

**A “women’s turn” in literature? Women’s literature in Hungary in
the last decade and its connections to feminist politics**

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's literary endeavors of the first decade of the 2000s in Hungary, with a focus on the *Kitakart Psyché* ("Uncovered Psyché") anthologies and the literary discussion series *Irodalmi Centrifuga* ("Literary Centrifuge"). My aim has been to see whether and how these recent literary events are connected to contemporary Hungarian feminism. In order to investigate these complex relations, I conducted interviews with women writers, the results of which I analyzed with insights of Anglo-American feminist literary theory. My argument is threefold. First, I argue that, despite disagreements among the women writers themselves and the lack of a clear self-identification as a feminist movement, women's literary movements such as the *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series and *Irodalmi Centrifuga* are important domains of contemporary feminism in Hungary. Second, by applying an intersectional analysis, that is, taking the writers' different political identifications and their diverse opinions about women's literature into consideration, I emphasize the complexity of the notions of the "woman writer" and "women's literature" and address the possible exclusions from the anthologies and thus probably from a forming canon of women's literature in Hungary. And third, I argue that the debates, discussions, and conflicts of women writers are logical consequences of the manifold notion of "women's literature", theorized so differently in feminist literary criticism, rather than a form of "belated" feminism in Hungary as one often hears.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will explore recent women's literary endeavors in Hungary, with a focus on the *Kitakart Psyché* ("Uncovered Psyché") anthologies, of which the first volume came out in 2005, and the literary discussion series *Irodalmi Centrifuga* ("Literary Centrifuge"), which started in 2003 and has very recently been transformed into a blog. These events regarding women's writing have gained much attention in literary criticism and generated a wider debate about the notions of the "woman writer" and "women's literature". The specific ways in which these literary movements are connected to feminism, however, are ambiguous and Hungarian feminist literary critics have not yet extensively theorized them. Based on a theoretical grounding in feminist literary criticism, my thesis is written with the aim of examining the complex connections of feminism and women's literature in Hungary in the past decade through analyzing fourteen interviews conducted with women writers.

The argument of this thesis consists of three parts. First, I argue that, despite disagreements among the women writers themselves and the lack of a clear self-identification as a feminist movement, recent women's literary endeavors such as the *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series and *Irodalmi Centrifuga* should be analyzed as important elements of contemporary feminism in Hungary. I would like to discuss how, why and to what extent we can see these movements of contemporary Hungarian "women's literature" as forms of feminist politics. Second, by applying an intersectional analysis, that is, taking the writers' different political identifications and their diverse opinions about women's literature into consideration, I would like to elaborate on the notion of the "woman writer" in Hungary. Analyzing my interviews, I will explore how Hungarian women writers conceptualize the much debated notion of the "woman writer", which has occupied a central position in both the "Anglo-American" and the "French" traditions of feminist literary criticism and nowadays it is visibly present in the Hungarian literary discourse as well. Intersectional analysis might also shed light on the possible exclusions from the anthologies

and thus maybe from a forming canon of women's literature in Hungary. And third, I argue that the debates, discussions, and conflicts of women writers are logical consequences of the complex and multiple notion of women's literature, theorized so differently in feminist literary criticism, rather than a form of feminist "belatedness" in Hungary as one often hears (including from some of my interviewees).

I concentrate on two remarkable literary events of the past decade in Hungary which have common origins. The first is the *Kitakart Psyché* women's literary anthology series, of which four volumes have been published from 2005 to the present: *Éjszakai állatkert* ("Night Zoo") in 2005, *Szomjas Oázis* ("Thirsty Oasis") in 2007, and *A szív kutyája* ("Dog of the Heart") and *Dzsungel a szívben* ("Jungle in the Heart") in 2010.¹ The series will be completed with two more volumes to be published in the coming years. Each volume has a central topic around which the short stories revolve: the first topic was sexuality, the second the female body, the third daughter-mother relationships, the fourth daughter-father relationships. The first anthology was edited by Krisztina Bódis, Agáta Gordon and Zsuzsa Forgács, while the latter three were edited by Zsuzsa Forgács only, a central figure in last years' events. As she has often said, the anthologies aim to show a wide variety of "women's experiences" from women's point of view. Another objective has been to draw attention to women's literature and to attempt to reclaim that term, often used in a negative sense in Hungary. The second important group I examine is *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, which was started as a radio program in 2003 by Agáta Gordon and Krisztina Bódis, who in 2005 edited the first volume of the anthology-series with Zsuzsa Forgács. *Irodalmi Centrifuga* was transformed into a literary talk series in the *Centrál Kávéház* (Café Centrál), and now it publishes a blog which aims to raise awareness concerning women's issues in general through promoting women's literature.²

¹ Krisztina Bódis, Zsuzsa Forgács, Agáta Gordon, eds., *Éjszakai állatkert*, (Budapest: Jonathan Miller, 2005); Zsuzsa Forgács, ed., *Szomjas Oázis* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2007); Zsuzsa Forgács, ed., *Dzsungel a szívben*, (Budapest: Jaffa, 2010); Zsuzsa Forgács, ed., *A szív kutyája*, (Budapest: Jaffa, 2010).

² *Irodalmi Centrifuga. Élelfolyóirat*. <http://elofolyoirat.blog.hu>.

My argument about the importance of setting the above mentioned literary endeavors into a broader feminist framework started to develop when I read a number of contradictory statements of women writers about the anthologies' connection to feminism. When the first volume was published, the main editor was reluctant to identify the anthology as a feminist step, whereas the other two editors seemed to acknowledge its feminist aims.³ At the same time, the reception of the 2005 anthology primarily dealt with it as a feminist political gesture. Having read the short stories of the first anthology and the subsequent volumes, together with the statements and the reactions, I think it is possible to view the anthologies and *Irodalmi Centrifuga* as feminist projects. In order to further investigate their connections to feminism, I conducted interviews with fourteen women writers about the recent attention for women's literature (for their names see Appendix 1). I was curious to see how they evaluate the anthology series and *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, whether they link them to a feminist framework, and about their self-identification as a woman writer. In this thesis I do not analyze the texts of the anthologies themselves or their reception because I think that the insights and recollections provided by the women writers themselves, who either participated in the events or not, are more helpful in addressing questions of women's literature and its connection to feminism in Hungary (as I will further develop below).

The past decade has been characterized by a growing number of studies on Hungarian women's writing. Hungarian literary scholars such as Anna Borgos, Anna Fábri, Györgyi Horváth, Anna Menyhért, Andrea Pető, Judit Szilágyi and Edit Zsadányi have examined women's literature from a historical perspective, while Anna Gács, Judit Kádár, Nóra Séllei and Edit Zsadányi, again, applied a more theoretical focus and discussed the figure of the woman author and the notion of women's literature in Hungary. The proliferation of these writings, often emphasizing the recent "boom" of women's literature, was another factor which initiated my research.

³ Viki Soós, "Nem lehet csak úgy létezni. Kerekasztal Debrecenben," *Tűsarok*, April 24, 2006, accessed May 21, 2011. <http://www.tusarok.org/rovatok/cikk.php?id=1372>.

My research wishes to combine sociological and literary perspectives and is based on two important starting points. First, applying a feminist viewpoint and agreeing with authors such as Rita Felski, Catherine Belsey, James Moore, Pam Morris and Ruth Robbins, I consider literature as politics, shaped by and constructing at the same time its social, cultural and political context. Literature is also a system of institutions defined by gender hierarchies and power relations. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theorized the “literary field” as an area of “literary practices [which] have become constituted in a social set of agents (authors, publishers, critics) and of rules that forms a specific space”.⁴ The field is “thus an essential mediation between the social world taken as a whole and literary creations”.⁵ Second, my interviews are conducted with the belief that authors, as important figures of this literary field, are neither “dead” in a postmodern sense, nor figures outside their era as creative geniuses.⁶ Therefore, I do believe that it is important to ask their views and opinions. I fundamentally agree with Rita Felski who wrote that “[a]uthors, of course are not the final experts on their own work, but if feminist critics wish to engage in dialogue with women writers, rather than simply using them as foils for their own theories, they need to attend to their views.”⁷

My research was not meant to be “representative”, thus, I acknowledge that the selection of my interviewees might influence my findings. I have included both contributors to the anthologies (seven) and women writers who did not participate (another seven), either because they did not want to or for other reasons. Unfortunately, I did not have the time and opportunity to interview some important characters in Hungarian literary life, in particular Zsuzsa Rácz, author of the extremely successful “Hungarian Bridget Jones-novel” entitled *Állítsátok meg Terézanyut!* (“Stop Mom Theresa!”) and president of the Hungarian PEN Club; Zsuzsa Rakovszky, one of the most successful contemporary novelists; and Krisztina Bódis, editor of the

⁴ Alain Viala and Michael Moriarty, “The Theory of the Literary Field and the Situation of the First Modernity,” *Paragraph* 1 (2006): 80.

⁵ Viala and Moriarty, 81.

⁶ Rita Felski, *Literature after Feminism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 91.

⁷ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 92.

first anthology and organizer of *Irodalmi Centrifuga*. Much to my regret, Zsuzsa Forgács, the main editor of all four volumes of the anthologies and definitely the central figure behind the movement, clearly refused to give me an interview, despite my repeated efforts. But while her voice is definitely missing from my thesis, I did have her previous interviews on hand, and the fact that she rejected my request is telling in itself, and something I will come back to.

Methodology

As Norman K. Denzin writes, qualitative research is “multimethod in its focus, involving an interpretative, naturalistic approach to its subject matter”.⁸ I based my research on feminist literary theory and recent writings on Hungarian women’s literature and feminism. I did not analyze texts written by the writers or short stories by the contributors of the anthologies, as my focus was instead historical and sociological with the aim of understanding last years’ women’s literary movements and to look at them as feminist political endeavors. Interviewing in this respect could yield sources for oral history of the recent years. I made an attempt to combine different methods in my research such as analyzing interviews, looking at theoretical and historical works and also examining critical reception of the anthologies, according to the method of methodological triangulation outlined by Denzin as an important element of qualitative research.⁹ I use an intersectional approach in analyzing differences among women writers, theorized by Leslie McCall as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations”.¹⁰

Concerning the specific methods and practicalities of interviewing, I turned to the work of Donald A. Ritchie, who outlines basic ideas for doing interviews for oral history.¹¹ My interviews varied elements of oral history interviews (concentrating on the topic of recent women’s

⁸ Norman K. Denzin, “Introduction. Entering the Field of Qualitative Research,” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln eds., *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (London: Sage, 2003), 2.

⁹ Robert E. Stake, “Case Studies,” in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln eds., *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (London: Sage, 2003), 148.

¹⁰ Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* 30 (2005): 1771.

¹¹ Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: Practical Advice and Reasonable Explanation for Anyone* (New York: Twayne, 1995)

literature in Hungary) and conceptual interviews.¹² I was interested in how my interviewees remember and evaluate the recent events, especially the publication of the anthologies and *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, and also how they conceptualize terms as “women’s literature” and the “woman writer”.

In my semi-structured interviews, I asked specific questions about the recent events concerning women’s literature, about my interviewees identities as women writers and their views on feminism. Although I tried to ask my interviewees the same questions, the fact that the writers were so different made it difficult to have a general design for all interviews. I also prepared specific questions for each interviewee, based on preliminary research about her ideas on women’s literature and her statements in other interviews. As Andrea Fontana and Anastasia H. Prokos point out, based on arguments of Gubrium and Holstein, an interview is a “contextually based, mutually accomplished story that is reached through collaboration between the researcher and the respondent”.¹³ I find this extremely relevant in my research as although my questions were basically formulated, the attitude of the interviewee very much influenced the interview process and outcome, just as much as my questions and my position as an apparently feminist researcher affected the interview process. The intersubjective relations during the interviews were shaped by the different positions of me as a researcher (younger, outsider, but reader of their literature and possibly sharing some of their ideas on feminism) and them as the interviewees (who are often sensitive towards interviewing, especially towards the topic of women’s writing). I am aware that, although I tried to ask as neutral questions as possible, my interest in the “growing attention on women’s literature” or the “emergence of women’s literature” could influence the answers I got. Some of my interviewees underlined that they would not give me the information I was seeking for, and consequently I had to emphasize that I did not have any “good” or “preferred” answers in mind. Using reflexive framing, I considered my framework and theoretical

¹² Steinar Kvale, *Doing Interviews* (London: Sage, 2007), 71.

¹³ Andrea Fontana and Anastasia H. Prokos eds., *The Interview. From Formal to Postmodern* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2007), 74.

perspective (literature as a possible form of feminist politics) as starting points that were open to debate with my interviewees rather than fixed. I was aware of the specific factors defining not only what constitutes “political,” but also how the connections between literature and politics and the notion of “women’s literature” are understood and constituted in a specific Hungarian context, and in different interviewees’ thinkings as well.

As for the details, I made semi-structured interviews with fourteen women writers. With one exception (a telephone interview with Anna Jókai), the interviews were face-to-face conversations, the setting was chosen by my interviewees. The selection of the interviewees was defined by my wish to include writers who had participated in the anthologies (or at least in some volume) and writers had not. The interviews were conducted between 25 March and 5 May, 2011, with the exception of the first interview with Agáta Gordon on November 15, 2010, which was followed by a second one with her in April 2011.

My qualitative research is structured by a feminist interpretive paradigm.¹⁴ This paradigm, according to Denzin, means a self-reflexive approach. I am aware that my position as a researcher could influence the outcome and also that my interpretation is one among the many possible interpretations. As Denzin points out, “there is no single interpretive truth”.¹⁵ My research is also feminist because dealing with women writers, I place gender as a central element of my analysis, however, with an awareness of the limitations of this category. After transcribing the full texts of the interviews (two of them were edited by my interviewees), analyzing and interpreting was done after partial segmenting of the texts, with the help of thoughts of Steinar Kvale.¹⁶

Structure of the Thesis

In the first chapter I outline the theoretical framework of my analysis, mostly based on feminist literary criticism by Rita Felski and Toril Moi, as well as the most recent Hungarian studies on Hungarian women’s literature. In chapters two and three I will analyze my interviews.

¹⁴ Denzin, “Introduction,” 13.

¹⁵ Denzin, “Introduction.”15.

