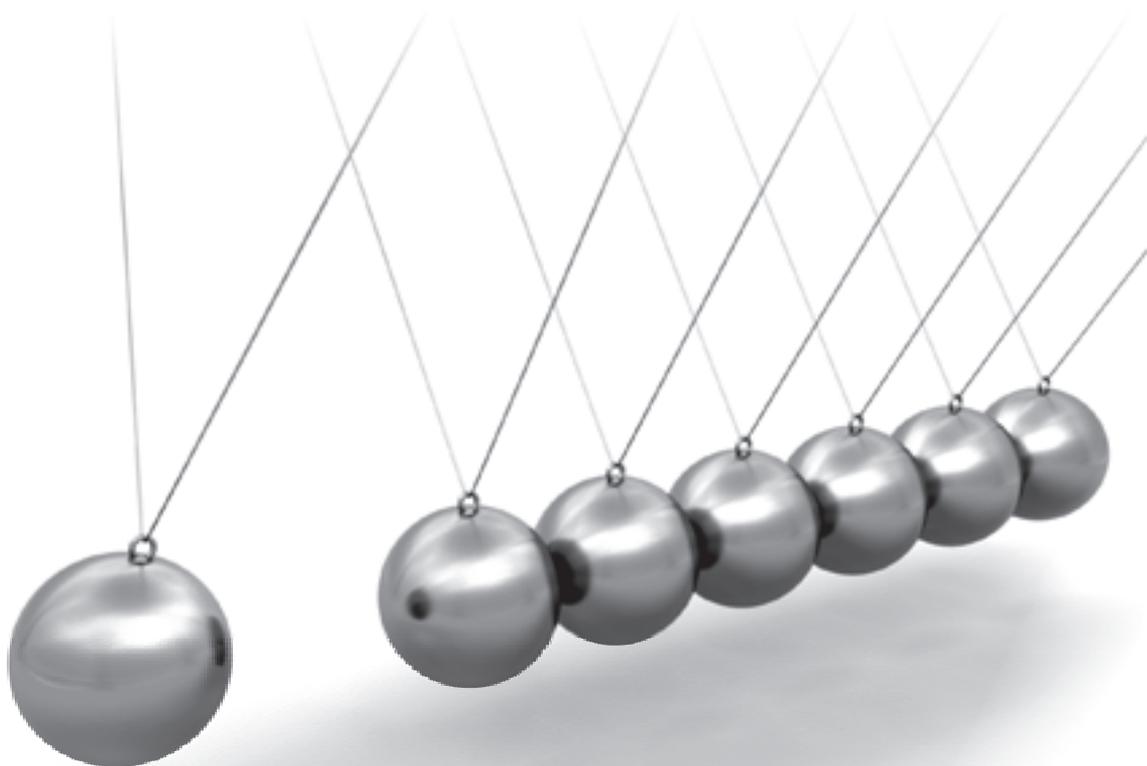


Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



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Edited by Irina Deretić

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Edited by Irina Deretić
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Dealing with a Crisis: A Note from Ksenija Atanasijević

Marija Petrović*

DEALING WITH A CRISIS: A NOTE FROM KSENIJA ATANASIJEVIĆ

Abstract: The paper focuses on a series of short texts written by Ksenija Atanasijević. Following her understanding of the role of philosophy in society, that it should not be confined to academia but must always correlate with everyday life, Atanasijević bravely states her views on the negative phenomena in the social, political, and cultural life of her time. She criticizes the irresponsible behavior of political and intellectual elites, their disinterest and cowardice, which she believes directly contribute to the multiplication of evil. The mentioned texts rely on her main ontological and ethical theses—that all human beings have the same essence and that the personhood of every human being must be respected. In dealing with crises, both those that affect all humankind and personal ones, Atanasijević engaged in a philosophical dialogue with her era. Only by facing the crisis bravely and analysing it meticulously can we hope to overcome it.

