

Postgraduate School ZRC SAZU

Adriana Sabo

Mentor: Assoc. Prof. Ana Hofman, Ph.D.

“Me Fancy, You Nothing”: Mechanisms of Producing the Empowered
Femininity within the Contemporary Balkan Music Industry

[“Ja fensi, ti nula”: mehanizmi ustvarjanja
opolnomočene ženskosti v sodobni balkanski glasbeni industriji]

Doctoral dissertation

Ljubljana, 2025

Povzetek

V disertaciji *“Ja fensi, ti nula”*: mehanizmi ustvarjanja opolnomočene ženskosti v sodobni balkanski glasbeni industriji, obravnavam produkcijo in reprezentacijo ženskosti v sodobni balkanski glasbeni industriji. Pri tem je ključnega pomena koncept opolnomočene ženskosti, ki deluje kot sidrišče moje analize tako izdelkov glasbene industrije kot tudi različnih materialnih pogojev, potrebnih za oblikovanje njihovih reprezentacij. Posebno pozornost posvečam žanru t. i. balkanske trap glasbe, ki sicer večinoma nastaja v Srbiji – konkretnije v produkcijskih hišah kot so Bassivity Digital ali IDJVideos –, vendar njena potrošnja ni omejena zgolj na državo izvora, temveč se pojavlja na področju bivše skupne države Jugoslavije in v njeni nekdanji diaspori, pa tudi v drugih balkanskih deželah, denimo v Bolgariji.

Pojem balkanske glasbene industrije uporabljam v skladu s strategijami znamčenja njenih glavnih protagonistov. Na to področje industrije popularne glasbe se osredotočam zato, ker verjamem, da ponuja edinstven vpogled v različne družbene, ekonomske in politične procese, ki jih naddoločajo kapitalistični produkcijski odnosi. Zato pričujoča disertacija preučuje tudi notranjo logiko delovanja neoliberalizma v postsocialističnih kontekstih in produkcijo ženskih subjektivnosti znotraj njih.

Žarišče analize tvorijo javne podobe štirih izvajalk, ki trenutno oblikujejo in v različnem obsegu vplivajo na sodobno trap sceno. Tri od štirih umetnic živijo v Srbiji – Teodora Džehverović, Milena Janković (Mimi Mercedes) in Ivana Rašić Trmčić (Sajsi MC) –, četrta, Senida Hajdarpapšić (Senidah), pa sicer prihaja iz Slovenije, vendar se je uveljavila skozi sodelovanja s podjetjem Bassivity Digital, ki ima svoj sedež v Beogradu. Temeljno gradivo analize sestavljajo besedila in videospoti glasbenih izdelkov oziroma pesmi štirih izvajalk, njihovi intervjuji in objave na družbenih omrežjih; v manjši meri pa tudi komentarji oboževalcev in sledilcev, saj ti govorijo zgolj o nekaterih aspektih recepcije v širši javnosti. Kombinacije teh različnih razsežnosti oblikujejo dokaj zapletene podobe javnih osebnosti, ki so predstavljene občinstvu in nazadnje ponujene v potrošnjo.

Čeprav disertacija razloži izbiro tropov in podob, skozi katere naj bi bila reprezentirana opolnomočena ženskost v izdelkih popularne glasbene industrije, to ni njen edini ali končni namen. Cilj je osvetliti mehanizme, ki poganjajo produkcijske procese določenih reprezentacij opolnomočene ženskosti, hkrati pa tudi tako rekoč preseči reprezentacijo oziroma stopiti »onkraj« nje. Vseskozi si namreč prizadevam razumeti, kako so same reprezentacije poblagovljene, znamčene in tržene, pa tudi kateri tropi in označevalci so skozi ta proces komodificirani. Proces in reprezentacije, na katere se osredotočam, tako niso novi, ravno tako jih ni odkril neoliberalizem, temveč jih je le drugače strukturiral. Raziskava pa odkriva konkretne načine produkcije in uporabe določenih skupnih in dodobra razširjenih idej, podob, motivov in tem. Sodobna balkanska glasbena industrija deluje kot opora razumevanju načinov produkcije ženskosti in ženskih subjektivnosti, ki jih neoliberalizem izvaja s pomočjo opolnomočenja. Ker se raziskava premakne onkraj reprezentacije, se si tem zastavi niz vprašanj: ali je opolnomočena ženskost feministična? V katerih primerih jo označujemo za tako? Še več: kako poteka proces znamčenja v določenem kontekstu? Kakšen je odnos med opolnomočenostjo in feminizmom v sodobnih, postsocialističnih, postjugoslovanskih družbah kot je srbska? Kaj sploh je feminizem v tem okolju? Pa tudi, kako se opolnomočena ženskost uporablja v procesu produkcije izdelkov glasbene industrije, ki jih je