¹⁶ Steinar Kvale, *Interviews. An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing* (London: Sage, 1996)

Chapter two examines the recent events of women’s literary organizing, focusing on the *Kitakart Pysché* anthology series and *Irodalmi Centrifuga* and how women writers evaluate and connect them to feminism. Chapter three, dealing with the literary identities and strategies of my interviewees, is an attempt to see how women writers in Hungary conceptualize the notions of the “woman writer” and “women’s literature”. Here I also make an attempt to examine the possible exclusions and the canon formation defined by the anthologies. Overall, my thesis wishes to contribute to the study of contemporary feminism in Hungary.

CHAPTER 1. LITERARY FEMINISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERATURE IN FEMINISM. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent women's literary endeavors in Hungary such as the publication of the *Kitakart Psyché* ("Uncovered Psyché") anthology series between 2005 and 2010, the launch of the discussion series *Irodalmi Centrifuga* ("Literary Centrifuge") in 2005 or the organizing of literary events such as *Rózsaszín szemüveg* ("Pink Sunglasses"), together with the growing importance of feminist literary criticism, has generated a discourse on women's literature and women writers. Connecting these women's literary endeavors to a broader feminist agenda requires acknowledging the crucial importance of literature in feminism, with attention for the multiple ways these two spheres interweave each other.

In the literature review below, first I examine how feminist criticism has theorized politics and the "autonomy of literature". Second, I discuss the figure of the "woman writer" and the Hungarian studies focusing on Hungarian women writers from the beginning of the nineties to the present. Finally, I summarize recent Hungarian scholarship dealing with the figure of the "woman writer". My aim in this chapter is to present a theoretical framework based on which I argue that it is possible to consider recent Hungarian literary movements as feminist movements, despite the internal disagreements, rejections of feminism and possible exclusions.

1.1. Literature, feminism and politics

Women's literary, and, in a broader sense, artistic production has a crucial importance in the emergence of women's movements and feminism. A huge number of works, even as early as *The Book of the City of Ladies* by Christine de Pizan (1405), express ideas on women's equality and thus have played a central part in women's struggles. Feminist theories, emerging with second wave

feminism in the 1960s, put literature in the centre of their analysis.¹⁷ This emphasis on literature is based on the conviction that literature is a primary field of representation. As Pam Morris points out, literature and language are “representational systems, (...) structuring our consciousness of ourselves and of external reality”.¹⁸ Janet Wolff further explains that “[a]rt, literature and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities”.¹⁹ On the other hand, literature is also “an influential cultural practice, embodied in powerful institutions (...) producing the meanings and values that lock women into inequality.”²⁰

Feminist literary criticism, similarly to feminism itself, is not a monolithic whole, but there is a common feature, as stated by Ruth Robbins:

All literary feminisms (...) share a double commitment to place women at the centre of their literary-critical discourses, and to do so as part of a wider political process. The sexual politics of the world outside the text, and the sexual politics of the world inside the text, however self-evident or disguised, are part of a continuum of political critique and action in feminist theories.²¹

With the institutionalization of feminist literary criticism, this original political edge of feminist criticism may have become less visible in the Anglo-American context, as Ellen Rooney points out.²² However, feminist literary criticism has clearly played an important role in the history of feminism. As Toril Moi puts it,

[t]he words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating a support for the aims of the new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960s. ‘Feminist criticism’, then, is a specific kind of political discourse: a critical and theoretical practice committed to struggle against patriarchy and sexism, not simply a concern for gender in literature.

Feminist literary criticism, traditionally divided into “Anglo-American” and “French” branches, especially since Toril Moi’s important 1985 book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, has been

¹⁷ See for example: Toril Moi, “‘I am not a woman writer.’ About women, literature and feminist theory today,” *Feminist Theory* 3 (2008): 259.

¹⁸ Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 7.

¹⁹ Janet Wolff, “Prospects and Problems for a Postmodern Feminism: An Introduction,” in *Feminine Sentences. Essays on Women and Culture*, Janet Wolff (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 1.

²⁰ Morris, *Literature and Feminism*, 8.

²¹ Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 14.

²² Ellen Rooney, “The literary politics of feminist theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

dealing with theorizing women's literature and women writers since its beginnings in the sixties. Important theoreticians of "Anglo-American" criticism which set out to challenge the traditional canon and find a women's literary tradition include Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics*, 1970), Ellen Moers (*Literary Women*, 1978), Elaine Showalter on "gynocriticism" (*A Literature of their Own*, 1978), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*Madwomen in the Attic*, 1979).²³ "French" critics, closer to psychoanalytic theories as opposed to the more historically focused "English-American" tradition, include Hélène Cixous' theory on *écriture féminine*, one of the most influential feminist theories.²⁴ Mary Eagleton has recently drawn attention not only to the multiple voices in feminist criticism, but also to the process of the construction of feminist criticism itself.²⁵

My aim here is to see how feminist literary criticism deals with the issues of the politics of literature. "No text is an island", writes Rita Felski in her 2003 book *Literature after Feminism*.²⁶ Questioning the formalist belief in the "autonomy of literature", feminist literary criticism problematizes the separation of the spheres of the social and political and the field of the literary.²⁷ Rita Felski challenges the dichotomy of literature being either "pure art" or political, and claims that "trying to hold literature and the social world apart is a Sisyphean task... because literature is double-sided. It is not either/or but both/and."²⁸ She claims that the two definitions of literature cannot be strictly separated, as literature is saturated with social meanings, it is "one of the cultural languages through which we make sense of the world, it helps to create our sense of reality rather than reflecting that".²⁹

Feminist literary theory made it clear that the "pure" aesthetics of literature is also political in as much as it has been defined by male scholars and critics, and thus has been formed within gendered power relations. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore write in 1989 that "for the feminist

²³ Mary Eagleton, "Who's Who and Where's Where: Constructing Feminist Literary Studies," in *Feminist Review*, 53 (1996): 2.

²⁴ Moi, "I am not a woman writer," 260.

²⁵ Eagleton, "Who's Who and Where's Where: Constructing Feminist Literary Studies," 3.

²⁶ Rita Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 13.

²⁷ Jasmina Lukic, "Poetics, Politics and Gender", in *Women and Citizenship in Central and Eastern Europe*, eds. Jasmina Lukic, Joanna Regulska and Darja Zavirsek, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 243.

²⁸ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 12.

²⁹ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 13.

reader there is no innocent or neutral approach to literature: all interpretation is political”.³⁰ The feminist approach thus challenges the seemingly “neutral” canon of mainstream literary theory, which is defined by patriarchy.³¹ Consequently, the feminist reading of the texts led to the view that individual “[w]riting is a cultural rather than a purely individual phenomenon, and the social context of literature [is] more than an explanatory ‘background’”.³²

Based on the above discussed theoretical foundation which considers literature as political, my aim is to see how Hungarian women’s literature is connected to feminism. By considering Hungarian women’s literary movements centering around the anthologies as political steps or gestures, I argue that despite strong disagreements among the writers the emergence of the *Kitakart Psyché* anthologies is an important part of contemporary feminism in Hungary.

1.2. Searching for the woman writer in feminist theory

The figure of the woman writer and the notions of “women’s literature” and “women’s writing” are certainly among the most often theorized notions in feminist literary criticism, whether “Anglo-American” feminist gynocriticism or poststructuralist French theories of *écriture féminine*. Rita Felski calls the different “projections” of female writers “allegories of authorship”.³³ As she claims, feminist theory has always been involved in creating a figure of the woman writer and a “female imaginative power” because authorship has been so readily associated with male creativity and authority. However, simultaneously to feminist theorizations of the woman writer, postmodern and poststructuralist theories of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida fundamentally challenged the figure of the author.³⁴ Thus, as Mary Eagleton has observed, the finding of the woman writer, or as she put it, the “birth of the woman author” by feminist literary criticism of the 1980s and the “death of the woman author” influenced by

³⁰ Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, “Introduction: The Story So Far,” in *The Feminist Reader*, eds. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 1.

³¹ Belsey and Moore, “Introduction,” 2-3.

³² Belsey and Moore, “Introduction,” 3.

³³ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 88.

³⁴ Moi, “I am not a woman writer,” 261.

poststructuralist theories were parallel processes, strikingly proximate to each other.³⁵ In Eagleton's view, this parallelism and the subsequent vibrant theoretical debates have [verb] the relevance of the figure of the woman author: "this figure has remained so in dispute, so she has remained alive".³⁶

Toril Moi, on the other hand, observed in her 2008 essay that recent feminist theory is not interested anymore in the figure of the woman writer.³⁷ For which she offered two explanations: first, postmodernism and its belief in the "death of the author", and second, the impact of Judith Butler's groundbreaking theory of gender performativity. Moi summarizes the influential debate of American feminist scholars Peggy Kamuf and Nancy K. Miller in the 1908s about whether the figure of the female author is needed or not.³⁸ Kamuf's ideas on the circumscribing nature of the figure of the woman author and Miller's insistence on the woman writer for political reasons, i.e. ending the marginalization of women authors, resonate very much in recent Hungarian debates (which will be discussed in Chapter two and three). Moi finds it is important to re-theorize the woman writer because "we haven't had any great new theories about women, writing and literature after the debate between Kamuf and Miller. The question of how to understand the importance – or the lack of it – of the gender or the sex of the author remains jus as unresolved as it was twenty years ago".³⁹ While I agree with Moi about the significance of this issue, I agree with Mary Eagleton that poststructuralism has actually enriched feminist literary theory on women writers and has offered new theoretical insights; one key example is that is has drawn attention to the variety of women writers and thus the need for an intersectional analysis rather than a focus on gender alone. Rita Felski, Janet Wolff, and even Toril Moi herself in another article have pointed out how poststructuralism might be important in feminist literary theory.

³⁵ Mary Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2005), 3.

³⁶ Eagleton, *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, 155.

³⁷ Moi, "I am not a woman writer," 259-260.

³⁸ Moi, "I am not a woman writer," 262-263

³⁹ Moi, "I am not a woman writer," 262.

Moi claims that because of these theoretical questions it is important to find new theoretical justification for analyzing women authorship.⁴⁰

Recent Anglo-American feminist theories on women's writing and authorship put emphasis on the diversity of women's writing always to be understood in an interrelation with their political and social context and not requiring a prescribed, independent feminist aesthetics. As Felski claims, "[i]t is precisely the vitality and visibility of women's current artistic and critical practice across a range of forms and genres, not the positioning of an abstract theory of 'subversive' aesthetic, which must provide a basis for a discussion of feminism's political function in culture".⁴¹ She states that feminist theory is beginning to recognize that "to prescribe what it means to be a female author is to do a disservice to the rich and unending variety of real female authors".⁴² Resonating with Felski's thoughts, Mary Eagleton and Susan Stanford Friedman claim in the editorial statement of the US journal *Contemporary Women Writers* founded in 2007 that "[a] woman's identity and writing can never be understood within the single framework of sex/gender. Intersectional analysis, a cornerstone of feminist theory today, has necessarily changed the terrain of women's writing and our ways of exploring it."⁴³ An intersectional analysis of the notion of the woman writer, that is, taking for example class or political dimensions of women's writing into consideration, can help further refine our view on the Hungarian anthology movement, criticized by some for presenting a limited view on "women's experiences" primarily by privileged, elite, urban women. An intersectional analysis may also shed light on the possible exclusions from the anthology and thus from women's literature in Hungary.

1.3. Hungarian studies on women's writing and feminist literary criticism

There is a growing body of research on women writers in Hungary, in both Hungarian and English. Beginning from the mid-1990s, a number of books have been published on women

⁴⁰ Moi, "I am not a woman writer?" 264.

⁴¹ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 164.

⁴² Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 93.

⁴³ Mary Eagleton and Susan Stanford Friedman, "Editorial Statement," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 1(2007):2, accessed 19 May, 2011, doi:10.1093/cww/vpm021.

writers that fit the gynocriticism line of literary feminism, which aims to discover a hidden female tradition. According to literary critic Györgyi Horváth, the roots of the Hungarian debate on women writers could be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when “women’s literature” was regarded to have a lower status than literature written by male writers.⁴⁴ Literary historian Anna Fábri has written extensively about the history of women’s writing in the eighteenth century,⁴⁵ while Edit Zsadányi, one of the pioneers of gender studies and feminist literary criticism in Hungary, published about women writers of the first half of the century besides her theoretical works on women writers, narratology and female subjectivity.⁴⁶ The 2009 book entitled *Nő, tükkör, írás* (“Woman, mirror, writing”) focused also on women’s literature of the first half of the 20th century and, as the first volume of a planned series, aims to create a foundation for a feminist studying of Hungarian women’s literature.⁴⁷ Most recently, literary historian and psychologist Anna Borgos and literary historian Judit Szilágyi have published a collection of biographies of women writers who in the beginnings of the 20th century published in *Nyugat* (“West”), the most prestigious Hungarian literary journal of the time.⁴⁸ This book is important as an undertaking close to the traditions of gynocriticism and for showing the multiple ways of being a woman and a writer defined women’s literary achievements and their ideas on literature in the early twentieth century. It thus draws attention to striking similarities between past and recent debates on women’s literature. While I cannot discuss this interesting parallel here, it is important to mention that debates on how we should define women’s literature did not emerge first in recent years, but have their history in Hungarian literature.

⁴⁴ Györgyi Horváth, “A női irodalom fogalmáról, Megjegyzések, javaslatok három pontban,” *ESŐ Irodalmi lap* 4 (2003), accessed May 15, 2011, <http://esolap.hu/archive/entryView/580>.

⁴⁵ Anna Fábri, *“A szép tiltott táj felé”: a magyar írók története két századforduló között* (Budapest: Kortárs Könyvkiadó, 1996).

⁴⁶ Edit Zsadányi, “Írók a századfordulón,” in *A magyar irodalom története II.*, accessed May 27, 2011, <http://www.villanyspenot.hu>.

⁴⁷ Virág Varga and Zoltán Zsávoly eds., *Nő tükkör, írás Értelmezések a 20. század első felének női irodalmáról* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2009).

⁴⁸ Anna Borgos and Judit Szilágyi eds., *Nőírók és írók. Irodalmi és női szerepek a Nyugatban* (Budapest, Noran Könyvesház, 2011).

