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Aspects of Feminist Critical Theory in Ollga Plumbi's Publicistic Writings and Political Activity

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Abstract

This article examines Ollga Plumbi's publicistic writings and political activity through the perspective of feminist critical theory. Drawing on a contextual reading of her contributions to "Bota e Re" ("The New World") and "Përpjekja Shqiptare" ("The Albanian Endeavour") in the 1930s, alongside historical studies on interwar Albania and the antifascist movement, it investigates the relationship between women's emancipation and the critique of the social order. The analysis situates Plumbi's writings within the contradictions between state-led reform and the persistence of patriarchal socioeconomic structures. It argues that her thought connects women's subordination to economic dependence, domestic labor, and the cultural and ideological reproduction of domination. Her criticism of women's supposed natural inferiority and of the language of fate presents women as potential agents of transformation rather than passive recipients of reform. The article further interprets her antifascist engagement as an attempt to translate intellectual criticism into collective political practice. Plumbi's contribution thereby illuminates the relationship between gender emancipation, social criticism, and political action in the Albanian historical context.

Keywords: Ollga Plumbi; feminist critical theory; women's emancipation; Albania; patriarchy; cultural hegemony; antifascism

1. Introduction

Ollga Plumbi, an intellectual, publicist, and activist during the 1930s and 1940s, was the first to address feminism and the modern feminist movement in Albania in a systematic and theoretically articulated manner. Efforts to raise the question of Albanian women's emancipation had begun in the early years following the declaration of independence. These had taken fragmented forms through initiatives by individual activists and intellectuals to establish charitable or educational institutions and, subsequently, through measures introduced from above by the nation-state, constrained by the character of the state itself and the social interests to which it was tied under the monarchical regime. Through her writings, Plumbi moved beyond moralistic criticism, bringing together a critique of women's position in the social order, a critique of the economic structure, and a critique of dominant ideology. Within this interconnection, the article identifies aspects of feminist critical theory expressed under Albania's historical and social conditions. Plumbi's feminist activity extended beyond the theoretical elaboration of feminism in Albania into the political and historical terrain of the Antifascist War, establishing, for the first time, a movement with a clear political programme for women's emancipation. This article aims to identify these aspects of feminist critical theory as they emerge in Ollga Plumbi's publicistic writings and are synthesized in her antifascist activity. In this sense, the study's central research question is: How are

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women's emancipation, the critique of socioeconomic relations, and the critique of ideology interwoven in Ollga Plumbi's thought, and how does this interconnection relate to her antifascist political practice?

The article proceeds through several theoretical, historical, and analytical dimensions that are synthesized in the dialectical unity of Ollga Plumbi's feminist theory and practice. The account of the historical development of the concepts of feminist critical theory establishes the theoretical framework and methodological orientation of the analysis that follows. A separate section addresses Albania's historical context in the 1920s and 1930s, the position of Albanian women during this period, and the failure of efforts confined to legislative measures and moralistic interventions aimed at their emancipation. The section on Ollga Plumbi's publicistic activity focuses on her writings published in the journal "Bota e Re" ("The New World") and, following its closure by the authorities, in "Përpjekja Shqiptare" ("The Albanian Endeavour"), a journal distinguished by its progressive approach to social issues.

The article also examines the development of the antifascist movement in Albania, which combined the struggle to liberate the country from occupation with the movement and aspirations for democratization and the broader liberation of society from forms of oppression. Within these conditions, the analysis considers the role of antifascism as an emancipatory space for Albanian women, who participated in large numbers in partisan formations and various forms of resistance. Particular attention is given to Ollga Plumbi's leading role in the political organization of Albanian women within the structures of the Antifascist Front in Albania. From this perspective, the article examines her publicistic and political-organizational activity during this period.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

To examine this relationship between Ollga Plumbi's thought and political activity, the study combines historical-theoretical analysis with a critical interpretation of her writings. It focuses on how she explains women's position, identifies the mechanisms through which subordination is reproduced, and delineates the possibilities for emancipatory action. The concepts of feminist critical theory serve as analytical instruments for interpreting these aspects in relation to the historical and social conditions in which her thought developed. Their application distinguishes between Plumbi's own formulations and the analytical categories through which the study examines their significance.

In this sense, feminist critical theory represents a perspective that conceives of women's emancipation as one of the foundations of the critique of social, cultural, and ideological structures of power. It examines the historical and socioeconomic mechanisms that produce and reproduce gender inequality, linking the woman question to relations of domination and their legitimation. The connections between feminist theory and other emancipatory movements, highlighted by Nancy Fraser, provide a basis for examining the interconnection of gender emancipation, social transformation, and political action (Humm 2003, pp. 50–51). This interconnection guides the analysis of Plumbi's social critique and her antifascist engagement.

A fundamental aspect of this orientation is the critique of the naturalization of women's subordinate position. Within the Enlightenment tradition, Mary Wollstonecraft, in "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792), connects the demand for equality with a critique of the social conditions that produce women's dependence. Her examination of moral and educational norms situates women's supposed inferiority in relation to social organization and the cultural authority that legitimizes it (Wollstonecraft 2002, pp. 130–38). This aspect informs the analysis of Plumbi's critique of naturalizing explanations of women's

inferiority, as well as the importance she assigns to education and cultural development in the process of emancipation.

