

**Merima Omeragić\***

Center for Interdisciplinary Studies

“Profesor dr Zdravko Grebo”

University of Sarajevo

## **The first Bosnian Muslim woman author Nafija Sarajlić, and the rediscovery of her writing in relation to the canon**

The aim of this paper is to analyse the stories by Nafija Sarajlić (1893–1970) in the relation to Bosnian Muslim literary canon, double standards towards women, restrictions, negation, trivialization and inferiority of the female experience. The phenomena described therein are the anxieties of authorship, the literary authority and influence, often overshadowed by the author’s autobiographical relationship with her husband Šemsudin Sarajlić (1887–1960). The focus of the analysis is her decision to stop writing due to family and social reasons. Therefore, from the example of Nafija Sarajlić, the ideal model of the woman-victim, or the Angel in the House, was built into the Muslim [Bosniak] literary canon. This paper will expose the distorted canonical image and feminist neglect of the first noted strategies of resistance to social dominance, as well as provide an explication of the complex position of the woman writer in the public sphere. With this interpretation, keeping in mind the literary injustice done to this author, I represent a cultural reinterpretation of Nafija Sarajlić. This paper offers a gynocritical reading of the works of the first Bosnian Muslim woman prose writer, Nafija Sarajlić, in the context of the historical Muslim Women’s Question and canon. This approach involves the reconstruction of the historical context of Bosnia under the Austro-Hungarians, as well as the particularities of Islamic tradition and culture, thereby highlighting the abandonment of writing.

**Keywords:** canon, Nafija Sarajlić, anxiety of authorship, literary authority, abandonment of writing.

---

\* merima.omeragic@cis.unsa.ba ; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6887-536X>

## 1. Who's afraid of Nafija Sarajlić?

Nafija Sarajlić (1893–1970), hailed as an icon of the contemporary construction of the national Muslim [Bosniak] literary canon, is a challenging scholarly phenomenon. Her figure is placed under the impact of the manipulative processes of canonization in the hands of men, directed at women. Although she represents a minority as a woman who received a ticket to recognition, it is necessary to reflect on the motives of her canonization. This careful research method is essential for identifying and addressing the overlooked aspects of the tradition, shedding light on “the representation of female with the very analytical instruments that caused this subordination” (Latković 2018: 125). In this scholarly context, particular attention should be drawn to the negotiation and struggle that occur within the literary field. The initial aspect concerns the status of women within the literary canon and the issue of the appropriateness of their writing. The succeeding aspect involves a re-evaluation of the author's efforts to influence literary order and to ascertain literary writing merits. The prevailing focus of available research on this author is on her biography, which is not surprising given the implications it might have for the justification of the method of choosing Nafija Sarajlić for inclusion in the literary canon.<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Nafija Sarajlić was among the first women educated to become a teacher, and is also considered to be the first female prose writer in the Bosnian Muslim community. Nevertheless, the aforementioned assertions do not align with the predominant narrative concerning the author's image and public position. The underlying reasons for this discrepancy are not readily apparent. Rather, the emphasis is on the fact that she was the wife of the writer Šemsudin Sarajlić (1887–1960), and the events in her own life that led her to give up both teaching and writing. In other words, it is about “reaffirming her role as a model Muslim woman who abandoned her teaching, as well as writing, careers for the sake of her family” (Omeragić 2023: 96).

The purpose of this article is to include Nafija Sarajlić's work in this context and determine its relevancy. This is part of the process of the “reinterpretation of female authors who have already gone through the chasm

---

<sup>1</sup> The shift in political systems during the 20th century led to Nafija Sarajlić's subsequent decline into literary obscurity, primarily due to her short writing career, and the historical flux of Bosnia's political landscapes. The gender, ideas, and writing style of the author were simply not aligned with the prevailing trends of the time. Interest in the work of Nafija Sarajlić only revived after her death in 1970, when researchers turned their attention back to Muslim literature (Isaković 1972, Idrizović 1977, Salihbegović 1980, Ljiljak 1986, Isaković 1987, Rizvić 1990). During the 90s, this previously limited interest underwent a radical transformation, driven by the establishment of the Bosnian Muslim national literary canon. In this new canon, Nafija Sarajlić occupies a key female role (Duraković, 1995 and 2012, Memija 1997, Brka 1998, Begić 2002, Pirić 2010, Tomašević 2021).

of canonization cancellations and who, after the initial national passions were silenced” (Latković 2018: 125), became its dislocated part. A central concern of this research is to highlight and validate the contributions of Bosnian Muslim women’s literature to Bosnian culture, as well as within the broader South Slavic literary tradition. On the other hand, I aim to intervene in the national interpretations of her work, thereby overcoming isolationist principles and ensuring inclusion in contemporary research streams. Additionally, this research aspires to reinterpret Nafija Sarajlić’s contributions within the context of contemporary feminist discourse, thereby facilitating the formal integration of her work into the domains of local and comparative gynocritics. From the perspective of a gynocritical reading, this paper will interpret the biography and works of Nafija Sarajlić. As defined by Elaine Showalter, gynocriticism is a “female framework for the analysis of women’s literature”, and the mode “to develop new models based on the study of female experience” (Showalter 2012: 28).

In the official national-canonical narrative, Nafija Sarajlić is examined in the light of loyalty to the male discourse. The degree of loyalty is reflected not only in her literary tactics but also in her decision to remain in the private sphere and to assume the roles of mother and housewife. The fundamental characteristics of this discourse are contained in the subjectivity in the estimation of excellence, aesthetic values, and mainstream politics, which, to paraphrase Nina Baym (Baym 1981), are placed at the heart of a particular tradition. The canon manifests a profound asymmetrical and heteronormative structure, rooted in the perpetuation of a model of subordination for female author.<sup>2</sup> These characteristics indicate that the ideal image and patriarchal essence of women in national culture, which are systematically reflected through literary discourse, are crucial to the concept of the canon. According to Lillian S. Robinson, the canon may be perceived as an “entirely gentlemanly artifact” (Robinson 1997: 3) in which women are generally not portrayed “as active agents rather than passive ‘images’ or victims” (Ibid: 6). In light of this perspective, it is possible to revise the processes of canonization that have been marked by distrust of women’s talent, the subsequent labeling of their work as trivial, and the ultimate doubt put forth on their excellence. As Nina Baym has explained, “[t]he critic does not like the idea of women writers, does not believe that women can be writers [...]” (Baym 1981: 124), and therefore,

---

<sup>2</sup> The canon has been the subject of considerable criticism, including, but not limited to, issues of status between high and low forms of literature, an interpretive misreading of female authors, the marginalization of the female experience, and the inadequate representation of female characters by authors (Robinson, 1997), as well as all aspects of male authors’ canon supremacy (Kate Millett, 1969; Ellen Mores, 1976; Elaine Showalter, 1977; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 1979; Annette Kolodny, 1980; Nina Baym 1980, 1992).

they exclude women writers, which leads to their invisibility in the canon itself. But what does it mean to integrate an author like Nafija Sarajlić into an official literary framework, as Nirman Moranjak Bamburać sees the canon as being founded “in the canonization of tradition” (Moranjak Bamburać 2005: 60)? This suggests the question of whether female authors are truly “cemented into canons like icons”, as this researcher asserts, because “in the built-in foundations windows are left for their breasts, so that they can feed their successors” (Ibid: 53).<sup>3</sup> Thus, the edifice of Nafija Sarajlić’s integration into the national canon is predicated on patriarchal conceptions of her life as a victim, particularly the prioritization of her marital and familial duties over her own aspirations. As Melika Salihbegović has described, the literary path of Nafija Sarajlić was as “a victim of the fate of a married woman and mother whose eldest daughter dies” (Salihbegović 1980: 23). The major criticism of her stories was the “underdeveloped plot”, the lack of “literary power to delve deeper into life”, the fact that “she did not deal with the subject in a wider sense”, the “modest artistic power” (Idrizović 1977: 618), and the “unfeminine nature of her writing” as a fidelity to male culture and connection to tradition (Avdagić 2003: 127). In a more general manner, her stories are characterized as “lyrical prose” (Duraković 1995: 11), that is, “lyrical-meditative prose [...] with an accentuated educational appeal and moralizing character” (Duraković 2012: 271). In contrast to the aforementioned major critique, the focal point of this article is not only the revision of her canonized image but also her exposure to the canon through her partnership with her husband, a fellow writer. Moreover, Nafija Sarajlić’s personal written remarks can be examined as her insights on the status of women in the literary field.