Keywords: Ksenija Atanasijević, war, feminism, intrigue, crisis

On Ksenija Atanasijević

A woman must step into the struggle of life—whether she wants to or not.
(Atanasijević, 2008, p. 29)

Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981) was an outstanding philosopher and a remarkable woman. She was relatively unknown to the Serbian public until recently when interest in her life and work began to grow. The relevance of her role in the intellectual circles of Yugoslavia between the two world wars is perhaps best grasped by stating the most important moments of her life.¹ She was the first woman to obtain a Ph.D. at the University of Belgrade, defending her dissertation *Bruno's Doctrine of the Minimum* in 1922. Two years later, she became the first female professor

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1 For more on the life of Ksenije Atanasijević, see: Vuletić, 2005.

to be appointed to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade. Sadly, her academic career did not last long. Due to false charges of plagiarism and a massive public campaign against her, she was forced to stand down from her position at the university. She engaged in different local, regional, and international feminist initiatives. Atanasijević was a member of the *Presidium of the Serbian Women's League for Peace and Freedom* and was very active in the feminist and pacifist organization *The Little Entente of Women*. She wrote for the feminist magazine *Women's Movement*, of which she was also the editor (Ograjšek Gorenjak & Kardum, 2019, p. 133). Her bibliography includes more than 400 books, essays, reviews, and translations (Stanković, 1970). Like most women of her time, she encountered misogyny both in her personal and professional life (Vuletić, 2005, pp. 141–144; Šajković, 1970, p. 33–34). It was not easy for a woman in patriarchal Yugoslavia, on the verge of WWII, to stand boldly in defense of feminist and pacifistic ideas, but that is exactly what Ksenija Atanasijević did.

In this paper, I will focus on a series of short articles Atanasijević wrote between 1923 and 1940, intended for the general public and primarily published in daily newspapers, in social chronicles and daily reviews. These articles and essays were written in response to specific crises in the society of her time, but also to crises from the author's life. Three major crises that I believe had influenced her work the most were: a) the intellectual and political crisis between the two world wars; b) the difficulty of being a socially and academically engaged woman in a profoundly patriarchal society; c) false charges of plagiarism and a massive public assault on both her character and academic work.

I use the term “crisis” broadly here, to refer to an unstable or crucial time, or state of affairs, that demands serious attention, or to an emotionally significant event or radical change of status in a person's life (Merriam-Webster, Crisis). This is in line with the origin of the word *crisis*, which comes from the Greek term κρίσις, which can be roughly translated as decision, judgment, turning point, sudden change (Liddell & Scott, 1940, κρίσις). Understood like this, a crisis is a time or an event that always requires dealing with.²

Her view on how to act against evil in the world and overcome crises is perhaps most clearly expressed in the article *Towards an Open Struggle*, in which she says that “all that is wrong, artificial, and perverted must be clearly, distinctly, and unsparingly denounced” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 76).

2 It is thought-provoking that the adjective “critical” has the same root as the noun “crisis”—from the Greek word κριτικός, taken as derivative of κρίσις (Merriam-Webster, Critical).

In *Fragments II*, Atanasijević writes that when our revolt is too general, it prevents us from seeing the essence of the specific problems we need to examine (Atanasijević, 1930, p. 194). That is why in times of crises it is necessary to carefully analyse and boldly and publicly identify all the individual problems, so as not to get lost in general issues and empty criticism. I will try to show that what Atanasijević did when faced with the above-mentioned crises was turn to what she knew best³—philosophy.

On the Role of Philosophers

... Philosophy has always been a guide to people towards light, truth, goodness, justice, and harmony.
(Atanasijević, 2011, p. 113)

Ksenija Atanasijević was one of the few Serbian thinkers whose philosophy was an expression of a living dialogue with her time. Her popular texts, collected in the publications *Ethics of Courage* (Atanasijević, 2011) and *Ethics of Feminism* (Atanasijević, 2008), are not a systematic exposition of a philosophical theory, nor do they pretend to be. They represent her intimate thoughts on philosophy, the society in which she lived, and the connection between the two. This, of course, does not mean that they lack philosophical or critical value. On the contrary, all texts are profoundly grounded in Atanasijević's philosophy. Based on her understanding of the role of philosophers, she bravely states her views on the negative aspects of social, political, and cultural life between the two wars.

Atanasijević's understanding of philosophy and the role of philosophers in society was largely inspired by ancient philosophers. This is not surprising when one considers that ancient philosophy was the main focus of her work (Deretić, 2020, p. 95; Šajković, 1970, p. 36). She was critical of the division of philosophy into disciplines, which she believed weakened the power of philosophical reflection (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 25; 1929, p. 11). Metaphysics, cosmology, ethics, and politics were more connected in ancient times, which is something that has been lost today. The ethical and political teachings of ancient philosophers had greater influence than those that followed (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 25).