Another aspect concerns the relationship between the formal recognition of rights and the conditions for their realization. In "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Woman-Citizen" (1791), Olympe de Gouges highlights the contradiction between the proclamation of universal rights and women's exclusion from the political sphere (de Gouges 1791). In the nineteenth century, Harriet Taylor Mill develops the critique of gender inequality by examining its institutional foundations in law, marriage, and the economy (Morales 2001, pp. 1–25). These issues guide the examination of the relationship between legal reforms in Albania, the social relations that constrained their implementation, and Plumbi's call for women's own organization and action.

The socioeconomic dimension of emancipation receives particular attention within the socialist and materialist tradition. August Bebel[1] links women's subordination to the development of private property and the social organization of relations of production, examining gender emancipation in relation to socioeconomic transformation (Bebel 1910). Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai develop the gender question as part of the critique of capitalism and the reproduction of inherited forms of patriarchal domination (Armstrong 2021, pp. 35–38). This dimension helps interpret the connections Plumbi draws between economic dependence, domestic labor, family responsibilities, and the need for social and state support.

Alongside economic relations, the analysis gives attention to the cultural and ideological reproduction of women's position. In "The Second Sex" (1949), Simone de Beauvoir conceives of woman as the "Other," examining the historical formation of the female subject through social and symbolic relations of power (Tidd 2009, pp. 99–101). This perspective provides interpretive tools for examining the mechanisms through which norms, family upbringing, and social representations contribute to the reproduction of subordination. In the analysis of Plumbi's thought, this dimension relates particularly to the critique of dominant ideology, cultural hegemony, and fatalistic representations that constrain women's autonomy and action.

The interconnection of these dimensions finds expression in Nancy Fraser's contemporary theory, which approaches feminist critique through the relationship between economic redistribution, cultural recognition, and political representation. Her critique of the absorption of feminist demands into neoliberal logic emphasizes the importance of linking emancipation to the transformation of socioeconomic structures (Fraser 2009, pp. 97–117). In this study, this perspective helps examine the relationships between the material, cultural, and political dimensions of emancipation in Plumbi's thought. These contributions, developed within different traditions and historical contexts, define the analytical dimensions through which the article interprets the specificity of her feminist critique and its connection to political practice.

3. Albania in the 1930s: Efforts Toward Emancipation from Above and Its Limits

3.1. Political Consolidation and the Beginnings of the Nation State

Until the late 1920s, very few reforms concerning women or social issues more generally had been undertaken in Albania. The 1920s can be characterized by three significant phases. The first was the struggle to defend and secure the country's independence against the territorial and hegemonic ambitions of neighboring states. The second was the struggle for power within the Albanian political class, which ended with the defeat of the June Revolution and the "Triumph of Legality" proclaimed by Ahmet Zogu following his return to Tirana. The third was the consolidation of Zogu's power, initially through a republican regime

and subsequently through the proclamation of the monarchy (Fischer 2007, pp. 31–47). Another obstacle to reform during this period was Zogu's reliance on conservative social elements, including large landowners and northern regional leaders, alongside the support of Fascist Italy. Nevertheless, the consolidation of his regime was accompanied by the establishment of the principal state institutions and the centralization of the administration and state bureaucracy (Fischer 2007, pp. 47–53). By the late 1920s, conditions had emerged for several limited reforms. These reflected the regime's attempt to find a new balance between demands for reform from intellectual circles and the constraints imposed by the persistence of premodern relations of production and structures of social power.

3.2. Measures for Emancipation from Above

As a result of these factors, compounded by centuries of backwardness in Albania, women's position in society was determined by the structures of the traditional patriarchal family and sanctioned by customary norms and religious codes (Musaj 2002, pp. 21–26)[2]. This arrangement displayed characteristics associated with premodern and precapitalist societies and with so-called peripheral capitalism (Hill 1975, pp. 30–37)[3]. The principal measures relevant to the emancipation of Albanian women "from above" included the Civil Code of 1929, the Educational reform of 1933, Legislation prohibiting the veil and other traditional forms of dress, and state support for women's associations, provided that they did not directly challenge royal authority.

The Civil Code marked an important step toward recognizing equal rights for men and women in the family and society. It introduced advances concerning engagement, marriage, women's rights as wives, divorce, and inheritance. Freedom of consent was established as a necessary condition for engagement and marriage, and a young woman was granted the right to reject an unwanted marriage (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, arts. 120–21). The minimum age of marriage for girls was sixteen. Yet the Code treated marriage as a union not only between two individuals but also between two families or "parties." If one party repudiated an engagement "without reason," it was required to compensate the other (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 117). The formal prohibition of polygamy was a progressive measure: "A marriage cannot be contracted before the previous one has been dissolved" (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 122). Marriages were required to be celebrated "before the state official" (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 149), whereas this had previously been the exclusive prerogative of religious institutions. Another achievement was the recognition of the right to divorce, which either spouse could request (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, arts. 203–10). Full equality was also established in inheritance rights (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 469)[4].

The educational reform of 1933 enabled the expansion of girls' education through the opening of schools in major towns. In October 1933, the "Nana Mbretëreshë" ("Queen Mother") Women's Institute opened in Tirana, incorporating pupils from private schools that had closed because of the reform (Xheraj 2016, pp. 66–68). Concentrating women's secondary teacher training in a single institution in the capital helped improve curricula and teaching quality by bringing together the country's most qualified teaching staff.