In the book *Brnjica za vještice* (2021), Dubravka Ugrišić draws attention to the chronic underrepresentation of women authors in the corpus and canon of Croatian literature. She identifies the contributions of these figures in the form of informative appendices attached to the sketches of epochs in the development of literature, and at the level of diminishing the importance of genres (women’s poetry and children’s literature, romance novels) and authors, such as Cvijeta Zuzorić, who served as muse to male writers. Additionally, this formula was previously elaborated by Dunja Detoni Dujmić (2001), who emphasized how female authors entered the canon due

---

<sup>3</sup> Nirman Moranjak Bamburać proposes that the image in question originates from South Slavic folk or oral poetry, as exemplified by “Zidanje Skadra”. The poem presents a heroine who is sacrificed by her husband in the name of building the city. The woman’s breasts, partially exposed through a narrow opening, serve as the focal point of the image, while the rest of her body is concealed by a wall. It is crucial to highlight the profound sacrifice, as it ultimately reduces her to reproductive function. Even when women are subjected to such practices, patriarchal law forces them to focus on nurturing and preserving their offspring.

to the trend of historical and religious writing, and also due to their focus on mysticism.<sup>4</sup> In her prior work, Dubravka Ugrešić in *Doba kože* (2019) examined the mechanisms of memorization, noting that leading canonical authors, including Ivana Brlić Mažuranić (1874–1938) and Marija Jurić Zagorka (1873–1957), were “the most frequent victims of such [canonical] constellations” (Ugrešić 2019: 172). These comments are of substantial importance within the context of Bosnian Muslim literature and women writers. In the particular example of Nafija Sarajlić, we encounter two phenomena: the underrepresentation of female figures in the traditional canon and the crucial issue of the hesitation to approach a gynocritical revision of her canonical position. This phenomena occurs through processes of codification in literary history, incommensurability in reception, institutional denial of their authorship, and even the legalization of timely recognition. The purpose of this article is to challenge both phenomena.

The research on the canonization practices of Nafija Sarajlić is absent from the Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Bosniak [Muslim] micro-planes. The motivation behind this phenomenon is primarily stemming from the reluctance to challenge the prevailing discourses that uphold the authority of the established canon, to paraphrase Annette Kolodny (1980), at “the expense of half of the population” (Kolodny 1980: 19). It is also relevant to consider the reduced need for revision, as such approaches are often met with resistance due to their potential conflict with the established canon and its “discriminatory cultural practices” (Ugrešić 2021: 44). Women frequently play an active role in the preservation of the established literary canon. The behavior is due to the fact that “women workers in the field of literature often listen to unwritten, deeply rooted – perfidious rules out of a desire to be admitted to the gates of the canon” (Omeragić 2024: 217). In this pursuit, they tend to select subjects that are more aligned with a gynocritical perspective towards canon ideology. The “recognition” of a writer, such as Nafija Sarajlić, does not guarantee that her biography and work will be revalued, despite the urgency to resist the ideological apparatus that adapted her to the canon.

In the article “Nevolje s kanonizacijom”, which is among the few that takes as its point of discussion the relationship of women authors with national canons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author Nirman Moranjak Bamburać identifies models of representation that are organized “in the context of the patriarchal code, the context of ‘general’ humanity, the context of physicality/eroticism, or in the epic code” (Moranjak Bamburać 2005: 67). All models

---

<sup>4</sup> As feminophile research indicates, Croatian women writers, despite the diverse subjects they addressed and their innovative methods, were conscious of social and “traditionally conditioned male supremacy” (Detoni Dujmić 2001: 182).

that reinforce the canon by incorporating others, are put in the fundamental service of subordinating women authors. They also facilitate the production of these women as effective signifiers of “absence—not only the excess of the hierarchical model of canonization, but also of an entire alternative and suppressed history” (Ibid: 71).<sup>5</sup> The biography and prose of Nafija Sarajlić were approached from in a series of readings that did not give consideration to the harmfulness of her canonically excluded inclusion, nor to the local nor the wider historical context. Existing interpretations both historical as in the case of Celia Hawkesworth (2000), and pro-feminist by Anisa Avdagić (2003), Vildana Pečenković and Nermina Delić (2015), Zlatan Delić, and Ifeta Lihic et al. (2017) were determined by the positive discrimination toward the work and life of Nafija Sarajlić, but also by the failure to consider her resistance strategies, while confirming the idea of her affirmation of the masculine discourse and system. Fabio Giomi (2015, 2021), in contrast, has recreated the significant historical context of women’s writing during the Austro-Hungarian administration. Giomi’s analyses, however, have not undergone a more detailed examination of aspects of the stories by Nafija Sarajlić, specifically those to which the storyteller refers to questions of the canon. In her article “The Muslim Women’s Question and the Emancipatory Potential of Nafija Sarajlić’s Literary Work in the South Slavic and European Context” (2023), Merima Omeragić reconstructed Nafija Sarajlić within a macro context, aiming to explore the reflections of the teacher’s vocation in the narratives.

In a similar way that Toril Moi (2002) demanded a feminist re-evaluation of Virginia Woolf, in the feminist text in which the author was exposed to readings according to which the author is “insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds that seem to exclude her fiction” (Moi 2002: 18). Toril Moi posits that this action is indicative of an underlying unconscious dynamic that does not effectively challenge the prevailing institutions and interpretations that dominate the field. This article will aim to reinterpret Nafija Sarajlić’s oeuvre within literature and feminism. The main focus of this article is on the collection of stories by Nafija Sarajlić *Teme* (1986), which was published posthumously, and 70 years (1986)<sup>6</sup> after their initial appearance in the journals *Zeman* and *Biser* (1912 –1918). Despite her

---

<sup>5</sup> The article to which I am referring, although it describes the analysis of another canonized author, Jasmina Musabegović and her novel *Skretnice*, is important because of the author’s effort to create a foundation for approaching the research of mechanisms and patterns on which the position and figure of the Bosnian Muslim woman in the national canon is produced.

<sup>6</sup> The publication of a book in Mostar was planned in 1916, but postponed due to World War I. After a lengthy interval, the first edition was finally published in 1986, when Zadrugar printed her first collection under the title *Teme*.



presence in the established literary canon due to her markedly dissonant voice, the central focus of this research is an in-depth literary analysis of her stories, which encapsulate specific elements that we identify as canonical. These elements serve to more dynamically ascertain the author's standpoint and her relationship to her own literary work and text, as well as to social movements.

With this theoretical context I will provide the analysis not only of Nafija Sarajlić's prose but also of her connection to literature, and to the patriarchal law of literary canon seen through feminist literary criticism. On the first level, I will shed light on the textual relation between the author and the Bosnian Muslim literary canon with key characteristics of a masculine literary authority and a history of critical reception. The strategic objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by woman author, including the impact of her husband's authoritative role on her own literary pursuits, the anxiety of authorship and the challenges she faced in her personal life. Ultimately, this study will address the phenomenon of women authors abandoning their professional literary and writing endeavors. In particular, this level engages in a careful explication of the context of the emancipatory strides made by Bosnian Muslim women with particular attention to the unique characteristics of their tradition and culture.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the subject of analysis is of crucial importance to the objective of the article, which is to innovate the study of Bosnian-Herzegovinian literature and to integrate the topic of the Bosnian Muslim woman into academic discourse.