In 2011, Edit Zsadányi, Bernadett Dierra and Zsolt Mészáros published a comprehensive biography of Hungarian women writers.⁴⁹ Anna Gács wrote about how feminist literary criticism theorized the female author and how it connects to postmodern theories. This growing body of work shown an increasing interest in feminist theorization of women’s literature in Hungary.

Two chapters in *A History of Central European Women’s Writing*, “Hungarian Women Writers, 1790-1900” by Anna Fábri and “Hungarian Women’s Writing, 1945-1995” by Andrea Pető also provide important starting points for my research.⁵⁰ Andrea Pető discusses Hungarian women’s writing between 1945 and 1995, analyzing two periods in detail: the communist era characterized by “the artificial promotion of women writers” and the post-transition period when a new kind of women’s writing emerged.⁵¹ After the transition, writers occupied an important position in the social and political field, however, there were no influential women writers. Two types of discourse emerged concerning “women’s literature”: the one viewed the writers’ sex as unimportant in connection to their social role, whereas the other attached a crucial importance to that.⁵² In my view, this doubleness is still present in the contemporary debates. In the past decade however, the approach that emphasizes the gender of the writer has become more visible in the literary and public discourse. Women’s literature has been a widely discussed issue, four volumes of women’s literary anthologies were published, conferences and discussions have been organized, and there are a number of women’s internet publications as well. The old question “does literature have a gender/sex?” seems to have become of central importance again. Zsuzsa Forgács’s novel entitled *Talált nő* (“A Woman was Found”), published in 1996, was celebrated as the first feminist literary work which, as Pető claims, set a new, “autonomous agenda, free from any traditions defined by men” and thus “marks the beginning of a new era”.⁵³ Here I will examine the debate and the events concerning women’s literature after that auspicious beginning.

⁴⁹ Edit Zsadányi et. al., eds., *Női szerzők a huszadik század első felében*, accessed May 27, 2011, http://irodalom.elte.hu/villanyspenot/images/1/16/Ironok_bibliografia.pdf.

⁵⁰ Anna Fábri, “Hungarian Women Writers, 1990-1945,” and Andrea Pető, “Hungarian Women’s Writing, 1945-1995,” in *A History of Central European Women’s Writing*, ed. Celia Hawkesworth (London: Palgrave, 2001).

⁵¹ Pető, “Hungarian Women’s Writing,” 240.

⁵² Pető, “Hungarian Women’s Writing,” 251.

⁵³ Pető, “Hungarian Women’s Writing,” 254.

Although literary criticism and the women writers themselves have been strongly divided about their opinions on the recent anthologies and on how they connect to feminism, the act of publishing together and stepping forward as a literary movement makes the *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series – edited by the same Zsuzsa Forgács of the influential 1996 book – the next important event of recent Hungarian feminism and its literary aspects.

In the last decade, a number of critiques, for example Anna Menyhért, Noémi Kiss, Györgyi Horváth and Andrea P. Balogh, pointed out the recent emergence of contemporary “women’s literature” and the growing attention turned towards women writers both theoretically and in a wider public and cultural sphere.⁵⁴ Literary critic and historian János D. Mekis claims in a 2009 essay that women’s literature (*női irodalom* or *nőirodalom*) has slowly gained ground since the nineties in the discourses of Hungarian literary criticism and history but these notions are still not as “natural” as the terms “woman writer”, women’s writing and women’s literature are in the Anglo-Saxon context.⁵⁵ Mekis goes on to claim that instead of a monolithic “woman” figure, there is now a plurality of women’s discourses in which the gesture of provocation represented by *Éjszakai állatkert* and the conservative voices for example writings of Magda Szabó both have their place.⁵⁶

Another critic, Márta Várnagyi, in an article published in 2011, examines the last years’ debates on women’s literature and feminist literary criticism. Studying women writers’ self-positioning in relation to women’s literature, she claims that

[t]he uncertainty and pessimism which characterize the statements of women writers are shocking. Contemporary women writers can be divided into two groups: there are those who embrace, voice and represent their feminist perspective on literature, but a number of women writers and poets who, in a

⁵⁴ Anna Menyhért, “‘S ír’ (A Lányá válik, s írni kezd – 19. századi angol írónők című könyvről),” in *Egy olvasó alibije*, Menyhért Anna, (Budapest: Kijarat Kiadó, 2002); Andrea P. Balogh, “A magyarországi feminista irodalomkritika korlátjai az ezredforduló tájékán,” in *Spaces of Transition*, ed. Erzsébet Barát (Szeged: JATE Press, 2005). Noémi Kiss, “A nő a kortárs magyar irodalomban. Szilánkok,” *Lettre* 63 (2006), accessed May 15, 2011, http://www.c3.hu/scripta/lettre/lettre63/kiss_noirod.htm.

⁵⁵ János Mekis D., “A modernség alternatívái - magyar női irodalom a 20. század első felében. Problémafelvetés,” in *Nő tükrök, írás Értelmezések a 20. század első felének női irodalmáról*, eds. Virág Varga and Zoltán Zsávoly, (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2009), 11. It could be debated though how “natural” are these concepts in the American-English context. See Toril Moi, “I am not a woman writer.”

⁵⁶ János Mekis D., 11.

feminist spirit, give voice to women heroes who speak of typical women's problems still reject any labeling mostly with the justification or explanation that literature has no sex."⁵⁷

I find Várnagy's reflections and analysis of last years' debates important. However, in my view, her categorization here might be too general, oversimplifying the different attitudes of the writers. Stating that their uncertainty is "shocking" implies that literary criticism expects writers to take a clear stand as feminists or not feminists and also suggests that feminism is a unified movement or idea. In my view, the debates, discussions, and perhaps uncertainties, are logical consequences of the complex and multisided phenomenon of women's literature, theorized so differently in feminist literary criticism.

Recently, the feminist literary critics have also begun to examine the recent situation of feminist literary criticism in Hungary. Nóra Séllei in her groundbreaking 2007 book on feminist literary criticism points out the problems within the writings of feminist literary critics.⁵⁸ Examining the still marginalized position of feminist literary criticism within this field, she comments on the fact that feminist literary critics still seem to question the very existence of feminist literary criticism in Hungary. She claims that

[m]aybe we ourselves, through our conscious or unconscious silencings and omissions are responsible for still pondering over the question of 'why there is not if there is' and posing as lonely wolfs, everybody in her own institution. Because in each institution there are really only few of us, but precisely because of this we know each other's work. A scientific and personal network has emerged, which is of course not without debates and tensions (...).⁵⁹

This observation is important because it yields an interesting parallel with the attitude towards feminism itself and the frequently voiced opinion that there is no such a thing as feminism in Hungary. Katalin Fábán challenges this widespread assumption that Hungary lacks an established women's movement.⁶⁰ She argues that "[t]hrough not fully united across time and

⁵⁷ Márta Várnagy, "A női irodalom és a feminista irodalomkritika Magyarországon. Hangok és visszahanok," *TNTeF, the Interdisciplinary eJournal of Gender Studies* 1(2011):28.

⁵⁸ Nóra Séllei, "Így írunk mi. A magyar feminista irodalomtudomány (ön)megjelen(it)ése," in *Mért félünk a farkastól? Feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Könyvkiadó, 2007).

⁵⁹ Nóra Séllei, "Így írunk mi," 157.

⁶⁰ Katalin Fábán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary. Globalization, Democracy, and Gender Equality* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press: Washington, The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2009).

space, Hungarian women's groups have not only a rich history but a lively present and a hopeful future".⁶¹ However, besides one short note on the recently published women's literary anthologies, she does not take the literary endeavors into consideration, which, in my view, are important for an in depth analysis and understanding of Hungarian women's movements.

This chapter has shown the important relations of literature and feminism. I argue that the *Kitakart Psyché* anthologies and *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, taking literature as an important domain, should be analyzed as parts of a feminist endeavor. My aim is to connect the literary events of the recent years, to be discussed in the following chapters, to the history of Hungarian feminism. This link, in my view, is still missing from scholarship.

⁶¹ Fábán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 75.

CHAPTER 2. WOMEN'S LITERATURE EMERGING IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE 2000S IN HUNGARY. IS IT FEMINISM?

This chapter discusses the most important events related to the emergence of the issue of women's literature, from a heated debate in a literary journal in 2003 to the *Kitakart Psyché* anthologies and the discussion series *Irodalmi Centrifuga*. I make an attempt to analyze the events based on how they were perceived and narrated by my interviewees. Section 2.1 summarizes the remarkable literary events of the past decade in framework of recent Hungarian women's movements. It also examines my interviewees' reactions to the "feminism as a swearword" discourse in Hungary. In Section 2.2 I focus on one of the most important milestones: the *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series whose first volume came out in 2005. Section 2.3 is about the literary discussion series *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, now turned into a popular blog on women's literature and cultural, social and political events. However, these two examples are not independent of their context, they are parts of the "literary field" in Hungary.

My definition of "feminist" is partly based on Katalin Fábíán's term, who, writing about feminism in Hungary, argues that "women's movements can be called 'de facto feminist' if they seek social and political change to lessen or eliminate gender hierarchies, which is the goal of feminism".⁶² I apply this definition and extend it to the sphere of culture, of which literature is an important part. This definition is not a normative one, and allows me to explore how women writers defined being a feminist or not.

2.1. Contemporary feminism in Hungary and its connections to literature

From a debate to the *Kitakart Psyché* anthologies

The events in the early 2000s are, of course, not without antecedents. The first special issue of a Hungarian literary journal devoted especially to feminist literary criticism, a volume of

⁶² Fábíán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 10.

Helikon, was published in 1994, with a lot of key feminist texts appearing in Hungarian for the first time.⁶³ The exhibition in The Museum of Literature Petőfi on women writers in 1996 was another important event that brought women's literature into the literary and public discourse.⁶⁴

Writing in 2009, feminist historian Katalin Fábíán claims that despite the fact “that there is certainly reason to lament the lack of a unified and vibrantly energetic women's movement in postcommunist Hungary, there is also much to appreciate in the commitment of many activist women”.⁶⁵ Whereas Fábíán has primarily examined women's NGOs, in my view it is important to regard the work of the editors of the anthology series or the organizers of *Irodalmi Centrifuga* as such ambitious and hard-working efforts. Writing about the importance of women's publications and the growing importance of the internet, Fábíán mentions *Irodalmi Centrifuga* only once, when she cites a feminist activist of an NGO, who said that

We achieved many things that did not exist before our activism or would have been seen as utopia, such as Túsarok, Centrifuge, ..., [Centrifuge, a regular artistic and literary gathering at Centrál, an old-style café in Budapest], two recent women's anthologies, and a whole list of feminist translations and book.⁶⁶

This short quote also suggests that feminist activists view these results in the sphere of literature as important achievements of the women's struggle in Hungary.

Fábíán differentiates four main phases of the emergence of contemporary women's movements in Hungary.⁶⁷ After the emergence and institutionalization of women's groups, the end of the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s were primarily marked by the dissolving women's organizations and a decline of the feminist struggle, due to a number of reasons such as lack of financial support and inner divisions within the women's movements.⁶⁸ Fábíán claims that women's groups found more opportunities to articulate their feminist standpoint in the early 1990s because of the particular political characteristics of the Hungarian state in transition: issues

⁶³ *Helikon* 4 (1994), edited by Judit Kádár. Mentioned by Susan Rubin Suleiman, “An Exchange of Gifts Feminism for History,” *Aspasia* 2 (2008): 181.

⁶⁴ Pető, “Hungarian Women's Writing,” 251.

⁶⁵ Fábíán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 94.

⁶⁶ Fábíán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 171.

⁶⁷ Fábíán Katalin, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 91.

⁶⁸ Fábíán, *Contemporary Women's Movements in Hungary*, 89-91.

of sexuality and abortion became primary spheres of political discourse along which political forces formed themselves. In my view, the first two volumes of the anthologies, *Éjszakai Allatkert* (2005) and *Szomjas Oázis* (2007), centered around issues of sexuality and the female body, thematized precisely these issues from a distinctive feminist standpoint. The blog of *Irodalmi Centrifuga* also deals with issues such as abortion and home birth which are again very much present in the recent political discourse in Hungary. Thus, although not in a strictly organized form, women's literature can provide a platform for the expression of feminist ideas.

The recent attention for women's literature started with the now infamous debate of writer Gábor Németh and literary critique and professor of American Studies Zsófia Bán about women's literature, published in 2003 in the pages of the left-leaning political and cultural weekly newspaper *Élet és Irodalom* ("Life and Literature").⁶⁹ In his writing, Gábor Németh criticized the anthology *Egytucat* ("A dozen") published in 2003, consisting of studies by female literary critics on Hungarian contemporary novels written by men (however, the foreword claimed that they were not feminists).⁷⁰ He also wrote about three novels by female authors. The tone of his critique was rather sexist, as pointed out by Zsófia Bán in her reply essay.⁷¹ This debate, mentioned by a number of my interviewees, certainly proved to be one of the triggers which started a wider debate and discourse on women's literature and feminist literary criticism and has a central importance in last years' discourse on women's literature. As Zsófia Bán recollects,

I think that our debate was very useful. I participated in it, or rather I initiated it because I saw that the four critiques about four books written by women were placed in a certain context which is detectable only for those who are sensitive towards that. A lot of people said that the critique was not meant to be derogatory but still you have to watch your language if you speak of four books written by women and you state that all of them are really bad. At that point I thought that this kind of criticism is neither good for Hungarian literature nor for women writers. Then a certain discourse started which I think is very important.⁷²

⁶⁹ Gábor Németh, "Ex Libris," *Élet és Irodalom* 27 (2003), accessed 01 June 2011, <http://www.es.hu/print.php?id=4929>.

⁷⁰ Mónika Dániel, Tibor Keresztury, Zoltán Kőrösi eds., *Egytucat – Kortárs magyar írók női szemmel* (Budapest: JAK–Kijárat, 2003).

⁷¹ Zsófia Bán, "A modor mint generátor," *Élet és Irodalom*, 30 (2003), accessed June 01, 2011, http://www.es.hu/ban_zsofia;a_modor_mint_generator;2003-07-28.html.

⁷² Interview with Zsófia Bán. May 6, 2011.

