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Camouflage Feminism Unveiled

220 years after Mary Wolstonecraft's manifesto *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and 40 years after the first wave of feminist criticism, a number of distinguished scholars, including Harold Bloom, John Piper, Anne Gardiner, Susan Hamilton, and Roger Kimball still proclaim that resentful feminist critics who challenge the Canon are hostile toward literature. They proclaim their unshakeable view that politics and aesthetics are incompatible, the former infecting and smudging the purity of the latter (Felski 171). Analogous to this assumption, in the minds of many, the concept of feminist literary criticism is inseparable from the feminist movement that goes back 150 years before feminist literary criticism would ever have come to life. Labeling feminist literature as "politized" and feminist scholars as "angry" and "resentful" contributes to the process of hindering feminist studies and the whole theory of feminism from establishing themselves as widely respected academic disciplines (172).

Irrespective of their different aims, the two approaches (political vs. aesthetic) are just two sides of the same (feminist) coin. Although it can be argued that a feminist scholar is not necessarily a political activist, the whole concept of feminist criticism would hardly get any credit without the ideological back-up from the movement. Not surprisingly, feminist critics whose subversive attitude towards Bloom's Western Canon does not conform to the taste of a highbrow academic audience are seen as embittered and angry (Bloom 265). In order to point out the weaknesses of such reasoning this paper attempts to justify the validity of feminist literary criticism in general and gender studies in particular with special reference to a Hungarian academic, a feminist scholar, who undoubtedly contributed to the slow but definite change toward recognition of gender studies in Hungary.

The concept of feminist literary criticism has a reference to English studies in Hungary, a country where feminism has a vague and camouflage tradition as it is claimed in Susan S. Arpad and Sarolta Marinovich's essay on the "Hungarian feminist paradox". A Hungarian feminist scholar is still haunted by the ghosts of communist skeletons and scarecrows stored in the attic in a culture where - quoting Arpad and Marinovich - "nationalism

rather than liberalism has been a major literary value or theme” and where “there is little intellectual tradition to support feminist ideas today” (77).

Disturbing troubled water

When the term “feminist literary criticism” is used even the collocation of the three vexed words causes turbulence among critics. But that would not solve the problem of interpretation whether it should be kept as a separate entity (feminist-literary-criticism) attached to a particular subject such as English studies or whether it should be subsumed into the cross-disciplinary institution of “feminist criticism”, one of whose interests will be literature for as long as literary studies last, but which is already prepared for the day - should it ever arrive - when literature is annexed by cultural studies and has to call for attention alongside more popular signifying practices such as films and television. The concept of literariness is a product more of categorising acts which result in some texts being declared “literature”, and others not - acts which serve some people’s interests more than others’ and are therefore political in nature. For even when written by and purposefully for women, feminist literary criticism is read also by men who make a living from talking about (feminist) books. And it provokes several further questions among many central issues of and over feminism. What makes a book “feminist”? Are women’s novels feminist novels? Is feminist reading a political act? Is feminist writing a political act?

Literary criticism thrives on provocation and dissent, and its renovation depends on the discovery of new questions with which new puzzles are constructed to interrogate books whilst different ways are provided to discuss them. It not only raises but voices loud many questions of the so far under-represented female authors/audience in the largely exclusively male-dominated academic arena. The followers of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are making great efforts to undo prevailing myths of male authorship and, at the same time, create alternative “allegories” of female authorship as firm bases or fundament of a distinct female literary tradition. The rise of the literary and aesthetic prestige of long-scorned female genres such as the Gothic, and the re-reading and re-visioning of—already canonized—female writers like Jane Austen, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte or Virginia Woolf is all due to literary scholars openly committed to the ideas of feminism.

How you see the connection between feminist discourse and literature depends on where you are standing: whether you believe feminism can or should be part of the literary curriculum. If it can, then our business

is to learn from feminist criticism how to improve the study of English language and literature, specifically by removing from it those procedures that are vulnerable to a feminist critique, or by modifying them—as in the case of canon formation.

Feminist commitment

The discreet apology “I am not a feminist” is announced by distinguished female writers, philosophers, scholars from different spheres of the academia, just to go on the defensive. This lame excuse has been voiced in Hungary 107 years after the formation of the Hungarian Feminist Association (1904). Arpad and Marinovich in their study on the feminist movement in Hungary give a detailed and profound explanation to the situation. While outlining the history of Hungarian feminism (or “feminist paradox”), they place women’s issues in the larger context of movement politics. They find that “Hungary is an atomized society in which most citizens conceive of themselves as private individuals rather than as parts of a collective organism” (78).

