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Books, Men and Women: Writing and Gender

“Books, Men and Women”—what does it mean? I asked myself this question when I started to participate in the International Writing Program. Then I noticed myself thinking about it, even though I never thought about it before—or, I didn’t want to think about it. Maybe this was because I strongly rejected anything that divided art by gender. Or because I didn’t want to see myself as weak in relation to a male-dominated society. Maybe the aim of the IWP organizers was to make us to think about different perspectives, to look at ourselves in the mirror. Thinking about this, I realized that a great part of my writing is about gender. Hence, not only have I, in fact, been thinking about gender, but this question has always formed one of the core issues of my work. I think I am the first Kosovar Albanian to employ the word *womb*, which not surprisingly has always been avoided. It was in this way that I began to talk about the issue of gender, because I presume that we must start from the experience of our own societies in order to better understand how gender is positioned within the world mosaic. Therefore, my paper will deal with how gender is experienced in my country, Kosova, and in my Albanian nation. I will continue with some reflections on biology and brain gender division, and on the roots of the problem, and finish with my view on gender and values.

1. Gender experience in Kosova and Albanian writing and reading

I come from a country dominated by a more or less patriarchal mindset, as is all of Southern-Eastern Europe. Reading and frequent travels have eased my soul by showing me that male domination is a universal issue. One example of this is the fact that all of the Special Representatives of the UN in Kosova have been men! This applies to other levels of the UN mission, as well. It is likely that the UN has forgotten its mission to promote and implement women’s empowerment, as stated in the UN document *Platform for Action*, enacted as the result of the Beijing Women’s Conference. I think that Kosova could become a model of gender equality *par excellence*, given its UN governance and the existing resources and readiness of Kosovar women to achieve this goal.

For better or worse, it was Kosova’s destiny to become known to the world through the genocide it experienced at the hands of the Serbian regime, and through the NATO intervention that helped stop this genocide. Few people know that Kosova is only one piece of the ethnic Albanian territories. Albanian, the language derived from Illyrian, is spoken in these territories, and it is one of the most ancient languages in Europe. Today it is not necessary to show where Kosova is on the map, but often I must point out that the people shown on world TV as having been expelled from their ethnic land are the same people who tried to establish a new philosophy in the Balkans—nonviolent response to institutional violence. This was a different way of thinking, and also of writing. We—mostly writers—founded a nonviolence movement with no gender inequality. Women took part in armed

resistance also, just as they did over the course of many decades to obtain freedom from the Turks as well as from the Serbs. After the war, the year 1999 brought a new reality: male leadership of the UN and Kosova's government. Oh yes, 30% of Kosova's Parliamentarians are women, but this is a farce because they have no real power. Kosova does not need a grotesque theater. In this desperate time Kosova needs effective leadership.

How does this relate to books and gender? No doubt, how writing and reading are perceived is determined by the environment in which they are conducted. As writers all Albanians (not only Albanians from Kosova) are fortunate not to need to look beyond ourselves for material—there is more than we need. Life has pushed us to survive, to analyze, and to write. Kosova was only recently “discovered” by the Western world, even though our Albanian ancestors, the Illyrians, were the founders of what is today known as Western culture. The later contribution of Albanians was not small—it extended from Europe to India. Not many know that the first woman in the world to hold a Ph.D. degree was Albanian—Elena Lukrecia Pescopia, who graduated in the seventeenth century from the University of Padua. Isn't that a remarkable model of female empowerment? However, the creative work of Albanian Kosovar women and Albanian writers as a whole still is not well known.

Writing and reading from the perspective of gender, no doubt, reflects the structure of society. Therefore the destiny of the book in our society is the destiny of woman. Both of them share the destiny of a people struggling for freedom, both in the past and in the recent transitional period. Someone would say that there is always movement. I agree, but when movement is forceful and fast it looks like Hurricane Katrina—it devastates. The sea gets troubled and brings dirty things—malevolent forces dominate the stage, and the prolongation of this transition will lead to the total distortion of the value system. As a consequence, the intellectuals are left to the mercy of time. In this respect, women writers suffer the most. All of them work to secure the means of survival. This applies to all readers as well, and to women readers in particular. This grave situation is the result of the pre-war and war periods, the devastated economy and the undefined final status of Kosova which prevents foreign investment. Writers, who were the initial, founding energy, now are in the twilight zone.

In this regard the guilt is parentless. The governments where Albanians live do not invest much or do not invest at all, and our private businesses are taking their first steps. Others outside of Kosova and the Albanian ethnic territories have just begun to discover us. Book editing is a unique problem in a society with an undeveloped economy and small, mismanaged budget: bread and circuses are well-funded, books are funded very little or not at all. In most of the cases the money for editing goes to the people linked to those in power by cronyism and nepotism. Reading is in decline, for both genders, because it is linked to an economic situation that makes it hard for people to buy books. In spite of this fact, every day there are more women engaged in creative activity. It is a way of struggling to secure their place in society.

2. Gender division—biology and brain

It is very complex to answer the question of what divides man and woman. Is it the physical force of man and learned sneakiness of woman that divides them? Or, is it that men think about global issues and women think about the small issues that make up daily life? This question, I believe, is reflected in the process of writing and reading in today's societies, as well as in the past.

I heard a few days ago that some Native Americans have more than fifty expressions for gender that describe the percentage of male or female characteristics in an individual. Similarly, S. Baron-Cohen, based on his clinical practice, describes clusters of two sorts of brains: *male* and *female*, and concludes that not all men have the typically “male” brain or all women a typically “female” brain.

And of course, the clustering of brains by gender in biological terms does not necessarily mean that those divisions apply to intelligence and talent. In an interview a long time ago I declared that the brain has no gender. I think we are somehow inter-sex persons. Androgyny appears in Greek mythology, and perhaps it was recognized by the Pellasgians before them. Today we see the domination of paternalism in many parts of the world and its negative effects, including those related to books, where again women are affected.

3. Searching for the sources of gender division

Someone might say that women are paying for *Eve's guilt*, but if there is a price to be paid, it is being paid by both genders. It is a matter of power, and power is not given up willingly. This “male power” is not given by the gods and it is not natural. Cultural anthropologists have found that the first gods were women and that they dominated for thousands of years. The power seized by male deities was only a reflection of the seizing of power by men on the earth. We name this period *Patriarchal*, and it has lasted for fewer than four thousand years. The fact of male domination is inherent in the structure of the great religious systems. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, said: *Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands...*; the daily prayer of a Hebrew male begins with: *Blessed Art Thou O Lord our God...who has not made me a woman*; Mohamed said: *When Eve was created, Satan rejoiced*. As a child I didn't want to be anyone's rib. Later I asked: If Adam was so smart, why didn't he prevent Eve's mistake?! The tale of Eve reminds me of the tale of Prometheus. Prometheus was punished because he stole knowledge from God and gave it to human beings. Eve wanted only to feel nature, to be nature.

4. Values / Gender

I am happy to be a woman in these times. The other women who paved the way for us faced immense challenges. Nevertheless, I would be even happier if I could live in the future when people, I believe, will be grouped by their values regardless of gender. Until that time comes,

we must continue to struggle for our place in this world, this world to which we give painful birth and rebirth. And that it is not all.

Life in general and literature in particular deserve to be enriched with the thoughts, feelings and reflections of the other half of this globe.

Let me end with a poem:

After Eve's apple
fire was stolen

and God
is the same again.

How do you put
apple and fire
together

to feel Paradise.