In response to my question about the possible outcomes of the anthology-movement, young poet Orsolya Karafiáth pointed out, one of the of the result of last years' literary movements and events is that nowadays such a condemning writing about women's common movement could not be published. Esze Dóra, one of the authors whose novel was criticized said that she was very offended by the critique, however, thinks that Gábor Németh did not mean to be sexist as he is "one of the most emancipated men". Nonetheless, she pointed out that "at least something happened in Hungarian literary life".

Besides the publication of the *Kitakart Psyché* anthologies and the start of *Irodalmi Centrifuga* which I am examining below, the Németh/Bán debate was followed by events such as a public lecture by Zsófia Bán about definitions of women's literature.⁷³ In 2006, a scholarly conference was organized entitled "A nő mint szubjektum, a női szubjektum ("Women as subjects, female subjects") in Debrecen while in 2008 the annual festival of The Museum of Literature Petőfi focused on women's literature in its program entitled "Nők a férfi(b)irodalomban" ("Women in men's literature"). A number of books were also published which dealt with women's literature and feminist literary criticism (detailed in Chapter one). Writers Anna Menyhért, Viktória Radics and Noémi Kiss has been organizing a literary discussion series entitled *Rózsaszín szemüveg* ("Pink Sunglasses") since 2009 which discusses women authors of the 20th century also through a gender lens. When asked about the series' relations to feminism, Anna Menyhért asked back:

What does being a feminist mean? I have problems with that. Feminism in my view is a cultural and political movement. It entails activism and a form of lobbying. *Rózsaszín szemüveg* is feminist in as much as it does scientific work in the interest of contemporary women writers in a comprehensible manner. But otherwise I do not know... It is certainly gender conscious, but I am not sure about feminism.⁷⁴

Similarly to other writers, she seems to distance herself from feminism, however, she puts emphasis on gender as an important category. In the next subsection, I will examine the phenomenon of denying feminism for strategic reasons.

⁷³ Zsófia Bán, "Van-e az irodalomnak neme?" Lecture at Mindentudás Egyeteme, 19 April 2004, accessed 20 May 2011, <http://mindentudas.hu/elodasok-cikkek/item/5-van-e-az-irodalomnak-neme?.html>.

⁷⁴ Interview with Anna Menyhért. April 27, 2011.

The phenomenon of “feminism as a swearword” and its effects

During my interviews, women writers often voiced their opinion that they still feel that “feminism is a swearword in Hungary”. Here, I am analyzing how this opinion might affect strategies of women writers concerning stating that they are feminists or not. The perceived negative opinion is neither a new phenomenon, nor unique to Hungary.⁷⁵ Fábíán claims that the usually negative portrayal of feminism in public discourse is still present in contemporary Hungary, quite similarly to the 1990s.⁷⁶ Previously, scholars such as Judit Acsády and Erzsébet Barát also pointed out the widespread anti-feminist sentiment in Hungary.⁷⁷ Éva Fodor wrote about how the negative aura and stigma of the word “feminism” has affected Hungarian women’s movements.⁷⁸

As my interviews illustrate, contemporary Hungarian women writers are rather divided on how they think of feminism, however, many of them still perceive that feminism is a negative term in Hungary. This feeling thus defines their strategies of acknowledging that they are feminists or keeping it hidden and even finding another word instead. This opinion strongly influenced the editors and the writers of the anthologies in their self-definitions as well, which resulted in not proclaiming themselves openly as feminists even though they voiced their definite opinions on gender hierarchies and the patriarchy of literature and literary institutions. Two examples illustrate the strikingly different strategies of women writers concerning acknowledging feminism or not. As Agáta Gordon, editor of the first anthology *Éjszakai állatkert* and of the blog *Irodalmi Centrifuga* summarized in my first interview, when asked about *Irodalmi Centrifuga* and its feminism,

We do not mention that we are feminist, not because we are ashamed of being feminists, but because we do not want to have a stigma which hinders us in

⁷⁵ Moi, “I Am Not a Feminist, But . . .”: How Feminism Became the F-Word,” *PMLA* 5 (2006).

⁷⁶ Fábíán, *Contemporary Women’s Movements in Hungary*.

⁷⁷ Judit Acsády, “The Construction of Women’s Case. Turn-of-the Century Hungarian Feminism,” in *Ana’s Land. Sisterhood in Europe*, ed. Tanya Renne (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 102. Barát Erzsébet, Pataki Kinga. Pócs Kata Rita, “Gyűlölködni szabad (?)”, in *Médiakutató* Spring (2004), accessed May 19, 2011. http://www.mediakutato.hu/cikk/2004_01_tavasz/03_gyulolkodni_szabad/01.html.

⁷⁸ Éva Fodor, “The Political Woman? Women in Politics in Hungary,” in *Women in the Politics of Postcommunist Eastern Europe*, ed. Marilyn Rueschemeyer (Armonk, London: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1998), 164.

achieving our aim at changing social consciousness and thinking. We are of course feminists, but we do not use this word in Hungary. But we want to promote woman-consciousness.⁷⁹

This “woman-consciousness” thus serves as a substitution for feminism. In my next interview with her a couple of months later, Gordon said that when publishing the first volume of the anthology, everyone was sure that it was feminist:

Forgács has always said that her first identity is a woman and then she is a Hungarian. Thus all of us were definitely sure that the anthology is a feminist gesture. Of course she said it is not feminist, because had she admitted its feminism she would have got even more attacks.⁸⁰

In my view, the fact that Zsuzsa Forgács, the central figure of the anthologies rejected my interview request is also a sign of this act of distancing from feminism. She replied that she wants scholars to deal with the “literature” of the anthologies and not their feminism. According to my interpretation, in the background of this reply is the fear that her work is not looked upon as “literature” but as feminist politics which is, in the usually voiced opinion, a negative, stigmatized ideology.

Zsófia Bán, initiator of the 2003 debate in *Élet és Irodalom*, who participated in all of the anthologies, represented a different standpoint. When asked about the women’s literary endeavors she pointed out that she is aware of the strategy of denying feminism, however, she does not think it is useful for feminism. In her words,

I think that in this situation not using the word might not be best strategy. Because then I give the floor in the discourse to those who think that feminism is a swearword. I am aware of the strategy of not saying that a book is a feminist because then they will not buy it... I think we should acknowledge it and I affirm that I am a feminist. ... A lot of people use feminism as a swearword because they do not know the movement and equate it with its radical, man hating, lesbian feminist line. But it is a mistake. If we distance ourselves from the idea of feminism, we are not able to change the perception of that. But I understand if someone has a different strategy which suits her best.⁸¹

These two examples imply that there is a significant difference in writers’ thinkings on feminism and the strategies how to represent it. Another underlying opinion was that in the public eye

⁷⁹ Interview with Agáta Gordon. November 15, 2011.

⁸⁰ Interview with Agáta Gordon. March 25, 2011.

⁸¹ Interview with Zsófia Bán. May 5, 2011.

feminism is a “militant movement” which wants to fight for the equality of women aggressively. Concerning the image of feminism in Hungary, many interviewees expressed that people think about feminists in stereotypical terms such as “bloody feminists” or “greasy hairy feminists” who might be even lesbian.⁸² Esze Dóra, clearly identifying herself as a feminist, voiced also these negative picture of feminism, however, with the aim of saying that we should go beyond these images.

After I asked a question about whether the anthologies are feminist projects fighting for equal opportunities or drawing attention to a marginalization, Krisztina Tóth, participant of all volumes, replied that precisely this is the stereotype of feminists, that they want to fight for something. After mentioning that she is rather a writer than a woman writer she went on with commenting on feminism and the anthologies:

It is not about fighting against someone, it is only about we want to restore the normal order of things somehow and these deeply rooted reflexes which seem to change in other areas of life, change in the literature as well. I am not a militant type, I do not want to fight or argue with anyone.⁸³

Toril Moi writes about this defensive tone when examining women writers who assert that they are not women writers.⁸⁴ She claims that this defensive tone always comes after a provocation, which, in my view, might be analyzed as a conscious strategy, on which I will comment in Chapter three.⁸⁵

During the interviews it was very interesting to see how the writers themselves define feminism. Poet Ágnes Rapai, who was among my interviewees the most determined about her feminist identity, claimed,

I affirm that I am a feminist, I think every human being is equal, a little girl is equal to a little boy. It is the most normal think to say. I really do not understand this aversion towards feminism. (...) It is a positive thing which helped societies to improve, helped women to be able to vote. Why do they deny it? Why can't you say that I am a feminist? Why not?⁸⁶

⁸² Interview with Dóra Esze. April 28, 2011. Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. May 2, 2011.

⁸³ Interview with Krisztina Tóth. April 17 2011.

⁸⁴ Moi, “I am not a woman writer?”

⁸⁵ Moi, “I am not a woman writer?”

⁸⁶ Interview with Ágnes Rapai. April 21, 2011.

She pointed out that she is usually not so open and systematic about her opinions and not an easy-going person who voices her ideas, she only summarized this opinion during my interview - a reaction which may have been triggered by my position. For successful novelist Dóra Esze, feminism and the achievements of feminism are “natural”. As she claimed already at the beginning of my interview, she has always been a feminist, it is not a question for her. In her words,

I am a privileged person in this respect, as my aunt is Enikő Bollobás [professor of American studies, feminist literary critic]. I never had to switch my mind to this, or fight negative ideas in my head (...). I was born with a feminist silver spoon in my mouth.⁸⁷

Éva Fejős, journalist and author of popular literature and chick-lit novels, not participant of the anthologies, was rather reluctant to talk about feminism. She felt that in her life her being a woman has never really been a problem, she has not been marginalized at all. She repeated several times that I would not hear the answers I was hoping to get as she is not fighting for anything: “Why would I protest? Against what?”. However, she also said that with her journalist work she deals with social problems which affect women.⁸⁸

Another women writer whom I interviewed, poet Zsófia Balla, also not a contributor, thinks that feminism is still very important because of the marginalized position of women in politics. In her view, the anthology-movement is feminist,

Because it draws attention to the deeply unjust situation of marginalizing women. (...) We are living in a men’s world. (...) If you take a look at how many women representatives do we have in the Parliament, you will see that it is much more difficult to get in to the Parliament or to a board of directors than to publish a book.⁸⁹

However, she connected feminism to political representation and political activism and claimed that feminism and literature must be treated as separate things because of the difference between the sociological and aesthetic levels. Similarly to Anna Menyhért, who instead of feminism speaks

⁸⁷ Interview with Dóra Esze. April 28

⁸⁸ Interview with Éva Fejős. April 12, 2011.

⁸⁹ Interview with Zsófia Balla. May 6, 2011.

of a gender-consciousness of her literary discussion series, Éva Bánki thinks that feminism is rather about social issues and not about sexuality as thematized by the anthologies.

I know about these feminist ideologies, but I am more attracted to a militant Latin-American kind of feminism. The *ars poetica* of exploring our body with writing and with our body we explore our language is rather narrow-minded. I think you can expect more from literature. Sure that these theories are important, but feminism is more than that.⁹⁰

She clearly distanced herself from the idea of women's literature as something dealing with the body and the sexuality (although she participated in the first volume), and voiced that a real feminist literature which portrays the Hungarian society from a feminist perspective is still missing from Hungarian literature.

Anna Jókai, a right-wing conservative writer, president of the Hungarian Association of Writers after the transition in 1989 (not a contributor of the anthologies), claims that feminism is useful as it helped us to make "traditional gender roles" much more flexible. In her words,

I believe in feminism, but I consider it rather as a thinking focusing on all human beings. ... In our life there are people predestinated for creating the world and people whose destiny is to keep this created world. Both of them are important. The creator is mostly the man, and the woman is the keeper. But nowadays it is changing and these roles are often reversed. I think it is fair. ... But it does not mean that we have to deny that there is a fundamental biological order of things.⁹¹

She also thinks that it might be true that the 21st century will be a century of women, who can help make the world a "better and more peaceful place". However, she thinks that feminism and literature are not compatible. Interestingly, during our interview (the only one which I made on phone) she constantly emphasized that she finds it positive that nowadays there are more women writers who are writing. In my view, she may have had the feeling that I, as an apparently feminist researcher in her view, would treat her as a kind of a negative example in my analysis, a writer who is against the anthology movement.

Although the different opinions and self-identifications of the authors and editors of the anthologies make it difficult to regard the anthology movement or *Irodalmi Centrifuga* as self-

⁹⁰ Interview with Éva Bánki. April 6, 2011.

⁹¹ Interview with Anna Jókai. May 5, 2011.

proclaimed feminist groups, in my view, it is clear that the problematic question of self-definition is rooted in a negative image of feminism still persistent in the writers' mind. On the other hand, as Nóra Séllei claims, because of the "belatedness" of Hungarian feminist literary criticism, it is possible that anti-feminism is merging with post-feminist opinions of claiming that we are over feminism and the questions raised by feminism are not relevant anymore.⁹² It is possible to argue though that the strategy of denying feminism is able to perpetuate this negative opinion on feminism.

2.2. The *Kitakart Psyché* women's literary anthology series

The *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series is certainly the central event in the recent women's literature "boom". As young novelist and literary critic Noémi Kiss, contributor of the all four volumes, claims,

I consider the publication of *Éjszakai állatkert* a paradigm change. I think something happened then. It had an uncountable number of receptions, either positive or negative, in a number of different publications.⁹³

Four volumes have been published between 2005 and 2010: *Éjszakai állatkert* ("Night Zoo") in 2005, *Szomjas Oázis* ("Thirsty Oasis") in 2007, *A szív kutyája* (Dog of the Heart) and *Dzsungel a szívben* (Jungle in the Heart) in 2010. The aim of the anthologies has been to draw attention to women writers and to the derogatory evaluation of "women's literature" and to make an attempt to reclaim the term. As often voiced by Zsuzsa Forgács, the volumes of the anthologies are also aimed at showing a wide variety of "women's experiences", from a women's point of view.

The anthologies, whether they were successful and important, whether their topics are good or not, whether they are ghettoizing women's literature or merely draw attention to women's literature which is was a central theme during all my interviews. As not all my interviewees have been published in the books, either because of their own decision or the editors' choice, their interpretation on the anthology movement has been rather different. From my fourteen

⁹² Nóra Séllei, "Így írunk mi," 140.

