Original scientific article
821.163.41.09-1:398
821.163.41.09-1 Николић В.
821.163.41.09-1 Максимовић Д.
https://doi.org/10.18485/knjiz.2025.15.15.1

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Poetry and the Burden of Creation: Rethinking the Walled-Up Woman Folk Topos Through Gendered Lenses[1]

The objective of this paper is to present a reinterpretation of the topos of the walled-up woman in contemporary poetry based on two poems: "Gojkovica" ["Гојковица"] by Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993) and "Despair" ["Очај"] by Vitomir Vito Nikolić (1934–1994). Both poems are analyzed in reference to the epic song "The Building of Skadar". The interpretation of a folk text in relation to gender relations, as proposed by Alan Dundes in his monograph *The Walled-Up Wife* (Dundes, 1996), serves as a critical reference point for introducing both male and female perspectives in the analysis of those poetic works. This paper argues that key interventions in relation to the primary source include the centering of the lyrical subject – emphasizing individual emotions and existential struggles – and the prioritization of the Gojkovica figure, accompanied by the marginalization of other characters. It concludes that this folk motif, though often regarded as marginal or peripheral, remains a fertile means of expressing the dilemmas of contemporary human experience, particularly those of the poet-creator. Furthermore, it continues to play a vital role in shaping local cultural identities.

Keywords: walled-up woman, folk tradition, foundation sacrifice, gender, Gojkovica

1. The Folk Topos of the Walled-up Woman

There exists a long and multifaceted tradition of invoking the topos of the walled-up woman centered on the motif of foundation sacrifice. At the heart of this narrative is the figure of the woman – mother – wife who

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[1] Research for this paper was conducted within the project 'The Topos of an "Immured Woman" in the Cultures of Southeastern Europe and Hungary' implemented in a period 2021–2025 at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, based in Warsaw, and financed by National Science Centre Poland (2020/37/B/HS2/00152).

is compelled to sacrifice her life to secure the successful construction and enduring stability of a structure deemed essential to the community.

This folk motif originating from oral tradition, is available to contemporary audiences in the form of songs, legends, and ballads. Nada Milošević-Đorđević emphasizes that the motif of immurement, presented within a developed narrative and in the form of an epic song, appears in two primary variants. Both revolve around the construction of a structure in continual destruction. In the first case the destruction is to be halted through the immurement of children and the offering of goods to the river; in the second by the immurement of a woman who brings food to the builders (Milošević-Đorđević 1971: 335).

In scholarly interpretations of cross-cultural character, the motif, on one hand, functions as a remnant of ancient beliefs and rituals, on the other hand, it reflects folk values and norms. According to the *myth-ritual theory* it originates from archaic sacrificial practices required to appease otherwise hostile supernatural spirits (Dundes 1996 after Köhler 1896, O'Sullivan 1945, Brewster 1971). The anthropological-literary approach emphasizes the ethical and psychological dimensions of the story, highlighting the mechanisms of loyalty, betrayal, and self-sacrifice. Elements of the myth–ritual theory appear in numerous analyses by local researchers of folk art, as well as by anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, and cultural historians, particularly in discussions centered on the issue of human sacrifice (Trojanović 1911; Janićijević 1986; Pavlović 1987; Petrović 1992; Đerić 1997; Šutić 2001; Milošević-Đorđević 1971). In this paper, the nation-centered discourse that dominated 19th-century interpretations of texts featuring the topos of foundation sacrifice, particularly the emphasis on the "primacy" of a given national variant's origins, is set aside (Jurić 2020, Dundes 1996).

Two interpretative perspectives also emerge from the dual meaning of the sacrificial foundation topos, articulated through the motif of day and night as symbolic spaces of creation and destruction. Šutić identifies these perspectives as an aesthetic one – concerned primarily with the analysis of creative processes – and an anti-aesthetic one, which foregrounds the barbaric dimension of sacrifice (Šutić 2012). Aleksić similarly argues that critical engagement tends to incline toward either the constructive or the destructive aspect of the motif. At the same time, the semantic ambiguity of the topos enables interpretations that incorporate the symbolism of death (particularly of the human body) as a necessary precondition for the creation of something new, whether a new cosmogony, family, community, or other cultural formation. (Aleksić 2013).

