

LITERATURE AS HISTORY AND EDUCATION IN THE MODERN BULGARIAN SOCIETY OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract

Art plays an important role in modern society, including education. The specificity and diversity of its functions make it an integral part of the world cultural heritage, a necessary and irreplaceable part of the modern content of education. If artists and men of letters stand at the border where ignorance turns into knowledge, it is they, with the power of the images they create, being that part of the processes in which the unknown is being transformed into knowledge. The work of Mara Belcheva and Fani Popova-Mutafova, who are pioneers in the imposition of modern artistic norms and historical interpretations, has been examined and analysed: one of them acting with impeccable finesse and spiritual elevation, and the other one - with the power of history. Their works are much more than aesthetic messages. Likewise, their lives also help make palpable the social denunciation of the 19th century with all its historical diversity, culture and attempt to educate the nation.

Keywords: educational, social development, contemporary content.

1. INTRODUCTION

Regardless of whether they are included in the curricula or remain outside the mandatory format of the educational process, there are authors whose influence on social processes determines the significance of their creativity. This fully applies to two women writers who remained in the shadow of the political conjuncture - one of them - in the years between the two world wars, and the other one - in the time of developed socialism; yet their life and work are that merciless and uncompromising a picture of the Bulgarian society thus revealing their social commitment and uncompromisingness of their own value system to the changing circumstances.

2. LITERATURE AS HISTORY AND EDUCATION IN THE MODERN BULGARIAN SOCIETY OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Mara Belcheva and Fani Popova-Mutafova. Their hometown – the town of Sevlievo, is not the only thing they have in common. They are also similar in terms of talent and capabilities, through the power of their creativity and the defense of their life attitude and principles, to be iconic figures in the birth and affirmation of modern Bulgarian literature. At the same time, regardless of the circumstances and vicissitudes of life, to be an epitome of preserved human and ethical norms in the years when the Bulgarian society had to complete the processes of its modernization and self-awareness of that had begun during the Revival. The modernization of society, however, as well as the practical building of the newly re-established state, give rise to a number of problems of moral and practical nature. As well known, creating a value system is a difficult and time-consuming process. Then, a sort of timelessness got established in society, when a number of negative

phenomena erupted. National ideas were forgotten, and in their place was taken by political wrangling, thirst for quick riches, moral impasse... In such case it is even bigger the need to build a literature that is modern in spirit. Part of this process is the work of these two writers - Mara Belcheva, who remained for a long time in the shadow of her famous beloved Pencho Slaveykov, and Fani Popova-Mutafova, whose fate is indicative of everything that happened to the Bulgarian intelligentsia in the transition between two epochs. They both had their own appearance and left a track in Bulgarian literature. Neither of them, however, has been included even in university curricula and textbooks, except as listed names.

Who are they and why are their names worth bringing out of oblivion?

Both Mara Belcheva and Fani Popova-Mutafova are talented artists and socially engaged individuals - either through their works or through their life disposition and actions. Both of them - bravely, yet subtly and elegantly, entered the world of the unknown, taking a piece of it and with the talent and persistence of a pioneer, turning it into an image and a valuable piece of literature.

Mara Belcheva was born on September 8, 1868 in the town of Sevlievo in the family of Ivanitsa Hadji Angelov. She got an extremely high education. She graduated from high school in Veliko Tarnovo and continued her education in Vienna. After a three-year stay, she returned to Bulgaria due to her father's death. She had been a teacher in Rousse and Sofia for several years. In 1886, she married Hristo Belchev, a politician from the People's Liberal Party, who in 1891 was killed in an attempt to assassinate Prime Minister Stefan Stambolov. Having widowed, the extremely beautiful and intelligent Mara Belcheva was a court lady in the palace for a short time. In 1903, she met Pencho Slaveykov, and became his companion until the end of his life in 1912 (Spassova, 2022a).

Thanks to the languages she spoke as well as her endless curiosity and eyes wide open to the world, she managed to get acquainted first-hand with the work of both classical and contemporary authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Gerhart Hauptmann, translating and published a number of their works.