⁹³ Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

interviewees, seven participated and seven not, due to the fact they did not want to or due to other reasons. According to my interviewees, the central figure in the decision making was Zsuzsa Forgács. From my interviewees, six writers tied the anthologies clearly to feminism (five participants and Zsófia Balla), while the others were hesitant or claimed that the anthologies are not feminist.

Four important patterns emerged concerning the writers' opinion on the anthology-movement: first, welcoming it as a revolutionary process, second, considering their publication as a temporary phenomenon important now but hopefully unnecessary later, third, seeing it as a far-fetched or subcultural phenomenon and fourth, looking on it as a "belated" process. The topic of sexuality also proved to be a field about which my interviewees represented different standpoints. Instead of categorizing the writers strictly to groups according to their thinking about the anthologies, which would, in my view, oversimplify the writers' attitudes, I made an attempt to detect main ideas about the recent anthologies which are presented in the interviews.

Feminism and the anthologies: "paradigm change" or "far-fetched" idea

As Nóra Séllei claims in her analysis of *Éjszakai állatkert* and its critical reception, the book clearly situated itself as a piece women's literature and thus created a special "women's discourse", which, then, became one of the most frequent target points of the negative critiques.

As she notes,

I take the risk of saying that the reason why the anthology became a scandalous book completely rejected by some and only partially criticized by others was the fact that it embraces openly and consciously its gender, and gives a clear gender identity to the book and its writings.⁹⁴

As already six years passed since the publication of the first book and three more volumes were published, it is interesting to see how the focus of the criticism has changed from the issue of the anthology's movement feminist character, the question of "why these women published such a

⁹⁴ Séllei, "A nagy kitérülködés" - Az *Éjszakai állatkert* recepciójának értelmezése," in *Mért félünk a farkastól? Feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Könyvkiadó, 2007), 190.

book?” to the literary and aesthetics aspects of that, the question of “are these writings good literature?”.

The anthologies’ connection to feminism is ambiguous, even though their aims would, in my view, make them parts of a feminist movement. In an interview published on a feminist news site, two editors of the first volume clearly spoke about *Éjszakai állatkert* as a feminist step.⁹⁵ On the other hand, main editor Zsuzsa Forgács claimed that the anthologies are not feminist and most of the authors are not feminist either.⁹⁶ As she stated in an interview given to a mainstream online news site:

Among the thirty-three authors including the editors as well, only six would identify themselves as feminist. Because this book is pure literature, the stories do not have implicit ideology. We did not want to edit a feminist book but a literary anthology which presents women’s hitherto hidden experiences and perspectives, Most of the authors would not call herself feminist, it was not our point in the selection. We only looked for good and interesting texts from a lot of authors in order to make the book more diverse.⁹⁷

This response might be analyzed as a strategy of not acknowledging feminism (equated with ideology) in order to avoid negative reception. This strategy is a conscious choice, when replying to a Hungarian online news site which is famous for its satirical tone and readers who are thought to be especially critical with anything they read. Whereas, the other editors felt free to detail feminist aims in an interview published on a feminist website.

The rejection of feminism is analyzed by literary critic and scholar Júlia Sonnevend in the cultural and literary journal *Jelenkor*. Besides acknowledging the importance of the anthology in Hungarian feminism and also in the very slowly emerging gender-sensitive criticism, Sonnevend still considers the book a failure which cannot lived up to the expectations of being a milestone in feminism, precisely because this inability of embracing its feminism and the lack of a firm

⁹⁵Viki Soós, “Nem lehet csak úgy létezni. Kerekasztal Debrecenben,” *Tűsarok* April 24, 2006, accessed April 04, 2011, <http://www.tusarok.org/rovatok/cikk.php?id=1372>.

⁹⁶ Barbara Thüringer, “A nők szerint a világ,” *Index*, December 02, 2005, accessed April 08, 2011, <http://index.hu/kultur/klassz/fzsint1130/>.

⁹⁷ Thüringer, “A nők szerint a világ.”

feminist literary theoretical basis.⁹⁸ I find her critique especially useful as it underlines the need of ending the perpetuation of stereotypes of “stigmatized feminism”. However, the critique does not consider the denial of feminism as a conscious strategy.

Agáta Gordon spoke in my second interview about the fact that the anthology-movement has now its own long history and as more and more people got involved, it might become easier to acknowledge a feminist perspective. Asked about the anthologies, Ágnes Rapai started speaking about their connection to feminism immediately. She pointed out the disputed feminist status of the books and claimed that although some of the writers (and also the main editor) do not acknowledge it, it is a feminist gesture with an enormous political significance, which will influence the whole society on a longer run and not only intellectuals:

I think it is very important that *Night Zoo* launched a kind of a feminist movement, which is fighting not only for the equality of women writers but also for the equality of women in general. I know, however, that a lot of the participants think about all this differently. ... It was not only literature, it is definitely politics, no matter how heavily they object to that. It was a literary gesture equal to a huge demonstration, similar to when the first woman writer dared to publish her first book with her own name.⁹⁹

Literature is treated by her as politics: Rapai, raising her voice and gesturing intensely, emphasized during the interview that the anthology movement should be interpreted as a feminist political move, despite the fact that it was often denied by the editor Zsuzsa Forgács herself as well. During the interview Rapai spoke passionately about the effects of the anthologies and their importance in creating a women’s literary tradition and also in playing a role in changing the rather conservative society of Hungary - if not now, in about 30 years.

Similarly enthusiastic was Noémi Kiss. However, she emphasized their literary influence in the first place and not their wider possible effects. Being a literary critic herself, she referred to the importance of the anthologies as a “paradigm change” in literary criticism and literary life as well and identified the whole process as a “women’s turn” being able to change the general

⁹⁸ Júlia Sonnevend, “Let’s talk about sex, baby! *Éjszakai állatkert. Antológia a női szexualitásról*,” *Jelenkor* 9 (2007), accessed May 19, 2011, <http://jelenkor.net/main.php?disp=disp&ID=1319>.

⁹⁹ Interview with Ágnes Rapai. April 21, 2011.

patriarchal nature of Hungarian literature such as the institutions or the editorial boards of literary journals. She pointed out that women's literature and feminist literary criticism are not as marginal anymore as they were and the conflicts among writers and critics, even within the anthologies, are organic part of this process:

I do not really think that it is a bad thing that there are conflicts because it belongs to the dynamics of the thing. As a particular movement becomes more popular, it is logical that solidarity and cohesion within the group is not as necessary anymore, thus there are the conflicts.¹⁰⁰

Another author of the anthologies, Orsolya Karafiáth did not attach the anthology to feminism. She claimed that it was mostly about consciousness raising. In her words,

if we look at the authors of the anthologies, there are only a few 'bloody feminists'. ... I think it is not a feminist gesture. The texts are against the stereotype that if you are a woman you should have a decent job and raise children. I think it is important to take side with the opinions that deny it. However, I am not against those who raise children. I think it is really interesting that it can be a scandal in 2011, I think we should have discussed these things earlier.¹⁰¹

Karafiáth emphasized during the interview that we should transgress the strict binaries of male and female, which could regarded also as a post-feminist attitude.

Noémi Szécsi, having studied Gender Studies before, finds feminist literary criticism crucially important. However, she did not take part in the anthology movement and sees the emergence of women's literature as a separate branch a hopefully temporary process, which draws attention to the fact that there are women writers who do not get enough attention because of the patriarchal nature of literary institutions. In her words,

Well, I think that I welcome this process, but I do not want to be a part of this, I do not want to in a group, as a woman. I have already said this several times, I do not want women's literature to be a separate thing. I do not agree with this, although I find it very important that it gains more space, and maybe that is the way it goes: it emerges separately and then it gains more space.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. 02 May 2011.

¹⁰² Interview with Noémi Szécsi. April 20, 2011.

Krisztina Tóth is similar in acknowledging the beneficiary effects on marginalized women authors, however, in her opinion it makes no sense to separate women and men in the realm of literature. She explains,

The anthologies simply point to the fact that there is a rather unknown area of contemporary literature, and of course, as there are good and bad authors among male authors, there are good and bad women authors as well. I do not think that positive discrimination makes sense here.¹⁰³

Krisztina Tóth focuses on the textuality of literature and not on the author, claiming that we should not search for the individual experiences of the author in the texts. Thus, the specific attention on women bothered her as it was visible during my interview as well. She mentioned, for example, that she had had enough of interviews where the interviewer had asked her about how her womanhood is present in her writing. She is of the opinion that writing is not simply about specific experiences. Interestingly, her figure, as definitely one of the most successful contemporary women writers, was constantly present in the interviews unlike any other names (besides Zsuzsa Forgács). A lot of the writers mentioned her in order to illustrate that although she has taken sides with the anthology movement she emphasizes a different idea on aesthetics.

Dóra Esze acknowledges that there was a boom, connected largely to the anthologies. She said,

Yes, no doubt that there has been a special attention on women. But I cannot decide whether it is good or bad. We do not want to be token women. It is not a solution. I do not know if it makes sense when we speak of writing itself, maybe not. I do not know whether sociologically this boom of women's emergence is a bubble or not, but it is a positive process, so let's be happy about it. But not more happy than about the emergence of men writers because then we deceive ourselves.¹⁰⁴

Thus, she is of the opinion that we should not make any difference between male and female writers.

A number of my interviewees pointed out that the last years' events happened in the "West" already in the seventies and Hungarian literary criticism and literature is very much left

¹⁰³ Interview with Krisztina Tóth. April 17, 2011.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Dóra Esze. April 28, 2011.

beyond in this respect. Anna Menyhért acknowledged that the recent events, especially the anthologies fit to the gynocriticism tradition of feminist literary endeavors, that is, finding the lost women authors who are not part of the traditional canon and discovering the women's tradition (as outlined by for example Elaine Showalter in the seventies). Zsófia Bán also said that we are "somewhere in the middle of the first wave of feminist literary criticism". However, she welcomes the anthology and find it an important enterprise:

Zsuzsa Forgács does a huge service as she is keeping the anthologies constantly in the centre of the discourse. And also because she searches for authors who are not writers but she supposes that they can write a short story. ... I think it is not a problem that not all of the authors are writers as these books are not only about selling a literary product but also about how different women from different social backgrounds think of their experiences as women.¹⁰⁵

Viktória Radics also mentioned that "these events took place in the West some fifty years ago", however she emphasized the existence of "women's solidarity" which emerged due to this anthologies. She said,

I was interested because of the honest request to participate and because of the anthologies' aim to broaden the notion of literature: the anthologies contain genres which transgress traditional literary genres, for example memoirs, letters, autobiographies.¹⁰⁶

Éva Fejős characterized the publication of the anthologies as a "far-fetched process". She does not participate in any of the event and nor did she follow the events as a journalist. But she is not offended for being "left out" - a clear sign of the anthologies distancing from popular literature. Anna Jókai pointed out, although she find it favorable that women writers emerged, she is part of a completely different tradition and holds the separation of men and women writers as a "literary cul-de-sac". As the editors never reached out to her or asked her to publish in the volume, she did not follow the events.

The writers are also divided on whether the anthologies are important and draw attention to a real marginalization of women's literature. Two distinct ideas became crystallized: on one hand, there are those who think that women are not marginalized and therefore it is no need to support

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Zsófia Bán. May 6, 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Interview wit Viktória Radics. April 29, 2011.

women writers and those who are good will find their ways, and on the other hand the majority of the opinions showed that women are still marginalized in literary life and the women's or gender perspective is still missing in criticism. It also shows that women writers are not a unified group, their success as women writers depends on a number of factors.

As for the outcomes of the past decade, Anna Menyhért was ambivalent. As she claimed,

Well, now I see a bit recoil. There was a boom, but the whole thing did not really accomplish as it could have. And Séllei Nóra is also explaining why not, because there is no institutional background, there are no Gender Departments, apart from CEU but it is not a Hungarian university, and something at Corvinus. However, it is wider known in the public discourse and you can now easily speak of women's literature, women writers and feminist literary criticism. But there is no institutional background.¹⁰⁷

Looking at all these rather different opinions, it is visible that women writers, even those who participated in the movement, are rather divided on how they connect the anthologies to feminism, how they think of the movement and the volumes themselves. This complexity, however, only draws attention to the rather elastic character of the notion "women's literature" and feminism, always to be understood in its special context. Based on its agenda of facilitating the emergence of women writer, the aim of showing "women's experiences" and also on its thematization of sexuality from a women's perspective makes the anthology movement a feminist movement. The anthologies, especially the first one were also successful in creating a discourse on feminism, feminist literary criticism and women's literature.

Sexuality and the body as debated topics: "Sex, sex, sex"

As the topics of the first two anthologies, that is, sexuality and the female body have been fiercely criticized by some of the writers themselves as well, I find it important to examine the question in detail. A number of my interviewees emphasized that speaking of sexuality and the female body locks women to their traditionally defined role of the field of sexuality even if the anthology is published with the aim of showing a woman's perspective. Concerning this, Zsófia Balla said,

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Anna Menyhért. April 27, 2011.

True, women have not written about sexuality and they were often portrayed from an outer perspective. But if a women's anthology is only about sexuality, it repeats the schematic portrayal of women defined by the society, or patriarchy, that a woman is equal to her sexuality. I think it is a deadly failure, a sin.¹⁰⁸

Éva Bánki, connecting feminism to a political and social movement and not sexuality only also thinks in similar terms. She claimed that a special kind of women's literature has traditionally got too much attention and the anthology movement only reinforces the stereotype of "pink" women's writing concerned with love, sexuality and the body. She criticized these kinds of writings for not being socially responsible and not turning towards political and social issues. She also criticized the anthology because in her view they were very limited in their scope and are not relevant to a huge group of women, for example older women or women from the countryside. Commenting on anthologies, she said in an ironical tone,

I see this as kind of a marketing trick. ... I think if the topic would have been society or politics, the book would not have been so successful. ... Women are so nice that they see sexuality from their own perspective but have no opinion on society and politics because women have their place near the stove. I think that this far-fetched sex-centeredness of the anthologies is a form of a postmodern "Kinder, Küche, Kirche", now said postmodern: "Sex, Sex, Sex". I think it is too limited. ... I also think it is only a subcultural thing, you know. ... Can you see the Hungarian society in this book from a woman's perspective?¹⁰⁹

Thus, she thinks that the anthologies are unable to tackle real problems and taboos concerning sexuality. Concerning the feminism of the anthologies, she pointed out the social blindness of contemporary feminism in Hungary which in her view consists only of "participating in conferences".

