Ujež”, in: *Život i rad*, n.b. 144, 15 October 1935, p. 510.

⁵⁵ V. Gligorić, “Gresi emancipovanih”, in: *Politika*, 6 December 1935

⁵⁶ B. Nušić, “Povodom mog Uježa”, in: *SKG*, book 46, 1 December 1935, p. 524 and B. Nušić, *Ujež, Svinja*, Beograd 1935, p. 5.

“twisted realities”, or perhaps his vision of the “twisted” was so caricatured, that they did not have any reason to support that kind of aspect of their social involvement.

That which was left from the possible reaction of the ladies of “Cvijeta Zuzorić” was found in a speech by the president of the Society, Olga Stanojević, at the annual assembly of “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, held on 15 December 1935: “I am sorry it has to be me to give recognition to our members, but I have to do it and to protect them from certain people, who tried to ridicule, even publicly, and belittle the sacrifices our members have to make for art and artists. We are not asking for any prizes or awards, but we have the right to ask at least for those personal crises we are going through not to be ridiculed...”⁵⁷. Nušić’s personal reaction to this “indirect” criticism also remains unknown, which is important, for Nušić was noted as present at the assembly. It is possible that Nušić reacted to this in typical style, smiling under his mustache, which certainly did not make the ladies feel any better. But as early as the following year, delivering a lecture on the topic “Alpha and omega of today’s society” at a tea party of “Cvijeta Zuzorić”, he went some way to paying respect to socially active women: “...Today’s women cross boundaries of commonplace happenings with their names. Today Mrs. Leposava Petković is giving a speech in Brussels, Miss Milena Atanacković is giving a speech in Washington, Mrs. Delfa Ivanić in Paris, Miss Ksenija Atanasijević is holding a lecture in Athens, Mrs. Jelena Dimitrijević is traveling around the world and interviewing a maharaja, Miss Nataša Bošković is performing as a ballerina in Barcelona, Mrs. Jelena Zrnica is being sentenced to a month in prison because of a newspaper article, and many others like them...”⁵⁸. Whether this ode to women’s engagement was the result of the “guilty conscience” of an old comedian, or the final recognition of women in the society, remains undecided. Still, whatever the intention of this listing of the activities of women, it is today a relevant testimony on how, in the interwar period and struggling with patriarchal surroundings, women still managed to gain recognition and be granted some of the rights they so sought.

Those years when the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society was active were politically, economically, and socially highly unstable. The struggle for the emancipation of women, that began intensely in Serbia in the 1870s when the first female societies were established, lasted, albeit with a few ups and downs, right through the interwar period. Powerful women’s

⁵⁷ *Politika*, 16 December 1935.

⁵⁸ *Politika*, 11 June 1936.

involvement, radically different and stronger than the involvement prior to the First World War, faced harsh criticism from the conservatives, but also the approval of liberal and left winged intellectuals. The ladies of the “Cvijeta Zuzorić” Society, through total engagement, from gathering the social elite via the construction of the Art Pavilion, taking part in feminist movement initiatives, organizing various exhibitions, concerts and literary evenings, standing up to false morality and the patriarchal view of the world, and women within that society, they managed to prove Skerlic’s assertion that patriarchal life is indicative of a low civilization where the role of the woman was reduced to the “hen that lays chickens and a head of cattle pulling the yoke”⁵⁹ and that the strength of a woman is precisely in her active social engagement.

⁵⁹ Dr J. Hlapec-Djordjević, “O ženi”, in: *Život i rad*, book XI, n.b. 66, 15 May 1932, pp. 741-742.