Per her own belief that philosophy should not be bound to academia but must always have a connection with everyday life, the above-

3 The subject of "experts" and "expert knowledge" and their importance in times of crisis has been brought to surface by the COVID-19 pandemic. For more on this subject, see: Pavličić et al. (2021a), Pavličić et al. (2021b), Goldman (2001; 2018).

mentioned texts by Atanasijević rely on her main ontological and ethical theses—that all human beings have the same eternal essence and that the personhood of every human must be respected because the spark of universal spirit burns within them (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 48, 111). Her major work *Philosophical Fragments* (Atanasijević, 1929; 1930) studies human beings, as the main element of reality. She understands philosophy as wisdom about the world that should focus not on metaphysical truths but on human and social reality. The goal of philosophy is to reexamine human existence and make everyday life better, more valuable, and humane.

To fulfill this goal, Atanasijević argues that we must boldly and courageously face the evil in the world. Evil is omnipresent in the world and we encounter it every day. As the basic negation of existence, evil threatens to nullify all of life's value (Atanasijević, 1968, pp. 18–19). She analyses various forms of evil and its ubiquity both in society and in the individual. It is the fight against evil that represents the core of her social engagement.

Only weak or fearful doctrinaires call for obedience and meekness. Tolerating increases evil, and a weak surrender to violence causes humans to fall to the lowest of lows. Injustice spreads faster than a vicious disease when one bows their head before it and can be somewhat suppressed only by ruthless destruction. (Atanasijević, 1930, p. 79)

Atanasijević considered her philosophical duty to fight against the challenges that life between the two wars brought upon individuals and societies.⁴ She courageously criticized political and intellectual elites' irresponsible behavior, their disinterest and cowardice, which she believed directly contributes to the multiplication of evil (see: Đurić, 2015, p. 109). We should not lose sight of the fact that a public activity like this from a woman in the 1920s and 1930s, especially in patriarchal Yugoslavia, was very uncommon and brave, to say the least.

Especially in her popular lectures and texts for the general public, Atanasijević gives preference to practical philosophy over theoretical, ethics and philosophy of politics over metaphysics (Deretić, 2020, p. 97). “Pondering the constitution of the world is enjoyable and indulgent; analysing relationships between people is a necessity” (Atanasijević, 1929, p. 11).⁵ That is why she claims that the role of philosophy is to help create

4 It is interesting to see how these remarks on the duty of philosopher resonate in the current COVID-19 pandemic. Pavličić, Petrović, and Smajević (2021a), as well as Quassim Cassam (2019), argue that philosophers—primarily philosophers of science and epistemologists—are obliged to express their judgment on the current pandemic situation and offer a critical discussion of public health policies.

5 This can be interpreted as a divergence from the philosophy of Branislav Petronijević (See: Lolić, 2020, pp. 236–238).

a better and nobler world for all mankind. “Philosophers in the true and best sense of the word, meaning philosophers both in terms of natural tact and culture” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 28) are the ones who have or should have the needed ethical knowledge that enables them to show true respect for every person. I argue here that it was her understanding of the philosophers’ role in society that drove her to be socially engaged and openly critical of the crises she faced.

On War

But evil must be reckoned with...
(Atanasijević, 1968, p. 18)

The basic metaphysical assumptions of her philosophy are that the universe is deterministic (Šajković, 1970, p. 46), that evil is omnipresent in the world, and that man is a selfish being whose history is marked by conflicts. These also form the basis of her critique of academic and social elites and their passive response to the general negative social climate between the two world wars. Atanasijević believes that humans do not possess free will (Atanasijević, 1929, p. 80; 1930, p. 75), but that this is no excuse whatsoever for refraining from action. For her, rebellion against evil is the natural aspiration of a human who cannot bear it anymore and who wants to find a “path that will lead him to clean and fresh air” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 82). In her *Fragments*, she emphasizes that we must not be “theoretical fatalists” and suggests that, although we know that we cannot essentially improve the state of affairs in the world, in practical life we must always assume the existence of free will (Atanasijević, 1929, p. 87).