## **2. Context: The Muslim Women's Question in Bosnia and Nafija Sarajlić**

The life and stories of Nafija Sarajlić, the first Bosnian Muslim woman writer, were influenced by the change in culture that happened when the Ottoman (1463–1878) and Austro-Hungarian (1867–1918) systems shifted. The sociopolitical microcontext of her life and work was significantly influenced by domestic social movements that gave rise to significant inquiries. This is primarily evident in the educational policies initiated by the new Austro-Hungarian administration, which advocated imperialist values and industrial needs with the objective of integrating the previously non-

---

<sup>7</sup> These emancipatory steps occurred during the historical period of the Austro-Hungarian administration over the territories that are parts of contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina (1887–1914).

participating female population into the working class.<sup>8</sup> The emancipatory aspect of education has been demonstrated to provide women with a significant source of economic independence, as well as the opportunity to lead debates on “issues contested in everyday life” and “for a broadening of women’s access to public roles” (Offen 2000: 29). This trajectory was also observed in the suffragette movement in Europe, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its provinces, which posed a substantial challenge to the emancipation of women. It was the Bosnian Muslim women themselves and their community that initiated the Muslim Women’s Question. The issues raised by this decades-long debate were based on “hijab, cultural and educational emancipation, participation of Muslim women in public life [...], women’s rights in Islam, and employment and work outside the home” (Kujraković 2009: 101). This led to the development of a polemic within the broader context of progress and modernity in post-Ottoman Bosnia.<sup>9</sup> The basic question that arose there was “re-examining the current position of Bosniak women in society and the family” (Ibid: 103). In fact, the gist of the argument was that “women began to be considered unfit to accomplish their role as mothers and educators of future generations, and then became an object of reform and regeneration” (Giomi 2021: 4). The space that opened up for these women was primarily due to their intellectual and humanitarian efforts and organizational work.<sup>10</sup>

Nafija Sarajlić was born in 1893 in the Sarajevian tailor and merchant family Hadžikarić. In a social environment characterized by the Muslim community’s deliberate auto-isolation, motivated by a desire to preserve their cultural heritage and religion, the writer’s father Avdaga Hadžikarić made the groundbreaking decision to educate all his daughters, including Nafija, as well as her four sisters. Nafija Sarajlić went to *Hermanovice ruždija* (Hermanovica’s Muslim female primary school) and then attended a *Muslimanska ženska preparandija* (Muslim women’s teacher school). Consequently, they became among the first Bosnian Muslim women to receive a formal education, the highest available for girls in Bosnia at the time. The difficulty for Muslim

<sup>8</sup> The official administration gradually took a lax line toward the conservative Muslim community, as their attitudes regarding public non-religious education were motivated by the practice of separating male and female children in classrooms and schools.

<sup>9</sup> The Muslim Women’s Question was started in 1908 and ended in 1950, with the Law Prohibiting the Veil and Bourque in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). The discourse was characterized by a dichotomy between traditional and modern strands, exemplified by the community’s stance on Islam and Sharia on the one hand, and the recognition of Western achievements and the emergence of feminist global movements on the other.

<sup>10</sup> During the first half of the 20th century, these included the *Gajret* (1903) and *Osvitanje* (1919) societies. It is also important to point out the publication of the first Bosnian Muslim women’s magazine as part of the movement of the same name, the action committees and the women’s section. Unfortunately, the magazine *Dulistan*, which was dedicated to the social and cultural empowerment of Muslim women, was published for only a brief period from March to May of 1926.



girls to attend school and then to enter professional work is described by Mina Kujović, who states that in 1911 the Ulema-Medžlis did not allow the establishment of a *Muslimanska ženska preparandija* because of the Sharia law<sup>11</sup> regarding the veiling of women, as well as the prohibition on them working in public schools (2010). Those rare Bosnian Muslim girls who were trained as teachers as part of their courses were only able to work in Muslim religious schools for girls, known as *mektebs*. This is primarily due to the perception of this position as “extensions of the motherly role and therefore less threatening to men’s professional interests” (Offen 2000: 96). Pedagogical work was instrumental in catalyzing emancipation processes. For Nafija Sarajlić, that was her entry into the field of emancipation, as she was “allowed to pursue her educational work and thus become a part of public life” (Omeragić 2023: 96). In her semi-autobiographical story *Rastanak*, she depicts the unfortunate ordeal her protagonist faced when she was disciplined by school authorities for her endeavor to offer additional educational instruction to female students. Nafija Sarajlić’s tenure as a teacher was brief, lasting a mere three years. Her decision to leave the profession was “by collusion between institutions and the school system [which] were reflected in her personal life when, at her husband’s request, she left her post and the teaching profession” (Omeragić 2023: 102–103). Nafija Sarajlić’s husband, as her daughter Nerdetta Sarajlić has noted, believed that his wife’s primary responsibilities were to prioritize her family and raise her children.<sup>12</sup>

Nafija Sarajlić burst onto the literary scene at the same time as her teaching career, coinciding with a period of intense controversy surrounding Muslim Women’s Question. While men have dominated discussions, Muslim women authors and intellectuals have also taken part in the debate about their own emancipation. Therefore, it is necessary to reemphasize the connection between emancipation through education and the fact that, for the first time, women authors expressed their opinions and experiences in the form of “women’s writings of that time which remains mostly unknown or marginalised until today” (Petrović 2019: 56). This subject was also addressed by authors who were educated and oriented towards tradition, including Nafija Sarajlić.

The period of the creation of her works was marked by a noteworthy controversy between traditionalists and modernists and with the Muslim

<sup>11</sup> Sharia is a set of religious laws based on the interpretation of the Quran. During the Austro-Hungarian rule, this legal system was inherited by the Ottoman Empire in the Bosnian Muslim community. It remained in effect until the end of the Second World War. Contrary to the rigid views often associated with Sharia, Islam actually promotes the emancipation of women through education, as education is considered an obligation (farz).

<sup>12</sup> The oral testimonies of Nafija Sarajlić’s daughter are retrieved from the text: “Nafija Sarajlić, književnica, intelektualka i borac za prava žena: Muškarcu se ne ustaje, pa makar to bilo i dijete”.

Women's Question. It heralded "modernism as a movement promoting a reform of the social position of the Muslim woman and her status" (Kujraković 2009: 119). This issue was important for the Muslim community due to traditional attire, educational and cultural emancipation, Islam and employment (Kujraković 2009). Even though it was unable to start its feminist movement, Bosnia changed profoundly during that period. Imperial education policy aimed at the female population triggered a broader conversation about the women's position in society. The Muslim Women's Question initiated the creation of the model for the modern European Muslim women. In the particular case of a Bosnian Muslim woman, this model reflected the predominance of traditional over modern values of economic empowerment and proper education. Under the influence of the intellectual elite, which advocated for the Sharia tradition, the problem was reduced to female morality. It was defined by Islamic teachings and a "patriarchal viewpoint of the society of that time; about a Muslim woman as a proper mother, wife and housewife who has to be educated to respond to challenges in her family and society" (Jahić 2015: 119). The discussion was primarily dominated by men, "but there were also the voices of women and girls, educated in schools and religious schools, who promoted the rising interest of the female generation towards education" (Ibid: 118). The rare female voices in the public spaces came from the press. The few women involved in the question mostly wrote under an alias. Hasnija Berberović Vahida (1893–?), Šefika Bjelevac Nesterin (1894–1927), Hatidža Đikić (1889–1918), Nafija Zildžić (1888–1941), and Nafija Sarajlić were among those who wrote texts for different journals. Nevertheless, there were more proponents vying for the traditional strengthening of the private sphere or "stressing motherhood and domesticity as the best and most fulfilling course for women" (Giomi 2015: 8). But even this challenge to traditional values and the opening up of access to education did not mean a rejection of the veil "or a challenge to the sexual and confessional segregation of Muslim women" (Ibid: 6).