Other forms of state intervention included the establishment of the organization "Gruaja Shqiptare" ("The Albanian Woman"), which operated under state supervision and was led by Sanije Zogu, the king's sister. The organization established branches in the country's main towns, promoted implementation of the Civil Code, and supported state policies such as the law prohibiting the veil. Its membership remained relatively small, and its activities were suspended between 1933 and 1936. The Law prohibiting the Veil, adopted in March 1937 with the support of the Muslim Community, was intended to promote women's

emancipation in Albania (Musaj 2002, pp. 314–15). While such a law would today constitute a violation of human rights, in the Albania of that period, where patriarchy and conservative traditionalism were intertwined with the Ottoman cultural legacy, the veil was regarded as an element of women's oppression. Its removal was enforced rigorously through state coercion.

3.3. Factors Limiting the Implementation of Reforms

Despite these measures, the lives of the overwhelming majority of Albanian women did not change substantially. The Civil Code was implemented primarily in urban areas. In villages and remote regions, where most of the population lived, enforcement was not always possible. The laws themselves also retained significant limitations associated with the country's broader social underdevelopment and the conservatism of its political class. In relation to engagement, the law imposed no restrictions that would prevent betrothals arranged in infancy (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 114)[5]. Young men and women under twenty could not marry without parental consent (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 128). The Code also maintained restrictions within marriage, legally stipulating that "the husband is the head of the family" and that a woman required her husband's consent to practice a profession or engage in an industry (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, arts. 188, 191)[6]. Given the country's socioeconomic conditions, the Women's Institute in the capital was not accessible to all girls. It was attended predominantly by girls from middle-class families. Girls in rural Albania, where most of the population lived, remained almost entirely without schooling. Female illiteracy reached 92 percent (Xheraj 2016, p. 78).

Moreover, interwar Albania did not meet the basic conditions for women's emancipation outlined above. The absence of socioeconomic transformation-marked inequality, poverty in different regions, the failure of agrarian reform, underdeveloped agriculture, and limited industrial development—was the principal obstacle to implementing reform. State intervention to reform society and advance women's emancipation had some impact but did not become decisive. State authority had not attained the political and cultural hegemony necessary to impose itself throughout Albanian society. To maintain its power, the monarchical regime also depended on social groups interested in preserving the existing social order. Measures for women's emancipation from above created a legal foundation and a general formal orientation toward modernity, but they did not produce structural transformations in Albanian society.

3.4. The Liberalization of the Press in the Mid 1930s

The emergence of intellectual discourse in public life accompanied these reforms from above and the prospect of social change. This became possible from the mid-1930s onward. Following the economic crisis and the improvement of relations with Italy, the regime considered it necessary to renew the governing political class. Ahmet Zogu announced a new government composed primarily of middle-class intellectuals educated abroad, inaugurating a liberal phase of the monarchy. The government of the "Young," led by Mehdi Frashëri, promised reforms to modernize and develop the country. Although most were never implemented, partly because the government was short-lived, censorship was relaxed and public debate became freer, provided that criticism did not extend to the king. This allowed newspapers and journals to appear that addressed current affairs and proposed visions for the country's future. They debated economic, social, and cultural development, criticized the government and opposition, discussed philosophical questions, and published translated extracts from foreign liberal and socialist literature (Boriçi and Marku 2010, pp. 192–213). This liberal "spring" was brief. Fearing that economic hardship

would fuel discontent and that an increasingly critical intellectual class might emerge, Zogu restored the conservative "Old" to power. Some newspapers and journals were closed, while those permitted to continue were placed under strict supervision.

4. Feminism and Social Critique in Ollga Plumbi's Writings

These developmental contradictions, between reform from above and structural obstacles to its realization, created opportunities for women intellectuals such as Ollga Plumbi to express their views on the position of Albanian women through an approach not previously developed in Albania: a feminist critique of society. After a period living in France, Plumbi returned to Albania in 1936 and initially contributed to "Bota e Re", a journal with a distinctly progressive and socialist orientation that led to its closure after the fall of the liberal government (Boriçi 1997, p. 105)[7]. She subsequently contributed to "Përpjekja Shqiptare", edited by the liberal intellectual Branko Merxhani. His periodical was allowed to continue on the condition that it avoided direct confrontation with the authorities and confined itself to cultural and philosophical questions, with the aim of distancing intellectuals from subversive ideologies. Nevertheless, Merxhani managed to navigate censorship and open the journal to collaboration with organic intellectuals such as Plumbi.

In "The Woman Question—Who Is to Blame?" (Plumbi 1936a, pp. 1–2), Plumbi rejects explanations of women's inferiority as natural and therefore unchangeable. Her criticism displays elements of the paradigm of symbolic violence: a condition of subordination accepted as self-evident by the oppressed themselves (Bourdieu 2001, chap. 1, 'A Magnified Image')[8]. Plumbi criticizes women's acceptance of their supposed inferiority and draws attention to the transmission of patriarchal attitudes from one generation to the next through family upbringing. Mothers reinforce these tendencies in the upbringing of sons and daughters, clearly separating their roles, attributing superior intellect and resourcefulness to boys while denying girls these qualities and educating them solely for housework and childrearing. Rejecting natural explanations, Plumbi exposes the structural foundations of subordination in what she calls the "social regime" and the "laws arising from this regime" (Plumbi 1936a, p. 2).