Alan Dundes, in contrast to myth-ritual interpretations, which he critiques as overly simplistic and literal in their treatment of this extraordinary ballad[2] up to the present day (Dundes 1996: 201), proposes an interpretation of the folk motif through the lens of gender relations and (fe)male capacities for (pro)creation. In this paper, Dundes's insights serve as a critical reference point for adopting a gender-centered approach that incorporates both male and female perspectives in the analysis of selected contemporary poetic works engaging with the topos of the walled-up woman.

This article begins with a concise overview of the epic song "The Building of Skadar", considered the earliest published and most widespread written version featuring the topos of the walled-up woman, which serves as the primary source for the analysis. This introduction is followed by an analysis of two contemporary poems: "Gojkovica" ["Гојковића"] by Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993) and "Despair" ["Очај"] by Vitomir Vito Nikolić (1934–1994) in reference to the main motives from 'The Building of Skadar' folk song. The discussion then turns to Alan Dundes's interpretative framework, which reads the topos through the lens of male and female capacities for (pro)creation. The article concludes by summarizing the identification of both original elements and new interpretive dimensions of the walled-up woman topos, as they emerge through the poetic reinterpretation of the epic song. It also emphasizes the continued significance of folk tradition and walled-up woman motif within contemporary culture.

2. "The Building of Skadar" Epic Song

The folk song "The Building of Skadar" ["Zidanje Skadra"], the most popular work that contains the topos of a walled-up woman, was first published in the collection of Vuk Karadžić (1787–1864) in the early 19th century (Karadžić 1823: 10–20). It was written down on the basis of performance of the singer [*guslar*] Elder Raško (of Kolašin) [Starac Raško (Kolašinac)]. I would like to emphasize that there exist many other variants of folk texts featuring the topos of the walled-up woman even with the same

[2] The issue of genre is problematic because folk texts featuring the foundation-sacrifice or walled-up-woman topos appear in multiple forms, ranging from ballads to epic songs, and are designated differently by various authors. Vuk Karadžić classified 'The Building of Skadar' as "an (epic) song" in his collection 'Serbian Folk Songs, Volume Two, Containing the Oldest Heroic Songs' (Karadžić, 1823, pp. 10–20). By contrast, Dundes refers to the same text from Karadžić's collection as a "ballad." In the preface to his book, Dundes elaborates on different folklore genres (including the epic), yet he ultimately concludes that 'the best-studied form of folksong is the traditional ballad' (Dundes 1996: 5). Therefore, when referring to 'The Building of Skadar', I use the designation "epic/folk song", whereas when discussing texts cited by other authors, I adopt their terminology.

title[3]. However, I refer to Raško's version which serves as the primary source for the analysis because it is the one of the earliest published and the most widespread variant.

The song is the story of three brothers from the Mrnjavčević medieval family, who built the castle of Skadar on the Bojana River. The eldest Vukašin was the king, the other two were named Uglješa and Gojko. Unfortunately, their efforts were not fruitful. They carried on building for three years and during that time what was built during the day was destroyed overnight. In the fourth year, the *vila* [fairy][4] informs King Vukašin that the erection of the castle requires a sacrifice, and instructs him to find the siblings named Stoja and Stojan and then wall the children in the foundations. With the mission to find the siblings, the king sends his servant Desimir, who eventually returns alone after three years of searching. The *vila* then instructs the king to wall up one of the brothers' wives. The one who comes the next day with lunch for the builders is to be walled up. Vukašin tells the brothers about the *vila's* demand, and they all swear that none of them will tell a word. Vukašin and Uglješa, however, unveil the secret to their wives the same evening, only the youngest Gojko keeps his word. The next day, both wives of the older brothers excuse themselves from going to the Bojana River. Despite many responsibilities of caring for her infant son, the wife of the youngest brother listens to the queen and heads off with a meal for the builders. When Gojko spots his wife in the distance, he falls into despair, sheds tears and grieves the loss of his beloved. Gojko's wife does not understand the situation, it seems to her that her husband's grief is unwarranted; thinking it is a joke, she laughs as the other brothers and builders begin to pile stones under her feet. Only when they reach her waist does she begin to beg for mercy and try to bribe the

[3] We can find two variants of the epic song with the same title only in Vuk Karadžić's collection. The second version, scarcely known, was published in 1974 within a second volume of the collection of previously unpublished manuscripts of Vuk Karadžić, entitled 'Serbian folk songs from the unpublished manuscripts of Vuk Stef. Karadžić' ['Српске народне пјесме из необјављених рукописа Вука Стеф. Караџића']. It was written down on the basis of a performance of the singer Todor Ikov Piper and sent to Karadžić by Petar Njegoš (Njegoš 1951). Another text entitled 'The Building of Skadar' was included into Kordunaš Manojlo collection (Kordunaš 1891).

