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Is There a Space for Teaching Gender Studies in Hungarian Higher Education?

A few days ago when I read about the news of Betty Friedan's death I was reminded of a classroom experience that indicates the peculiar situation of teaching gender studies in Hungarian higher education.

We all are aware of the significance of Betty Friedan's epoch-making book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).¹ So in a course on feminism and literature in a class on the second wave of feminism in the 1960s the students were assigned to read Betty Friedan's text. The Hungarian students of English and/or American Studies were unable to grasp the essence of the first chapter of the book "The Problem that has no Name". I was baffled to realize that quite simply they could not understand it, and not because of their language skills. The students, mainly young women in their early twenties, were unable to understand the problem itself, the problem that has no name. In the early 1990s they were unable to understand what was wrong with these spoiled, middle-class suburban American housewives. They had all and everything, what the newly developed consumerism in the post-communist countries offered to women in Eastern Europe. The students were unable to understand why it was a problem that American women did not 'have to' work, and that they did not have to exploit themselves in the two shifts of having a job and housekeeping, as they could see it in case of their exhausted, frustrated mothers. It was difficult to understand why Betty Friedan calls the highly desirable American way of life a "comfortable concentration camp", they can only dream of as an idyllic lifestyle suggested by the commercials that were bombarding them from the mass media. In their branded jeans these Cinderellas would rather wait for a rich yuppie prince-charming in his dashing white Jaguar.

For me this classroom experience was an epiphany: suddenly it illuminated the most characteristic difficulties to be faced when feminism(s) and/or gender studies is taught in Hungarian higher education: the inevitable necessity of analyzing the historical, cultural

¹ Friedan, Betty *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell, 1963.
(Not yet available in

embeddedness of gender, the ambiguous status of the uncritical, imitative appropriation of Western feminist theories and literary criticism which ignores the local and regional perspective and socialization as well as the dubious validity of a universal female experience, of the generalizing definition of the female/the feminine, the improbability of the existence of a homogenous female subject.

Furthermore, whatever happened in this class, I think, very effectively represented the problem of the West-East unidirectional flow of feminisms and gender theory, and all the difficulties that the formation and the legitimation of a feminist perspective induces in a Hungarian context. The discussion and understanding of those specific difficulties was the objective of the paper written by Susan Arpad and Sarolta Marinovich „Why Hasn't There Been a Strong Women's Movement in Hungary”,² and ten years later the same were analyzed by Erzsébet Barát in her essay published in the volume *Women/Gender Studies: Against All Odds*.³

It has to be acknowledged that also Western feminists detect the difficulties of the West-East unidirectional flow of academic feminist thinking. Rosi Braidotti,⁴ for example, raises the problem in terms of translatability of the key terms of the works of Western feminism. And at this point our concern about this work is the uni-directionality of the flow of academic thinking it outlines. The issue of translating post-socialist works into, shall we say, English, let alone English academics speaking the 'minority' language in order to read the given culture of their interest in the 'original' is not considered at all, not even as a telling, productive gap in the existing practices.

Thirdly, the above-mentioned classroom experience made me think about the complicated and controversial interrelationship of theory and experience, about the question which seems to be one of the fundamental issues of scholarly quality in the teaching of gender studies. The 'theory versus experience' issue in our context becomes the issue of Western-European theory and Eastern-European experience on the one hand, and on the other this is an issue of the theoretically textualized feminisms versus the political activism of feminist civil organizations.

² Arpad, Susan S. and Sarolta Marinovich, "Why Hasn't There Been a Strong Women's Movement in Hungary?" In *Journal of Popular Culture*, 29(1995):2. pp. 77-97

³ Barát, Erzsébet "Variations to Co-optations: The Uses and Abuses of Feminism". In Eva Blimlinger and Therese Garstenauer (Hrsg.) *Women/Gender Studies: Against All Odds*. Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2005. pp. 21-31.

⁴ Braidotti, Rosi „The Uses and Abuses of the Sex/Gender Distinction in European Feminist Practices”. In Gabriele Griffin et al. (eds.) *Thinking Differently: A Reader in European Women's Studies*. London: Zed Books, 2002. pp. 285-307.

It is known, that the majority of the students, who register to the courses on feminisms and gender studies find it important to emphasize, „I am not a feminist, but I am interested in the feminist critical approach to literature, film, the media, art, etc.” This attitude can be more or less understood, since previously these students have met only with a stigmatizing and marginalizing representation of feminisms and gender studies, for example, in the media.⁵ It can be understood if they feel they cannot afford a commitment to feminism considering their future career in a rather hostile academic environment. They feel it easier and somehow safer to study, theorize and discuss in an abstract way the very same issues as are dealt with by the feminist civil organizations in their consciousness-raising projects, let it be according to either the theory of equal opportunity or sexual difference theory.⁶ Thus during organizing and teaching these early, experimental courses on gender studies we had to realize that in higher education the articulation and representation of women’s experience as well as the raising of gender-consciousness were mainly possible on the level of textuality (both verbal and visual) and theorization.