She extends the analysis beyond material and structural explanations to the effects of the system's cultural hegemony[9]. Even a mother conscious of oppression becomes, willingly or otherwise, an agent of systemic oppression. The cultural hegemony generated by the "social regime" produces the contradictory situation Plumbi describes as one in which "*woman becomes woman's greatest enemy*." (Italics in quotations from Plumbi have been added by the authors to distinguish the quoted passages from the surrounding analysis.) (Plumbi 1936a, p. 2). Yet, with new possibilities emerging, acceptance of oppression and despair are no longer the only alternatives: "*By disparaging her own sex, a woman naturally elevates that of the man. 'If only I were a man,' whispers every woman who considers herself oppressed*" (Plumbi 1936a, p. 1). Instead, the subject becomes an agent of change through practice: "*Rather than uttering this phrase, which expresses both despair and weakness, she would do better to work, strive, and struggle to stand on an equal footing with man in everything that is good; and not only that, but also to strive to raise him with her to the height of her morality and the virtues that characterize her*" (Plumbi 1936a, pp. 1–2). Genuine liberation from oppression thus comes not from external forces, from "above," from the state or cultural elites, but from women themselves. Through participation in production and the political struggle for their rights, they secure liberation and equality. The emancipated woman's capacity to bring about change can also draw society, her family, and her husband forward, extending gender emancipation into broader social progress.

Plumbi developed the connection between women's emancipation and the wider social and familial environment—that is, social structures, discussed above as part of feminist

critical theory—from her earliest contributions to "Bota e Re". Her approach is significant for the way it emphasizes, in the Albanian context, the benefits that women's education and emancipation bring to husbands and families. In "Woman as Homemaker, Wife, and Mother" (Plumbi 1937, pp. 5–6), her method is to refute ideology on its own terrain[10]. She begins with the dominant argument restricting women to domestic and familial activity, which consequently denies the value of their education and cultural development. This position is untenable because women have demonstrated their capacity not only to receive an education and enter professional life but also to achieve excellent results that benefit society. Yet even on the premise that a woman is a homemaker, wife, and mother, her education and cultural development are indispensable. First, this applies to the material management of family resources and income: "*A woman with cultural education has the moral strength to overcome any desire for luxury beyond her means. She does not sacrifice the money intended for her children's proper upbringing to vanity and useless things. … An intelligent and educated woman is not at all afraid to acknowledge a lack of resources when explaining the economy she must practice*" (Plumbi 1937, p. 5). Beyond this material foundation, an educated woman brings changes through which she becomes not merely a homemaker but an "ideal wife," a "companion," an "adviser," and a "helper." Here again, the argument describes a qualitative transformation from a subject acted upon by externally imposed change into a subject who becomes an agent of change: "*A particular education and cultural formation are necessary for a woman to remain truly an ideal wife in every circumstance along his path through life. Whatever difficulties he encounters, she will stand beside him as companion, adviser, and helper*" (Plumbi 1937, p. 5). The same perspective informs the role of the intellectually cultivated mother, who provides her children with maternal care as well as sound formation and guidance: "*How much moral benefit and goodness accrue to the young person who looks up to his mother with complete confidence, seeking her advice and opinion even when he is a grown man, can also be told by those sons fortunate enough to have had such a mother*" (Plumbi 1937, p. 6).

Moving beyond Albanian conditions, Plumbi also addresses the position of women globally. A characteristic connection between the labor question, systemic issues, and the woman question appears in "The Problem of the Unprotected Woman" (Plumbi 1936b, pp. 6–7). Her point of departure is a conference of European feminist organizations in Dubrovnik, where one proposal concerned state payments to women whose marriages had ended through divorce or the death of their husbands. Her defense of this proposal focuses on two issues: women's contribution to the family and their inability to bear the costs of raising children alone after marriage ends. In the first respect, rather than merely drawing a parallel, she places marriage in its contemporary form within the world of labor: "*Why should a married woman's life not be considered a profession? Does she not devote all her strength to her husband and child? … Could a man support his family on the earnings of his labor alone? … Yet earnings are often meager, and it is the woman who bears most of the consequences, since she must organize expenditure so that the requirements of health are also met*" (Plumbi 1936b, p. 6). This establishes a connection between the burden borne by labor under capitalism's contradictions and that borne by women oppressed within the patriarchal family.

Second, Plumbi identifies state assistance to impoverished women as a necessary systemic solution. She rejects charity because its sporadic character offers no real remedy. Her metaphor also allows the hypothesis that she seeks to convey to the cultivated reader of her time[11] how charity serves to legitimize wealthy social groups ideologically: "*When I speak of support, I mean genuine support, not the money occasionally collected by elegant ladies in their circles, or the small amount of assistance municipalities can provide. That assistance, or rather alms, feeds them for one day only, so that on the next they begin their life of suffering anew*" (Plumbi 1936b, p. 7). Women's inability to meet their expenses is rooted in the social structure and economic conditions. The only "vocational training" they receive prepares them to manage

a home and raise children: "*Men, of course, can earn their living through their work; but what of women, when the occupation for which girls are destined today is marriage?*" (Plumbi 1936b, p. 7). An established system sustains this status quo, and it is from this that women's entitlement derives: "*Men, in particular, must bear in mind that the society which constitutes the state has given them the opportunity to develop a career and secure an income; therefore, in such circumstances of need, it has the right to take part of their earnings in order to maintain the social balance*" (Plumbi 1936b, p. 7). With this last point, Plumbi returns to the conservative Albanian context and to the challenge to ideology on its own terrain.