Another perspective is represented by Dóra Esze who claimed that the topic of sexuality is far-fetched in itself and does not have a justification as an independent topic. In her words,

I think sexuality is a very strained topic. Sexuality is not a topic in itself, if the plot requires speaking of it, then we should speak of that. But in the anthology lot of the writings felt awkward.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Zsófia Balla. May 6, 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Éva Bánki. April 6, 2011.

¹¹⁰ Interview with Dóra Esze. April 28, 2011.

However, it is possible to regard the anthologies feminist precisely because they thematize the female body and sexuality. From a feminist point of view, sexuality is just as political as larger social issues: feminist theory extends politics to a broader and complex notion containing the private and personal spheres as well. As for example Carol Pateman summarizes, feminist theory fundamentally challenges the patriarchal-liberal notion of strict dichotomy of the private and the public and instead implies their mutual interrelation.¹¹¹ Second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political” implies that it is impossible to distinguish between the realms of private and public because “both are constituted by power relations which inscribe and perpetuate power relations the power of man”.¹¹² Writing about sexuality (which however, is not really new in the history of Hungarian women’s literature) thus can mean a reconfiguration of what is held to be political, the forty six short stories are not only about female desire and passion but also focus on social issues such as violence against women, rape and public attitude towards lesbianism. As Nóra Séllei claims, “the anthology examines how sexuality, one of the elements constructing being a woman (according to some, the central element) is present in existence of women and not the mythical Woman”.¹¹³

On the other hand, considering the feminist theory of Hélène Cixous on *écriture féminine* which states that women’s writing roots in the female body, also implies the feminist roots of the anthology. As Cixous wrote, “[w]oman have almost everything write about femininity: about their sexuality, that is to say, about the infinite and mobile complexity of their becoming erotic. ... Woman must write her body.”¹¹⁴ A similar opinion was voiced by Noémi Kiss who claimed,

The body itself is language, it can present the world, a character or the society that it shows some problems, pains, a mother-son relationship surfacing in body contacts, lover and family. The body is a surface on which a number of things are written. So I think it was a good topic and all the other volumes relate back a little.

¹¹¹ See for example Carol Pateman, “Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy,” in *The Disorder of Women* (London: Polity Press, 1989).

¹¹² Judith Squires, “Framing Politics” in Judith Squires, *Gender in Political Theory* (Polity Press), 46.

¹¹³ Séllei, “‘A nagy kitárulkozás’”186.

¹¹⁴ Hélène Cixous, “Sorties: Our and Out: Attacks/Ways out/Forays”, in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clémont, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 94.

On the other hand, the body is one of the fields of feminine writing, an open speech about ourselves, one of the fields of feminist aesthetics.¹¹⁵

To summarize this subchapter, it is important to note that I am not saying that every women writer is feminist, similarly to the idea that not every women's writing is feminist writing.¹¹⁶ Rather, I wished to argue that rejecting feminism is also a strategy which is made consciously, defined by a special social and political context where feminism is still - or still felt to be - a negative "ideology". However, it does not mean that there is no feminist ideas underlying the strategy.

2.3. Irodalmi Centrifuga as a feminist platform

Another important participant in last years' events is the literary circle *Irodalmi Centrifuga* which has been one of the most active women's groups in Hungary in the recent years. It started as a radio program in 2003, the editors took part in the publishing of the first anthology *Éjszakai állatkert*, from 2005 to 2009 it organized a talk series in *Centrál Kávéház* (Café Centrál), and it has now become part of the organization *Interkulturális és Irodalmi Centrifuga Alapítvány* ("Intercultural and Literary Centrifuge Foundation") which aims to promote gender equality and gender-specific social change and also to raise awareness concerning women's issues in general through its blog called *Élőfolyóirat* ("Living journal"). *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, mentioned by a number of my interviewees as an important organization, illustrates how literature can provide a platform for feminist social activism. It is also a clear example how feminist activism capitalizes on cyberspace and social media.

As Erzsébet Barát claims, *Élőfolyóirat* is important for showing "the impact of feminist politics in popular culture".¹¹⁷ Analyzing the short stories and reflections of sixteen women in the *Irodalmi Centrifuga*'s series entitled *Milyen ma nőként alkotni, nőnek lenni Magyarországon?* ("How does

¹¹⁵ Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

¹¹⁶ Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in *The Feminist Reader*, Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore eds. (Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell), 1989).

¹¹⁷ Barát Erzsébet, "The Troubling Internet Space of Woman's-mind," in *Discourse & Communication* 3 (2009): 2.

it feel to be a women artist and a woman in Hungary nowadays?”¹¹⁸, Barát claims that *Élőfolyóirat* “is of particular importance for a refreshing point of departure against the hegemonic (symbolic) violence” against feminism which is still strongly present in the contemporary Hungarian society.¹¹⁹ This series also shows that *Irodalmi Centrifuga* has become an important forum of feminist discussions and a possible agent to set the agenda and show the most important concerns and issues of contemporary feminism in Hungary.

Irodalmi Centrifuga organized approximately 30-40 discussions from 2005 to 2009, the topics were diverse. As Agáta Gordon, main editor of the blog recollected,

We raised all the issues which cannot be avoided if we speak of women. Our topics, not only literary, were mostly treated from a literary point of view or aspect. The topics were very diverse; it was such a huge experience to engage ourselves in so many things. Just to mention few examples, we had a discussion on American literature and feminism, on women in the news media and their role in investigative journalism in Hungary, or we spent half a year with discussing trauma and women. Each and every time we have learned a lot.¹²⁰

The discussions reflected on many “traditional” feminist issues. According to Gordon, there were evenings with only twenty guests and there were lot of discussions which were overcrowded. *Irodalmi Centrifuga* has also dealt with political and social issues. “From the beginning we put much emphasis on Roma issues”, said Gordon. For example, Krisztina Bódis’ social work for Roma children is widely discussed on the blog and this project is a part of the Foundation. After the murder series of Roma people in 2009, *Irodalmi Centrifuga* organized a two-week long vigil in Budapest. Their event was extensively covered by the media and Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai also replied to their action.¹²¹

In June 2008, *Irodalmi Centrifuga* launched a blog called *Élőfolyóirat* which started originally as an important platform of the talk series, however, it has become a more independent publication which focuses not only on women’s literature but on women’s issues in Hungary in general. As

¹¹⁸ See Agáta Gordon’s thoughts: http://elofolyoirat.blog.hu/2008/09/10/gordon_agata_orszagon_no, accessed May 19, 2011.

¹¹⁹ Barát, “The Troubling Internet Space of Woman’s-mind,” 3.

¹²⁰ Interview with Agáta Gordon. November 15, 2011.

¹²¹ Bajnai Gordon válaszolt a néma nőknek, *Élőfolyóirat*, August 19, 2009, accessed May 19, 2011, http://elofolyoirat.blog.hu/2009/08/19/bajnai_gordon_valaszolt_a_nema_novereknek.

they wrote in their mission of statement connecting women's literature and the social issued in 2008,

Irodalmi Centrifuga – Éljólyóirat presents the most important topics on which women's literature or the literature written by women has been focusing recently. We want to examine who do, write and read this literature and why is it gaining a foothold more and more in Hungary and with what kind of socially useful, current and indispensable knowledge it enriches our collective knowledge. *Irodalmi Centrifuga* is aimed at spreading women-conscious literary perspective, while ICA Online magazine promotes Hungarian women writers in Hungary and abroad as well. ICA would like to provide ground for women artists, and other minority groups with less opportunities to show their talent. By doing so, it makes an attempt to introduce a new, colorful voice to the double-divided, flat arena of our present social communication. It wants to raise civil consciousness and awareness, which, due to the weakness of contemporary civil movements, is so important for minorities, women and the whole society as well. With its indirect means, literature can be a help in this process.¹²²

The blog works as an archive of women's literature (besides contemporary writers, they publish writings of "unknown" women writers from the previous centuries) and a forum of feminist literary criticism and women's literature. *Éljólyóirat* has documented the events of *Irodalmi Centrifuga* (from the literary discussions to social actions such as the vigil), presents the social work of Krisztina Bódis in Hétes and reflects on policies concerning women, for example issues on violence against women, or more recently, debates around homebirth and planned stricter legislation on abortion. They endorsed the failed project of the organization called *Nők a Pályán* ("Women on the Field").

Agáta Gordon used the term "woman-conscious" as a substitute for the term "feminist" which is in her view so discredited in Hungary that it makes feminist work extremely difficult. Asked about what "woman-consciousness" means, my interviewee contemplated lengthily. In the end, she underlined the importance of woman-consciousness as a means to draw attention to the patriarchy embedded in our society and our socializing processes:

It is everything which is not "man". Because there definitely exists something which is not "man". Although it is very difficult to find that because we are living in a man's system: we learn to work, write, read and think in a man's system.¹²³

¹²² Part of *Irodalmi Centrifuga's* statement of purpose from 2008, detail from a written document of founding application in 2009. Provided by Gabriella Györe, former editor of *Éljólyóirat*.

¹²³ Interview with Agáta Gordon. November 15, 2011.

Agáta Gordon thinks that women's literature could be a good means to shed light on this subjugated woman-consciousness and thus could serve as an important basis of feminism. She is of the opinion, that *Élőfolyóirat* should move beyond a circle of a so called "radical feminist" readership, however, the widespread negative connotation of feminism hinders them in their open and straight communication. As she summarized,

We really think that literature is the best ground for feminism. Those who start reading women's literature, will get to know to the so-called woman-consciousness or woman's quality. Women's writings are characterized by a stronger social consciousness, they are more socially radical, open and self-reflexive. Those men who have been writing for such a long time, have already forgotten about these things. If you read some hundred thousands of pages of literature, you will realize that. We want to share this knowledge, but it is very difficult when we cannot say openly what we are talking about. Because if we are outspoken, we may very easy drift into the minority category, which is read only by the radical members of the women's movement. Which is a wonderful thing because we want to provide a resting place for these women who would get what they want, but we also want to move beyond this circle and reach more women and men as well.¹²⁴

The feminism of *Irodalmi Centrifuga*, then, is based on Gordon's definition of "woman-consciousness". In a second interview five month after the first one, however, Gordon was already critical of this term as well. She said that the term "woman-conscious" annoys a lot of people. As she explained,

I have just posted an advertisement that we are searching for a woman-conscious informatician, and it was readily criticized in a comment for being lame. I don't know whether they would criticize man-conscious. So, everything which has woman in it, is no... I am searching for a new term. Woman-faith sounds good, because for me this whole thing is beginning to resemble a faith.¹²⁵

The role of *Irodalmi Centrifuga* was emphasized by a number of my interviewees. Dóra Esze said that she enjoyed the talk sessions very much and claimed that internet and the social media is now really important in creating a democratic platform for social interaction. Éva Bánki pointed out that *Irodalmi Centrifuga* is a much more democratic and free medium than an anthology, open to new, unexplored voices. In her words,

¹²⁴ Interview with Agáta Gordon. November 15, 2011.

¹²⁵ Interview with Agáta Gordon. March 25, 2011.

ICA is more open. It is a political question who to include in an anthology. It is party and literary politics. Internet has done much in renewing the politically divided Hungarian society and the ICA has a huge part in it. I know it from women's lives as well that sometimes there is a unique power residing in powerlessness. An internet blog is not important enough to be considered as something able to influence the society. And when it is already read by twenty thousand people, it is too late.¹²⁶

Noémi Kiss, who writes a thematic series on the blog, thinks that the blog means a new, “practical form of feminism”. As she said,

I wrote one article which was read by twenty thousand people. It is much more than what you can reach with a book or a theater piece. I have a series on being a mother to a twin couple, the readers ask me about my articles, ask for my help, etc. It is much more than feminist ideology, the original aims of that. It has become a practical feminism, diverse with diverse participants. I think it is great.¹²⁷

Although some writers expressed the fear that voicing political opinion on social issues might be harmful for literature, the majority of my interviewees were of the opinion that a social responsibility is needed from writers. I would like to argue that it is possible to see *Irodalmi Centrifuga* as a feminist public sphere as outlined by Rita Felski. Felski refers to the important relation of feminist politics and feminist literature, which are connected in a complex and subtle way. She claims that a feminist public sphere is “a means of theorizing the complex mediations between literature, feminist ideology, and the broader social domain”.¹²⁸ In *Élőfolyóirat*, literature, feminism and social issues merge, making the blog a unique phenomenon in recent Hungarian feminism.

¹²⁶ Interview with Éva Bánki. April 6, 2011.

¹²⁷ Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

¹²⁸ Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 9

CHAPTER 3. WOMAN WRITER OR NOT? STRATEGIES OF HUNGARIAN WOMEN WRITERS IN THEIR POSITIONS TOWARDS WOMEN'S LITERATURE

This chapter examines how contemporary Hungarian women writers conceptualize the terms “woman writer” and “women’s literature”, focusing especially on how debates of recent years have shaped or changed their thinking. I discuss the different strategies of my interviewees regarding how they identify themselves as women writers and position themselves in the debate on women’s literature. In 3.1, I analyze my interviewees’ self-identities as writers or women writers, using feminist literary theory of Rita Felski and Toril Moi, who have written extensively about the dilemmas of women’s literature such as the “fear of over-feminization” and the denial of being a woman writer. In section 3.2 I examine how my interviewees think of the notion of women’s literature. Section 3.3 explores how building up a tradition of “women’s literature,” in this case largely defined by the anthology movement, may not only contribute to building up a recognized space for women writers, but may also lead to processes of exclusion, in this case of women writers with different political viewpoints or different views on women’s literature.