She published her own works for the first time in periodicals in 1907. Her first collection of poems "Steps on the Threshold" was published in 1918. Nevertheless, the positive critical reviews of Vladimir Vasilev and Vasil Pundev failed to overcome the generally accepted opinion of the poetess as an inaccessible beauty, "Hristo Belchev's wife" or "the muse of Pencho Slaveykov", stressing on the resemblance of her poems with Slaveykov's poetics. It was a year later that a critical article by Vladimir Minev, published in *Lisopad* magazine, emphasized the independent poetic voice and creativity of the poetess (Vacheva, 2010).

If only, could I fetch some spring for you in my palms!

In Mara Belcheva's enigmatic and gentle poetry, a woman's love and attitude towards her loved one, built on reciprocity and quiet dreaminess, shines through. And yes, in her works you can definitely find the traces of Slaveykov's verse. But who influenced whom - it's hard to say. The love between them was extremely beneficial for both of them. Pencho Slaveykov himself admitted that "Bloody Song" - his Nobel Prize nomination - was created at the request of Mara Belcheva. "The Swedish Academy is faced with happy and quite extraordinary circumstances to be able to present to Europe an undeniably great poet, the creator of the poetic masterpiece – "Bloody Song" - reads part of the text of Alfred Jensen, who nominated Pencho Slaveykov for the literary distinction.

The poet, for his part, introduced her to the most famous intellectuals of the time and encouraged her to write and translate. Encouraged and guided by him, she kept translating, writing poems and increasingly gained popularity not only in Bulgaria, but also in Europe, as a poet and translator. Love helped them rise above pettiness and backbiting. Misunderstood and rejected, gossiped about and condemned, the "public opinion" had been much more interested in the yellow news about her name, rather than trying to savvy the beauty of her creative work.

My soul you visited again

and made the autumn feel like Easter!

A bright chime in the darkness rang again,

a cherub's wing it must have been.

In her second book *Sonnets*, published in 1925, Mara Belcheva continued to search for the spiritual path that would make her free through faith and in faith. All doubts, pains and reproaches are now only part of that "beyond" which is both path and enlightenment, and the doctrine of love is the prism through which our human existence is measured.

After the death of Pencho Slaveykov, Mara Belcheva, overwhelmed by grief, spent many years abroad.

When she returned to Bulgaria, apart from her fascination with Danovism, she devoted herself to establishing and canonizing the poet in the pantheon of Bulgarian literature. Devoted to her love, with dignity and innate aristocracy she accepts the doom of being a “companion” and “muse”. But not to lose the voice of her heart:

*When I was for their sight a feast,
a vestal and an unrevealed day-dreaming
temptations used to run away from me,
And safely nested I in my own song.*

A year after Slaveykov's death, Belcheva served as a nurse during the Balkan War, and later worked as a teacher.

Along with her philosophical and religious poems, she is one of the Bulgarian poetesses whose poems also reflect wars. But here, too, national and social problems are seen through the prism of philosophical pacification and empathy. Suffering is perceived as part of the test that God had sent to Bulgaria:

*After the storm there will be a calm.
And on their grave a single cross
the sky will put up and stand there.
And the black blood-soaked earth
the plow will scrape again.
Breadfruit spikes will sprout,
feeding the new generation
with anger for its enemies.*

The life and charisma of this unique woman offer multiple plots worthy of a cinematic masterpiece. It is this charisma of hers that marks her life and turns it into a measure of love and devotion and as a poet “out of the box”, as Albena Vacheva calls her (Vacheva, 2010). At the same time, thanks to her attitude towards the world, she is present in the Bulgarian literary space in an unshakeable way. Indeed, without her presence our cultural history would be considerably poorer and incomplete.

She left this world on March 16th 1937, in humiliating poverty, but still proud and timeless. Mara Belcheva - an immortal example of love and empathy, which make the artist significant and necessary.