Another element of feminist critical theory in Plumbi's thought is her movement beyond formal legality. She recognizes the limits of emancipation pursued solely through laws, decrees, and the state's coercive power, emphasizing comprehensive social change and the conditions for women's intellectual and professional development. This becomes central in "Feminism and Our Society" (Plumbi 1938a, pp. 177–79), which argues for the necessity of a feminist movement in Albania. Its justification lies in the inadequacy of emancipation from above. The Albanian state lacks the means to enforce the Civil Code throughout society, and much of it remains unimplemented: "*They point, for example, to the rights granted by the Civil Code, which have placed her alongside the women of the most civilized states in the world*[12]. *… Yet we all know that the Albanian woman is unaware of all the rights she has been granted, and much time will pass before she understands that she can benefit from them*" (Plumbi 1938a, p. 177). Even where the Code is implemented, society—the prevailing social order—perceives it as a danger to the family and to its own foundations. Plumbi stresses the necessity of a movement from below to demand rights and their implementation. Even in developed countries, the state and social order have opposed women's emancipation in principle; rights have instead been won through women's own organization and mobilization. The progress of a people or society can thus be measured by the consolidation of women's rights (Plumbi 1938a, pp. 177–79)[13]: "*No state has favored the feminist cause from the outset on its own initiative. On the contrary, the first women to work for women's emancipation were persecuted by society, scorned, and discredited. … Gradually, women in civilized countries became indispensable to society, at the same time gaining independence, dignity, and self-confidence for themselves*" (Plumbi 1938a, p. 178).

Plumbi discusses the importance of feminist movements in the developed world and their connection with the labor movement, viewing feminism as bound up with social emancipation. One example is the "professional women" of the United States who secured "rights outside the home and entered public life." Feminism is therefore also necessary in contemporary Albania. Rather than destroying the family, it would contribute to transforming it into a more developed form: "*The aim of feminism is to raise us intellectually to the point where we feel compelled to seek a different type of family*" (Plumbi 1938a, p. 179). This new family would rest on both spouses' awareness of their shared mission and their responsibility for fulfilling it (Plumbi 1938a, p. 179)[14]. Gender emancipation and freedom are therefore not simply ends in themselves; they are also instruments for social development and for establishing society on new foundations: "*Recognizing the family's importance for human progress, feminism seeks to give it new strength. It begins with the foundation of the family: woman. It opens a broad field of activity to her, giving her greater strength and happiness. It entrusts her with responsibilities so that she may make the family more sound and sincere*" (Plumbi 1938a, p. 179).

The subjection of the female subject to external forces is central to "Woman, a Victim of Fate" (Plumbi 1938b, pp. 21–23). The lives of Albanian women and girls are determined not by their professional preparation or rational decisions about the future, but by forces beyond themselves. The family assigns them predetermined gender roles, orienting them from an early age toward marriage, submission, and the reproduction of the patriarchal order, while reducing individual choice to a minimum. Woman is thus conceived not as an autonomous

agent of her own life but as the object of others' decisions, familial will, social customs, and a collective morality operating as an external regulatory force. In this sense, "Woman, a Victim of Fate" clearly articulates a form of gendered alienation. Women's lives unfold under the domination of forces they neither produce nor control, yet which determine their identity, choices, and possible social horizons. "Good fortune" is consequently the ideological construct[15] through which alienation is reproduced and naturalized[16]: "*Until now, what a girl will become, how she will value life, and whether she will attain happiness have depended not on her will, worth, or strength, but on fate. Once a girl reaches a certain age, she is entrusted to fate's protection. Her ideals and dreams are woven around a good marriage. Relatives and strangers alike wish her 'good fortune.'*" In another passage from the same article, Plumbi writes: "*Fate determines the life and happiness of our secluded girl; fate also determines the life of the girl who acquires an education, works, and seeks emancipation. Every girl's future is a matter of fate*" (Plumbi 1938b, p. 21).

"Good fortune" is an ideological category of the superstructure that, under conditions of alienation, shifts the explanation of social position away from actual relations toward a fatalistic logic. The critique of this category brings Plumbi's critical method into focus: "*In life we see women so happy that they become consumed by base selfishness, and, on the other hand, miserable women, mercilessly tormented and bitterly wounded. If we examine the circumstances and causes that produced these different ways of life, we find that neither did the former earn her happiness through her own worth and ability, nor was the latter to blame for her wretched condition. … Is such fatalism really in women's interests?*" (Plumbi 1938b, p. 22). This passage connects feminist criticism to a broader systemic critique, moving from the fatalism imposed on the subject toward the dismantling of meritocracy as an ideological concept.

Plumbi's criticism does not stop at identifying ideological categories. She projects new realities that liberate the subject and set her autonomous will in motion: "*Let us not leave today's girl, tomorrow's woman and mother, at the mercy of fate. Instead of wishing her 'better fortune,' it is more useful and more appropriate to our times to give her the strength for 'a better life'*" (Plumbi 1938b, p. 23).