3.1. Woman writer or not?

As mentioned in Chapter one, Márta Várnagyi differentiates between two kinds of women writers in Hungary: “those who embrace, voice and represent their feminist perspective on literature” and “women writers and poets who, in a feminist spirit, give voice to women heroes who speak of typical women’s problems but who still reject any labeling mostly with the justification or explanation that literature has no sex”.¹²⁹ She also writes about Hungarian women writers’ uncertainty about their identity as woman writer. In this section I am elaborating on this, in my view, rather simplifying categorization. Based on my interviews, I discuss the different attitudes of woman writers concerning literature, women’s literature and their identity as women

¹²⁹ Várnagyi, “A női irodalom és a feminista irodalomkritika Magyarországon,” 28.

writers. I would like to argue that it is impossible to categorize women writers into two simple categories because their strategies and literary identities are much more complex than such a division would suggest. As Rita Felski pointed out, the notion of the “woman writer” is not a given or fixed term, therefore it should be theorized with attention for its complexity.¹³⁰ I will therefore ask what are the possible reasons why some Hungarian women authors do not want to be labeled as “woman writer” or “feminist,” and will explore whether we can see their choices as strategies to position themselves in the literary life; choices which moreover should not be automatically dismissed by feminist literary critics.

Most of my interviewees, except for Krisztina Tóth, did identify themselves as women writers. In most cases this definition was treated as self-evident by them and when I asked them about this term specifically, they said they have nothing against the term “woman writer”. It is important to note here that the notion of the “woman writer” can be expressed in two ways in Hungarian: either as *nőíró* (woman writer) or as *írónő* (writer woman). In my view, this differentiation, having its origin in the middle of the nineteenth century, lost most of its significance in recent years, however, *írónő* tends to be more accepted and “neutral” whereas *nőíró* can either be still perceived as derogatory for women writers or can serve as a reclaimed self-definition of women writers who put a primary emphasis on being a woman in their literary work (Agáta Gordon, for example).¹³¹ My interviewees used both terms (however, *írónő* was more frequently mentioned) and by large they are not interested in contemplating over this difference. According to them, the definition is unimportant as long as the opportunities of women writers are equal. The difference between *írónő* and *nőíró* might add another level to the analysis of women writers in Hungary, however, elaborating on this is beyond the scope of my current research. In my thesis I am using “woman writer” and “women writers” regardless of the possible tensions between *nőíró* and *írónő*.

Asked about how she defines herself, Orsolya Karafiáth replied jokingly that

¹³⁰ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 89-93.

¹³¹ For the thoughts of Pál Gyulai, see for example Borgos and Szilágyi, “Nőírók és írók.”

If someone asks me whether I am fine with having *költőnő* (woman poet) written under my name I always reply: just write what you want. This is not important for me. They could also write zombie, I do not care.¹³²

Similarly, Ágnes Rapai and Agáta Gordon also mentioned that the term is rather unimportant for her. Only Noémi Szécsi and Krisztina Tóth objected heavily to *nőíró*. Szécsi, who does not have objections against *írónő*, answered,

I do not know, sometimes I am defined as an *írónő*. I am not a *nőíró*, that is for sure. I think writing only about women's issues is linked to being a *nőíró*, and this would limit one's possibilities, would lock one in.¹³³

Krisztina Tóth is rather reluctant to identify herself not only as a *nőíró* but as an *írónő* as well. In her words,

I have a strong aversion towards *nőíró*, and I do not like *írónő* either. When I work, I am primarily a writer and by the way, on the margin I am a woman as well.¹³⁴

It is also important to add that Krisztina Tóth mentioned that the question about being a woman writer bothers her because it is often asked and asked on an “elementary level”. She believes that the question of her gender should not be thematized, similarly to the fact that male writers are never asked about their gender. Rita Felski, based on Elaine Showalter's ideas, claims that this denial is caused by a “fear of over-feminization”.¹³⁵ According to Felski, the denial of being a woman writer is related to the fact that “women writers have often suffered from being reduced to their sex”, thus, “it is hardly surprising when they bridle at feminist readings of their work coextensive with their gender”.¹³⁶ The fact that Zsuzsa Forgács, the main editor of the anthologies, refused to give me an interview could also be interpreted as a form of her fear of being reduced to her womanhood. Toril Moi, in her recent essay on women writers, claims that the negation of being a woman writer always comes after a provocation, therefore it should be interpreted as a “defense speech act”. She builds her argument on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, who argued that sexism forces women to eliminate their sex or to be imprisoned in

¹³² Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. May 02, 2011.

¹³³ Interview with Noémi Szécsi. April 20, 2011.

¹³⁴ Interview with Krisztina Tóth. April 17, 2011.

¹³⁵ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 91.

¹³⁶ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 93.

their sex and thus poses a dilemma for women writers either to negate or to emphasize their womanhood.¹³⁷ The dilemma of rejecting being a “woman writer” or acknowledging it still exists, but not in such black and white terms. Women writers have more possibilities to construct their identities, I argue. However, according Agáta Gordon, Hungarian women writers still tend to have a fear of “ghettoisation”. She constantly spoke of women’s and men’s literature as separate terms. Remembering the first reactions of the writers to the anthology-series, she said,

The first objection of the writers when we worked on *Éjszakai állatkert* was that it would be a women’s ghetto and oh no, they did not want it... So when women acknowledge that they participate in an clearly defined women’s anthology, they have a little fear that they will be left out of the boys’ literature and they do not want it. There is a fear that if I affirm that I am a woman writer, I will be closed out of the community of men.¹³⁸

Those interviewees who participated, however, did not voice this fear. The contributors in the anthologies maybe changed their mind after they saw that the anthologies did not bring an exclusion from literature. To the contrary, a lot of them were published and have become more successful after their participation in the anthologies.

Interestingly, Krisztina Tóth’s attitude was often thematized by my other interviewees. Commenting on Tóth, when asked about the contributors of the anthologies, Ágnes Rapai claimed,

It is never the militant feminists who get in. Those who emphasize that they are different do not get in. It is those who say that I am exactly the same as you who eventually get in. This is the thinking that is expected of her. If she emphasized that she is a woman writer and she cannot identify herself with the traditional categorizations then she could not be in the circle and position where she is now. She has to say this in order to be accepted. But I admire her because she did not stay away from the anthologies; she has been participating in them since the first volume.¹³⁹

Rita Felski writes that “one common feminist response” to writers who denied their being a woman writer “was to shrug off such views as evidence of antifeminism or a retrograde

¹³⁷ Moi, “I am not a woman writer,” 264-267.

¹³⁸ Interview with Agáta Gordon. March 25, 2011.

¹³⁹ Interview with Ágnes Rapai. April 21, 2011.

attachment on art for art's sake".¹⁴⁰ I agree that this reaction is too simple and my aim is to show that this rejection should not be automatically analyzed as an antifeminist attitude. In my view, Rapai's opinion is closer to an accepting tone towards Tóth's strategy, acknowledging that women writers do make rather different choices concerning their identities and strategies. Noémi Kiss also acknowledged that women writers choose different strategies in positioning themselves in the literary field. She thinks that the recent Hungarian debates among women writers on how they think of themselves as writers or women writers are a logical part of the emergence of women writers and the process that women's literature is a less marginalized and more mainstream phenomenon than before.

The majority of my interviewees do not deny being a woman writer. For example Anna Menyhért, Viktória Radics, Noémi Kiss claimed that they did not feel the term woman writer to be derogatory anymore, thus they feel free to use it. A number of my interviewees think this change in meaning or connotation of the term "woman writer" is partly the result of the events of the last years, for example the anthologies and the emergence of feminist literary criticism. As for example Orsolya Karafiáth explained,

It does not only changed because of the anthologies. It changed fundamentally. Women are not put into boxes, that they write sentimental stuff and like, okay, you can write it must be some nice romantic love story... This is completely over now. The period after the transition was important, that women should be acknowledged as artist having all rights. Anthologies are also important in this process, and the fact that a lot of women writers emerged and they became more visible. Good texts emerged by good authors and they could not be ignored. Contemplating about the fact that there is a good short story and it was written by a woman is simply not trendy anymore.¹⁴¹

3.2. Women's literature: sociological and aesthetical levels

One of my main findings is that my interviewees often differentiated between the "sociological" and the "aesthetical" level of literature, and claimed that women writers often face a certain marginalization; in their view, the spheres of literature and aesthetics are or should be

¹⁴⁰ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 92.

¹⁴¹ Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. May 02, 2011.

independent of aspects of gender. Many of them claimed that especially because of last years' literary events such as the anthologies, they do not feel that the term woman writer is derogatory anymore. Basically the main question in the recent Hungarian debates around women's literature has been whether promoting women writers and drawing attention to women's literature might, at the same time, contribute to a certain "ghettoisation" of women's literature, especially to the ghettoisation of the writers of the anthologies. As writer and literary critic Noémi Kiss said,

Sélei Nóra also wrote how contradictory is women's literature because no one want to be ghettoized and so join a dominant community. But if you compare Hungarian literature to other neighbor countries or dominant Western countries you can see that our literary life is extremely patriarchal. Similarly to our Parliament, in institutions, boards, editorial groups in award juries you hardly find women.¹⁴²

Thus, it is possible to claim that in this environment, the publication of women's anthologies still might have a political justification in the sense of it draw attention for an existing problem. However, women writers are divided on the question to what extent women are marginalized or not within literature and whether or not the anthologies were needed to tackle this issue. Many of the writers, even those very different in terms of thinking, shared similar experiences of their treatment as women writers in the literary life. For example Noémi Szécsi, who commented lengthily on her first experiences in literary life as a young woman writer, said:

Yes, I had negative experiences with that in the beginnings of my career. Maybe it was because I was young, now it could have changed, but I encountered a lot patting on my back, and heard many times that I am a chick... You know these stereotypes when these old or not so old men start checking young women out whether they are nice or not because when they are nice they cannot be too clever and so on... So I had a lot of these kinds of experiences, and I have to admit I find it disgusting. Now it is different, because I got older [laughs]. It is obvious that every young women writer undergoes the same things. I think men of the same age are not treated in this derogatory manner.¹⁴³

Asked about her identity as a woman writer, Krisztina Tóth also started to speak of the sociological phenomenon of treating women writers separately. In her words,

There is this condemning tone, I have experienced it much. Of course it changes with time, but I can mention one concrete recent example. There was a ceremony

¹⁴² Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

¹⁴³ Interview with Noémi Szécsi. April 20, 2011.

earlier this year, we gave the Petri György award to Lili Kemény. Two older architects came to me after my laudation speech asking whether I could send the text to them because it was ‘so silent’ and they rounded their lips so [rounding lips]. I do not want to experience this peck in the cheek as a 43 year old woman. ... I am not a militant type, I do not want to fight or argue with anyone, I just want to do my work surrounded by the same conditions as my male colleagues have without having to endure cheek pecking, shoulder patting, lip rounding and babbling.¹⁴⁴

Another writer, Éva Bánki explained that one publisher did not want to believe that her novel was written by her and asked her which male writer had written it. Ágnes Rapai often sent her poems under a male pseudonym as she thinks that women are differently judged. She said,

I sent my first poem to a journal under a men’s name. Even as a 15-year-old girl, I knew that the work of a girl is judged differently than a boy’s.¹⁴⁵

Another interviewee, Agáta Gordon, thinks that she, as an openly lesbian writer, has never been part of the canon or the literary community; she said this marginalized position did not change when she was “opening” to women’s literature and started to edit the first anthology and organize *Irodalmi Centrifuga*.

However, there were different opinions as well concerning the position of women writers in the literary life, suggesting again that the category of the “woman writer” must be treated with care. Depending on a number of factors, not all women writers experience the same marginalization or treatment and their reactions towards how they are treated vary. Dóra Esze and Éva Fejős, for example, did not mention any sexist treatment at all. According to Anna Jókai, the fact that she was a woman did not prevent her from anything. Orsolya Karafiáth remembered the beginnings of her career as a writer, when there were not as many women writers as nowadays. However, she found this situation “comfortable”:

In 1995 or 1996 when I was a beginner, I was almost alone as a woman. I remember when they needed a woman, I was the woman poet, or Krisztina Tóth or there was also Virág Erdős as novelist. I was often asked how did it feel like being in a men’s world. I did not have an opinion because I only felt the positive side of it.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Interview with Krisztina Tóth. 17 April 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Interview with Ágnes Rapai. 21 April 2011.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. May 02, 2011.

Zsófia Balla thinks that the issue of women's writing is primarily a social issue and is about the marginalization of women as a group. However, this does not affect the aesthetics of literature. She pointed out several times that she is against the marginalization of women in all spheres of life but especially politics, and claimed that after women are equal and able to write they should forget about their being women:

Of course I am happy that there are more and more women who write. They write because emancipation in Europe and also in other places is advanced. They have more time. Because art is time-consuming. ... I think the social status defines whether women are able to write or not. But after they are in the game, they have to be artists and not women. Or not only women.¹⁴⁷

According to Andrea Pető, in the 1990s there were two types of discourse present in Hungary concerning the figure of the woman writer. The first viewed the writers' sex as unimportant in connection to their social role, and claimed that there is only "good literature" and "bad literature" (a view represented by for example Magda Szabó), whereas the second attached importance to the gender of the writer in literary production (represented by for example Zsófia Balla).¹⁴⁸ In my view the second discourse is more in the forefront nowadays, however, in a more complex form because a division between sociological and aesthetical arguments is made. From my interviews it seems that women writers tend to point out a sense of difference in literary production by men and women, in the sense that women still face a certain sexist treatment or are marginalized within literary institutions such as journals or decision-making bodies. However, they do not argue that the gender of a woman is not important when she writes, and they do not speak of "women's literature" as a separate category. This view is represented by Krisztina Tóth, Noémi Szécsi, Zsófia Balla, and Viktória Radics. There seems to be a pattern in which these writers acknowledge a form of social marginalization, however, they want to keep it away from the realm of literature, either because they do not want to be identified only with their femininity or they ideally see literature and aesthetics as being free from such categories as gender. Zsófia Balla thinks that women's literature should not mean a separate

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Zsófia Balla. May 10, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Pető, "Hungarian Women's Writing, 1949-1995," 251.

aesthetic category. She thinks that the quality of the writing is of the utmost importance and it is defined by aesthetics irrespective of gender. When asked about her opinion on the idea that the requirements of what can be called “literature of high quality” has traditionally been defined by men she said,

Thinking that we have to discard everything which is invented by men is a huge mistake of feminism. It is an enormous flaw. These requirements were not against women... When it was claimed why a piece of writing was good it was not written from a men’s perspective. To build up a sentence stylistically, to construct a plot, to depict things so that they are able to create an atmosphere, to trigger catharsis, these are not characteristics of the men’s world, they are characteristics of art. ... Who tells what it is good and remarkable literature? In my view, the big writers tell it since two thousand years. Aesthetics is a distillation of that. Why is it better when women define the categories of aesthetics?¹⁴⁹

Viktória Radics also emphasized that

From the point of view of the work of art it is no use in differentiating women and men’s literature. As a critique I do not discriminate positively a woman writer. If I write about a book, I do not care if it is written by a man or woman. As critique I do not feel solidarity with anyone.¹⁵⁰

On the other hand, my other interviewees underlined the problematic of these requirements of literature traditionally defined in a social system of gendered power relations. Anna Menyhért, for example, said that “there is no such a thing as good literature” in itself. There are different interpretative circles who decide what is good and what is not. When I asked her about the phenomenon that other writers do not want to treat women’s literature separately, she said that we should accept that “woman” is not an inferior attribute. She claimed,

Everybody is still locked in this thinking that when someone says it is woman then it is discriminatory or excluding. It will stay the same as long as woman means the opposite of men. Because as long as we think that there is literature and next to literature somewhere hidden is women’s literature, women will not acknowledge that they are women writers.¹⁵¹

Zsófia Bán also said that those who think that aesthetics is free of social aspects such as gender, simply do not notice these aspects as they are hidden. She pointed out that gender should be

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Zsófia Balla. May 10, 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Viktória Radics. May 29, 2011.

