

Albena Vacheva  
South-West University Neofit Rilski  
bnv@abv.bg

## Women and the Emancipative Projects of Bulgarian Modernity

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The main focus of the current study is the role of periodicals in the emancipation of the woman in a modernizing Bulgarian society. From a social and political perspective, female virtues, rights and duties become an object of varied debates in Bulgaria at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Women's newspapers and magazines participate actively in these debates whilst familiarizing their female readers with the ideas and struggles of women in Western Europe, presenting diverse philosophical concepts, and discussing established cultural models. In these periodicals there appear materials which endeavour to cultivate models of emancipative behaviour; these publications include translations and authentic literature with a „feminine” axis. Female identity in this period gets formed within respective periodicals and the circles clinging to them, and it comes to represent a complex entity of, on the one hand, radical concepts stressing equality and female rights, and, on the other, conservative perceptions of the place of the woman in the modern household environment.

KEYWORDS: newspapers; magazines; modernity; feminism; emancipation; ideology

In the age of modernity, in Bulgaria, periodicals gradually become a mechanism for the active formation of the literary taste. On the pages of newspapers and magazines literature emerges through critical reviews and literary portraits devoted to the introduction of one author or another. In this way, periodicals begin to function as a mediator of reading and create a common context for the realization of the literary work in its contact with the reader. Thus, the process of producing sense spreads out within the close unity of critical and literary addition/juxtaposition, which forms certain inventions and as a result – reading audiences. Periodicals undertake a massive campaign for facilitating the intricate relationship between the agents participating in the process of creating and decoding a literary work's gist: author – reader – critic.

In this media context there gets born – to live further for more than twenty years – “Vestnik za zhenata” (“The Women’s Newspaper”)<sup>1</sup>, edited and run by Hristo Cholchev. From its very beginning, this newspaper assumes the task of being “Sedmichen list za literatura, obshtestven zhivot, moda i domakinstvo” (“A Weekly Bulletin of Literature, Social Life, Fashion and Housekeeping”) – a definition placed as a subtitle. The editorial board’s ambition to maintain an edition for literature gradually begins to materialize. Alongside the columns dedicated to fashion, housekeeping, useful pieces of advice, information about women’s situation abroad, news of women’s movements in Bulgaria as well as announcements of “Bulgarskia zhenski saiuz” (“The Bulgarian Women’s Union”), on the pages of this newspaper there begin to appear short stories, verses, and authorial portraits. The emphasis on the literary presence in the newspaper is gradually strengthened: competitions begin to be held, critical texts start to get published, surveys are conducted amidst female readers with the purpose of establishing their taste, a children’s literary page gets organized (1927)<sup>2</sup>, prizes are awarded to authors selected by readers. Especially visible is the newspaper’s active orientation towards literary issues after the establishment of “Klub na bulgarskite pisatelki” (“The Bulgarian Women Writers’ Club”), whilst works produced by women begin to spread out on the pages of the newspaper in a degree proportionate to the growing female presence in the social and cultural life.

The newspaper in hand is notably different from one of the first women’s periodicals – “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”). The task, which the editors of “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) assume, is to participate in the processes which ought to eventually bring about a change in the role and the cultural presence of the woman in society. “It seems to us – it states in the editor’s note published in the first issue – that currently and for the time being it would be beneficial *to urge the woman’s mental prowess*, to demonstrate to her that be that as a mother and tutor to her own children, be that as a woman, and a companion to her husband, she needs

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<sup>1</sup> Here and henceforth, all titles of magazines, literary works and social/literary organizations appear transliterated, followed by a translation into English (in brackets, respectively).