Tragic yet magnificent is the presence of Fani Popova-Mutafova in our literary history. A daughter of a Tsarist Army general, Fani Popova-Mutafova was born on October 16th, 1902 in Sevlievo, where her mother came from. In 1907, the girl's father was sent to study at the Military Academy in Turin, where he came with his whole family. The Italian city with its century-old and multi-layered history, where the 5-year-old girl was to spend about four years, would forever strengthen her bond with the Italian language and literature. The years of the Balkan Wars followed, when her family had already come back to Bulgaria. She was predestined to meet her husband - Chavdar Mutafov – when she was a high school student and married him at the age of 19. The year was 1922, when the couple left for Munich. There Fanny enrolled to study playing the piano and Chavdar Mutafov - architecture. In her memoirs, she describes this period of their life together as materially poor yet bohemian happy and carefree. Despite her mother's disapproval of her son-in-law, Fani advocated her marriage and her professional choice – the writing. Despite the acquired diplomas and education, both Fani and her husband were lured and devoted to literature. It is no coincidence that in Ivan Sarandev's book *Confessions: 101 x 31* by, where the author has collected the answers of 101 Bulgarian writers to 31 questions, Fani Popova-Mutafova defines her favorite pastime as: “rummaging in libraries with treasure hunter's passion, in chronicles, memoir and records of the most ancient peoples, to bring out from oblivion some very little known name of some very important man. I would not call this an occupation, but rather entertainment. Because if there wasn't an hour when the lights in the reading rooms in the libraries go out, I could wake up without getting tired of reading, searching, sifting tones to find some small precious grain.”; while a most pleasant entertainment she considered: “reading an old favourite book, watching theatre, cinema, listening to music.” (Sarandev, 1995)

Up until 1944, Fani Popova-Mutafova wrote 35 books that reached thousands of Bulgarian readers. Her works were distributed in a circulation of three to six thousand copies, while some of her historical novels reached eight thousand to fifteen thousand copies. This was quite rare an achievement in Bulgarian

literature of that time. She was the most widely read Bulgarian author in that period. She published her first short story in 1924 under the name Fani Dobрева; with her historical prose she became the first woman in Bulgarian literature to touch this subject (Kasabova, 2020b). In 1937 she was awarded by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences as “the first woman to work successfully in the field of historical novels and short stories”, and her book *The Boyana Master* was nominated by the Ministry of Education for best Bulgarian novel of 1939. (Tashev, 2022b)

In her article *The “Little Marquise” or “the Great Bulgarian Martyr - Fani-Popova-Mutafova”* Paulina Nikolova notes that the novels where the writer resurrects the Bulgarian past, “although charged with romanticism, are based on deep scientific knowledge and true recreating the historical truth”. (Novakova, 2020c). Fani Popova-Mutafova’s maturity of considering our past in the context of world history is amazing. She was only 28 years old when *The Thessalonian Miracle Worker* had been published - the first part of the tetralogy about the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Acclaimed by both readers and critics, she was compared to the patriarch of Bulgarian literature - Ivan Vazov.

Some explanation of her exceptional epic talent could be the times she lived in, as well as the socio-political context in our country back then. These are the years after the Balkan War of 1912, the years after the First World War, the years in which Bulgaria was literally torn apart and subjected to severe reparations; or as Pauliana Novakova would put it: “A time when the country was experiencing the bitterness of its national catastrophes and the self-consciousness of the Bulgarians needed to be recharged with the energy of its national ideal.” (Novakova, 2020c).

The combination of historical authenticity, a result of many years of consistent and in-depth research, and romantic narrative, vivid images of characters as well as philosophical interpretation of historical facts make her books irresistible to the audience eager for such readings. Perhaps that’s why her answer to Ivan Sarandev’s question “Which historical figure do you like best?” is: “Kera Tamara, the daughter of Ivan Alexander, who was betrothed to Murad for the sake of the Bulgarian people” (Sarandev, 1995).

Fani Popova-Mutafova would not write about the Middle Ages only - she was interested in, researched and published stories, novels and plays about a number of prominent representatives of the Bulgarian Revival Era- Paisii, Sofroniy, Georgi Sava Rakovski, Hristo Botev, Vasil Levski, Angel Kanchev, Todor Kableshkov. In 1972 she published a biography novel about Dr. Peter Beron, which is still considered one of the best portraits of this remarkable revivalist in Bulgarian literature.

These works can be treated both as literature art and as strict historical testimonies to gain indisputable history knowledge from, and according to one of the most prominent researchers of the author - Katya Zografova: “They are certainly a projection of universal values as Fani Popova is a profound psychologist” (Zografova, 2015). The prominent Bulgarian Prof. Enrico Damiani says that Fani Popova as a woman and mother interprets the female soul ingeniously. Her interest in the psychology of the ruler, the great statesman, as revealed in the image of Tsar Yoan Assen II, is remarkable. But it seems that the most exciting are her female characters in *Kaloyan’s Daughter* and her legendary stories *Great Shadows*.