Her text *The Religious and Philosophical Basis of Pacifism* begins with the words: “Empirical events show us, persistently and frequently, that the relationship between humans, from the earliest times to the present day, comes down to all forms of struggle and conflict” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 29). Atanasijević sees the historical development of civilization as a vicious circle of conflicts and unrest. As the cause of these struggles, she sees the desire for self-affirmation of both individuals and societies (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 111). This pessimism concerning human nature is further elaborated when she says that all humans are egoistic beings (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 29) and that mutual affection is not in human nature (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 31). Primordial evil is embedded deep in human nature and can never be completely removed (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 127).

Analogous to her understanding of an individual, she defines society as “monads turned to themselves” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 30), closed units

that are selfishly organized. Precisely human self-centeredness is the reason why people unite—so that they can defend themselves more easily and achieve their selfish goals. “... A man, family, tribe, or state are not satisfied with simply preserving themselves, but a desire arises in them to improve themselves beyond the limits of their needs, or even to occupy themselves with trivialities, to the detriment or destruction of others.” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 30). In line with her view of humans as essentially selfish and of human relations as defined primarily by conflict, Atanasijević sees the origin of the war in the egoistic desire of individuals and societies to progress and develop themselves unhindered, even beyond any need and to the disservice of others.

She defines war as “one of the most disgusting and reckless manifestations of selfishness, blindness and all kinds of negativity, which are ominously rooted in human nature” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 111). As already stated, the most important ontological and ethical assumption of her philosophy is that all human beings have one identical, indestructible, and eternal essence. In every human being lives a spark of the eternal spirit, i.e. a soul, and thus the personhood of every human being must be respected (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 48, 111, 123). This is why every educated person should be a pacifist, and pacifist action should be aimed at “healing the roots of the evil that exists in human relations” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 41). In pacifism, Atanasijević saw the possibility of bettering human souls.

Despite her pessimistic view of human nature, Atanasijević does not believe that humans are necessarily doomed to eternal conflict. Peace is possible, but only in the constant effort of humans to better themselves and overcome their egoism. It is here that the irreplaceable role of philosophy shines through. “Humanity can be saved only by strengthening philosophical and scientific knowledge and nurturing true religious sentiments,” Atanasijević argues (2011, p. 41). She believes that there are two ways to achieve this (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 41–42): In choosing a transcendental way, a person can distance themselves from earthly things, perceiving them as empty and insignificant. This will bring them indifference towards other people, with whom they will then have no reason to enter into conflict. Another way, more suitable for humans, is that by comprehending philosophical truths, people will accept the moral principle according to which every human being is inviolable. From this will follow a political doctrine that will enable each entity, both an individual and a group, to live freely and develop unhindered.

The task of philosophy is to, at least partly, *tame* the egoistic nature of man. Atanasijević emphasizes that it will never be possible to bring humanity to a state of absolute peace, “because human nature will (...) attempt

to resist the control of consciousness and compassion” (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 42–43). The goal of philosophy would then be to establish at least *relative* peace, which would help avoid the recurrence of great conflicts and bloodshed (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 43). It is not possible to eliminate evil in a person, but its negative effects can be mitigated.

On Feminism

... In politics, women must not be meekly patient.
(Atanasijević, 2008, p. 43)

Feminism and the idea of equality take up a significant part of Ksenija Atanasijević’s social engagement. She believed that feminism has profound ethical and ontological foundations, that it is based on the belief that every human being is inviolable and has the right to fully and freely develop itself, thus all spiritual, mental, and social distinctions between men and women must be dismissed as prejudice. (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 22; 2011, p. 45). Men and women are equal by their nature, they have the same essence and the same virtues and weaknesses, so the only difference between them can be physiological (Atanasijević, 2008, pp. 29–30). This notion is partly based on Plato’s view of equality of the sexes in Book V of his *Republic*,⁶ of which Atanasijević gave a detailed account in her article *On Emancipation of Women in Plato* (See: Atanasijević, 2008, pp. 82–85; Loncarevic, 2015; Deretić, 2016; 2020).