<sup>2</sup> Editor-in-chief of this page is Dora Gabe. The intention for this page to come out on a monthly basis is hastily forestalled upon the female readers’ insistence: in their letters to the editors they complain that their offspring destroy each entire issue of the newspaper.

to maintain an interest in all that happens in the world and is aimed at the progress of humanity.” It is necessary to cultivate in the woman a sense of her social mission. Because of this – the editor’s note further maintains – it is necessary to “kindle in the woman an awareness of her being a human being, a member of society to which she holds certain obligations” (Редакционен 1899: 2). It is exactly her social obligations that are going to rescue her from the humiliating state she has been placed in, whilst the newspaper shall contribute to clarifying her social duty. The cultural and social enlightenment is amidst the primary tasks which this periodical faces as it strives to change an attitude firmly established and inherited in Bulgarian society from the nearest past – from “our erstwhile masters – the Turks”. This legacy prevents the woman from being able “to be considered a human being” as it claims that the woman “may only ever be able to find her way even to Heaven guided by her husband.” In this particular task, the newspaper conscientiously and decisively approaches the role played by female societies at the time – “to unite women in the name of enlightenment and intellectual progress” (A. C-ва<sup>3</sup> 1899a: 3). These societies, as the article clarifies, emerge authentically as early as the 1870s, provoked by the example of male social spaces established prior to that, rather than in imitation of charitable female societies in “enlightened countries”. They aim at creating social spaces whereby the woman could take care of her spiritual and intellectual development and enrich her knowledge whilst liberating herself from “the *stifling* loop of her household environment”<sup>4</sup>. This is the role allotted to “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper by the editorial board – to raise women’s spirit and to participate in the change of their social status. This newspaper, similar to the function of the periodicals that emerged during the Age of the Bulgarian Revival, whose readership was primarily male, as is noted in the article signed by the penname A. C-ва, intends to support the activity of these societies by way of contributing towards the improvement of female enlightenment and

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<sup>3</sup>The initials “A. C-ва” authenticate the sequel of the article “Zhenskite druzhestva u nas” (“Female Societies in Bulgaria”), published in the second issue of the newspaper. The authorship of the first part has been marked only as “C-ва”. The probable author of both is Anna Karima (Anna Todorova Velkova), at this time wife of Yanko Sakazov, also founder of the newspaper.

<sup>4</sup>On this matter consult A. C-ва (1899a and 1899b).

education. Its emergence marks the parameters of a unique political project aimed at activating women and gradually transforming them into a factor of social, economic and cultural development of the state. Women are entitled not only to receive education – they are expected to rise above the level of being merely passive recipients of male creativity in the sphere of the literary word – they must gain their own right of artistic performance. A kind of art that should break the tight bondage of the family in order to reach as wide a public readership as possible. These initial steps made through these societies prove to have stimulated women, as was the case in the city of Zheleznik (Stara Zagora), to “give talks”, to write “outstanding reports, to translate articles, short stories...”.

In the sphere of modern publicity “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper stands out not merely as part of mediators facilitating the relationship between female authors and female readers, rather, it is driven by the ambition to take on and maintain the best achievements from already existing editions or from those that have ceased to be. All those issues left unresolved by periodicals such as “Savremenen pokazalets” (“The Modern Index”) – edited by a woman – or “Zhenski svyat” (“The Female World”), “Moda i domakinstvo” (“The Fashion and Housekeeping”), “Bulgarka” (“The Bulgarian Woman”) and “Razvitie” (“The Development”)<sup>5</sup>, will be successfully dealt with by “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper. Such are the editors’ intentions, stated unabashedly in the editorial in the first issue of the latter newspaper. Closely related to that is the firmly expressed political position which “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) assumes and for whose cause it will fight. The need for this newspaper to emerge is motivated by the fact that in “our female press” there are not to be found anywhere “clear definite demands” on the matter of the Bulgarian woman’s equality with regard to her social presence and electoral

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<sup>5</sup> The columns existing in these periodicals provide a reliable picture of the editorial policy as well as the public readership which it aims. At the beginning of the second anniversary of the existence of “Moda i domakinstvo” (“The Fashion and Housekeeping”), the editor-in-chief, Elena Usheva, addresses the readers with an appeal for renewal of their subscription. She promises that the magazine shall preserve its shape and it shall publish materials in already established sections: “1. Fashion; 2. Science and Literature, which contains novels, short stories, poems, sketches, and scientific articles of popular interest; 3. Housekeeping; 4. Aphorisms, miscellanies” (Подписка 1898: 16).