mogoče označiti za feministične? Navsezadnje želi disertacija "Ja fensi, ti nula": mehanizmi ustvarjanja opolnomočene ženskosti v sodobni balkanski glasbeni industriji na široko odpreti vprašanje smotra procesov opolnomočenja v neoliberalnih družbah. Je opolnomočenje samo po sebi in na sebi sredstvo in cilj? Tovrstna in druga vprašanja terjajo še posebej pazljivo zgodovinsko perspektivo. Obenem pa je nujno ohraniti v mislih, da so si jugoslovanska država in njene ženske organizacije prav tako prizadevale za opolnomočenje žensk, vendar na drugačne načine in z drugačnimi cilji kot jim sledimo danes. Tako naj bi disertacija prispevala k sodobnemu diskurzu o namenih procesov opolnomočenja v neoliberalnih družbah. Ali se opolnomočamo/smo opolnomočene zato, da bi izgradili boljšo družbo in uveljavili globlje spremembe, ali z namenom doseganja individualnih ciljev in lažjega delovanja znotraj obstoječih, kapitalističnih načinov produkcije?

Skladno z idejo Ilane Gershon o neoliberalnem subjektu kot »fleksibilnemu naboru veščin, ki reflektivno upravlja samega sebe, kot da bi sebstvo bilo podjetje«, je doktorska naloga usmerjena v razumevanje načinov proizvajanja opolnomočene ženskosti kot dela takšnega procesa upravljanja. Pa tudi, kako se tovrstna subjektivnost uporablja kot sredstvo za doseganje različnih ciljev, ki obkrožajo uspeh v glasbenem poslu. S podobnega stališča analiziram, kako se le-ta proizvaja v povezavi z žensko seksualnostjo in, splošneje, s telesnostjo, prek njene večplastne prepletenosti s procesi pornifikacije medijev, popularnih kultur, nazadnje tudi vsakdanjega življenja.

Glede na to, da se analiza prebija in razkriva različne plasti, se je izkazala potreba po diferenciaciji med različnimi modalitetami obstoja opolnomočenja. Skozi analize gradiva se je porodil razmislek o »opolnomočeni ženskosti« kot o stanju bivanja, procesu, cilju, produktu, okvirju, konceptu, diskurzu. Na podlagi tega sem razplastila videospote in besedila izbranih pesmi, ki jih izvajajo štiri izbrane izvajalke. Raziskala sem, kako se opolnomočena ženskost proizvaja in predstavlja z uporabo vizualnega in govornega, pri čemer sem upoštevala posebnosti izdelkov glasbene industrije in se nenehno zavedala dejstva, da se takšno predstavljanje v skrajni instanci uporablja kot orodje komodifikacije. V primerih, ko je to mogoče in/ali potrebno, sem predstavila tudi mnenja izvajalcev in sicer z analizo njihovih pripovedi o izbranih pesmih, v katerih pojasnjujejo cilje in ideje, ki naj bi se skrivali za besedili ali glasbenimi videi. Če lahko recepcija njihovega dela ponudi pomemben vpogled v obravnavano vprašanje, sem analizirala tudi komentarje občinstva oziroma recenzije glasbe/izvedbe na YouTube-u ali Instagramu, čeprav recepcija ni moje glavno zanimanje.