[4] *Vila* translated into English as a 'nymph' or 'fairy' is a complex figure from supernatural order. Veselin Čajkanović argues that when her genealogy is fully examined, *vila* emerges as a divinity of nature and natural phenomena, inseparably and intrinsically connected to the forest, to streams and lakes, and to the clouds (Čajkanović 1973: 278). Nevertheless, he asserts, *vila* can also take the form of a woman, among others (Ibid: 278). Tihomir Đordjević upholds this statement, contending that a *vila* constitutes a type of supernatural female (Đorđević, 1989: 57). Adnan Čirgić, considering theories about the origin of the *vilas*, agrees with Kulišić, who links them to the representation of the demon of nature in animism (Čirgić 2021: 191). *Vilas* frequently appear in oral traditions concerning the creation of ancient strongholds and cities (Ibid: 204), and are therefore figures inextricably linked to the motif of the foundation sacrifice. In this case, *vila* is a woman, a demon or deity, and a representative of nature in the form of a river, she combines multiple characteristics that elicit varied responses from other characters.

brothers. Finally, when Gojkovica realizes her faith, she asks Master Rade to leave openings for her breasts and eyes to see through them and feed her son Jovan. Gojkovica loses her voice after a week, but continues to feed her child for another year. According to the legend, a white liquid still appears there in the place where the mother and wife was walled up, serving as a remedy for women who cannot feed their newborns.

Through an analysis of various texts that engage with the topos of the walled-up woman, I have identified several distinctive features in this particular Raško's iteration. It is embedded within the narrative framework of the medieval Mrnjavčević family; it introduces two categories of human sacrifice – namely, a sibling and a woman; the imperative of the woman's sacrifice is portrayed as naturalized and uncontested; and the act of immurement is ultimately framed as producing a positive or generative outcome. The walled-up woman's body functions not only as the foundational element of an enduring architectural structure but also as the symbolic cornerstone of a patriarchal social order. The sacrificed woman, mother and wife at the same time, consents to her death after a process of negotiation and continues to nurse her child until the very end. In this way, she becomes both the foundational element of a fortress intended to protect the community from foreign invasion and a source of life-sustaining nourishment for present and future generations.

I argue that the features of this widely known version mentioned above contributed to the fact that, in most cases, narratives about this epic song and its reinterpretations have focused on issues of (self-)sacrifice (for the community) and the struggle for power in a reality constructed by and perceived from a male perspective. This issue, which is extremely important to local cultures, is addressed by Tatjana Aleksić in book "The sacrified body. Balkan community building and the fear of the freedom". Aleksić referring among other sources to the epic song "The Building of Skadar", argues that the process of identity formation in the Balkan region rested upon the metaphor of the body sacrificed for the sake of the community (Aleksić 2013).

Moreover, by assigning the heroes the names of well-known epic and at the same time historical figures, the singer historicized the content of the universal topos (Milošević-Đorđević 1971), thereby situating it within a specific local context. As a result, "The Building of Skadar" was integrated into the broader narrative of the Nemanjić dynasty and, by extension, the golden age of medieval Serbian statehood (Mojašević 1976). These historical references thus endowed the song with a new dimension, allowing the motif of sacrifice to be interpreted in terms of the Serbian national experience (Devrnja 1979).

In contrast, the emphasis is distributed quite differently in poetic works that engage with the topos of the walled-up woman analyzed in this paper. This shift in emphasis is explored through an analysis of contemporary poems, examined in the following sections with regard to both their structure and thematic layers, in dialogue with the folk epic song "The Building of Skadar". The main themes connected with the topos of the walled-up woman identified as crucial include: the meaning of the construction being erected and its connection to existence and creation; the nature of the sacrifices involved; and the representation of the main characters (including both female and male perspectives) in relation to the source epic.