Nusret Kujraković (2009) pointed out that only an educated woman could contribute to the process of the Muslim community's exit from a deep material and spiritual crisis. The writings of Nafija Sarajlić with her protofeminist awareness about education articulates women as instigators of the reform of the role of Muslim woman disposed towards a social renaissance. An important phenomenon that marked the works of Nafija Sarajlić is the relationship to writing or viewing her literary work as a profession. The canon erases the woman writer and classifies her today under the terms of a woman-victim model. The dangerous model of the victim in contemporary culture is the place for the creation of the desirable figure of the Bosnian Muslim woman.

### 3. Canon trouble

In her writing, Nafija Sarajlić sheds light on the position of women in Bosnian Muslim society, and the clash between Islamic and universal values, which are symbolized by a man. In her stories, she depicts the difficulties of Bosnian Muslim women's lives, the choices and societal pressures that place them in the appropriate sphere of the home, as well as their contact with the male-centered world of literature and the primary processes of canonicity. An existing oversight in the interpretation of Nafija Sarajlić's work, and even her subordinate position in the canon, is related to the lack of decoding the coded messages of gender inequality, which will be analyzed in the further course of the article. Beyond the reintegration and reconstruction of the Bosnian Muslim women's tradition in itself, but also in the broader comparison that this study foresees, a new reading aspires to something that Lillian S. Robinson challenges in the literary canon lists as a "the feminist efforts to humanize the canon" (Robinson 1983: 86). In addition to interventions in the canonization of women writers, this work will disrupt leading biases regarding women writers on the basis of their sex and gender, affirming their struggles for voice and social position. This strategy will achieve the goals of the research, summarized in national reaffirmation. It will also reinforce criticism of canons based on author negative experience.

Negative connotations of heroines and women writers are a product of a rigid gender double standard. It is not only an issue of its time, but it "still remains in the literary world. The man still stands as the dominant figure, and the woman is forced to 'prove' her worthiness" (Howell 2015: 25). The concept of female inferiority has its roots in socially delegated gender differences, which Elaine Showalter sees as a condition of critical discourse in the evaluation of novels by female authors, which are "recognizably inferior to those by men" (Showalter 2009: 76). The fundamental assumption of this set of stereotypes is that not just the female body, but also the female mind, is "an inferior instrument" (Ibid: 76). The second determinant from the binary patriarchal pair of philosophical mindsets is the opposite superiority. In the literary field, the symbolization of a man as an authority is maintained by the concept of superiority, while a woman is defined "by restrictive notions of the role of women" (Landy 1988: 21), and the image of herself in literature "is that of silence" (Ibid: 20). As women writers were beginning to see their own position in the sphere of literature, they were also working on breaking the myths about gender.

A different deliberation of the canon, when it comes to Nafija Sarajlić's prose, is how she argues against the notion of substandards and

imputed inferiority. A new evaluation with a focus on the imbalance of the literary hierarchy and the silencing of the female experience is affirmed through examples from the author's prose and biography. I will concentrate on the described discouragement of women writers through the relationship with her writer-husband, anxiety of authorship, and the vow of silence as an abandonment of writing.

Appropriating the writer by the national canon is aided by the powers to glorify the victim as an exalted pattern. In this sense, the context of Bosnian and Herzegovinian women writers who position in the canon is important, as they are "part of the literary game and a symptom of its symbolic excess" (Moranjak Bamburać 2005: 71). The prevailing canonical perspective on Nafija Sarajlić is that she was the wife of the writer Šemsudin Sarajlić. The fact that she abandoned her writing career to prioritize her familial responsibilities and raise her children is frequently discussed in an affirmative light. The third problematic aspect concerns the emphasis on the modesty of her work, which lacks a thorough analysis of her prose. The canonical image of Nafija Sarajlić is constructed upon these three profoundly patriarchal foundations. In a specific sense, Nafija Sarajlić's personal history functioned as a key that unlocked the door to the canon for her. Nafija Sarajlić paid the price for entering the canon by becoming a model of the victim. Indeed, an inadequate focus on Nafija Sarajlić serves to reinforce the prevailing male-dominated canon, thereby perpetuating their order, standards and distributed positions. Consequently, this persistent allusion to the women's role is a constant reminder of their marginalization and underrepresentation in the literary field. The sensationalization of Nafija Sarajlić's life has contributed to a distorted image in the canon and to restrained readings. Submission to the canon through history, as well as the reception of the writer's work, appear as the product of the stereotypes about the female sex. It is a reflection of the social women submission, or the way in which the artistic leads the gender "ideology into an ideal, into a myth that works to extend precisely that which it obscures its provenance" (Jehlen 1981: 578). The image of Nafija Sarajlić was created, because she openly spoke about the difficult experience of being a Muslim woman. The grievous injustice to her in the reception can be rectified through a re-vision of the canon. To do this means prioritizing the analysis of the heroine and writer in a way that, as Myra Jehlen states, places at its center "an investigation whose categories and terms [are] derived from the world of female experience" (Ibid: 56). To that end, the feminist scholars' task also contains what Lillian S. Robinson (1983) names a protest against the systematic neglect of women in the canon. Nafija Sarajlić's prose and her experiences of the culture against the modernization of the women,

needs to be based on examination of the canon's features. "We have to return to confrontation with 'the' canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes" (Robinson 1983: 96). The return to the canon shall mark the articulation of the different spectrum of troubles with canons that women have defined.

Women's resistance to a canon could be understood from the manner of representation of the figure and subject of the author, pinned down by her inability to articulate herself. In her semi-autobiographical story *Teme*, Nafija Sarajlić speaks of "a female writer's struggle to define herself as a writer" (Schwartz & Thorson 2017: 41). Nafija Sarajlić and her heroine are struggling to be an accomplished author, but instead they are establishing themselves in relation to the culture of male authority. The relationship between Nafija and her husband Šemsudin Sarajlić, the writer and her "role model, teacher and the first critic" (Tomašević 2021: 189), constitutes the basis of the story. In general, this is a well-known, canonical model of discourse about women writers and the ways in which they are subordinated, but it is also, as Marcia Landy (1988) suggests, an important link that needs to be analyzed in order to understand the influence of social structures on the writer and on the art itself. Such a discourse, which assumes that women are by nature more family-oriented than men, embodies the biographical records. This literally means that "the biographies of women authors chronologically integrate information about their marriages and children into the text" (Tuchman & Fortin 1984: 80). As in the example of Nafija Sarajlić, in Bosnian Muslim literature, female authors are biographically described based on their relationships with men, as was Šefika Bjelevac for her marriage to the writer Abdurezak Hivzi Bjelevac (1886–1972), and Hatidža Đikić in relation to her brother writer Osman Đikić (1879–1912).

The question arises as to what this outward classification of women authors actually generates. The response to this is to be found in their voices. Nafija Sarajlić put her protagonist woman writer in "opposition to a male character who makes a decision about the value of the literary work, someone who publishes literary work and creates what is called canon" (Delić 2016: 79). With the story *Teme*, the position of the woman writer is mapped within the cleric-patriarchal surroundings. The field of public space implies the existence of the male authority, which comes with the intention to discourage women in their efforts to write. In the conversation between spouses in the story, two angles of the same problem appear: patronizing by the author to the woman author, and the concept of anxiety of authorship. Struggling to use words to articulate art, without predecessors and with different experiences of the literary canon, a woman author becomes fearful in her attempt to master

writing. Consequently, the author turns to a man who is a “precursor incarnate of patriarchal authority” and attempts to “enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel / monster) drastically conflicting with her own sense of herself — that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity” (Gilbert & Gubar 1984: 48). With her story, the author confirms this hierarchy and distribution of power – for, the author asking her husband for “his opinion she asks him to read ‘a few themes that [she’s] tried out’ (Sarajlić 2010: 262). The text concludes with his response” (Schwartz & Thorson 2017: 41–42), which included confirmation of reading, corrections, and finally a rebuke to the question of whether her writings were valuable:

*‘Beginners should not ask this question. When a person feels a drive to work toward the greater good, he should do so, all possible recognition notwithstanding.’*

*And I understood that he approved.*

*Therefore, here I have strung together a few themes that could be expanded if there were only more leisure time, but that is unattainable to me (Sarajlić 2010: 263).*

The dynamic between the heroes mirrors the woman’s submissive role as an author, a sentiment that underpins the atmosphere of the story. The imbalance in the relationship serves to reinforce the discourse and rigid responses exhibited by the way the hero regards her authorial needs, and interaction. This quotation lends further insight into the phenomenon of “their internalization of restricting views of their creative potential” (Landy 1988: 21). Nafija Sarajlić offers an illustration of how the response of an authority figure, in this case the heroine’s husband, to her literary endeavors, exerts a decisive influence on the female concept of self-valorization. In sum, the author uses this dynamic to capture the heroine’s consciousness as a dependent self who cannot, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar judge for the Victorian model of womanhood, “take seriously the struggle of authors or their characters for self-sovereignty” (Gilbert & Gubar 1984: xxxviii). The narrator’s timid approach in asking for her male authority’s approval to write is an act that determines the prominence of her identity as a woman author. The heroine struggles with the contradiction triggered by the creative need and conditions of gender determination in the historical moment. This phenomenon establishes a context for an experiential position, though culturally specific that is reflected in the narrative and that has been found to be a universal experience of women writers: the anxiety of authorship. This



concept is delineated by the two aforementioned researchers as “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (Ibid: 49).

This story *Teme* also points to consumption of time for the woman in a household. In the end, “probably justifying the shortness of her texts, she says that they are sketches which could be built upon in the time of leisure, unattainable to her” (Memija 1997: 250). The interpretative accent is placed on the power relations between the characters. That imbalance is the mechanism through which the woman writer is kept in the culturally desirable position – in the private sphere. Before she dares to ask him about his readings of her notes, the husband-writer categorically retorts: “The books you are reading, I’ve read them before; carry on with your fancywork; I have far too many affairs of my own; and housekeeping is the least of my concerns” (Sarajlić 2010: 261).

Establishing his superiority, the writer represents the patriarchal expectation in relation to prescribed female duties. The heroine should learn from her husband, the writer. In terms of her biography, a bit of information provided by Nafija Sarajlić’s granddaughters about her relationship with her husband Šemsudin is important: “when she got married, she had a complex about our late grandpa, because grandpa was already an established name and his works had been published”.<sup>13</sup> This complex, which describes the relationship between the spouses, is central to the opposition of the woman writer and the male writer. Women writers cannot identify with men because they have a different experience of a writer’s identity. This is why Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine the importance of male authority in the construction of the female writer’s personality in the sphere of “the fierce power struggles in which they engage in their efforts of self-creation, yet seem to the woman writer directly to contradict the terms of her own gender definition” (Gilbert & Gubar 1984: 48). Her identity is defined within a hiatus of the desire to create and the discouragements which are created by the cultural binary matrixes.

When Nafija Sarajlić’s heroine evaluates her own writings by reducing their importance, she does so in accordance with society’s dominant ideas about family life. From description of her own attitude towards writing, it is possible to see that her heroine lacks the resistance to the effects of socialization which begin with “a battle for self-creation [which] involves her in a revisionary process” (Ibid: 49). This can be read in her description

---

<sup>13</sup> See: oral testimony of the Nafija Sarajlić’s granddaughters: Kapetanović, Tarik, “Priča o Nafiji Sarajlić”, posted August 8, 2016, by Tarik Kapetanović channel, YouTube, 8.43’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INh8xPvjbxM> (last access: 2025-03-19).

of writing on “papers” and creating “little things” and “weak expressions”. Nafija Sarajlić’s work also lacks the revolt against the patriarchal literary system which could have helped her to become a writer for the rest of her life. In addition to the aforementioned descriptions of her own weak expression and little things, Nafija Sarajlić also referred to her work in this story with the epithets “modest attempts”. In the story *Teme*, she describes the feeling of anxiety of authorship, based on which she builds her relationship with the authority: “I don’t have many of them, only a few attempts – I accepted a couple of papers and raised them in my hand. I recognized them easily, because there were corrections of my weak contents in a few places” (Sarajlić 2010: 261, 263).

The issue here is the women writers’ realization that “their work was viewed as sub-standard and unimportant, but instead of deterring them from writing, it seems to have made them all the more determined to succeed and make their voices heard” (Ryan 2010: 80). The problem with the self-evaluation of one’s writing stems from the lack of literary predecessors, which is exemplified by the way that Nafija Sarajlić’s writing manifests itself as pioneer work in prose. But because she is alienated as an outsider, where does she fit in without a history of her own? Canonical approaches to literature are distinguished by a system that reward work by male authors with the highest reviews, while works of women authors are assessed on relatability and whether it is at all significant. Such a position results in a marginalization of women authors.

The character of the story, an author named Muhamed, refuses to read what his wife wrote, mocking the form of writing, style and even her effort. The heroine of the story accepts the normative ideals of writing, but she is curious to hear her husband’s comments, because this will sway how she feels about the worth of her writings. Through her descriptions of anxiety surrounding her belief in herself as an author, the critics are left with the first trace of feminine awareness of their position and the problem of writing.

Her doubt in herself as a woman writer is further complicated by the restraints imposed by the character Muhamed. The character as authority prevents his wife’s writing with his ironic comments, and his underestimation of any form of female literary expression. “In any text then, male readers who find themselves outside of and unfamiliar with the symbolic systems that constitute female experience in women’s writings, will necessarily dismiss those systems as undecipherable, meaningless, or trivial” (Kolodny 1980: 6). Trivialness as a weakness is associated with the works of women writers. A similar pattern emerges in the example of Nafija Sarajlić, who, as described in the introduction to this article, has mostly been criticized for the weakness of

her work. However, the gap between the complicated situation of abandoning writing and, on the other hand, the contemporary canonization aimed at reinforcing the patriarchal structures of the Bosnian Muslim literary canon, sheds light on the dilemmas about the insignificance of work that Nafija Sarajlić faced and referred to in her stories.

The main problem is the lived experience of the female sex and identity within a certain culture. In that sense, the heroine and Nafija Sarajlić create an intimate ambience the figure of the ideal passive woman. In their historical space, they both write an *écriture* which is different from the recommended role model. The text is created based on “the differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones who make a difference in female writing” (Showalter 2009: 9). Cynthia G. Wolff starts with the assumption that exclusion from the public sphere determines “the woman’s role so that an accommodation can be made between public and private” (Wolff 1972: 206). Through her gender, text and experience, the woman writer becomes excluded from the canon due to being inferior to man. The expressions of the character of the story are the reflection of this domination visible through his syntagms which denounce woman writing: “‘ah’ and ‘wah’” poetry, discussions, dramas with “male women and strange language”, novels “with the role model – a heroine – guzzling and spending the wealth”. Those texts “hurt” Muhamed, because they did not have a didactic note that appeals to women, “even more so since nothing appeals to them – no matter what is being written for them – because they do not read it” (Sarajlić 2010: 262). The character’s comments are a product of the negative reception of women’s literature.

Even though the critical text ties Nafija Sarajlić to her husband, in some cases her prose has been evaluated as that of a higher quality. Alija Isaković praises Nafija Sarajlić and “her witty, lively conversation, clean language and mild sarcasm, concise” (Isaković 1987: 43). Even though the claim that she outdid her contemporaries, as well “her husband Šemsudin, who was incomparably more famous in the literary circles” (Idrizović 1977: 619), critics emphasize the impact that Nafija Sarajlić’s husband left on her work. It is certain that the major influence he left on her definitely separated Nafija Sarajlić from her writing. Her prose is distinguished by “formal innovation and experimentation – it has commonly been referred to as literary modernism” (Schwartz & Thorson 2017: 27). As Agatha Schwartz and Helga Thorson explained, Nafija Sarajlić shaped a genre “emphasizing women’s experiences”, which “shows how these genre experiments accentuated gender related realities or inequalities” (ibid: 34, 41). Nafija Sarajlić subverts writing, offering a chronicle of the lives of Muslim women and their social struggles.