rights to which she is entitled. “The intellectual development of the woman is one of our demands”, the third issue of the newspaper states (Редакционен 1899: 1), which justifies the in depth discussion of the problem of female education, and more specifically, the problem of the access of women to universities. “That the woman has been wronged in Bulgaria is an undeniable fact” (Редакционен 1899: 2). The firmly assumed political platform of this newspaper is to work towards changing the latter state, whilst it aims at providing women with a tribune for expressing that in which they believe<sup>6</sup>; it also strives to inform them of events locally and abroad, to participate in female education as well as enhance their organizational life. Into the very first issues of the newspaper there find their way: excerpts of statements of members of parliament which delve into the question of the rights of female teachers, the report of the chair-woman of “Maika” (“The Mother”) Female Society, and sundry materials directly related to the cause the newspaper supports.

This newspaper, which defines itself as “the organ bound to defend the interests of women”, proves largely successful in realizing its programme, if one were to judge by what Sanda Yovcheva shares: “in order [for all female societies in the country] to unite, and for the idea of uniting per se to come through, Ana Karima starts “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) Newspaper. The idea of establishing a women’s union to lead our feminist movement, has been put forward just at the right time” (Йовчева 1929: 270). Also appropriate is considered the time of the publication of the editorial in the next issue of the newspaper. The pieces of news regarding female societies in the country, which proliferate on the pages of this newspaper, strive to present the actual state of organized women’s life. In this way, the newspaper facilitates the coming together of the efforts of separate organizations into a wholesome policy. “The spheres of female intellectual and moral progress,” as female societies define themselves, “appear to be largely neglected, inefficient and forgotten” (A. C-ва 1899a: 2). In issue #3 there is published *A Proclamation*, sent to the female societies in the country, which states that “only united, intelligent Bulgarian women who work towards the elevation of our female individual mentally and morally, shall

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<sup>6</sup>Amidst the major issues is the one regarding the right of married female teachers to practice their profession.

be able to demonstrate an activity more successful than the one which has been the case so far” (Настоятелство 1899: 6). The efforts made by the circle of activists around “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper are eventually rewarded so that in 1901 there is summoned an Assembly attended by women representing 20 female societies – women that have come to be known as the initiators of the Bulgarian women’s union. The printed organ of the Union is “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper (Йовчева 1929: 270).

The political engagement of “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper can be argued to have been largely predetermined by the social-democratic tendencies with which its editors identify. The influence which the issues of this newspaper bear and disseminate amongst the public readership is the result of pro-western-Europe orientation within the boundaries of leftist ideas forming. “Translations of feminist literature, published during the 1890s through to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, play a crucial role for the popularization of the ideas of female emancipation amidst these layers,” Krasimira Daskalova notes (1999: 89), in the common context of the emergence and shaping of “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”). From its very beginning the newspaper functions as an organ which places the issue of female emancipation in the sphere of political publicity.

Together with its political bias, this newspaper gets progressively fed information on literary-musical evenings and balls organized by female societies. Part of the information concerns charitable initiatives, yet there dominate details on meetings to do with talks given on matters concerning the movement for women’s rights locally and abroad, scientific research papers, poetical events, and musical performances. An editorial note published on page 8, issue #3 of the newspaper, says:

for all our sincere effort to satisfy the demands of some of our female subscribers who require a specific literary section, the editorial board regrets to announce that for the time being the newspaper’s financial resources disallow the appearance of even a second page; nevertheless, the volume of the material gathered for each issue of the newspaper has become an increasing challenge for the modest space which has so far had to contain all the existing sections of the newspaper.