3. Skadar Descended into Despair

The poem "Очај" [Despair] by Vitomir Vito Nikolić (1934–1994) was first published in the volume "Друмовања" in 1962 (Nikolić 1962). Vito Nikolić is regarded as one of the most important and popular Montenegrin poets of the 20th century (Rakočević 2012). On the one hand, his work is praised for its high artistic value; on the other, Nikolić's poetry enjoys widespread recognition and popularity among contemporary audiences across different cultural strata[5].

Nikolić's poems refer to difficult existential moments, and speak of the feelings that accompany man during crises and experiencing the transience of existence. The poet describes a lonely man in a constant struggle with the world and himself, doomed to constant breakdowns, who is ultimately left only with his own sadness (Rakočević 2012).

Despair
The day rises and I – Skadar,
Evil forces have
turned me
into heaps,
crushed to the foundation.
For three years they
have broken me thus,
and I can no longer
keep building myself up
and falling

[5] Interpretation of Nikolić's poem by Danilo Čelebić, one of Montenegro's well-known actors, is available on YouTube platform: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Auf1B9S1OdA [retrieved 23.04.2025].

down the cliffs.

Gojkovica,
young Gojkovica…
(Nikolić 1962; transl. M.M.)[6]

The lyrical subject in Nikolić's poem is a man, an artist, a poet confronting "evil forces." The original solution comparing to the epic song remains the personification of the fortified castle of Skadar. The lyrical subject, like the medieval castle, has been regularly destroyed for a long time. He is simultaneously a perpetually disintegrating and re-emerging fortification upon a hill, as well as every rock tumbling down its slope. Much like in the primary source employing the topos of the walled-up woman, the "builder" once again, at daybreak, becomes aware of the destruction of the "foundations" that condition his existence. It is not possible to clearly determine what the "evil forces" that drive the lyrical subject to despair are. Perhaps his condition is due to illness, the loss of a loved one, some kind of impotence or other traumatic events (not necessarily on an individual level) that have made existence unbearable.

The situation of collapse or despair has been going on for three years, which is the same as at the beginning of the song "The Building of Skadar". This is the moment when one learns of the failures of the three brothers related to the erection of the building, but the necessity of the sacrifice is a matter of the future. Faced with repeated failures, the brothers in the song decide to wall up one of the wives who arrives the following day at the construction site bringing a meal. In this situation, the lyrical subject realizes that the sacrifice is inevitable, maybe his despair is caused by the awareness of the inevitability of sacrificing an innocent being.

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[6] *Очај*
Дан осване а ја – Скадар,
Зле ме силе
претвориле
у гомиле,
до темеља порушиле.

Три године тако оне
мене ломе,
а ја више нијесам кадар
да се зидам
и сурвавам
низ литице.

Гојковице,
млада Гојковице...

The lyrical subject is apparently aware of the inevitable failure of any efforts, lacking both hope and strength. He perceives himself as unfit – whether due to a sense of weakness, or because he believes that he is undeserving, or unworthy. This raises the question of whether, after three years of striving, the lyrical subject contemplates surrender in recognition of the inevitability of sacrifice and whether his despair arises from the profound awareness that the offering of an innocent being is both necessary and inescapable.

Also noteworthy is the implied, erotically charged relationship between the lyrical subject and the Gojkovica, articulated in the final two stanzas. The man appears to invoke Gojkovica. However, who she is remains ambiguous. Does she represent unhappy love, loss, or perhaps a muse? Similarly, the question of the lyrical subject's identification with Gojko, the builder and Gojkovica's husband, remains open. The nature of the relationship between the lyrical subject and Gojkovica, as well as his dependence on her, remains unresolved. It is possible that he is incapable of managing without (the assistance of) Gojkovica. Alternatively, he may feel that he is failing the "young Gojkovica" – unable to protect her from suffering – yet at the same time recognizes that he cannot rise, liberate himself, or succeed without her sacrifice. The metaphor of a crumbling, unfinished, failed construction site, a project requiring innocent sacrifices, was used in Nikolić's poem to portray the human condition from male perspective.