She, however, had not been spared by Fortuna as she was subjected to most severe and difficult trials. The year is 1944. A turning point in our entire history. After September 9, Fani Popova and her husband were arrested almost immediately. The so-called People’s Court sentenced her to 7 years in prison for “pro-German activities” and “Bulgarian chauvinism” - accusations that stigmatize and condemn to oblivion, and often to death, many Bulgarian intellectuals. Due to the severe asthma, she suffered from, and after her father’s repeated intercessions, she was pardoned and released after 11 months. But the veto on her work remained - it will be no sooner than two decades before they see the light of day again. Additionally, both Fani Popova-Mutafova and her husband were included in the protocol for expulsion from the Union of Bulgarian Writers on charges of fascism, which in fact closed their doors to Bulgarian publishing houses.

Fani Popova had most often been accused of overestimating the role of kings, monarchs, and underestimating the role of the masses. This is far from the truth. In fact, she is deeply balanced in her work, and today we must admit that in the pantheon of images of great personalities she provides spiritual and historical support for future generations, “since, without these great personalities we could not have national self-confidence. It is guiding the writer in her life and creative work, and she pays a very high price for her so-called Great Bulgarian ideas.” (Zografova, 2012)

It was because of these “pro-Bulgarian ideas” that ruthless and cruel years followed. We have this precedent when some Western publishers asked for help the Bulgarian Writers’ Union to contact the writer as they intended to translate some of her books, but the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party advised our writers to answer their Italian colleagues unequivocally: “Tell them she’s dead” (Tell them, 2020a). Considering this retort, will there be a person “without sin” to accuse her of her later redactions in

Kaloyan's Daughter, The Thessalonian Miracle Worker and Yoan Assen II?

Among the most prominent researchers of Fani Popova-Mutafova are Prof. Vera Mutafchieva, Prof. Ivan Duychev, Prof. Mihail Arnaudov – competent scholars and connoisseurs of Bulgarian history, highlight her ability to be a precise researcher of historical facts and sources. She had been researching all available chronicles, using the languages she spoke: Latin, Old French, German, Italian. On the one hand, she strove to keep the most accurate factual knowledge, on the other hand - she had that really rare quality of a great fiction writer who can tell fascinating and colourful stories.

In 1962, when Fani Popova-Mutafova turns 60, for the first time, after the relentless isolation, *Kaloyan's Daughter* is published although with that contradictory preface to the book, which was necessary and demanded by the Communist party conjuncture for “self-criticism”. Based on linguistic and stylistic comparisons, it was even suspected that the writer was not its authentic author but had only given her consent to be published on her behalf. With this compromise, she would make it possible for the readers to reach both her banned and newly written books. This was the end of the isolation of the writer, who survived the pain of denial. She remained true to herself and to the Balkan Mountain which evoked her into existence and raised her, and whose peaks gather winds and storms; and people who resist them – for better or worse. Always proud and capable, standing up for themselves and the truth.

Today, more than ever, we are accountable to the memory of our future generations to bring back from oblivion undeservedly forgotten or banned authors, including Fani Popova-Mutafova. Tried by the People's Court, she had experienced the destiny of many Bulgarians, and not only, intellectuals - from “Hosanna!” to “To be crucified!” Her works still fascinate readers with the colourfulness and fairy-tale atmosphere as well as responsible attitude to history.

3. CONCLUSION

Literature is that border line where artists transform chaos into harmony and maintain their own ethos at the watershed between historical reality and their own aesthetic and humanistic values. We are used to thinking of the modern as of hidden or overt opposite to the traditional. In his study of Stoyan Zaimov's *The Past*, Nikolay Aretov considers real phenomena to be far more complex, since they contain different, sometimes opposing tendencies, “often entering into complex, even conflicting relations, and it is only the observer's point of view that gives advantage to any of them. The diversity of potential viewpoints determines the possibility for the existence of different notions and evaluations. The same applies to literature, and to any larger narrative text.” (Aretov, 2003).

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