Nafija Sarajlić's book of stories, *Teme*, is an innovative work, formed with the economy of women's time. The author's prose is deeply feminine, original and vivid, critical about her own work and society (Idrizović 1977), and very didactic (Ljiljak 1986).

This is defined by the attitude towards the Bosnian Muslim woman, or as Alija Pirić (2010) states in the patricentric literature of the revival, the conditions are defined by education, the nonexistence of a literary foremother, disapproved writing, descriptions in androcentric texts and with the role of the housekeeper and protector of family values. "[Nafija Sarajlić] was denied the possibility of narrative autoreflexion", and therefore her writing gains value on the road of its disruption of the "androcentric canon of the traditional culture" (Duraković 2012: 303). The fact remains that Sarajlić's stories "shook certain opinions that women should only deal with housework and take care of their children to their foundation" (Ljiljak 1986: 15).

Emphasizing the information about the writer's pioneer work is a part of the canonical narrative. This is the way national literature builds an affirmative image of its own diversity, and celebrates a harmless figure of a woman whose writing was subordinate to her family. The former can be traced in the literary anthology *Biserje* where the editor Alija Isaković emphasizes that "Sarajlić had no forerunners in the environment from which she arose" (Isaković 2002: 300). Also, Aleksandar Ljiljak underlines that the author "could not have had a role model in the Bosnian Herzegovinian 'female prose' for the simple reason that we only meet female fiction writers later in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Ljiljak 1986: 7). In her readings, Celia Hawkesworth identifies Nafija Sarajlić as a writer of "evident talent whose sketches certainly deserve a be better known" (Hawkesworth 2000: 254, 256). Zlatan Delić signalizes the "inability to articulate the feminine literary creation through the figure of the female subject which writes [...] and the male character who makes a decision about the valorization of the literary work, as someone who publishes literary works and creates what will become canon" (Delić 2016: 79). Nafija Sarajlić's prose must be uncovered in the dimension of the importance of the female literary subject's articulation – who writes about problems with her own quill, but who also makes decisions which point towards the inability to act.

Along with the shaking of the traditional family models through educational campaigns, the Austro-Hungarian policies on female employment were also highly important as a part of the Muslim Women's Question. Other than the economic independence of women and the strengthening of a woman's authority, a special aspect of the discussion was about women's clothing style and the Sharia laws that prohibited mingling with men, and whether Muslim

women can/should be permitted do work. As has already been pointed out, Nafija Sarajlić was also in a rare profession in which women were expected to try their hand. She left teaching and “agreed to this [her husband’s] request without a dilemma [...] and dedicated herself to the upbringing and education of her children”.<sup>14</sup> The profession of the writer was determined by the forced return to the private sphere. The decision was made based on the imperatives of family authority, and this action confirms the degree of social reduction and the struggle of educated Bosnian Muslim women to “confront a traditional and religious ideology” (Omeragić 2023: 103). The point is that despite the education and aspirations of Muslim women, the difference between men and women was reinforced by the asymmetry between them and the traditional view of both education and profession. Preparing women to be teachers meant that this knowledge would help them in “childrearing and the administration of the domestic space” (Giomi 2015: 6). But Nafija Sarajlić is not the isolated author who automatically adopted this traditional model of the mother-educator, even if it led to her ultimate retreat.

The fundamental assumption, that is, the precondition for women writers who want to write professionally, was stated by Virginia Woolf. In the essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), this author states that a “woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved” (Woolf 2015: 3). These necessities for writing are preconditions that relate to the position of a woman writer and the problem of writing in the context in which it is being written. A specific symbol which is present in Nafija Sarajlić’s fiction is the motif of the writing desk. In her story *Teme*, the heroine invokes the desk and directs the antagonist to it, as it becomes the part of an ideological current and our model for elementary deliberation about the condition of women’s own writing.

‘And why don’t you cast a glance at my desk, to see what’s there on it?’ ...  
 ‘Ah, you don’t know – I tell him, hesitantly – there are also manuscripts on my desk’ (Sarajlić 2010: 261).

The narrator’s manuscripts “share space on her desk with her embroidery and the household bills to which she must attend” (Schwartz & Thorson 2017: 42). The literary text struggles for time with the family. Nafija Sarajlić’s stories reflect brevity and simplicity because of the lack of time and the effect of anxiety of authorship. Cynthia G. Wolff (1972) identifies the problems of entering an appropriate marriage and motherhood and

---

<sup>14</sup> The oral statement of Nerdeta Sarajlić, the daughter of Nafija (see: 2017).

accepting the private sphere as the exclusion of the women from literature. The role of women in the family unit includes not only the care of children and other family members, and the organization of time and resources, but also a system of power distribution under the authority of the husband. In contrast to the authoritative husband, there are wives who, as Gisela Bock puts it, “support the man through their work” (Bock 1992: 3). In light of this experience in the private sphere, what is left for female authors, apart from the internal examination of themselves? In fact, let us recall Elaine Showalter’s characterization of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s letters, in which this author struggled “between her womanly love and ambition for her husband and her conflicting commitment to her own work” (Showalter 2012: 30). The revision of the institution of marriage is marked by an analysis of women’s intervention in public life, i.e., the courage of women writers to document, question and provoke men’s responses.

The accent is placed on femininity and social interpolation of the biological and familial characteristics. The doubt created between the expectations and the needs is heightened with the idea that women need to, for their own good, accept the “restraints of male-dominated marriage; for their intelligence, however great, cannot compensate for biological inadequacy” (Wolff, 1972: 214). Nafija Sarajlić and her heroine are examples of a woman’s respect towards her husband as a literary and familial authority, which she describes:

And finally, his assessment ‘it’s good’ or ‘alright’. That made me happy. – I would just get angry when I would have a few lines crossed out, those that I had thought should have stayed written or when I would notice the final assessment ‘sufficient’ or ‘at least’. Somewhere – why should I hide it from you – there would be rebukes about how I should rewrite which excerpt. What can I do – it’s the beginning, and not my only job (Sarajlić 2010: 263).

The woman writer puts forward two observations: disagreement with the character’s suggestions and the burden of economy of family time. This nicely reflects the duality of anxiety of authorship and lack of time as determining factors. She considered her time for writing “stolen from her family” (Tomašević 2021: 187). Indeed, the heroine, as well as Nafija Sarajlić herself, tries to determine her own value, which eludes her, because she seems insignificant in comparison to the figure of her husband. With literary authority of the character Muhamed, without ancestors, both heroine and Nafija Sarajlić do not possess adequate tools to oppose the hierarchy. In short, Nafija Sarajlić “ironically refuses her husband’s suggestions” (Ljiljak



1986: 15), because she recognizes the aesthetical requests of literature and its potential for engagement. Because of the time with family, the heroine, as well as Nafija Sarajlić, is facing a “‘proper’ submission to her husband” (Wolff 1972: 213). The patronizing attitude of a husband author is the essence of woman’s submission. The exit from the public sphere is a question of the potential resistance and self-realization of a woman who would be represented “as political rebellions against the system of male-dominated marriages” (Ibid: 213). Having found a stronghold for the preservation of her talent, a liberated woman would represent danger for all social orders. Due to primary stereotypes, a woman is accused of not being interested in marriage and motherhood, or should she choose to write, that it would be at the expense of her innate tasks.