Poem "Despair" is a part of a consideration with universal overtones, but at the same time it is firmly rooted in local culture. Elements identical to, or evoking folk traditions are apparent in the poem's composition and thematic structure. Rajko Cerović argues that "Odmetanje" and "Očaj" are examples of "untranslatable" works by virtue of their association with the local folklore-cultural model (Cerović 2022). Unlike the source epic decasyllabic verse, "Očaj" has no fixed metrical structure, which makes it structurally reminiscent of other forms of folk creativity rather than epic song. However, Marija Knežević points out that the last two lines together form a decasyllabic verse and thus keep the work within the space of epic tradition (Knežević 2018). The subject matter of the piece reinforces the lyrical dimension, making the poem an example of an original combination of epic and lyrical inspiration from folk art.

4. Liberated Gojkovica

Desanka Maksimović (1898–1993) is a widely known poet and writer, present in the cultural life of the country for more than 70 years. The

importance of her work is evidenced by the establishment of an institution commemorating her achievements in 1993 – the Desanka Maksimović Endowment [*Zadužbina*].

The poem "Gojkovica" was published in the poetry volume "No man's land" [*Ničija zemlja*] (1979). Despite the fact that Maksimović's work is widely known, the poem received neither widespread public nor academic attention.

Gojkovica
Time is walling me up,
but poetry opens the tower window
and with its magnetic needle
I attract the gold of the stars
And the sky high
I touch with its antennae.

Time is walling me up,
but with poetry the tower of stone
I transform into a winged abode,
from which on the rainbow I make appointments
as on a beam.

Time is walling me up,
but by the simple means of poetry
I dig myself deep underground
corridors of liberation
as if with a pickaxe.
(Maksimović 1979; transl. M.M.)[7]

[7] *Гојковица*
Време ме зазиђује,
али поезија ми отвара прозор на кули
и њеном иглом магнетском
привлачим звезда злато
и високих се небеса
антенама њеним хватам.

Време ме зазиђује,
али ја поезијом камену кулу
у крилат чардак преобрнух,
с њега да дуги заказујем састанке
као на брвну.

Време ме зазиђује,
али ја поезијом пуком

The topos of walling up is the central motif of the work, each of three strophes begins with a reference to the motif of walling up. In Maksimović's poem, it is not a one-time act, it is a process, it takes place constantly, it is inherent in existence. Bricking up is enslavement, imprisonment, a circumstance beyond the influence of the individual and beyond the reach of his causality. Time metaphorically "walls-up" the lyrical subject which apparently identifies herself with Gojkovica, restricts and detains her/them within a certain framework. This condition can be interpreted in several ways, both in the context of the passing of time, old age and death, as well as the socio-cultural framework that determines the individual's state of enslavement. Liberation from the time that bricks up is possible thanks to both: the poetry and the lyrical subject herself creating the poetry. The lyrical subject's agency is expressed through a shift in her position within the network of relationships that structure her engagement with the world. Modification of the verb, from the third to the first-person singular demonstrates that shift: "(…) but with poetry the tower of stone / I transform into a winged abode".

The issue of the perception of time corresponds with the overtones of Maksimović's poem "I Have No More Time" ["Nemam više vremena"] (1973) where the passing is presented as a basic poetic experience and an expression of awareness of existence, rather than a longing for the lost time or a borderline situation of loss (implying fear of death) (Bošković 2004). The time of the lyrical subject is not over, the text is an expression of awareness of the value of life and responsibility for decisions, there is no more time for unimportant, unnecessary or unnecessarily difficult matters. The overtones of both poems "Gojkovica" and "Nemam više vremena" indicate deep self-reflection and a sense of agency.

The other interpretive path which strengthens the idea of the socio-cultural framework as the reason for Gojkovica's struggle is indicated by the information about the tower (*kula*)[8] in which the titular Gojkovica is walled up. The tower evokes contradictory associations, on the one hand it is an element of a fortified building, built of stone, stable and used for protection, on the other hand it is a symbol of confinement, captivity, restriction. Does the tower symbolize marriage? This interpretive thread points to the theme of a structural resemblance between the act of immurement and the rituals of both

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дубоко под земљом себи дубем
спасилачке ходнике
као пијуком.