These writings demonstrate Plumbi's intellectual stature and establish her as a theorist of the feminist movement in Albania. Her feminism is characterized by a conception of women's emancipation as inseparable from a critique of society as a whole. In the context of interwar Albania, Plumbi connects women's emancipation with a critique of economic dependence and the devaluation of domestic labor, placing particular emphasis on the ideological mechanisms and cultural hegemony through which patriarchal relations are reproduced. Women's cultural development, autonomous initiative, and participation in social and political life acquire a transformative role in her thought. Through their own emancipation, women also become agents of change within the family, contributing to the development of a new type of family founded on mutual responsibility and equal relations. Her feminist critique thus links the transformation of women's position to the transformation of familial relations and the wider social order.

5. Antifascism as an Emancipatory Space and the Passage from Theoretical to Political Practice for Ollga Plumbi

Antifascism encompassed a range of political orientations, including social democratic, communist, and liberal positions. In opposing fascism, it acquired values and concepts that made it an emancipatory space, connecting resistance to occupation with hopes for social justice after the war. Against fascist propaganda's images of the "housewife" and the "fertile woman," conceived as elements of an antimodern and patriarchal vision of the social order (de Grazia 1993, pp. 2–18), antifascist discourse and political practice embraced women as active participants in society and social transformation through intellectual and productive

activity. Antifascism thus became an important political instrument in the struggle for women's social emancipation.

Between 1939 and 1941, resistance to the fascist occupiers took sporadic and spontaneous forms, particularly among educated young people who occasionally organized demonstrations or undertook individual actions. There was no organized political structure in the country committed to fighting the occupation regime. The only political organization that openly took up this initiative was the Albanian Communist Party, founded in November 1941. Following Comintern directives, it proclaimed an uncompromising struggle against the occupiers and promised measures for a democratic Albania after liberation. Albanian Women and girls who felt isolated within traditional patriarchal society and wished to contribute to resistance became actively involved in the antifascist struggle, which the PKSH led through a front strategy. Antifascist fronts established by communist parties, primarily in Eastern Europe, sought to unite noncommunists willing to oppose fascism and occupation within a single communist-led front (Frashëri 2006, pp. 242–48). Many women and girls who did not necessarily hold communist views therefore joined the antifascist front. Most of its members were not members of the PKSH. Lastly, the political discourse and social aspirations expressed by the Communist Party and by left-wing ideas more generally (Eley 2002, pp. 22–23, 188–95), presenting women's liberation and emancipation as part of the "struggle for national and social liberation," encouraged women to participate in youth organizations, the women's organization, front councils, and partisan formations.

Plumbi's involvement in the antifascist movement constitutes an attempt to transform the theoretical practice developed in her writings into the inclusive political practice of antifascism. Direct engagement and collective action were understood as conditions for transforming social reality. The struggle for national and social liberation offered a historical opportunity for women's emancipation through participation in collective action. During the war, she therefore drew increasingly close to the Communist Party without formally joining it. In July 1943, she was among the founders of the journal "Gruaja Shqiptare" ("The Albanian Women"), to which she contributed under the pseudonym Zita. At the conference of the National Liberation Council in Labinot on 4 September 1443, she formally proposed establishing and expanding a women's antifascist organization affiliated with the Front, with the aim of raising women's awareness of participation in the struggle against occupation. Following the establishment of the Tirana Antifascist Women's Council, Plumbi was entrusted with directing the organization until its first congress (Adhami 2002, pp. 51–53). At the Congress of Përmet, she was elected to the General Antifascist Council. She played an important role in leading the First Congress of the Union of Antifascist Women, held on 4 November 1944, shortly before the country's liberation. The congress elected her to head the organization's Secretariat. Its resolution opened prospects for freeing women from inherited legal obstacles and called on Albanian mothers and sisters to overcome the restrictions of traditional mentalities. The Second World War and Albania's antifascist struggle marked an important moment in efforts toward women's emancipation. Hundreds and thousands of women and girls joined partisan formations and the various auxiliary structures of the struggle. Plumbi played an important role through cultural activity and direct participation in the war, herself joining the partisans in the mountains (Adhami 2002, pp. 54–56). She accordingly described the Women's Congress as "*the most eloquent testimony to the development Albanian women have achieved within a short period*" (Adhami 2002, p. 89). Her political importance and public standing contributed to her election as a deputy for the Tirana district on 2 December 1945 (Adhami 2002, p. 60).

Nevertheless, Plumbi did not experience a sustained political rise after the war. The reasons why she did not formally join the Communist Party, which was taking the first steps toward establishing its regime, remain unclear. At the Second Congress of the Union

of Antifascist Women of Albania in 1946, she was removed as president and replaced by Nexhmije Hoxha. She continued working in the cultural sphere at the National Library for another decade, mainly in administrative roles, until her retirement (Adhami 2002, p. 61). After the war, Albanian women secured basic rights within the family and at work. They entered various sectors of the economy, including production, enterprise management, education, and medicine. Women were placed on an equal footing with men, while traditions and attitudes that regarded them as inferior were challenged (Xheraj 2016, pp. 132–33). In this respect, an important part of the aspirations of Plumbi and the women who had participated in the wartime struggle was realized.