Po uvodnem poglavju je predstavljen pregled obstoječe literature, ki se osredotoča na teoretske koncepte, ki oblikujejo kritiko neoliberalne produkcije subjektivnosti, ter spisov, ki obravnavajo postfeminizem, vprašanja podjetništva in postsocializma. V tretjem poglavju sem pregledala besedila, ki so mi pomagala začrtati poseben kontekst balkanske glasbene industrije v zvezi z vprašanji glasbene produkcije, distribucije in potrošnje prek interneta, pretočnih platform itn. V glavnih potezah sem opisala glasbeno sceno, njene glavne značilnosti in protagoniste. Četrto poglavje je zasnovano kot most med teoretičnim in analitičnim delom, saj ponuja pregled štirih izbranih študij primerov – karier izvajalk, osnovnih značilnosti njihove glasbe in javnih osebnosti. Peto poglavje uvede analizo razpoložljivega gradiva, ki sem ga uporabila za razumevanje toposa ženskosti, ki vstopa v različne vloge in položaje, običajno rezervirane za moške. V naslednjem, šestem poglavju zasledujem procese osvobajanja žensk od moških – kar je, mimogrede, pogost topos v popularni glasbi –, ki so predstavljeni skozi prizmo opolnomočenja. Sedmo poglavje je obenem tretje poglavje tega grozda, ki obravnava primere reprezentacij izvajalk, a tokrat kot že

opolnomočene v samih pesmih. Vendar se naloga premika od predstavljanja opolnomočenja h kartiranju njegovih načinov oblikovanja solidarnosti, sestrstva in odnosov med ženskami. V nekem smislu ta tri poglavja (od petega do sedmega) orišejo načine, na katere glasbena industrija v grobih potezih ponavlja proces opolnomočenja žensk v (neo)liberalnih kontekstih: ženske najprej »osvojimo« vloge moških, nato ugotovimo, da jih ne potrebujemo, in končno postanemo opolnomočene »same« ter iščemo solidarnost z drugimi ženskami.

Naslednji dve poglavji disertacije (osmo in deveto) se poglobljata v odnose med opolnomočenjem, spolnostjo in delom ter poskušata razkriti strukture (glasbene industrije), ki »stojijo v ozadju« opolnomočenja ali jih oblikujejo. Osmo poglavje poskuša razumeti spremembe reprezentacij in produkcije ženske seksualnosti skozi opolnomočenje, obenem se pa sprašuje, kako se opolnomočena ženskost proizvaja ravno skozi topoizirani izraz lastne seksualnosti. Deveto poglavje poskuša razvozlati zapleten odnos med opolnomočeno ženskostjo in »podjetniškim duhom« izvajalk. Nazadnje, deseto poglavje ponuja pregled pesmi, ki porajajo vprašanje značenja opolnomočene ženskosti kot feministične. Vsebuje pa tudi opredelitve feminizma Sajsi MC in Mimi Mercedes ter njuno razumevanje samih sebe in svojega dela v odnosu do te oznake. Poglavje se nazadnje spušča v zapleten razmislek o tem, kako izvajalki strateško uporabljata oznako "feministična", da bi se vmestili na glasbeni trg, in se sprašuje, kaj takšne konceptualizacije razkrivajo o feminizmu v postsocialistični Srbiji.

Že od samega začetka zavzemam kritičen odnos do številnih, vendar ne nujno tudi raznolikih načinov, na katere balkanska glasbena industrija ustvarja ženskosti. Skozi disertacijo sem predvsem želela pokazati, da glasbeni trg od žensk zahteva, da so opolnomočene in da opolnomočenje poosebljajo na zelo specifičen način. To seveda velja tudi za občinstvo, od katerega se ravno tako pričakuje, da bo opolnomočeno oz. se bo opolnomočilo samo. Tako naj bi se občinstvo dobro odzivalo na »opolnomočujoča sporočila«, ki jih širijo proizvajalci glasbene industrije. Izsledki raziskave dokazujejo, da tovrsten način uveljavljanja opolnomočenja ni namenjen doseganju družbenih sprememb, temveč je zasnovan kot orodje, s katerim ženske najdejo svoje mesto na prostem trgu, ne da bi pri tem motile status quo. Kljub tej kritiki, moj namen nikoli ni bil obsojanje konkretnih žensk, dvom v njihove odločitve in motive za vstop v glasbeni posel. Ravno tako ne želim kritizirati njihovega vedenja z domnevno visoke moralne pozicije. Raziskava je pokazala, da se umetnice in izvajalke pri strategijah reprezentacije in samopozicioniranja opirajo na zapleteno in nenehno spreminjajočo se mrežo tipov in praznih označevalcev, ki jih je mogoče kombinirati na potencialno nešteto načinov, odvisno od konkretnih potreb po značenju osebe ali izdelka in njunem trženju želeni publiki. Z drugimi besedami, podobno kot v drugih segmentih javne sfere tudi v balkanski glasbeni industriji velja mantra »vse je dovoljeno«, seveda pod pogojem, da to »vse« bistveno ne moti kroženja kapitala. Glede na to, da se disertacija ukvarja predvsem s segmentom lokalne glasbene industrije, v katerem je dobiček odkrito postavljen kot glavni cilj glasbenikov, se je analiza večinoma ukvarjala s procesi komodifikacije različnih tipov. Zato sem se želela spopasti tudi z diskurzi in metodologijami študij popularne glasbe, ki kapitalistične odnose jemljejo kot »naravne« za glasbeno industrijo.