[8] The word *kula* is a Balkan Turkism, originating from Arabic (ar. *kulla*) (Skok 1972), and was introduced into the Slavic languages through Turkish during the time of the Ottoman Empire. According to the dictionary of Turkisms in the Serbo-Croatian language, *kula* can have at least three meanings: 1) a part of a fortress – a stone building with loopholes instead of windows, designed for defense against attacks; 2) a multi-story residential building; 3) a tower (Škaljić 1985).

marriage and burial – a parallel introduced in Miroslav Šutić's reflections on the meaning of immurement in epic song "The Building of Skadar" (Šutić 2012). Thus, one could conclude from this that the lyrical subject may be interpreted as female who identifies herself with the figure of Gojkovica as limited by the rules of the (patriarchal) world in which she lives. This also aligns with Dundes's proposed interpretation of the folk ballad, which I further develop below.

5. (Fe)male Perspectives on the Burden of Creation

Alan Dundes's interpretation of the topos of walled-up woman presented in monograph *The Walled-Up Wife* offers a framework for reading both the folk text and its reinterpretation through the lens of male and female capacities for procreation and creation (Dundes 1996).

Dundes argues that there are at least two distinct possible perspectives: one of the victim, the tragic fate of the female who is immured, and the other of the male builder and tragic grief of the builder-widower (Dundes 1996: 200). Based on his analysis of numerous variants of folk narratives from around the world, he concludes that in the Balkan tradition, the story is most frequently presented from the perspective of the male builders (Ibid: 201). In presenting the male perspective, Dundes refers to the night-day motif – particularly the nightly destruction of the constructed fortress – linking the act of building to male erection and, by extension, to male procreative capacity. Introducing feminist reading of the ballad he argues that the plot provides a deadly metaphor for marriage in which a wife – figuratively immured – is forced to give up her freedom and mobility by the demands of her husband and his family (Ibid: 200). The window, through which she can feed her infant son, he claims, serves as the only sole point of contact with the outside world (Ibid: 198). Dundes argues that his proposal of reading explains why female is the one sacrificed and reveals ballad's popularity and continuous presence in many countries[9].

The poems under discussion offer both the perspective of the woman-as-victim and that of the man-as-builder of the fortress. They align with existing interpretations and remain closely connected to folk tradition, yet by introducing a strong existential perspective of the individual, they also reveal new potential avenues for interpretation.

[9] Tatjana Aleksić expands upon Dundes's analysis by offering a novel framework for interpreting the persistence of sacrificial tropes in the Balkans. Drawing on gender studies, myth studies, cultural theory, human rights discourse, and Balkan studies, she connects these tropes to contemporary forms of violence and processes of communal formation (Aleksić 2013).

Nikolić's poem opens at least two compelling interpretive paths connected to the topos of the walled-up woman and the foundational sacrifice, both of which concern male and female creative potential. In the context of the erotic relationship between the man (Skadar-Gojko) and the woman (Gojkovica), the nightly destruction of the foundations may be read as a manifestation of male procreative incapacity, while the relentless pursuit of completing the construction – even at the cost of sacrificing Gojkovica – can be interpreted as an attempt to compensate for this inability. According to Dundes the ballad "represents wishful thinking on the part of males, that they can create remarkable edifices just as women procreate, but the sad reality is that the male hubris brings only death to the female" (Dundes 1996: 201).

The destroyed foundations may also symbolize the creative crisis of the builder – be it an artist, a poet, or a creator. The lyrical subject may be creatively barren, unable to produce, or exhausted and burdened by the responsibility for his previous works and actions. In this interpretation, Gojkovica may symbolize his supportive inner element – one that, likely at its own expense, provides relief or serves as a source of inspiration. The lyrical subject, Skadar in this reading, is a despairing man who suffers from poetic or artistic impotence.

In the context of the distinction between the female and male creative potential as well as perspectives on the topos reading, the analogy between the poems of Nikolić and Maksimović proves particularly compelling. Numerous parallels can be observed between the situation and actions of the heroines in the folk epic song and in the modern poem. Both women, by virtue of their gender, experience certain forms of subjugation within the dominant socio-cultural framework. At the same time, their actions extend beyond the individual and impact the wider community. In the traditional song, Gojkovica supports other women by "nurturing" future generations of infants. In the poem, Gojkovica reclaims her voice through poetry, engaging in an act of self-liberation and reasserting agency – not only for herself but also on behalf of other women, challenging the gendered constraints imposed by the dominant socio-cultural order.