The editors vow to their female readers that, should an appropriate opportunity present itself, the issue in hand would be solved so that literature

would be able to find its place on the pages of the newspaper. “The editorial board can only promise that as soon as this becomes possible we will do our best to satisfy our female readers by publishing select short stories and novellas – translated or authentically produced by our own prose-fiction writers” (Бележка 1899: 8). The first poem, “Drugarski zov” (“A Comrade’s Appeal”) is to be found in issue #6 of the newspaper – it summons men and women to awaken “that who suffers”, whilst in issue #7 there is an excerpt from Ivan Vazov’s “Geroinya (Ekaterina Avksentieva-Simidchieva)” (“A Heroine [Ekaterina Avksentieva-Simidchieva]”). Ana Karima’s “Ne ò vreme” (“Ill-Timed”) is the first short story to appear in the supplement of issue #21–22 whilst the supplement of issue #23–24 contains the translated short story “Pokayala se” (“Atoned Woman”), originally authored by Matilde Serao. The following – second – anniversary of the newspaper affirms the practice of publishing literary materials, some of which are placed in the supplement of “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”), and in case there is no opportunity for publishing a supplement, they are published on the pages of the newspaper itself.

In its dedication to the cause of changing the social role of the woman in Bulgaria “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper proves to be that edition which is notably different from the existing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century periodicals.

The new currents coming from liberated countries inundate Bulgaria and the Bulgarian woman – the woman of the enclosed household environment, the woman of children, the woman mother whose virtues – loyalty, industry, housekeeping and humility – are her dear spiritual accessories; gradually, she exports her spirit into the outside and away from the house,

as Stefan Peykov explains the need for periodicals serving the female audience (1929: 255–256). The emancipation of the Bulgarian woman, judging by the contents and the choice of subject matters in periodicals, is a gradual process. Up until the emergence of “The Female Voice” the existing editions orientated towards the female audience predominantly deal with housekeeping matters. “The thirst for a cultural revival” shared by the entire society is apparently to be found even in the most intimate spheres of daily chores – the home environment. The household environment changes rapidly which itself causes transformations in the culture

and the lifestyle of the family unit. The woman, whose sphere of realization is very much the home, starts feeling a necessity which urges her to “search for manuals which would facilitate her novel orientation by providing her with appropriate directions”, as Stefan Peykov motivates the presence of housekeeping editions. As a housekeeper, she is responsible for the wellbeing of the family, for its unanimity and mutual understanding. An addendum to the man, she is the one to make the home a cozy and trustworthy environment as she looks after the children and their education, guards her husband’s authority, she is also responsible for maintaining order in the household. This projection of the cultural perceptions is fairly clearly reflected in periodicals through to the wars. “Almost all magazines designed to address the Bulgarian woman and the Bulgarian home have been marked by similarity of contents: what the earliest one argues is also maintained by the latest: “Wise women erect their houses whilst foolhardy ones demolish them with their own hands” (Solomon). “The woman is the other half of the world”; “the woman is an appendix to the man” (Пейков 1929: 256).

The erection of the new Bulgarian home is the woman’s duty and responsibility. For this purpose the woman herself is expected to get specific training which should not directly collide with established social norms and rules. On the contrary, this training must be of the sort that has the capacity of preserving social order and the relationships on which it rests. The editors of housekeeping magazines venture to fulfill this excessively burdensome task – to emancipate the Bulgarian woman and her household environment. The task is extremely challenging because various editions strive to adhere both to the “wisdom” of Solomon’s aphorism quoted above as well as to existing views about the place of the woman in the horizontal and vertical projections of the social order. Thus, the problem of the female individuality is projected within the boundaries of sex-gender identity which in its own turn relates to the discursive practices and roles imposed and accepted as natural in society. Due to this, most Bulgarian magazines, which aim to serve the female readership and are published in the period 1878–1920, develop and present topics relevant to housekeeping and to household matters. There find their place materials devoted to “raising the woman’s cultural level”, according to the most commonly used expression; there are also articles which discuss social problems