In the meager data available about Nafija Sarajlić, there is a statement by her grandchildren who claim that their grandma “was hindered in a way by grandpa [Šemsudin]”.<sup>15</sup> With the decision to abandon her writing and dedicate her time to her family, and with the death of her first daughter, Nafija Sarajlić was neutralized as a writer in competition. Dragana Tomašević interprets Nafija Sarajlić’s gesture as decision to assume a patriarchal role “triggered by the guilt over her child’s death” (Tomašević 2021: 191). Ellen Moers reminds us that women writers “can manage with an hour or two of writing time, before the baby cries, because they carry their work in their head the rest of the day” (Moers 1976: 12). However, family is not the only cause for women to give up writing. Under these circumstances, writing was not a harmless profession, as was with the case of Nafija Sarajlić, which was encroaching on her husband’s vanity and the patriarchal, as well as traditional-religious, order. Only by her withdrawal was peace restored to the family, which Virginia Woolf (1931) thought had been disturbed by the scratch of a pen.

Sharia is also another factor that contributed to her decision to abandon writing. A compromise with her husband and the acceptance of erasing herself from the public literary space was the result of reaching the perfect model. Despite their involvement in the Muslim Women’s Question, women found themselves at the borders of dominant ideology, which “left no space for free judgement and decision making of a woman about her own position, needs and aspirations” (Jahić 2015: 119). Fabio Giomi has highlighted the temporary nature of writing in lives of Muslim women writers from Habsburg era. Specifically, the transition from public to private life was characterized by the predominance of the latter, as evidenced by the fact that “marriage and motherhood represented for almost all of them the end of the writing experience” (Ibid: 7). Therefore, Nafija Sarajlić, was taking into account

---

<sup>15</sup> See: “Priča o Nafiji Sarajlić” (2016).

tradition, and husband's request to dedicate herself to the family, after the painful tragedy of the loss of her daughter, and probably her own sense of guilt in regard to it. Nafija Sarajlić was made to become the ideal model of the Bosnian Muslim woman-victim who gave up her profession. This event actually embodied the centuries-old experience of women – being herded into their own quarters, to use Dubravka Ugrešić's (2019) phrase. As a result, she has been canonized as the distorted model which remains exalted even nowadays in Bosnian Muslim literature.

In *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf equates a woman's engagement in the family with unselfishness, obedience, and the economy of giving. The woman has perfected the family life, "constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" (Woolf 2008: 142). The phantom that stands between the author and her paper, embodying a disruption in women's writing, represents the universal women and even the Muslim woman-victim model. In relation to interpreted dimensions of the biography and work of Nafija Sarajlić, one cannot but realize that she lost economic independence when she left her teaching job and her desk. The writer did not win a room "hitherto exclusively owned by men" (Ibid: 145) and she did not destroy, in Virginia Woolf's words, the *Angel in the House*. As an Angel, the Muslim woman-victim model is also the ideal model of a passive and pure woman, submissive to her husband. Nafija Sarajlić's short period of active writing reflects teaching and writing experiences, as a testimony to the inception of a new emancipation practice of European Muslim women.<sup>16</sup>

Despite her modest opus, Nafija Sarajlić was guided by the imperative "one needs to write" (Sarajlić 2010: 324), which she talks about in the story *Nekoliko stranica*. This was a huge step not only on the new path for Muslim women, but for emancipation of the literature from dominant patriarchal viewpoints. Nafija Sarajlić's work represents a serious contribution to bringing to life a key historical moment in the modernization of Bosnian Muslim women. This call for awakening from the lethargy of traditional misogyny was social. Her verses from a poem she wrote in the period of World War I "*Ustaj, ženo*" are relevant, because they are the testimony of an all-out struggle of a woman for a better society and wakening "from nooks and retreats" (Sarajlić 2010: 92):

---

<sup>16</sup> Although she had given up on her professions, Nafija Sarajlić's life mission was to teach illiterate women, advocating feminist views in the family, and managing the group *Osvitanje* (1919). *Osvitanje* was the first Bosnian Muslim association dedicated to solving the Muslim Women's Question through cultural and economic practice, with an aim to educate women.

Rise Woman, / [...] you hear the ringing voice / of a woman of the world calling you / to rise, to fight / for the freedom of human race and salvation (Sarajlić 1997: 92).

Therefore, a feminist reading of the data crosses its paths with the question of emancipation, and it has articulately taken into consideration multiple potentials of her work. In his book, *Neminovnosti: baština, kritika, jezik, intervju*, Alija Isaković makes a point about her abandonment of writing: “There was no one there to tell her how wrong she was. And what a sin – reality’s victory over lyrical prose. Nafija certainly dropped her quill, but it would have been better had her husband done it instead!” (Isaković 1987: 44).

## 4. Conclusion

The starting point of this article was a feminist and gynocritical revision of the works of the first Bosnian Muslim prose writer, Nafija Sarajlić in the context of her position as the most important women author in the national literary canon. Compared to different canonical practices and discourses, which aim to create the model of the woman-victim or are based on sensationalism and lack an interpretation of the text, the goal of this research is mirrored in the creation of the new connections between biographical data, stories, and the historical context in which Nafija Sarajlić wrote. At the same time, the focus of the research is on the traces and links of Nafija Sarajlić with the literary structure and elements that form the basis of the canonical experience today.

The second foundation of the research is the historical context of the Muslim Women’s Question, which is viewed in the light of regional emancipatory tendencies and practices, but at the same time with its specificities and in relation to the writings of Nafija Sarajlić, who was part of the first wave of this movement. The central analytical interest is placed on the neglected elements of Nafija Sarajlić’s stories, in which she first detected the position of a Bosnian Muslim woman in literature and society. The phenomena of the anxiety of authorship, literary authority and influences, the Angel in the House model, and abandonment of writing were examined in light of anticanonical ideas. Research indicates that Nafija Sarajlić’s prose is a rudimentary descriptive act or strategy of resistance against the patriarchal social practices with which literature and the canon count, and which also dictate the image of the woman author and the ways of her public acting and writing.

## References

- Avdagić, Anisa. "Pripitomljeni diskurs (O nekoliko crtica Nafije Sarajlić)". *Patchwork* 1–2 (2003): 123–131.
- Baym, Nina. "Melodramas of beset manhood: How theories of American fiction exclude women authors". *American Quarterly* 33.2 (1981): 123–139.
- Delić, Zlatan. "Emancipatorne politike kanonizacije književnosti: taktike otpora ženskog književnog stvaralaštva u BiH". In *Crveni ocean: prakse, taktike i strategije rodnog otpora*. Eds. Lada Čale Feldman, Anita Dremel, Renata Jambrešić Kirin, Maša Grdešić & Lidija Dujić, 75–89. Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije, 2016.
- Bock, Gisela. "Challenging Dichotomies: Perspectives on Women's History". In *Writing Women's History International Perspectives*. Eds. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson & Jane Rendall, 1–23. The MacMillan Press, 1992.
- Detoni-Dujmić, Dunja. "Croatian Women Writers from the 'Moderna' to the Second World War". In *A History of Central European Women's Writing. Studies in Russia and East Europe*. Eds. Celia Hawkesworth, 182–196. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Duraković, Enes. *Obzori bošnjačke književnosti*. Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2012.
- Duraković, Enes. "Predgovor". In *Antologija bošnjačke pripovijetke XX vijeka*, 5–28. Sarajevo: Alef, 1995.
- Landy, Marcia. "The Silent Woman: Towards a Feminist Critique". In *The Authority of Experience: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Arlyn Diamond and Lee R. Edwards, 16–27. Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988.
- Gilbert, M. Sandra & Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Giomi, Fabio. *Making Muslim Women European Voluntary Associations, Gender and Islam in Post-Ottoman Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1878–1941)*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2021.
- Giomi, Fabio. "Daughters of Two Empires: Muslim Women and Public Writing in Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878-1918)". *Aspasia* 9.1 (2015): 1–18.
- Hawkesworth, Celia. *Voices in the Shadows: women and verbal art in Serbia and Bosnia*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2000.
- Howell, Samantha. "The Evolution of Female Writers: An Exploration of Their Issues and Concerns from the 19th Century to Today". Hohonu