Like most of Desanka Maksimović's poems, the piece is positive in tone because the lyrical subject finds a way to liberate herself. Slobodan Marković points out that Desanka Maksimović stops at key historical moments and figures; he argues that the poet sees the boundaries that divide eras, sees their obstacles and challenges, but at the same time, as exemplified in the Gojkovica poem, she expresses her faith in the power of poetry: "Time is walling me up, but poetry opens the tower window" (Marković 2004: 76). The existence of limitations is undeniable, but in Desanka's poem, poetry is a

way to overcome them. Although time is limiting, poetry allows the woman to symbolically open a window, travel and fulfill her dreams (touching the stars and sky), create a house from a tower (depicted as a winged *čardak*) and learn about herself (liberation by digging freeing passages, breaking through them with a pickaxe). Creation and the poet's imagination become gateways to freedom and a source of happiness despite limitations and the inexorable passing of time.

An interesting interpretive path that takes into account the extra-literary context, other works by Desanka Maksimović and contemporary interpretive tendencies is proposed by Celia Hawkesworth. The author of *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia* (Hawkesworth 2000) herself describes her interpretation as an alternative feminist reading, which implies confronting the poet with the dominant heroic ethos. Hawkesworth points out that Maksimović, in her volume *I Ask for Forgiveness* [*Tražim pomilovanje*] (1964), which is a kind of polemic against the *Dušan's Code* [*Душанов законик*], gives voice to the hidden, silent figures of ordinary medieval women. In her view, Desanka, having previously proven her devotion to her homeland (and having become, as it were, a poetic authority creating in the national spirit), could afford to present an alternative image as a model that could coexist with the heroic ethos that dominates and excludes all alternatives (Hawkesworth 2000). The poem "Gojkovica" is in line with these motivations, the poet gives voice and agency to the heroine of the epic song, makes her the central figure of the work without any references to the male heroes of the epic song although she does not name her other than as in the source song after her husband's name – Gojko.

In both cases, the central figure of the Nikolić's and Maksimović's poem can be interpreted in relation to male and female creative potential – not only connected with the roles of mother and builder, but also as an artist-creator reflecting on the creative process, the meaning of existence, and the existential condition that accompanies it. The difference between them lies in the contrasting attitudes of the individuals toward the symbolic structure undergoing destruction. The artistic work of both male and female creators, metaphorically envisioned in reference to an edifice, is ultimately destroyed by time or malevolent forces, in response to which the creators adopt contrasting attitudes: resignation versus resistance. While in Nikolić's poem creation is portrayed solely as a source of crisis and suffering, in Maksimović's work it becomes a source of freedom.

In Nikolić's poem, motifs from the original folk song are employed to depict the creative crisis of the builder-artist-poet who, in a state of impotence, calls upon Gojkovica, which may suggest a dependence on the feminine. In contrast, in Maksimović's poem, the figure of Gojkovica serves as a point

of departure for the restoration of agency and the search for ways to attain freedom. In Nikolić's poem, Gojkovica serves as essential support for the lyrical subject, whereas in Maksimović's work, the lyrical subject identifies with Gojkovica, who independently confronts adversity. While in Nikolić's text the crumbling foundations may be interpreted as a metaphor for artistic impotence, the tower walls in Gojkovica provoke the release of the heroine's creative potential, as she overcomes the crisis through an act of self-liberation. Poetry is thus portrayed as a site of crisis and suffering, but also as a potential space for freedom.

Interpretation of folk texts with walled-up woman topos from the creator perspective and in the context of artistic work is neither new nor isolated phenomenon, but rather reserved for male-centered perspective. Moreover, it was rather marginalized in previous (re)interpretations of "The Building the Skadar" while this narrative was dominated by presence of historical characters, the issue of sacrifice as well as the hero and the anti-hero figures, all not rarely connected with the struggle for influence and ideological disputes over a national variant "primacy". Nikolić's and Maksimović's return to the topos of the walled-up woman enables not only the development of new (fe)male readings, but also a reconsideration of previously marginalized interpretative tropes. These new readings of texts featuring the walled-up woman allow for a (re)discovery of the richness of folk creativity – partially liberated not only from gendered but also nation-centered narratives.