Zaključki v raziskavi so pokazali, da je prav to področje praviše mesto za oblikovanje kritike kapitalističnih produkcijskih odnosov. Z drugimi besedami, znotraj takšne strukture je postalo jasno, da sta tako feminizem kot opolnomočenje – kot simboli, oznake, pa tudi globlje strukture – močno odvisna od pretoka kapitala. Izkazalo se je, da lik opolnomočene ženske služi kot blago, ki se ponuja v potrošnjo, in kot sredstvo, s katerim se komodificirajo drugi toposi kot so spolna osvoboditev, osvoboditev od moških/patriarhata, ženska kolektivnost in/ali sestrstvo, podjetniški

duh in tako naprej. Prav tako ugotavljam, da gre za individualno značilnost in individualiziran proces, v katerem izbrane ženske krepijo druge ženske z osebnimi zgledi in ne s spreminjanjem materialnih pogojev, v katerih živijo. Povedano drugače, »opolnomočenje« se ne nanaša na politično prakso prerazporejanja družbene moči, temveč na duševno in čustveno stanje, ki naj bi ženskam omogočalo, da svobodno uveljavljajo svoje delovanje. Proces opolnomočenja jim ponuja orodja, ki so potrebna za preživetje/prehod neoliberalnega kapitalizma oziroma za pridobivanje koristi od prostega trga, ne pa za njegovo spreminjanje. Zato nam pričajoča disertacija pomaga razumeti širše družbenopolitične procese ne le na območju Balkana ali nekdanje Jugoslavije, ampak širše. Daje vpogled v kompleksne procese delovanja in ustvarjanja subjektivitet skozi glasbeno indutrijo v čigavem centru je postati del sistema, ne pa njegova sprememba, ali, če parafraziramo Audre Lorde, uporablja eno od gospodarjevih orodij, ki ne bo porušilo gospodarjeve hiše. Potencialno nam bo le pomagalo, da bomo tudi mi postali gospodarji.

Ključne besede: opolnomočenje, ženskost, podjetništvo, Balkan, glasbena industrija.

Abstract

The thesis titled *“Me Fancy, You Nothing”: Mechanisms of Producing the Empowered Femininity within the Contemporary Balkan Music Industry*, focuses on empowerment as the central concept through which femininities are produced and represented within the contemporary Balkan music industry. Crucial for my analysis is the concept of empowered femininity which serves as a kind of anchor through which I analyze the representation of femininity in music industry products, as well as various material conditions that shape those representations. I direct my attention towards the genre of the so-called Balkan trap music which is predominantly created in Serbia (by production companies like Bassivity Digital, IDJVideos etc.), but is mainly marketed towards the audiences in ex-Yugoslav states and their diaspora, and also followed by listeners in some other Balkan countries, like Bulgaria. I use the term “Balkan music industry” following the labeling strategies of its main protagonists. I focus on this realm of the popular music industry, believing that it offers unique insights into various social, economic and political processes, all of which are shaped by capitalist relations. Therefore, this thesis also examines the inner-workings of neoliberalism in postsocialist contexts, and the production of female subjectivities within it. The focal points of my analysis are the public personas of four female performers whose careers are currently shaping and influencing – to different extents – the contemporary trap scene. Three of the artists are based in Serbia: Teodora Džehverović, Milena Janković (Mimi Mercedes) and Ivana Rašić Trmčić (Sajsi MC). The fourth, Senida Hajdarpapšić (Senidah), is originally from Slovenia but has gained prominence through her collaboration with Bassivity Digital, based in Belgrade. The material that forms the basis for my analysis consists of lyrics and music videos of their songs, interviews and social media posts, as well as, to a lesser extent, comments of fans and followers that speak to some aspects of their reception by the public. I thus focus on various elements that, when combined, form their complex public personas which are presented to the audiences and ultimately, offered for consumption. My aim in this dissertation is not to simply explain through which tropes and images the empowered femininity is represented in different popular music products – although I will do that as well. One of my central objectives is to illuminate the