- 13 (2015): 23–26.
- Idrizović, Muris. “Tri zaboravljene književnice”. Radio Sarajevo - Treći program VI, 18 (1977): 608–621.
- Isaković, Alija. “Novija književnost”. In *Biserje: Antologija bošnjačke književnosti*. Ed. Alija Isaković, 267–269. Sarajevo: Ljiljan, 2002.
- Isaković, Alija. *Neminovnosti: baština, kritika, jezik, intervjui*. Tuzla: Univerzal, 1987.
- Jahić, Adnan. “U raljama ‘degeneracije i[li] nužde’. Prilog istraživanju muslimanskog ženskog pitanja u Bosni i Hercegovini pod Austrougarskom upravom”. *Historijska traganja* 16 (2015): 117–156.
- Jehlen, Myra. “Archimedes and the paradox of feminist criticism”. *Signs* 6.4 (1981): 575–601.
- Kolodny, Annette. “Dancing through the minefield: some observations on the theory, practice and politics of a feminist literary criticism”. *Feminist Studies* 6.1 (1980): 1–25.
- Kujović, Mina. “Muslimanska osnovna i viša djevojačka škola sa produženim tečajem (1894–1925): Prilog historiji muslimanskog školstva u Bosni i Hercegovini”. *Novi Muallim* 41 (2010): 72–79.
- Kujraković, Nusret. “Islamska zajednica i muslimansko žensko pitanje u Bosni i Hercegovini”. *Pregled* 3 (2009): 101–121.
- Latković, Ivana. “Tri frajle kavaljera Kanona (Žensko autorstvo u prevrednovanjima književnog kanona nakon 2000. godine)”. *Književna smotra* 50.187 (1) (2018): 125–132.
- Ljiljak, Aleksandar. “Teme Nafije Sarajlić: Jedno književno otkriće”. In *Teme. Nafija Sarajlić*, 7–21. Sarajevo: Zadrugar, 1986.
- Memija, Emina. “Medaljoni života Nafija Sarajlić”. In *Sarajlić, Šemsudin & Nafija Sarajlić: Iz bosanske romantike & Teme*. Eds. Emina Memija, Fahrudin Rizvanbegović, 247–258. Sarajevo: BKZ Preporod, 1997.
- Moers, Ellen. *Literary Women: The Great Writers*. New York: Doubleday, 1976.
- Moranjak Bamburać, Nirman. “Nevolje s kanonizacijom”. *Sarajevske sveske* 8–9 (2005): 49–73.
- Moi, Toril. *Sexual/textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Offen, Karen. *European Feminisms 1700–1950: A Political History*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- Omeragić, Merima. “The Muslim Women’s Question and the Emancipatory Potential of Nafija Sarajlić’s Literary Work in the South Slavic and European Context”. *Radovi Zavoda za hrvatsku povijest* 55.1 (2023): 87–111. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17234/RadoviZHP.55.6>

- Omeragić, Merima. "Imperativ pamćenja loma dominantnog književnog kanona – prva istraživačica bosanskohercegovačkog ženskog pjesništva Ajša Džemila Zahiromić". *Historijska traganja / Historical Searches* 23 (2024): 209-246. DOI: HYPERLINK "<http://dx.doi.org/10.51237/issn.2774-1180.2024.23.209>"10.51237/issn.2774-1180.2024.23.209
- Petrović, Jelena. *Women's Authorship in Interwar Yugoslavia: The Politics of Love and Struggle*. Springer, 2018.
- Pirić, Alija. "Ženski glasovi u bošnjačkoj književnosti". In Sarajlić, Nafija: Teme. Ed. Alija Pirić, 5–20. Sarajevo: Dobra knjiga, 2010.
- Robinson, Lillian S. *In the Canon's Mouth: dispatches from the culture wars*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Robinson, Lillian S. "Treason our text: Feminist challenges to the literary canon". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 2.1 (1983): 83–98.
- Ryan, Mary. "Trivial or commendable?: women's writing, popular culture, and chick lit". 452°F. *Revista de Teoría de la literatura y Literatura Comparada* 3 (2010): 70–84.
- Salihbegović, Melika. "Tri sudbine. (Uz obljetnicu smrti tri muslimanske književnice: Nafije Sarajlić (1893–1970), Habibe Stočević (1856–1890) i Umihane Čuvidine (1795–1870)". *Odjek* 19 (1980): 19–23.
- Sarajlić, Nafija. *Teme*. Sarajevo: Bosanska knjiga, 2010.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics". In *Women Writing and Writing about Women*. Ed. Mary Jacobus, 22–41. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of their own: From Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing*. UK: Virago Press, 2009.
- Schwartz, Agatha & Helga Thorson. "The Aesthetics of Change: Women Writers of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy". In *Crossing Central Europe: Continuities and Transformations, 1900 and 2000*. Eds. Helga Mitterbauer & Carrie Smith-Prei, 27–46. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017.
- Tomašević, Dragana. *Priče o bosanskim ženama: ženska čitanka*. Sarajevo: SPKD Prosvjeta & BZK Preporod, 2021.
- Tuchman, Gaye & Nina E. Fortin. "Fame and Misfortune: Edging Women Out of the Great Literary Tradition". *American Journal of Sociology* 90.1 (1984): 72–96.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka. *Brnjica za vještice*. Zagreb: Multimedijalni institut – MaMa, 2021.
- Ugrešić, Dubravka. *Doba kože*. Zagreb: Fraktura, 2019.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Malden, MA: John Wiley/Blackwell, 2015.



## **Prva bosanska muslimanska spisateljica Nafija Sarajlić i razotkriće njenog pisanja u vezi s kanonom**

Ovaj rad je zasnovan na pretpostavci potrebe inovativnije analize priča prve bosanske muslimanske autorke priča Nafije Sarajlić. U svojim zapisima autorka je ostavila tragove koji svjedoče njen odnos sa elementima koje identificiramo kao strukture i zakonitosti književnih kanona i uopšte polja književnosti. Glavni fokus u ovom radu čine veze autorke sa iskustvom negacije, obezvjeđivanja, trivijalizacije, guranja u ralje inferiornosti ženskog znanja i talenta, te na koncu djelovanje dvostrukih književnih standarda kada su u pitanju autorke u okviru bosanskog muslimanskog književnog kanona. Drugu dimenziju čini i postavljanje rada ove spisateljice u povijesne okvire bosanskog Muslimanskog ženskog pitanja. Težeći ostvarenju postavljenih ciljeva, u ovom radu se specifična pažnja posvećuje analizi specifičnosti taktika otpora dominantnim vrijednostima kanona u djelu Nafije Sarajlić. Stoga, ovo istraživanje se hvata u koštac sa složenošću fenomena strepnje od autorstva i aspekata i funkcija književnog uticaja i autoriteta. Posebna dimenzija analize je predstavljena u načinu ispitivanja moguće refleksije privatnih događaja – zahtjev supruge i tragedija smrti kćeri, te porodičnih obaveza na povlačenje iz javne sfere, konačnim napuštanjem pisanja. Ovaj potonji fenomen se ispostavlja kao temelj na kome je izgrađena kanonska figura Nafije Sarajlić, to jest model žene-žrtve ili anđela u kući. S ovim člankom se razotkriva iskrivljena kanonska slika i feminističko zanemarivanje prvih strategija otpora društvenoj dominaciji, ali i radi na pravovremenom opisu složene pozicije autorke u javnoj sferi. Imajući u vidu kanonsku nepravdu učinjenu ovoj autorki, s ovim istraživanjem predstavljam kulturnu reinterpretaciju Nafije Sarajlić u duhu i koordinatama ginokritike.

**Ključne riječi:** kanon, Nafija Sarajlić, strepnja od autorstva, književni autoritet, napuštanje pisanja.

Примљено 1. 9. 2025.

Одобрено 4. 10. 2025.