6. Folk Tradition Reinterpreted: Revealing New Layers Through Contemporary Readings

Nikolić's and Maksimović's poems align with existing interpretations and remain closely connected to folk tradition, yet by introducing a strong existential perspective of the individual, they also reveal new potential avenues for interpretation. Moreover, they allow not only the development of new (fe)male readings, but also a reconsideration of previously marginalized interpretative tropes as well as the integration of both constructive and destructive aspects of interpretation.

Both the original elements and new interpretive dimensions of the walled-up woman topos emerge through the analysis of poetic reinterpretations of the epic song. The representation of the main characters in relation to the primary epic song reveals a clear prioritization of the figure of Gojkovica, accompanied by the marginalization of other characters, most notably, the striking absence of brothers from Mrnjavčević medieval family. The shift in

perspective was observed both in terms of gender (from male to female) and subject position (from group to individual). Instead of the singer's narrative centered on a community story from the perspective of male builders, we are presented with the perspective of the individual, focused on their own existence and the process of creation. In the center appears the lyrical subject – emphasizing individual emotions and existential struggles whether male or female. The poems introduce exclusively the symbolic meaning of the construction being erected presenting it as a framework for the struggle linked to existence and creation. This perspective enables a broader and more nuanced understanding of the nature of sacrifice in relation to the figure of the creator, whether male or female.

Although the analyzed poetic works differ significantly from the primary epic song, their cultural foundations remain intact, attesting to the enduring significance of native traditions and the internalization of folk culture, which was demonstrated by the identified presence of folk tradition elements in the structural and thematic layers. The continued significance of folk tradition and the motif of the walled-up woman in contemporary culture is evident in the very fact that such a reinterpretation emerges at all.

Moreover, it demonstrates that this folk motif, though often regarded as marginal or peripheral, remains fertile in expressing the dilemmas of the contemporary human experience and continues to play a vital role in shaping local cultural identities. These findings are consistent with Aleksić's conclusions, who contends that sacrificial logic is deeply embedded in cultural texts, which function as vehicles for articulating and perpetuating communal belonging, processes of exclusion, and the apprehension of freedom (Aleksić 2013).

These new readings of texts featuring the topos of the walled-up woman allow for a less literal and more cross-cultural interpretation. In doing so, they enable a (re)discovery of the richness of folk creativity, partially freed from gendered and nation-centered narratives.

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Poezija i breme stvaranja: Kritičko preispitivanje toposa zazidane žene kroz rodno usmerene perspektive

Cilj ovog rada jeste da predstavi reinterpretaciju toposa zazidane žene u savremenoj poeziji, na osnovu dve pesme: „Gojkovica“ Desanke Maksimović (1898–1993) i „Očaj“ Vitomira Vito Nikolića (1934–1994). Oba pesnička teksta analiziraju se u referenci na epsku pesmu „Zidanje Skadra“. Tumačenje narodne balade u kontekstu rodnih odnosa, kako ga predlaže Alan Dandes u svojoj monografiji *The Walled-Up Wife* (Dundes, 1996), predstavlja ključnu referentnu tačku za uvođenje i muške i ženske perspektive u analizu tih poetskih dela. U radu se tvrdi da ključne intervencije u odnosu na primarni izvor obuhvataju centriranje lirskog subjekta – sa naglaskom na individualna osećanja i egzistencijalne borbe – kao i prioritizaciju ženskog lika Gojkovice, uz marginalizaciju drugih likova. Zaključuje se da ovaj folklorni motiv, iako često smatran marginalnim ili perifernim, ostaje plodno sredstvo za izražavanje dilema savremenog ljudskog iskustva, posebno onih koje proživljava pesnik-stvaralac. Pored toga, on i dalje igra značajnu ulogu u oblikovanju lokalnih kulturnih identiteta.

Ključne reči: zazidana žena, narodna tradicija, žrtva prilikom osnivanja, rod, Gojkovica

Примљено 1. 9. 2025.

Одобрено 5. 11. 2025.