locally or abroad. These magazines therefore acquire an eclectic outlook as they welcome on their pages at the same time a variety of materials of the widest range – starting from housekeeping and matters to do with hygiene, through to fashion and recipes in order to go, eventually, as far as literary works and discussions about the place of the woman in modern Bulgarian society. “Zhenski svyat” (“The Female World”), for instance, the first periodical magazine for women in Bulgaria (1893–1898, Varna), comes in fortnightly installments and according to the description provided by Stefan Peykov, “publishes articles on the feminist movement, some literature, some recipes and instructions and very little of cookery” (Пейков 1929: 256). The ambition of the editor, G. Noev, to enlighten Bulgarian women by publishing materials related to housekeeping, gets also realized in “Domakinia” (“The Female Housekeeper”) supplement which starts coming out under the editorship of Elena Ivanova the following year.

Within the common context which housekeeping magazines establish, the woman is presented, above all and wholly, as a housewife with outstanding interests, which overcome the boundaries of her household duties. Publications related to the issues of female suffrage, social equality, the rights of women to get university education as well as to teach at schools, also find their place in housekeeping magazines without, however, defining the general outlook of those editions. On the contrary, one may claim that “Zhenski svyat” (“The Female World”), “Moda i domakinstvo” (“The Fashion and Housekeeping”)<sup>7</sup>, and “Bulgarka” (“The Bulgarian Woman”) function, more or less, as exceptions to the common air of presentation which is in harmony with the editions of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose nature of contents is mostly focused on housekeeping. “Bulgarka” (“The Bulgarian Woman”)<sup>8</sup> and “Moda i domakinstvo” (“The

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<sup>7</sup>“Moda i domakinstvo” (“The Fashion and Housekeeping”) owes its emergence to the efforts of its editor, Elena Usheva. After the magazine ceases to be in 1907, she starts publishing “Domakinsko iliustrovano spisanie” (“The Housekeeping Illustrated Magazine”), whilst in 1910 she initiates “Sedianka” (“The Working Bee”) Magazine. In 1905 Elena Usheva publishes “Rakodelno spisanie” (“The Handiwork”) magazine in the form of separate brochures. See more on this in Пейков (1929: 256).

<sup>8</sup>“The literary section of “Bulgarka” (“The Bulgarian Woman”) magazine is reasonably modest bearing in mind the magazine’s aim” – as Penka Vatova summarizes in her observations. “Rather weak in their aesthetic impact, the literary publications hardly ever deviate from the magazine’s key objective – to teach readers to cherish the family and the home. The

Fashion and Housekeeping”)<sup>9</sup> magazines are of especial interest to us as because of their emphasis on fiction which appears on their pages, and “The Female World” is particularly appealing in the attention it pays to the presence of the woman in Bulgarian society, in cultural, economic and institutional life. “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper – the edition which succeeded “Zhenski svyat” (“The Female World”) magazine (1893–1898) after the latter ceased to be – admits to this emancipative role which “Zhenski svyat” (“The Female World”) tried to perform; together with some critical notes, this novel newspaper appreciates the merits of the late magazine. Rather curious appears to be the case of Mrs. Noeva – the magazine’s editor – as “Zhenski glas” (“The Female Voice”) newspaper reveals. “During the latest elections, Mrs. Noeva, the magazine’s editor, wished to vote, and as she was denied this right, she raised the issue of whether, in accordance with our main law, the constitution, the Bulgarian woman is denied the right to vote, unlike other citizens” (Редакционен 1899: 1).

Female editions make an attempt to form one common body within the established social order. The woman begins to emerge, to get recognizable and despite the fact that these editions exist whilst balancing on the brink of social stereotypes and conventional social attitudes, they nonetheless become landmarks of the processes of female emancipation. A tribune for female voices being built by the press, the Bulgarian woman, denied public appearances, begins to claim her rights for participating in common issues. In this logic, the press turns out to be one of the modern mechanisms through which the woman strives to break the bondage of the marginal sphere of the socially disempowered established by traditional cultural models. The first steps are made through existing female societies, whilst the initiation into the

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following genres have been represented: poetry, prose fiction, memoir writing and playwriting. Most of the publications are translations.” (Barova 1993: 214).