As revealed in the study, women got emancipated without challenging the basics of patriarchal structure. Moreover, patriarchal attitudes and stereotypes are not only taken for granted but encouraged by both men and women. That is why there is a popular disapproval of and even hostility towards the attempt by feminists to challenge established social and cultural hierarchies: “[...] for Hungarians, much of western feminist theory does not strike a resonant chord. With little liberal tradition of individual rights and freedom, liberal feminism appeals to only a small, educated middle class” (92). One half of the women interviewed by sociologists display negative attitudes towards the word “feminism”. As it is concluded from the interviews: “Although most Hungarians say that they have never met a feminist, they are firmly convinced that feminists are men-hating aberrations of womanhood” (91).

The official declaration of women’s equality walk hand in hand with institutionalized patronizing and sexist attitudes. While “feminism” and anything that has the word “sex” in it are seen as “dirty” words in Hungary, gender has an appeal of political neutrality (not to speak about the intellectual refinement) that was immediately appreciated in the 1990s by those who had already been moving in the direction of gender studies. The term “gender” and its derivations was introduced for the purpose of consciousness. In the early 1990s when gender studies were first launched at universities, “gender” was used strategically to disguise feminist activism under the scholarly jargon that many people were not aware of. The

introduction of feminism (under “gender studies”) to English studies is a significant act not only from the point of view of English studies but also from the point of view of feminism. When feminist criticism finally represented itself to the mostly male academic staff supervising the Canon it was regarded as merely supplementary to what needed to be known. It must be noted that it was not only ideological and political constraints that put limits on the unbiased study of gender but also the division of subject matters between the disciplines in the academia. The “feminist perspective” was imagined to be something that trendies would take up and fossils put down, and the watchful might mention if it seemed appropriate to the code and setting of both the text and the audience.

From the point of view of those in Academia, however, the principle deficiency of feminist literary criticism is that it constitutes itself as a faith to be strengthened rather than as a truth-claim to be investigated. Indeed, it is difficult for the academics themselves to accommodate feminism as a faith, as they are much more experienced in training people to “know” than to “be”, and tend to employ teachers to impart knowledge rather than gurus to implant “wisdom”. The academies are better equipped to teach feminism as a subject than to breed feminists. This is not to deny that many students will indeed become feminists after learning about feminism. Feminism is something which everybody should know about, and what better place to encourage such disposition than colleges and universities.

Network of communication

At present feminist scholars apply new approaches in their research and try to popularise the new field among students and fill the gaps in the methodology they apply in order to raise feminist consciousness and form networks for developing support for research and projects in and outside Academia.

We live in a world of controversial discourses. Theories come and go, and beliefs about almost everything constantly change. At one point of time we find one truth more convincing than a previous one. Feminism also has its many different approaches, literature meets the demand of popular culture leaving high-flying disputes on the profession and the professionals. After all, it is the reader’s choice. Rosalind Coward claimed reading a political activity 30 years ago. Judith Fetterly’s “resisting reader” is a conscious reader, who finds new ways of communication provided by books rather than facebook. This old/new type of feminist reader knows (though unconsciously) that the development of gender is impossible without a network of communication. Showalter uses patchwork metaphor for



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connecting forms, narrative, tradition, etc. of American women writers, and quilt is a metaphor of domesticity and everyday values. Sarolta Marinovich quotes Showalter in her paper “Trifles and Everyday Use”, pointing out that: “Both theme and form in women’s writing, piecing and patchwork have also become metaphors for a Female Aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for politics of feminist survival” (109). Marinovich concludes: “Even when they rebelled

against the task of learning to quilt, American women internalized its aesthetic concepts and designs, and saw it as a fundamental part of their tradition” (110).

If reading literature for feminist purposes is a political activity, then writing about books written for or about women as only a woman can write or read is all the more so. A well-established academic of feminist studies can put a women’s studies programme on the move, or set up a gender-research group or organize low-budget high-standard conferences in addition to the tasks of everyday teaching. Working on projects for and with students and other scholars where the collective product is more important than the producer is an achievement that goes beyond skills and professional expertise. It is like doing patchwork: To find the right patches for the quilt and let others join and adjust their own patches to the rest goes beyond an academic expectation. Quilt making does not have a long tradition in Hungary, either in the literal or metaphorical sense of the word. In order to make it widespread significant changes are needed both in attitude and value-system. I quote Sári: “Everyday values have been produced in everyday use, and the value is in the continual use and renewal of it, the value is in the process of producing it, in case of the quilt by the domesticity of women, enriching both the product and the producer” (111). And one has to be committed to do the job. Once you finish your part there will always be someone else who picks up the fabric and ready to add new

stitches to the old ones. The colours and the form might change but the essence will remain.

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