mechanisms that govern the processes of producing certain kinds of representation of the empowered femininity, and to move “beyond” representation, so to say. Furthermore, my wish is to understand how representations are commodified, branded and marketed, and what tropes and signifiers are commodified through them. I thus focus on processes and representations that are not new, or “invented” by neoliberalism, but are structured differently by it, and it is my goal to unpack what are the concrete ways in which neoliberalism produces and uses certain common and well-known ideas and themes.

The contemporary Balkan music industry serves as a resource for unpacking how the production of femininities and feminine subjectivities in neoliberalism is conducted through empowerment. This move beyond representation led me to wonder, is empowered femininity feminist? In which cases are we inclined to label it in this way and furthermore, how does the labeling process work in my chosen context? What is the relationship between empowerment and feminism in contemporary, postsocialist, post-Yugoslav societies like Serbian, and even, what is feminism in this milieu? How is the empowered femininity employed in the process of making music industry products that can be labeled as feminist? Ultimately, with this dissertation, I wish to open up the question of what is the goal of empowerment processes in neoliberal societies? Is it in, and of itself, both a means and a goal? In that sense, I also remain mindful of a historical perspective, or rather, of the fact that the Yugoslav state and women’s organizations of the time also aimed to empower women, but in ways, and with purposes that are different than the ones I track today. Therefore, my thesis is meant to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the objectives of empowerment processes in neoliberal societies. Are we empowering ourselves/being empowered in order to build a better society and enact deeper change, or with the goal of achieving individual objectives and better navigating the existing, capitalist modes of production?

Following the idea that the neoliberal subject is “a flexible bundle of skills that reflexively manages oneself as though the self was a business”, to quote Ilana Gershon, my thesis is also directed towards understanding how the empowered femininity is produced as part of such management process, and how it is employed as a resource for achieving different goals that revolve around success within the music business. From a similar standpoint, I analyze how it is produced in relation to female sexuality and, more broadly, corporeality, through its multifaceted entanglement with processes of pornification of the media, popular cultures, as well as our everyday lives.

The analysis in the thesis unfolds through various layers and levels, as I aim to map the different modalities of existence of empowerment, so to say. The analysis of the material prompted me to think about whether the “empowered femininity” refers to a state of being, a process, a goal, a product, a framework, a concept, a discourse, or all of the above. Thus, I begin to peel off these layers from the music videos and lyrics of selected songs performed by my chosen performers. I explore how the empowered femininity is produced and represented through use of visual and verbal means, taking into account the specificities of products of the music industry, constantly being aware of the fact that such representation is, ultimately, used as a commodification tool. In cases where it is possible and/or necessary for the better understanding, I also introduce the opinions of the performers, through analyzing their accounts on selected songs in which they explain the goals and ideas behind the lyrics or music videos. If reception of their work can offer important insight into the issue at hand, I also analyze comments left by the audiences on YouTube or Instagram, or reviews of their music/performances, although reception is not my main interest in this case.