Atanasijević believed that feminism will bring with itself a new morality that will improve society as a whole. Through the advancement of women, it will help build a better and nobler relationship between people, that will exclude all forms of oppression (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 45). Precisely this is the connection between feminism and pacifism presented by the author. At the core of feminism is the equality of all people, which necessarily entails refraining from hurting others. For Atanasijević, feminism is a profoundly idealistic and optimistic position. Like pacifism, feminism must start with the assumption that it is possible to “tame the self-absorbed human nature, and to establish among men the conditions for living in individual freedom, in sympathy, and peace” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 46). Through their feminist aspirations, women should aspire to establish harmonious cooperation between the sexes.

In pursuit of these goals, it seems that the author gives a privileged epistemic position to women. She writes that there are many “elements of

6 For more on Plato’s feministic views in Book V, see: Kandić, A. “Emancipation or Instrumentalization: Some Remarks on Plato’s Feminism” in this volume.

the morality of compassion and love” in feminism (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 46), which she seems to understand as inherent in women. This privileged epistemic position is especially seen in the following paragraph:

As mothers, feminists will instill in the blood of their children the truth that people do not exist in the world to kill each other. Women, as teachers, spread the ideal of peace very successfully among the younger generations, nurturing a pacifist mind frame. Women understand better than men the wisdom and truth of the words that, he who lives by the sword will die by the sword. (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 46–47)

Atanasijević believes that women are by nature more inclined to resolve conflicts peacefully. This is explained in more detail in the text *The Altruistic Agency of Women*, where Atanasijević states that women are “because of their naturally assigned and more diverged sensibility, more compassionate and altruistically inclined” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 50) which makes them more suitable to deal with discord and hatred than men. She goes on to say that:

Because women have a softer soul and a spirit more radiant with warmth than men, they are less likely to succumb to the desires of their own egoism, and more likely to grasp the truth (...) that every living being should be approached with compassion and sympathy. Since women, by their own orientation as mothers and educators of the human race, are better suited than men to tame self-centeredness, they can be more closely and more immediately illuminated by the supreme ethical inevitability, according to which thy neighbors should be seen as creatures akin and similar to ourselves. (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 50)

Contradicting her claim that there are no differences in men’s and women’s natures, other than physiological ones, Atanasijević states that, although men and women have equal moral capacities, virtues in women have “smoother gradations and tones than in men, due to their physiological nature” (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 30; see also: Duhaček, 2020, pp. 89–90). Therefore, as more sensitive and refined, women will rather than men become aware of their abilities to overcome the selfish human nature and encourage and maintain those abilities as one active power (Atanasijević, 2008, p. 23). This can be interpreted as, although men and women have the same moral capacities,⁷ women will be more inclined to resolve conflicts peacefully and fight for equality, thus being the bearers of a new morality that will correct the injustices in the world.

7 For a further discussion on equality of man and women regarding virtues in Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, see Plečaš, T. “Female Friendship in Ancient Greece and Rome in Times of Crisis” in this volume.

On Intrigue

For my exodus from the University, I have to thank the insidious intrigues, masked as the “autonomy” of the university.
(Atanasijević, 2011, p. 74)

When she faced a personal crisis, persecution from the university, and the attack on her personality and work, Atanasijević also turned to philosophy. She analysed the concepts and social phenomena that she believed contributed the most to this situation: plagiarism, anonymous writing, slander, and intrigue.

Except for her response to the Rectorate (Atanasijević, 2011, pp. 67–74), where she addresses the Rector of the University of Belgrade and her colleagues by name, in all other texts that deal with her persecution from the university she sharply notes that this problem is not only personal but also a sign of a bigger social and intellectual derogation that concerns everyone. Her critique is successful precisely because it does not use *ad hominem* arguments, but measured and well-thought-out arguments that bring to the surface the unfoundedness of the claims of her rivals (Deretić, 2020, p. 94). By allowing intrigue to be used as a means of dealing with dissenters or rather with competition in intellectual circles, we fall into a state in which “the possibility of feeling safe has been radically eliminated” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 86).

For intrigues and slander to succeed, anonymity is necessary, because it prevents the victim from directly dealing with its opponents, calling them to account and defending themselves. Atanasijević criticizes anonymous writing as a cowardly act that stands the “lowest on the ethical ladder” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 109). Although she is not critical of all kinds of anonymity—she even notes that it was once a symbol of the primacy of the collective over the individual (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 106)—she believes that anonymity is abused to escape responsibility for the spoken and written word.