The above mentioned course, where we were reading Betty Friedan, was in 1989/90, at that time it was advertised as a new, experimental course. At that time there were similar initiatives, mostly by university departments of English and sociology. In starting to organize and teach gender studies courses the privileged status of these departments played a role to a certain extent. Connected to this is the experience we have had, here at the University of Szeged, due to the effect of the work by our visiting professors (Fulbright scholarship, TEMPUS projects), mostly coming from English and American universities, as well as the knowledge and insights in gender studies gained at Western European and American universities by our academic staff and students due to the increasing staff and student mobility in the 1990s.

In the frame of international cooperation financed by a TEMPUS Joint European Project in 1993 we organized a conference on teaching gender studies at the University of Szeged entitled *A Classroom of One’s Own*. The objective of this conference was to share the experience of teaching women studies, gender studies courses in our partner institutions, where these teaching and research programs had already been established . Although the

⁵ Barát Erzsébet, „Gyűlölködni szabad (?) A magyar sajtó a feminizmusról és a feministákról”. In *Médiakutató*, 2004. Tavasz, pp. 41-58.

⁶ Shrage, Laurie, „Equal opportunity”. In Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds) *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford:Blackwell, 1998.pp.559-568.
Braidotti, Rosi, „Sexual difference theory”. In Alison M. Jaggar and Iris Marion Young (eds) *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*. pp 298-306.

West-East flow of academic knowledge, theory and method was mainly unidirectional there was also the objective of generating a dialogue between Western and Eastern scholars, and as a conclusion of the conference it has been reinforced, that gender studies as a field of teaching and research we initiated and experimented with, may have a long-term legitimation and in some form it might become institutionalized in the future.

From 1989 to 1994, in the first phase of teaching gender studies within the English Studies and American Studies programmes in the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Szeged we organized courses on the topics of women writers, women's writing, women and literature, feminism and literature, feminist literary criticism.

These courses may be classified in three groups:

'the resisting reader' courses, aiming at the reception of a text when it is assumed that reading is against the grain of the mainstream logics of the text,

'gynocriticism' courses,

'rewriting the canon' courses.

The objective of 'the resisting reader' courses was the re-reading and the re-interpretation of canonized literary works by a feminist critical approach following Judith Fetterley's,⁷ then Catherine Belsey's⁸ theoretical and methodological considerations.

The courses in the second group may be identified as 'gynocriticism' courses on the basis of the work of Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar⁹. The objective of these courses was to read and discover the work of forgotten and unknown women writers, as well as to re-read the marginalized genres of non-canonical women's writing, and as a result of this wondering at the quality of forgotten, but in their days widely read texts, as well as re-discovering that women were able to write even sonnets and dramas.

Based on the gynocriticism courses it was possible to introduce the third group of courses the objective of which was re-writing the canon. In order to understand the achievements of a given period in English or American literary history the contributions of feminist research were significant not only by restoring women's writing to the literary canon, but also by studying the texts of popular literature in addition to the texts of high literature.

⁷ Fetterley, Judith, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

⁸ Belsey, Catherine, *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980.

⁹ Moers, Ellen, *Literary Women*. New York: Women's Press, 1986.

Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from the Brontes to Lessing*. New York and London: Virago, 1986.

Gilbert, Sandra S. and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

From about the second half of the 1990s, in the second phase, which was partly parallel with the first one, feminist literary theory and criticism were introduced in the schedule of literary theory courses, and in the field of linguistics courses on gender and appropriating a feminist perspective were introduced. Following the dominance of orthodox marxist literary theory up to the 1980s it was very exciting to get acquainted with the various critical approaches of poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, and in a way this type of critical practice became a vogue in the academia. On the other hand in the field of linguistics simultaneous attention was paid to the description of the 'female language repertoire' as a consequence of the use of language embedded in social practices and processes, as well as the understanding of the English and American linguistic research of the 1970s, recognizing the limitations of their research methods, which simplified and devalued women's use of language. This double objective was motivated both by the dominance of the Western, third wave feminist research in linguistics focusing on the re-definition of sexuality and gender and marked by the work of Deborah Cameron, Penelope Eckert, Sally McConnell-Ginet¹⁰, as well as the initiatives and progress of feminist literary and cultural studies courses in English and American Studies programmes in our Institute. While in case of the literary and cultural studies courses the second and third wave of feminist theory and critical practice appeared in chronologically subsequent phases, in the gender studies courses in linguistics they appeared simultaneously, within one phase.