¹⁵¹ Interview with Anna Menyhért. May 27, 2011.

treated simply as an aspect which influences the literary analysis, similar to when we for example speak of English or German literature.

3.3. Exclusions and canon formation

Third-wave feminism challenged the notion of “sisterhood” or women’s solidarity, claiming that women are divided along the lines of other categories such as “race,” class and others. Intersectionality, “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations”, as Leslie McCall put it, has proved to be a crucial concept to address and grasp these differences.¹⁵² When looking at “women’s literature”, it is important to see that this term takes gender as the one and only analytical category in its definition and thus, tends to be an essentializing category. Applying intersectionality, that is, in my case, looking at other categories such as political views, literary strategies or ideas of women writers, can help us to see the differences among women writers and thus elaborate the notions of women’s literature and the “woman writer”. As Mary Eagleton and Susan Stanford Friedman claim, “[a] woman’s identity and writing can never be understood within the single framework of sex/gender”.¹⁵³

During my interviews it became clear that the authors of the anthology do not form a unified group at all. However, as for example Viktória Radics underlined,

There is a certain solidarity among women writers. Although it is a very loose group, there is a sense of solidarity. But there is no common platform.¹⁵⁴

She emphasized constantly during our interviews, that there were differences in opinions or the chosen strategy. Orsolya Karafiáth also said,

No one has ever said the women writers form a unitary front. ... You also see, it is not a mass, I do not take community with no one, not with the writers, not with the football players, no one. We are sovereign personalities, the only link is that we are women. But we could be transvestites or Roma as well.¹⁵⁵

Challenging the solidarity of women writers, Agáta Gordon also claimed,

¹⁵²Leslie McCall, “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” *Signs* (3) 2005: 1771.

¹⁵³ Mary Eagleton and Susan Stanford Friedman, “Editorial Statement,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 1(2007) doi:10.1093/cww/vpm021.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Viktória Radics. May 29, 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Orsolya Karafiáth. May 02, 2011.

A lot of women's initiatives fail because of two things: first because men silently ignore it, and second because of women's self-censorship. When a women's movement is beginning, there comes the question, who is going to lead it. And imagine, whoever comes to my mind who could nowadays work consistently in literature or in politics, I find immediately a whole bunch of other women who would say of this woman that 'okay but we do not love her'... Women can stab their fellow women in their back... Women's community is a difficult one.¹⁵⁶

It is important to see that the Hungarian women writers, like the rest of Hungarian society, are divided along political lines, along how they think of women's literature, along ideas about literature and how literature should reflect politics or not.

As Zsuzsa Forgács claimed, the selection process of the anthologies was primarily influenced by the aim to show quality literature written by women. However, logically, other aspects also played a role. Even though the four anthologies include altogether over 50 very different authors and the last two anthologies has also non-writer contributors as well (plus some male writers whose name are till this point kept in secret), such as singers and actresses, a number of well-known women writers were not included, such as Magda Szabó, the most well-known Hungarian woman writer of the second half of the twentieth century, novelists Zsuzsa Rakovszky, Anna Jókai, Zsófia Balla, or young or the young and successful writer Edina Szvoren. Popular literature, chick-lit is also missing, for example Zsuzsa Rácz, who is the author of the extremely popular *Allítsátok meg Terézanyut!* ("Stop Mummy Theresa!"), the "Hungarian Bridget Jones-novel" and now president of Hungarian PEN Club, as the editors were clear in their ideas that the anthologies contain "quality literature".

Some of my interviewees criticized the selection process for the anthologies, led by the editors and after the first volume by Zsuzsa Forgács as the only editor for sometimes including those who were personally closer to the editor, but excluding those who should be there because of their literary merits. As Ágnes Rapai claimed, there were some conflicts during the selection process, and two of my interviewees. As Agáta Gordon, editor of the first volume said,

¹⁵⁶ Interview with Agáta Gordon. March 25, 2011.

We called other women as well. It is not closing someone out, it is rather not approaching them. Literature is rather diverse...¹⁵⁷

She added that someone, for example, may have been left out because she has published a lot or is successful already. She also claimed that sometimes she tried to find a good text by some well-known writers, but in the end, she did not find them suitable for her taste.

It seems likely that during the selection process political differences and differences in thinking about literature played a decisive role. During my interviews, only one writer spoke clearly of a political division among women writers. Éva Bánki, contributor to the first volume only, said that the right-wing women writers considered the anthologies as “a performance of leftist women writers”. She thinks there is absolutely no communication among leftist and rightist women writers, or even more, she said,

I think in Hungary there are two very disgusting kinds of women writer’s roles according to the political dividedness: the leftist and the rightist. In the left they laugh at the right-wing women writers and their hypocrisy and in the right they laugh at the leftist writers. For me it is like that these roles were motivated by political expectations, as if women writers were presenting certain patterns of political behavior as bio-scenery in the background of political dividedness.¹⁵⁸

Although her rather straightforward opinion on the political dividedness of women writers is unique among my interviewees, similar opinions were also voiced by Agáta Gordon. I find it important, as it implies that the term woman writer should be treated with more attention for other categories such as political identification as well.

As feminist literary theoretician Ruth Robbins notes, building up a tradition logically means exclusion as well.¹⁵⁹ The process how the anthologies logically lead to a certain form of canonization of women’s literature and thus the exclusion of some writers was clear when speaking to those who were not participants because the main editor Zsuzsa Forgács did not select them or did not contribute because they themselves did not want to be included. Zsófia Balla, thinking otherwise on women’s literature than the editors and publishing an essay also

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Agáta Gordon. March 25, 2011.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Éva Bánki. April 6, 2011.

¹⁵⁹ Robbins, *Literary feminisms*, 98-100.

about her ideas as early as 1997, was rather happy because she did not have to say no as none of the editors have ever asked her.¹⁶⁰ However, commenting on the fact that she is never invited to women's literary events, she added, "In this country I have only been discriminated by women". Anna Jókai and Éva Fejős were not approached as well, however, they are not angry about this fact.

The anthologies can form a canon also because they have an effect on how women writers approach literature. As Noémi Kiss said,

Now it is not enough that someone is a woman. She should bring some novelty. ... I can see that the dominant voice of the anthologies, although the authors are diverse, the taste of Agáta Gordon or Zsuzsa Forgács is very defining, they do effect younger generations, there are those who copy this voice. These women figures in the anthologies are not classical passive figures, they are radical and I acknowledge it but an author should always come up with something new in order to stay interesting. But this history of effects is a really important thing, it belongs to the dynamics of the process, women's literature is not a marginalized literary discourse any more.¹⁶¹

Thus, a certain view on women's literature defined mainly by the editor Zsuzsa Forgács can shape how "women's literature" is defined. I do not want to say that it is a unique phenomenon. In addition to Ruth Robbins, Pam Morris has also noted that every tradition forming means exclusions as well.¹⁶² However, I find it important to recognize this process and to argue that women's literature should be seen in its variety, containing different voices and completely different ideas on how women's literature is to be conceptualized. As Rita Felski claims, feminist literary criticism should go beyond creating a distinct feminist aesthetics and should not prescribe certain static requirements for feminist texts.¹⁶³ In my view, when we theorize not only feminist but women's literature and women writers we should also be aware of how certain processes, theories or ideas could lead to exclusion of some writers.¹⁶⁴ As Felski has put it, "as feminist

¹⁶⁰ Zsófia Balla, "Nőirodalom, mi az?" *Lettre* 24 (1997), accessed June 03, 2011. <http://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00012/00008/14balla.htm>.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Noémi Kiss. April 29, 2011.

¹⁶² Morris, *Literature and Feminism*. 86.

¹⁶³ Felski, *Beyond feminist aesthetics*.

¹⁶⁴ Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine."

critics are coming to recognize, to prescribe what it means to be a female author is to do a disservice to the rich and unending variety of real female authors”.¹⁶⁵

Despite the differences and tensions outlined above, I would like to argue that the anthology movement is an important feminist endeavor which belongs to the history of contemporary Hungarian feminism.

¹⁶⁵ Felski, *Literature after Feminism*, 93.

CONCLUSION

My thesis has explored women's literature in Hungary in the past decade, as well as the connections of women's literature to feminism. I focused on two literary events which have the same origins: the *Kitakart Psyché* anthology series and the literary discussion series, now online blog, *Irodalmi Centrifuga*.

My argument consists of three main parts. Chapter two elaborates on the first part of my argument, which is that the examined literary endeavors can be considered feminist projects. Chapter three has examined how Hungarian women writers conceptualize the much debated notion of the "woman writer." It develops the second part of my argument, which is that an intersectional analysis, in this case, moving beyond the category of gender by taking the writers' different political identifications and their diverse opinions about women's literature into consideration, is needed in order to show the actual complexity of the notions of "women's literature" and the "woman writer". Problematizing these notions shed light on the possible exclusions from the anthologies and thus possibly from a forming canon of women's literature in Hungary. The third part of my argument is that the debates, discussions, and conflicts among women writers, which have been clearly present in Hungary in recent years, and are illustrated by the striking diversity of opinions voiced by my interviewees, are logical consequences of the complex and multiple notion of "women's literature".

The main body of my thesis is based on the interviews I conducted with fourteen women writers, the results of which I analyzed with insights of feminist literary criticism. I was curious to see how my interviewees evaluate the recent "boom" and attention for women's literature. Their opinions, of course, varied. Many of my interviewees claimed that "women's literature" has entered the public debate because of the anthologies and the other literary events and that now the term is free of its earlier derogatory meaning. This is a paradigm change, argued Noémi Kiss. However, others underlined that these movements did not result in institutional changes in the

literary field, because there are not more women in editorial committees of literary journals or in the different decision-making bodies than there were before.

My interviewees were also divided about how these literary events are connected to broader societal processes, and whether they can initiate a change in the attitudes towards feminism and gender equality. Ágnes Rapai and Zsófia Bán pointed out that the anthologies will affect society in the longer run and therefore are crucially important. *Irodalmi Centrifuga* is also based on this conviction. However, other writers argued that literature nowadays cannot reach people as it used to do, and therefore does not have an influence on societal processes. Éva Bánki criticized the anthologies for being only “subcultural” and unable to address problems of less privileged and non-urban women. Zsófia Balla emphasized that because there are still considerable problems with women’s equality in Hungary, for women it is more important to search for solutions through political representation. According to her, literature can be a field of this struggle, but it is not the most important domain where real changes can be achieved. There are those who hope that the current attention for women’s literature is only a temporary phenomenon and that as soon as women are equal in the literary field, there will be no further need to theorize and to speak of it separately. However, I think that this view implies that literary theory (and also public discourse) is entitled to theorize and discuss only those issues which are problematic or not acknowledged. I would like to argue instead that it is important to have a discourse on women’s literature because literature is a primarily field of representation and a construction of our world in which gender relations are decisive.

A number of my interviewees also spoke about the “belatedness” of these literary events, by which they implied that “Western” countries had these debates a long time ago and that Hungary is far behind in this respect. However, although the recent events are close to the traditions of gynocriticism which started in the 1970s, the figure of the women author is still alive and debated in feminist literary criticism, as theorized by for example Rita Felski, Ruth Robbins, Mary Eagleton and Toril Moi. Thus, the recent Hungarian debates actually do fit in the broader

framework of recent “Anglo-American” feminist literary theory and belie any notion of “backwardness” (which is a problematic and normative term to begin with). From my interviews it became clear how differently my interviewees evaluate the recent events, which also underlines that women writers are not a monolithic group, but are divided along political lines, along their views on literature as well as other issues.

The complexity of how my interviewees think of the outcome of the above detailed literary events is also present in their views on the current events’ connections to feminism and in their strategies in acknowledging themselves as women writers or feminists as not. Women writers do base their strategies of positioning themselves in the discussion on women’s literature on various factors. My interviewees illustrate that a denial of being a woman writer sometimes is a conscious strategy, defined by the perceived negative image of feminism, or a fear of “over-feminization”.

I am aware that there are number of important issues present in my interviews which I could not elaborate in my present analysis. Further research on the past literary events should combine a feminist textual analysis of the anthologies with the sociological perspective I attempted to base my research on. Because, as feminist literary criticism has argued consistently, it is impossible to divide literature from the social world in which it is embedded and which it constructs.

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APPENDIX 1. LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Balla, Zsófia (b. 1949), poet and editor. Volumes of poetry: *A dolgok emlékezete* (1968), *Egy pohár fű* (1993), *A nyár barlangja* (2010). Interview conducted: May 6, 2011.

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Bánki, Éva (b. 1966), writer, literary historian, Professor of Hungarian and Portuguese Literature at Eötvös Loránd University and Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church, Budapest. Important novels: *Esőváros* (2004), *Aranyhímzés* (2005), *Magyar Dekameron* (2007). Interview conducted: April 6, 2011.

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