<sup>9</sup>“Moda i domakinstvo” (“The Fashion and Housekeeping”) is an illustrated family magazine – a pioneer in this variety of periodicals published in Bulgaria” – Leontina Dorosieva writes. “On the pages of this newspaper we discover some dozen of poems, two novels, over sixty short stories, several novellas, fables, plays and several literary critical articles”. The magazine itself possesses a prominent “Literary-Research Section” which is an evidence of the editors’ desire to raise the cultural awareness of their female readers, rather than merely to foster skills in aid of their housekeeping chores. Further reference on the matter of this edition in Dorosieva (1993: 291–294).

sphere of publicity is achieved through the growing influence of newspapers and magazines. Regardless of the fact that the image of the woman gets declared as the collective disempowered based on the body and its sex-gender belonging, the initial stages of change are already a fact. From the collective body there begin to protrude and emerge separate female presences which start speaking with their own voices. The modern Bulgarian woman gets born thanks to the major, significant role of periodicals.

The female voice in Bulgarian magazines and newspapers bears simultaneously resonances from Renaissance and Enlightenment voices, if we were to apply Amelia Licheva's observations on the female presence in European literary traditions. "The Renaissance female voice is an audible voice. (...) a voice which ought not to reside in silence, but to cry out and echo, to roar, that tongues be untied and humility be overcome" (Личева 2002: 296–297). The Renaissance reverberation of the voice is an undeniable claim on the part of Bulgarian women, who start emerging creatively on the pages of periodicals, as to their willingness to participate in the distribution of social and symbolic power in the modernizing Bulgarian society. The female voice is a projection of the male voice, as Amelia Licheva outlines one of the characteristics of the Renaissance voice. In the age of modernity this voice, once again, is a projection of the male voice – it seeks its intimacy and support in order to actually resist it and then rise to become its equal in the sphere of public speaking. This is a voice, "driven by the clear memory of the past of women in history and mythology, a voice which constantly compares its own zones with those zones" (Личева 2002: 300). This commensuration, projected on the pages of modern Bulgarian periodicals, is expressed in a variety of survey materials which attempt to present the role of the woman within the historical perspective of various social regimes, cultural orders and religious doctrines. The editors believe it is important not only to present the history within which the woman gets recognized as "the second sex", they also think it necessary to reveal the current state of those societies whereby changing the status quo is under way. This renaissance voice has no demands from history as a factor to do with the formation of identity rather it resists only the projections of tradition which largely softens the radicalism of its sounding.

In this search for the woman in the past as well as in modernity there is also projected the voice of the Enlightenment. Loud enough, it is easily

recognizable in its attempts to parallel as well as to encourage into a choral sounding the multitude of voices of individual women. This voice owes its volume to its ambition of drawing in the history of sex-gender identity and juxtaposing it to modern sociality. It seeks not to change social order through history but it tries to legitimize its earnestness. Tradition needs changing yet that contains no threat for the props of social order. The New Age requires novel, literate individuals who must revise the role of the woman in the age of reason, as they must approach this matter without succumbing, covertly or overtly, to existing social stereotypes. The voice of Enlightenment finds its own listeners, figuratively speaking, through newspapers and periodicals as it organizes its own audience. This audience needs to be enlightened so that the woman could realize her place not only as a housewife but as a fully fledged, respectable and equal member of society. This, in fact, is one of the major tasks of periodicals at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – to create an environment of audibility. The change which needs to be made shall be achieved by women themselves – by those who shall embrace the cause of Enlightenment and shall disseminate knowledge amidst the rest. The common idea is that it is within the collective unity that the woman shall succeed in obtaining rights which shall allow her to realize her own individuality.

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