After the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 offers an overview of the existing literature, focusing first on theoretical concepts that formulate a critique of neoliberal productions of subjectivities, as well as on writings that deal with postfeminism, issues of entrepreneurship and postsocialism. In Chapter 3, I review the writings that help me map out the particular context of the Balkan music industry, concerning issues of music production, dissemination and consumption via the internet, streaming platforms etc., and I give a brief outline of the scene, its main features and protagonists. Chapter 4 is envisioned as a kind of bridge between the theoretical and analytical segments, as it offers an overview of my four case studies, the careers of performers, basic features of their music and public personas and so on. The portion of my thesis in which I analyze the available material begins with Chapter 5, dedicated to understanding the trope of women stepping into different roles and positions typically reserved for men. Next, in Chapter 6, I track how the process of liberation of women from men – incidentally, a common trope in popular music – is envisioned through the lens of empowerment. In the third chapter in this cluster (Chapter 7), I focus on examples where the performers are represented as already-empowered in songs, but I also move away from representation towards mapping how empowerment structures solidarity, sisterhood and, more broadly, relationships between women. In a sense, these three chapters outline the ways in which the music industry echoes, in broad strokes of course, the process of female empowerment within (neo)liberal contexts: first we “conquer” men’s roles, then we realize we do not need them, and we finally become empowered “on our own”, and seek solidarity with other women.

The following two chapters of the thesis delve deeper into relationships between empowerment, and sexuality and labor, as I attempt to unpack the (music industry) structures that “stand behind” empowerment, or are shaped by it. In Chapter 8, my focus is directed towards understanding how representation and production of female sexuality refracts through empowerment, as well as how the empowered femininity is produced through the trope of expressing one’s sexuality. In Chapter 9, I attempt to untangle the complex relationship between the empowered femininity and the performers’ “entrepreneurial spirit”. Finally, Chapter 10 offers the examination of songs that invite the question of labeling the empowered femininity as feminist, as well as of how Sajsi MC and Mimi Mercedez define feminism and position themselves and their work in relation to this label. In it, I go down the rabbit hole of thinking about how the feminist tag is strategically used by the performers to position themselves on the music market, and what do such conceptualizations reveal about feminism in postsocialist Serbia.

In this thesis, I adopted a critical attitude from early on, towards the numerous, but not always very varied ways in which femininities are produced within the Balkan music industry. I mainly wished to show the music market required women to be empowered, and to embody empowerment in a very specific way. This is, of course, true for the audiences who are also expected to be empowered/empower themselves and who respond well to “empowering messages” disseminated by music industry products. For me, this showed that such a way of embracing empowerment is not deployed towards achieving social change, but conceived as a tool for women to find their place within the free market, without disturbing the status quo. Despite my criticism, I never wished to “call out” concrete women, question their choices and motifs for going into the music business, or criticize their behavior from a supposed moral high ground. My research has shown that in terms of representation and self-positioning strategies, the artists and performers rely upon an intricate and ever-fluctuating web of tokens and empty signifiers which can potentially be combined in countless ways, depending on the concrete needs for branding a person or a product, and marketing them towards the desired audience. In other words, much like with other segments

of the public sphere, the “anything goes” mantra governs representation within the Balkan music industry, providing, of course, that the “anything” does not substantially disrupt the circulation of capital.

Given that I was dealing primarily with the segment of the local music business in which profit is openly positioned as the main goal for musicians, my analysis largely dealt with processes of commodification of various tokens. Therefore, I also wished to engage with the discourses and methodologies of popular music studies that take the capitalist relations as “natural” for the music industry, in order to show that this area is precisely an excellent place to formulate a critique of those very relations. Within such a structure, in other words, it became apparent to me that both feminism and empowerment – as tokens, labels, but also deeper structures – are strongly dependent on the flow of capital. As it turns out, the figure of an empowered woman serves both as the commodity that is being offered for consumption, as well as the vehicle through which other tropes are commodified – tropes like sexual liberation, freedom from men/patriarchy, female collectivity and/or sisterhood, the entrepreneurial spirit and so on. It also appears to be an individual feature as well as an individualized process in which selected women are empowering other women through personal examples and not through changing the material conditions in which they live. Put differently, “to empower” does not refer to a political practice of redistributing social power, but apparently to a mental and emotional state that enables women to freely exercise their agency. The process of empowerment offers them tools that are necessary for surviving/navigating neoliberal capitalism, or profiting off of the free market, rather than for changing it. It helps us become part of the system, rather than change it or, to paraphrase Audre Lorde, it is one of the master’s tools that will not bring down the master’s house. It will potentially just help us become masters as well.

Keywords: empowerment, femininity, entrepreneurship, Balkan, music industry.