Related to this is her critique of “the special methods of presenting scientific views” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 119). These special methods consist of incorrect and unclear or completely omitted citations of specific authors and works to which the writer refers or whose views are criticized. This is done with the aim of not only confusing the reader but also avoiding responsibility for the things that are claimed. (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 119). Atanasijević sees this as disastrous for the progress of science. The written word can only have meaning if it is honest, that is when there is “actual mental content” behind it (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 115).

If there is not any truthfulness to words, then their origin is confusion, illusion, and lies, or ontologically speaking, they come from “pure nothing” (Atanasijević, 2011, p. 117). Any written word should only be an expression of the author’s authentic thought. Otherwise, it is delusion, demagoguery, and a means of deception. Atanasijević believed that every person should express their honest opinion bravely, publicly and sign it with their own name. Failing to do so will create an environment in which one can say whatever they want and suffer no consequences for the harm they cause.

On Dealing with a Crisis

One must be strong—this above all.
(Atanasijević, 1930, p. 74)

Three major crises I singled out from Ksenija Atanasijević’s life are: a) the intellectual and political crisis between the two world wars; b) the difficulty of being a socially and academically engaged woman in a deeply patriarchal society; c) false charges of plagiarism and a massive public attack on both her character and academic work. In all three she acted having in mind her notion of philosophy—that it should not be confined to searching for metaphysical truths but always a dialogue with everyday life, which reexamines human existence and makes everyday life better, more valuable, and humane. This is why she considered her duty as a philosopher to bravely and publicly take a stand and fight for what she believed was right. Her social engagement was grounded in her philosophy and her philosophy was aimed at creating a better and nobler world for all mankind.

In dealing with the intellectual and political crisis between the two world wars, she criticized the passiveness of intellectual and political elites. She believed that every educated man and woman should be pacifists, and pacifist action should be aimed at minimizing evil in human relations. In dealing with challenges a profoundly patriarchal society had put before her, Atanasijević advocated for feministic ideas. She believed that at the core of feminism stands the idea of the equality of all people, which necessarily entails refraining from hurting others. When faced with a personal crisis, the false accusations of plagiarism, and the attacks on her personality and work, Atanasijević analysed the concepts and social phenomena that she believed contributed the most to that situation, incisively noticing that problems of false charges, slander, and intrigue are not only her personal but concern the society as a whole. By allowing anyone to falsely accuse and anonymously slander others without suffering any

consequences, we create a social atmosphere where no one is safe. It seems Atanasijević believed that the tasks of fighting injustices in the world and bringing a new morality to improve the society as a whole fall on women, as they are more inclined than men to overcome their selfish human nature. If there is a note to be taken from the way Ksenija Atanasijević dealt with crises in her life, it is that we should approach every difficulty courageously and never remain silent when confronted with injustice.⁸

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СУОЧАВАЊЕ СА КРИЗОМ: НАПОМЕНЕ КСЕНИЈЕ АТАНАСИЈЕВИЋ

Апстракт: Рад се фокусира на серију кратких текстова које је написала филозофкиња Ксенија Атанасијевић, прва жена која је докторирала на Београдском универзитету. Иако су намењени широј јавности и објављени углавном у дневним новинама, овим текстовима не недостаје филозофске и критичке вредности. Следећи своје разумевање улоге филозофа у друштву, Атанасијевић храбро износи своје ставове о негативним појавама у друштвеном,

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политичком и културном животу друштва између два рата. Смело критикује неодговорно понашање политичких и интелектуалних елита, њихову незаинтересованост и кукавичлук, за које сматра да директно „доприносе умножавању зла“. Филозофија не сме бити ограничена на академску заједницу, већ увек мора бити у корелацији са свакодневним животом. Поменути текстови ослањају се на њене главне онтолошке и етичке тезе – да сва људска бића имају исту суштину и да се мора поштовати личност сваког човека. Бавећи се кризама, како онима које погађају цело човечанство, тако и оним личним, Атанасијевић је водила филозофски дијалог са својом ером. Само храбрим суочавањем с кризом и њеном пажљивом анализом можемо се надати да ћемо је превладати.

Кључне речи: Ксенија Атанасијевић, феминизам, интрига, криза, рат