The presence and knowledge of the poststructuralist and postmodernist theories in Hungarian academia brought about two major developments. On the one hand the presence and knowledge of feminist literary and critical theories became unavoidable in teaching the courses on literary theory. As Patricia Waugh points out, „feminism can be seen to be an intrinsically postmodern discourse.”¹¹ (It is worth mentioning, in brackets, that a Hungarian handbook of literary theory edited by Bókay Antal, published in 1997 ignores feminist literary theory, in an anthology of postmodern literary theory, however, published in 2002, edited by the same scholar, there is a chapter on feminit literary theory.¹²)

On the other hand, due to the interdisciplinary quality of the concept of 'discourse' having a central position in postmodernist theories the previously hierarchical differentiation

¹⁰ Cameron, Deborah, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. London: Routledge, 1988/1992 Revised 2nd edition, Eckert, Penelope and McConnell-Ginet, Sally "Think practically and look locally: language and gender as community-based practice". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21(1992): pp. 461-490.

¹¹ Waugh, Patricia, "Modernism, Postmodernism, Feminism: Gender and Autonomy Theory". In Patricia Waugh (ed) *Practising Postmodernism/Reading Modernism*. London: Edward Arnold, 1992. p. 189.

¹² Bókay Antal, *Irodalomtudomány a modern és a posztmodern korban*. Budapest: Osiris, 1997.

Bókay Antal et al. (szerk) *A posztmodern irodalomtudomány kialakulása*. Budapest: Osiris, 2002.

between 'theoretical' and 'applied' linguistics as well as the demarcation lines between the analysis of fictional texts and the description of the texts of the everyday use of language have been necessarily interrogated and so they have lost their earlier obvious status.¹³

The third phase of teaching gender studies in Szeged, running partly parallel with the first two phases, was the transformation of the traditional 'English language and literature' major. The philological 'lang&lit' programme was opened up in the direction of cultural studies both in English and American Studies programmes, although it has to be acknowledged at first mainly in the American Studies programme. The traditional linguistics and literary studies courses were complemented by courses on feminist cultural studies courses on film, popular culture, the representation of the female/the feminine in the media of consumer society.

The fourth phase was built on the achievements of the first three phases. Consequently from 1998 the above described courses have been structured into a unified module and as the first step in the institutionalization of gender studies the specialization stream *Gender in Language and Literature* has been established within the course load of the English Studies/American Studies programmes. This specialization stream is officially recorded in the graduation documents of those students who participated in and accomplished the requirements of the specialization stream. (As to our knowledge the University of Szeged is the first in Hungary allowing this documentation of the specialization in gender studies.)

The students who wish to register to not only one or two gender studies courses, but want to acquire the whole gender studies module, may do it from the sixth semester and are required to complete ten gender studies courses in their optional English course load as well as to write their MA thesis on a gender studies topic.

Concerning the institutionalization of teaching gender studies in higher education the organization of conferences may contribute to the visibility of the research going on in gender studies in our Institute at the university, in the local community, on national and international level. These events may initiate an exchange of ideas, a joint way of thinking, a strategic distribution of force, which could induce the national coordination of MA programmes in gender studies in the new system of higher education in accordance with the Bologna Treaty.

¹³ Concerning the issue of the self-definition of linguistics see the debate of Norman Fairclough and Henry Widdowson in 1996 in the periodical *Language and Literature*, and also Deborah Cameron's critique of 'the female versus male culture' model in Bergvall, Bing, Freed (eds.) *Rethinking Language and Gender Research: Theory and Practice*. London: Longman, 1996. pp. 31-53.

In order to enhance the interdisciplinary approach to the use of language as a pioneering effort in feminist linguistic research the first of a series of conferences was organized in Szeged in September 2005 focussing on the issues of language and power, language and ideology. The first conference entitled *The place of woman in the Hungarian use of language* aimed at revealing and analyzing the gendered division in the use of language. The objective of the next conference to be organized in 2006 is the study of gendered language stereotypes.

As to the teaching merit of the conferences there is a very promising presence and participation of our ex-students in the gender stream, for whom these conferences offer a way to have an insight and enter the national and international professional public sphere.

Similar observations could be made in case of another conference on gender studies organized in Szeged in the summer of 2004. In addition to the professional advantages gained by joining an international research project supported by the British Academy and entitled *European Intertexts: A Study of Women's Writing as Part of a European Fabric* the Szeged conference on women and travel, women's travel writing as one of the yearly conferences of the project provided the encouraging experience both for staff and students that there is an international community of gender studies scholars and that cooperation in the teaching and research of gender studies is possible.

Finally we would like to dwell only on one idea: is there an answer to the question we put in the title of this paper? Is there a possible space for the teaching of gender studies in Hungarian higher education? In our opinion, according (also) to the Szeged experience we may risk the following answer: by hard work, thorough attention to details, by patience and empathy, that is by 'true feminine' characteristic qualities, it may be rather said, 'virtues', it seems, it is possible to gain space for the teaching and research of gender studies in the, nowadays not too generously financed, Hungarian higher education.