Yet, in the absence of freedom of thought and criticism, and with increasing bureaucratic centralization across the economy under the Stalinist model of state socialism, women's oppression manifested itself in political repression and workplace relations. This was associated with subordination to the bureaucracy, the impossibility of free trade union organization, and growing economic difficulties during the crisis of state socialism (Lelaj 2015, pp. 145–55), preventing the overcoming of actual socioeconomic inequalities and the conceptions sustaining them. Following the collapse of Albania's Stalinist regime and the dramatic phases of the so-called Albanian "transition", Plumbi and her feminist thought remain an important point of reference for the movement for women's emancipation.

6. Conclusions

Ollga Plumbi made a pioneering contribution to the development of feminist criticism in Albania. The article argues that her thought articulates significant elements of feminist critical theory, understood here as a critique of society centered on women as both a subject of domination and an agent of emancipatory practice. This practice challenges the existing social order and the cultural and ideological mechanisms through which it is reproduced. The following conclusions emerge from this analysis.

- Plumbi's writings developed against the background of unsuccessful attempts to emancipate society from above. During the 1930s, the state introduced legal, cultural, and educational measures toward this end. Such emancipation proved unattainable for two reasons. First, Albania's economic situation was dire, while inherited inequalities and hierarchies were embedded in the social model itself. Second, Zogu's regime relied to a large extent on traditional, hierarchical, premodern social structures. Measures initiated by the king and royal governments could therefore not move beyond formal and partial reform without endangering the foundations of their own power and authority. One important element of Plumbi's writings is consequently the insistence that the subject must take the initiative in her own liberation. This is evident in "Feminism and Our Society," where she moves beyond formal legality and the rights enshrined in the Civil Code, which remained inapplicable under the conditions experienced by most Albanian women and girls. Merely establishing rights is insufficient. What matters above all is a movement from below: women's own awareness and mobilization to realize those rights and eliminate inequalities.
- In Plumbi's feminist thought, women's oppression is consistently connected to the economic and social order and its structures of domination. She rejects explanations of women's inferiority based on natural causes. Her writings never treat the woman question in isolation. Social criticism occupies a central place in her analysis of the inequalities shaping women's position.
- Plumbi's critique moves beyond society's material foundations to examine the cultural and ideological reproduction of the social order and its dominant structures. "The Woman Question—Who Is to Blame?" particularly emphasizes women's cultural development as a condition for awareness of their own existence and social position. She

analyzes how cultural norms reproduce and consolidate hierarchies and structures of domination within what she calls the "social regime," where the oppressed themselves become agents of systemic oppression. In contrast, a significant element of feminist critical theory in Plumbi's thought is the importance of culture, alongside work and political practice, in the process of the subject's liberation. Since mass participation in employment and political representation was inaccessible to women in the Albanian conditions of the period, cultural development assumed primary importance. The "woman with cultural education" challenges the patriarchal family and the norms reproducing it: "The aim of feminism is to raise us intellectually to the point where we feel compelled to seek a different type of family" (Plumbi 1938a, p. 179).

- Refuting ideology on its own terrain is another aspect of Plumbi's feminist thought. She contests the stereotyping of women within the patriarchal family by arguing that an educated and culturally developed woman is more valuable to her family and husband. Moreover, such a woman contributes to the improvement of the family itself, moving from a subject acted upon by change to an agent of change.
- Plumbi places women at the center of her analysis of systemic oppression. In "The Problem of the Unprotected Woman," which addresses payments to women in hardship, she draws a parallel between a life devoted to household and family service and paid work. She thereby connects the burden borne by labor with that borne by women oppressed within the patriarchal family. She demands payments for these women, opposing charity both as inadequate compensation and as ideological legitimation of wealthy social groups.
- Plumbi raises the question of gendered alienation particularly in "Woman, a Victim of Fate," where external forces determine her life, identity, choices, and social position. "Good fortune" is the ideological construct through which this condition of alienation is reproduced and naturalized.
- Plumbi's analysis culminates in the articulation of possibilities for women's emancipation. "The 'better life', which is superimposed on 'good fortune', is the prospect of liberation." The subject's liberation is realized through two principal conditions: cultural development and awareness as an initial stage, and political practice as the final stage in the transformation of society.
- Antifascism enabled the realization of the dialectical unity between theory and practice in Ollga Plumbi's multifaceted activity. Plumbi became personally involved in putting her views into practice. She found this historical opportunity in antifascism. Her participation in the antifascist movement and partisan ranks, alongside that of hundreds and thousands of Albanian women and girls, marked an important historical moment in the struggle for women's emancipation.

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Notes

[1] The German Social Democrat August Bebel is treated here as a classical representative of this approach because he was the first author to develop thorough Marxist and materialist perspectives into an analysis of women's condition and the prospect of their liberation from systemic oppression in Woman and Socialism (1879) (Bebel 1910).

[2] Women's rights within the family and society were subordinated almost entirely to the absolute authority of the patriarch, whether father or husband. This operated at several levels. Parental authority over children was entirely patriarchal. Girls could not choose their partners for engagement or marriage; these were selected by their families through matchmaking. In some regions, children continued to be promised in marriage while still in infancy. Within marriage, women owed absolute obedience to their husbands. Customary law prescribed punishment for adultery only for women. The right to divorce, subject to restrictions, was reserved for men. Inequality in traditional society was also evident in property rights. Property was considered to belong to the husband, while the wife could only use and administer it. Daughters were excluded from ownership and inheritance. Customary definitions of marriage emphasized the woman's function as a source of labor and as a means of increasing the number of children. Political rights were out of the question: women could not participate in general meetings or men's assemblies.

