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Speculum of the Mad Woman

by Tatjana Srceva-Pavlovska

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Speculum of the Mad Woman by Tatjana Srceva-Pavlovska, published in 2023 by the IKONA publishing house, is a monograph examining cases of female madness in literature and their subversive social impact. The general premise focuses on female madness in Western literature, which represents one of the ultimate and most radical forms of resistance. Literature offers novel perspectives on this phenomenon, exploring how it reshapes those who embody it and the social upheaval it triggers. It fuels diverse feminist movements and avant-garde ways of living while simultaneously challenging societal norms. Madness in this context not only disrupts but also liberates—introducing innovative forms of democratization and freedom from oppressive structures. It envisions contemporary systems where division, segrega-

tion, and patriarchy become obsolete. Such profound change, driven by modern historical and social trends, demands a transformation of cultural frameworks and a reconfiguration of societal values. To distance itself from the grip of traditional patriarchy, society must embrace new standards of merit, virtue, and identity formation. In doing so, it opens the possibility for individuals to choose their own way of life, fostering personal empowerment and the construction of authentic identities.

In this respect, in her book *Speculum of the Mad Woman* (the title being an allusion to the critically acclaimed foundational text of second-wave feminism *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974) or *Speculum of the Other Woman* by Luce Irigaray) Tatjana Srceva-Pavlovska examines the cultural connections between femininity and madness by skillfully directing her analytical lens and methodological focus in order to open, and examine the metaphorical cervix of history of female madness as a gendered concept and its depictions in Anglo-American and Macedonian literature.

Srceva-Pavlovska inspects madness, which for centuries, metaphorically and symbolically, has been perceived as a female malady and continues to be gendered even in the twenty-first century. In her comparative study, the author starts from Scotland with Lady Macbeth's mental issues, goes to the North of England and visits Charlotte Brontë's attic room and examines *Jane Eyre's* 'Madwoman in the Attic' then, her next stop is Elsinore Castle, where she analyses Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, after which she crosses the Atlantic and immerses herself in the fluidity of the *Wide Sargasso Sea* with Jean Rhys. Along the way, with *The Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, Srceva-Pavlovska returns home again to peek into the "kitchen" where the Macedonian literary heroine is trapped by the Balkan patriarchal setting. Throughout the history of Western literature, images of mental illness in women signal subversiveness, whereas in Macedonian literary history, according to the author's conclusions, female characters are forced into "the metaphor of silence" by the patriarchal society, struggling to vocalize their 'subversive madness'.

The author views narrative fiction not only as a reflection of society but as its active agent, a stimulus with an internal locus of control. Shakespeare's verse, "frailty, thy name is woman" ("Hamlet," 1.2), under the interpretative lens of Srceva-Pavlovska, in Macedonian literature and criticism should be transformed into "be resilient because you are a woman" in the direction of the 'cultural resurrection' of female characters. Thus, undoubtedly, this study, due to its readability and originality, makes a significant contribution to Macedonian literary criticism and essay writ-

ing, but most importantly, sparks curiosity about a topic central to comparative, cultural, and gender studies.

This monograph published with the support of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of North Macedonia as one of the projects of national interest in the area of culture provides an in-depth vivisection of the problem of female malady in English and American literature, as well as its (almost complete) absence from the Macedonian literary tradition of the twentieth century.

On the other hand, although Srceva-Pavlovska detects the concept of a thread as well as the initiation, the commencement of subversive female madness in the Macedonian literary tradition of the twentieth century, she states that it still needs to be further developed and that it should be a process of strong, consistent and persistent, and even and strategic, direct action in order to achieve the degree of powerful subversion of the system of governance and functioning that is dominantly male according to the schematic outline of the Western literary traditions.

Srceva-Pavlovska emphasizes the necessity of freeing from the restraints of women's questioning of social dogma and encourages the development of the subversive template or the subversive scheme for creating a new generation of Macedonian literary female characters with madness whose ultimate role would be revolutionary and socially concerned.