

Candidate: **Adriana Sabo**

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ana Hofman, Ph.D., Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU

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“Me fancy, you nothing”: constructing femininities via matrices of Serbian popular music industry (*“Ja fensi, ti nula”: konstrukcije ženskosti skozi matrice industrije popularne glasbe v Srbiji*)

Presentation summary:

In the thesis, I offer an analysis of the various, complex, and often contradictory ways in which femininities, and more narrowly what I have labeled as empowered femininities, are produced within the popular music scene of Serbia and the Balkan region. My attention is focused on four performers, Teodora Džehverović, Mimi Mercedes, Sajsi MC, and Senidah, who are currently very popular among the audiences from former Yugoslavia. I have deliberately chosen four women who are popular singers and/or lyricists, all of whom create/perform music with the goal of releasing commercially successful products. Put differently, I direct my attention towards what is often labeled as commercial music, given that such music and its ecosystem (that is, its systems of production, distribution, marketing, consumption, etc.) reveal the inner workings of the neoliberal free market and, which is more important for my research, how femininities are produced and offered for consumption in such a framework. I purposefully chose to analyze the products that are created to be consumed by a large number of people, wishing to understand what kind of femininity is being sold to thousands, and even millions of listeners, as well as to uncover the role such femininity plays in the vast popularity of certain performers. Although numerous constants connect the selected performers, they are also quite different from one another, not only in regards to the music they perform but also when it comes to strategies they employ in the processes of self-positioning within the music market, as well as in the ways the products they offer to the audiences can be branded. Both the differences and similarities thus enable me to better understand how femininities are (re)produced to meet the requirements of the flexible and adaptable neoliberal (musical) market. My attention in the thesis is, thus, focused on the public personas of the four performers that is, on the modes in which they present themselves to the public through songs, lyrics, interviews, and social media. One of my goals is to attempt to think about the topic of women in popular music in terms that are different from those often found in writing about Balkan commercial music (mainly turbo folk), which focus on discussing whether women are represented as victims or as emancipated subjects, whether the erotic displays of their bodies are liberating or proof of the lasting domination of patriarchy, etc. Through the use of the term “femininity”, and by focusing on different modes of their production, my goal is to shed light on how femininities ‘work’, and to understand what can we learn

about the broader social contexts and the role of women within them, from the way the production of femininities is conceptualized and ultimately commodified.

To understand how mechanisms of the neoliberal market are involved in the processes of producing femininities, I turned to the vast body of writings that deal with what is commonly known as postfeminism (as conceptualized by Angela McRobbie, Rosalind Gill, and others) and more precisely, look at how femininities are produced within neoliberal contexts and in particular how various tokens of feminism are employed in such constructions. Given that these are mainly working within the Anglo-American context, they almost automatically related concepts like empowerment, sexual liberation, economic emancipation, etc., to the feminist movement and more precisely, what is known as second-wave feminism. Given the specificities of the Serbian and Balkan contexts, the way neoliberalism works in the post-socialist context, as well as how the fight for women's rights has been conceptualized in socialist legacies of the fight for women's rights, in my analysis I avoid using the term "postfeminism", but I do make use of the conclusions and observations the authors made regarding how gender and femininities are constructed within neoliberalism. I thus use these publications to map a broader theoretical context, related to the complex relationship between neoliberal capitalism, femininities, and feminism. Since the four performers I chose as my case studies are active performers, making a living off of the music they make/perform, I also used the concept of entrepreneurship to better frame their careers and public personas, as it offers me a kind of all-encompassing framework for understanding how femininities, but also subjectivities in a broader sense, are constructed within the regional popular music market.

The thesis is, thus, divided into two parts – the first one containing the literature review as related to the previously-mentioned concepts, as well as concepts related to the specificities of the regional music industry, and the second one presenting the analysis of the selected material. In the second portion of the thesis, I employed a mixed-media analysis, looking at music videos, lyrics, interviews, and the social media presence of the four performers. To better understand the different elements of the processes of the production of femininities, I selected four tropes or themes that play important roles in the mentioned processes. They boil down to the following concepts, and each one of them is assigned a separate chapter: the Balkans, empowerment, labor, and feminism. In each section, my goal was to analyze how the tropes are constructed by the performers, and how they are employed in the processes of their positioning within the music market. Of course, the division was (as they usually are) created for the sake of clarity, as the four tropes are intertwined and complimentary to one another. In other words, I tried to 'start from the material', and to understand which concepts or labels are important for the production of femininities of the four chosen performers, as well as how those concepts are shaped and used with the goal of 'succeeding' within the music industry (whatever that success might mean to each of the four women).

I was, thus, faced with a very complex and often contradictory web of meanings produced by the music and public personas of the four performers, a web within which I viewed concepts like empowerment, labor, sexual liberation, etc., as empty signifiers (a term I borrowed from Tisha Dejmancee) that can be 'filled' with a seemingly endless number of meanings, combined, and used for the fulfillment of different needs of the music industry and its protagonists. After analyzing the selected material, I concluded that, on the one hand, femininities are dominantly

produced according to the neoliberal 'standards', and on the other, that the specific ways in which such construction is done, play a very important role in the commercial success of the products of the music industry. All four women, namely, perform a kind of empowered femininity, which has, incidentally, been established as the norm within the global music industry in the last thirty years or so. In some cases, that power is attributed to their Balkan origins (in cases of Teodora, Mimi Mercedez, or Senidah), in others to feminism (Sajsi MC), but it's always conceptualized in individualistic terms. The constructions of femininities that are happening within the regional music industry, in other words, seem to require following the well-known patterns related to beauty, sexuality and sexual freedom, erotic bodily displays, etc., with such presentations and behaviors being framed as proof of empowerment, the result of hard work, proof of one's entrepreneurial genius, etc. – depending on the situation. The 'feminine topics', like traditional gender roles (and the breaking of them), violence against women, individual empowerment, etc., also play a very important role within the regional music industry, as all the performers I selected, except for Teodora, tackled subjects of female sexuality, gender norms, feminine strength, and so on. Furthermore, such topics can be, but are usually not, labeled as feminist (only Sajsi MC declared herself to be one, although fans did label Mimi Mercedez as a feminist in the early days of her career). They are also not understood as being in any way political (as one might expect), but seem to be just another tool in the performers' toolbox, meant to (among other things) keep the audiences entertained and constantly consuming the products they are offered. In that sense, how femininities are produced and commodified within the popular music industry, being mostly narrowed down to empowerment, reveals a tendency that is present in broader public discourses related to women's rights. The empowered femininity thus turns out to be

Namely, they are to a large extent modeled after the Western (neoliberal, that is) practices that are conceptualized around individual freedoms and within the broader discourse of human and civil rights, erasing almost completely, for example, the heritage of the fight for women's rights within Yugoslav socialism (which is a practice typical for most post-socialist societies). In conclusion, I discuss how the focus on empowered femininity reveals various tendencies of cooptation of the struggle for women's rights by the (music) market. In that sense, the regional popular music industry is following the global trends of employing various tokens of the fight for women's rights to 'shed light on', or 'raise the visibility' of certain issues that are commonly recognized as 'feminine', ultimately exploiting their growing popularity for the money-making purposes. The presented analysis thus inevitably brushes on various larger debates regarding the relationship between regional and global, the popularization of feminism and its consequences, conceptualizations of feminism, but also politics in a broader sense within neoliberalism, and the domination of the market-logic in all areas of human lives it affirms, etc.