

## Nove (The New Women) by Jelena Dimitrijević – Distant Reading for European Literary History

by Justin Tonra : 10-12 minutes

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*The fourth article of the Distant Reading Recommends series comes from Serbia, and is written by Cvetana Krstev of the University of Belgrade and Vasilije Milnovic of the University Library “Svetozar Markovic,” University of Belgrade. They introduce a prominent oriental-themed novel from the Serbian tradition, puzzlingly neglected today but notable for its formal and thematic innovations.*

*In Distant Reading Recommends, an Action member introduces a novel, published between 1850 and 1920, from one of the participating countries in our Action. These novels may be important or notable within the individual nation’s literary tradition, but less well-known in the broader European context. By bringing these novels to light, we aim to further advance our objectives of creating a broader, more inclusive, and better-grounded account of European literary history and cultural identity.*

Jelena J. Dimitrijević (1862 – 1945) was a Serbian writer, but also a world traveler and benefactor. Ignored and neglected far too long, Serbian culture has only recently become reacquainted with her voluminous opus.

Jelena was born in Kruševac, to a merchant’s family, as the tenth child. Her mother’s family was highly regarded, comprising several well-known scholars and artists, and it also bore a princely title. After the marriage to Serbian Army Lieutenant Jovan Dimitrijević, she permanently settled in Niš. Residing in a big city and marrying a well-educated and open-minded Dimitrijević opened up new perspectives for her and developed her lasting love for the Orient. This was particularly prompted by her intense socializing with prominent Turkish women in Niš, but also in Thessaloniki, Istanbul and Skopje, where she was a frequent and welcome guest. In her subsequent opus, that included the novel “The New Women (*Nove*),” Jelena elaborated in a creative manner the intimacy of these gatherings and her familiarity with the daily life of Muslim women in the Balkans.



Jelena J. Dimitrijević

By the end of the nineteenth century, she moved with her husband to Belgrade, where she would live for the rest of her life. The First World War founds her in Germany, from whence she returned to Serbia via Switzerland, Italy and Greece. After the war and the death of her husband on the front, trips to France, Spain and England followed, from where she

traveled to America. With the same passionate fervour with which she illuminated the well-kept secrets of the everyday life of Muslims, she also discovered the way of life of American women, describing them in a picturesque way in a travelogue *Novi svet ili u Americi godinu dana* (New World or One Year in America) in 1934. In 1926 she made her way to the East, to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. She went to see Alexandria, Cairo, Memphis, Luxor, the Holy Land, and Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut, and Haifa. Of importance is her encounter in Egypt with the famous feminist Huda Sha'arawi, president of the Egyptian Feminist Union. From Egypt she traveled to Bombay, where she also stayed with a famous feminist, Mrs. Tate. From there, she traveled to China, Japan, and Ceylon. Her impressions of this voyage were published in her travelogue *Sedam mora i tri okeana* (Seven Seas and Three Oceans) in 1940.

The novel *Nove* (The New Women) was published in 1912 and immediately attracted the attention of the professional public, receiving an award from the Serbian Literary Cooperative (*Srpska književna zadruga*). This novel was recommended for publication by the Serbian Literary Cooperative by the well-known literary historian and distinguished professor at the University of Belgrade, Pavle Popović, who had followed Jelena since her early poetic works, and pointed out that her verses should be given “special importance” due to their quality.



Bust of Dimitrijevic

In a letter to her friend Lujza St. Jakšić, dated 2 August 1908, Jelena Dimitrijević explained the reasons for her journey to Thessaloniki, anticipating in fact the action of a future novel: “I went there with great joy and curiosity: I will see the ones I love and who love me, I will find out how they feel now when they became developed, whether old Turkish women are blushing with shame, do they still don scarves on their heads out of habit, are they able to walk along with people and do the new ones rejoice, were there enough hats for all of them in Thessaloniki or are some of them bare-headed.” Her excellent choice of the moment of Young Turk social changes in the novel *Nove* offers a vivid and unique testimony about the everyday life of Turkish women in Thessaloniki, torn between the anachronistic role of women in traditional Islamic society and the modern requirements of upbringing “in the Western fashion.” The rigorous partitions in traditional Islamic society, with very clear rules, presented constraints to new, young Turkish women, which they faced at every step of their daily lives. When they tried to make their dreams come true,



although they were often entirely hazy, lacking experience and idealistic, they fell victim to the dire collision of old and new, Eastern and Western, traditional and modern.