[3] Peripheral capitalism refers to the form of capitalist development characteristic of societies integrated into the world capitalist system on unequal and dependent terms, where capitalist relations coexist with inherited economic, social, and institutional structures, whether precapitalist, patriarchal, or clientelist. Two approaches have predominated in the social sciences. One views this as a transitional phase through which the periphery may move toward integration with the center. The other understands the periphery not as an incomplete stage on the road to developed capitalism, but as a specific structural position defined by economic dependence, delayed industrialization, institutional weakness, and the asymmetric transfer of value toward the centers of the world system (Hill 1975, pp. 30–37).

[4] Article 469 states: 'The father, the mother, and every other ascendant are succeeded by their legitimate children, without distinction of sex, even if born of different marriages' (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 469).

[5] Article 114 states: '… An engagement is not binding upon a person under legal incapacity or a minor, unless the latter has reached the age required for marriage and has obtained the consent of their legal representative' (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, art. 114).

[6] Article 188 states: 'The husband is the head of the family. …' Article 191 states: 'The woman has full civil capacity. However, to practice a profession or engage in an industry, she must obtain her husband's consent. …' (Mbretnia Shqiptare, Ministria e Drejtësisë 2010, arts. 188, 191).

[7] Boriçi describes Bota e Re as follows: 'It became the voice of ordinary people and their aspirations. The journal reflected the most important problems of its time, always viewed with an eye to the future: it exposed the existing socioeconomic order; criticized the government for leaving agriculture underdeveloped; and, in the name of working people, accused the Albanian state's administration and administrators. It sought solutions to the problems it raised through the idea that radical changes to the political and social system and its structures were necessary. It became a distinguished forum for writers and scholars, political scientists and sociologists, intellectuals of the time, and even young newcomers; it brought together many serious literary and journalistic voices, including Migjeni and Petro Marko, Nonda Bulka and Selim Shpuza, Sterio Spasse and Veli Stafa, Dhimitër Shuteriqi and Kristaq Cepa, Andrea Varfi, and others' (Boriçi 1997, p. 105).

[8] Pierre Bourdieu uses the concept of symbolic violence, particularly in gender relations, to explain how the patriarchal order is reproduced through cultural norms, social practices, and schemes of perception. These make women's subordination appear natural and self-evident, including to women themselves (Bourdieu 2001, chap. 1, 'A Magnified Image').

[9] Gramsci conceptualized cultural hegemony as the cultural and intellectual support through which the ruling class's social order maintains its legitimacy. Cultural hegemony encompasses norms, concepts, and ideological categories presented as universal, natural, and self-evident, although they express the historical interests of dominant forces. It rests primarily not on violence or institutional coercion but on the production of social consent through cultural, educational, religious, and media institutions, making relations of power appear to constitute a natural order. Hegemony thus operates at the level of 'common sense,' structuring how social subjects perceive reality and the limits of political possibility (Anderson 1976).

[10] Among the theorists who have addressed this concept, Louis Althusser argues that ideology consists not simply of manipulated representations that can be dismantled through theoretical analysis, but of the forms through which individuals live and experience their actual social relations. In this sense, the critique of ideology does not occupy a position external to it. Rather, it proceeds by appropriating and reconfiguring its premises and examining its internal mechanisms—institutions, practices, and processes of interpellation, or the ways ideology produces social identifications—in order to overturn it on its own terrain as a form of legitimation of the social order (Althusser 2001, pp. 85–126).

[11] This interpretation takes into account the censorship that continued to operate, even when it had been relaxed.

[12] The effects of renewed censorship are visible here: the Code's limitations could not be highlighted, and its progressive character was therefore accepted in principle. This did not prevent Plumbi and other Albanian intellectuals from continuing to criticize social reality in forms adapted to the restrictions imposed by the new circumstances.

[13] 'There is no doubt that the well-being and progress of a people are closely connected to women's progress and development' (Plumbi 1938a, pp. 177–79).

[14] 'One in which both spouses appreciate the importance of their mission and the magnitude of their responsibility when establishing it' (Plumbi 1938a, p. 179).

[15] An ideological construct is a discursive and practical form through which a materially produced historical and social condition is presented as natural, inevitable, or desirable, obscuring perception of the actual relations of power and domination that produce it (Althusser 2001, pp. 106–20).

[16] In feminist critical theories, alienation refers to the process through which women's labor, bodies, and social experience are detached from self-determination and reproduced as naturalized functions of the social order, including care, reproduction, moral sacrifice, and emotional labor. Although essential to social reproduction, these dimensions of women's lives are ideologically presented as expressions of 'nature' or 'fate,' rendering their relationship to structures of power and exploitation invisible. Silvia Federici has argued that this process produces a specific form of gendered alienation alongside social alienation and the alienation of labor. Women experience the conditions and products of their life activity as alien to themselves, while these experiences serve to stabilize and legitimize the existing social order (Federici 2004, pp. 15–16).

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