This is portrayed in a very suggestive way through the fate of the main character of the novel, Emir-Fatma. She is the character with all the prerequisites for accomplishing a successful woman's role in the society, which in this case means the traditional role of a woman deep behind closed doors. Yet she is one of the "new" women, and so is her intimate friend and cousin Mersija, educated on Western European values and French novels, and as such, deeply dissatisfied with the moulds of traditional Ottoman society, which has itself been pretty well weakened by the coming social changes. The vibrant atmosphere of the reality of that time and place in this novel is full of anthropologically intriguing images of women's lives in the harem, i.e. the feminine part of the house, strictly separated from the men's world, in which lesbian love often developed, presented in the novel through Emir's longing for a French female teacher. Traditional regulations are especially evident in the marital problems of Emir-Fatma and her chosen one, Jamal. These regulations entail another essential characteristic of the Oriental world: intrigue. It is through intrigue that Emira marries her chosen one. Through intrigue, because of his alcohol problem, a sin worthy of contempt in the traditional Islamic world, she divorces him as many as three times. Through intrigue, she marries another man, aware of his nature, with the intention of being banished by him so that she can return to her chosen one and thus outsmart the traditional regulations. After her traditional father Hassan-bey refuses to let her daughter marry again the same man with scorn worthy vices, Emir – until then obedient to her father's will – now openly opposes him for the first time, but in this case the only thing left to Emir-Fatma and Jemal in the context of traditional Ottoman society, is an escape to Paris. In this they will be helped by the skillful intrigues and networks of experienced women, and above all by her aunt Aruf-Hanum, herself also a representative of the "new" ones.

After the arrival of Emir to the much-desired West, through her diary notes that reach Aunt Aruf, the novel provides a testimony of unfulfilled women's dreams and her sufferings in that same West: unable to live as a traditional Turkish woman in Thessaloniki, Emir-Fatma could not also live in Paris as a European. A year after his daughter's escape, a granddaughter arrives to Hassan-bey, followed by the news of Emir's death and the telling Emir's last will: a request for her father that her daughter be educated solely following the traditional patterns.

The novel's anthropological and documentary detail contributes to its constant re-readings within feminist, narratological, or orientalist approaches to the study of literary work. From today's point of view of particular interest is the formal procedure in the novel, which is told in the third omniscient person. However, letters and diary notes, always given in the first person, are also interpolated into this narrative. In addition to the overt depictions of lesbian and incestuous desires, concealed by the drapes of traditional Ottoman society, a particular contribution to the modernity of this novel are also explicit feminist viewpoints, very atypical of the literary context of the time.

Therefore, it is perplexing that this novel, the only one published during the author's life and awarded immediately after its release from the press, has fallen into oblivion after the death of Jelena Dimitrijević. However, precisely because of all of the above, it should come as no surprise that, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the interest of both expert and wider audiences for this masterpiece of Serbian literature continues to grow.

*Nove* is included in the Serbian corpus of ELTeC, and can be read [here](#). For further reading, see:

*Jelena Dimitrijević – život i delo*: zbornik referata sa naučnog skupa, Niš, 28 i 29. Oktobar 2004: Centar za naučna istraživanja SANU i Univerzitet u Nišu, 2006. ISBN – 86-7025-406-9. COBISS.SR – ID: 133976332.

*Čitate li Jelenu Dimitrijević?*: zbornik radova, Beograd, Filološki fakultet 2018. ISBN – 978-86-6153-480-5. COBISS.SR – ID: 259682060.

*Knjiženstvo: teorija i istorija ženske književnosti na srpskom jeziku do 1915. godine*. Beograd, Filološki fakultet 2015. ISBN – 978-86-6153-306-8. COBISS.SR – ID: 217916428.

Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, "Čarobni san istoka – stvarnost u romanu 'Nove' Jelene Dimitrijević", izlaganje na konferenciji, 2007, COBISS.SR-ID: 514249902.

Biljana Dojčinović-Nešić, *Jelena Dimitrijević*, Knjiženstvo, <http://knjizenstvo.etf.bg.ac.rs/sr/authors/jelena-dimitrijevic>.

Ana Stjelja, *Elementi tradicionalnog i modernog u delu Jelene Dimitrijević*: doktorska disertacija, Beograd, 2012, <http://phaidrabg.bg.ac.rs/o:5604>. DOI <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2298/BG20121120STJELJA>>, COBISS.SR-ID:43215887.