

Edit Zsadányi

Gendered Narrative Subjectivity

Some Hungarian and
American Women Writers



Introduction

This book is about contradictions, or rather the positive possibilities arising from contradictions, and its purpose is to show how contradictions between postmodern and feminist conceptions of the subject – that have been debated since the 1980's – do not manifest themselves in the works of women writers as mutually exclusive ideologies. On the contrary, contradictions between the united feminist and the disunited postmodernist concepts of subjectivity are an important, exciting and constructive part of narrative feminine identities.

The book contains comparative and intercultural interpretations of Hungarian and American literary texts by female writers and adopts an intercultural perspective to examine the issue of representing feminine identities in decentered narrative constructions. The main thesis of my book is that in literary narrative it is possible to represent female political interest (that presupposes a strong and united concept of subjectivity) in a decentered narrative subjectivity. In other words, the theoretical contradiction between maintaining centered and decentered concepts of subjectivity at the same time functions as a constructive element (and not a logical contradiction) in certain narratives written by women writers. Based on this theoretical contradiction, I will illustrate that literary narratives readily accept the contradictory nature of identity issues and create an exciting and complex network of articulating female voices.

Apart from the theoretical and narratological argumentation, the book also responds to the growing interest in Hungarian writers in the English-speaking world. Works of major Hungarian novelists, such as Péter Esterházy, László Krasznahorkai, Péter Nádas, György Dragomán and the Nobel-laurate Imre Kertész have gained significant international attention. The other purposes of this book are to extend this list and to make some works by twentieth century and contemporary Hungarian women writers accessible to a wider, English-speaking public. I also engage in intercultural mediation as I interpret these novels in the Hungarian cultural context from the perspective of international literary theoretical trends. Finally, from a feminist-narratological point of view, I intend to illustrate in the following chapters that gender based narrative subjectivity cannot be limited to the figures of the narrator and the character, or to their speech and thoughts. Instead, it is formed in the textual and rhetorical matrix of the text and forms of cooperative readership. I suggest in my readings that when examining constructs of their (feminine) subjectivity, we should take into account not only the narrative appearance of united subjects such as the voice,

represented thoughts and the personality of a female character or narrator, but also other signs of a decentered subjectivity emerging elsewhere in the text. I distinguished several narrative-rhetorical figures that are characteristic and often occurring ones, such as enumeration, omission, chiasmus, detailed description, and projecting feelings onto objects. Also, conflict between story and discourse or between cultural and fictional narratives are able to bring together centered and decentered notions of the female subject.

The first part of the book (Chapters 1, 2, and 3) provides a concise overview of the theoretical and literary historical developments by using modernist and contemporary literary works and excerpts as illustrations of the key arguments. Doing so it wishes to represent a component of Hungarian literature from a feminist point of view. The second part (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) offers more detailed analyses of entire texts. It primarily pursues comparative studies, thus puts Hungarian modernist and postmodernist works by female writers into an intercultural context.

Chapter 1 gives a brief survey of the key issues and concepts of gendered narrative subjectivity as it is raised in feminist criticism and postmodern theories. It addresses the conflicting relationship between representing gender difference from a united position of the subject and the disunited postmodernist concept of the subject as they appear in narrative texts. This chapter wishes to weave together three relating concepts: gender difference in articulating female voices and interest; issues of decentered subjectivity and finally, feminist aspects of narrativity.

Chapter 2 and 3 outline narrative rhetorical figures in several works by Hungarian modernist and postmodernist female writers. Instead of the speech or thoughts of the character, I identify several narrative figures that express united and disunited notions of gendered subjectivities at the same time. I bring examples by female authors to widen the scope of Hungarian literature represented abroad.

Chapter 2 investigates narrative rhetorical tropes in the works of some Hungarian modernist writers that express peculiarities of femininity. Referring to feminist scholars Griselda Pollock and Rita Felski, I examine instances and possible interpretations of female subjectivity such as the rhetoric of enumeration, overlapping cultural and fictional narratives and the projection of feminine subjectivity onto objects in the works of Hungarian modernists such as Margit Kaffka, Emma Ritoók, Jolán Földes, Cecile Tormay and Anna Lesznai.

In Chapter 3 I analyze contemporary Hungarian literature in order to see how feminine prose is able to project a solid yet fragmented subjectivity as well as both affirm and reject the possibility of a particular feminine language. Examining the ruptures and omissions in the language of prose, I search for the remains or traces of the erasure of alternative feminine perspectives that do not fit into oppositional

conceptions. What remains allows the reader to face this lack and create a discursive space that is able to voice lost female voices. I focus on the manifestations of femininity and subordination in the prose of Virág Erdős, Zsuzsa Forgács, Viktória Köves, Alaine Polcz, Zsuzsa Rakovszky, Margit Halász and Noémi Szécsi.

In Chapter 4 I discuss *Three Lives* by Gertrude Stein and *Don Quixote* by Kathy Acker to examine how rejecting a self-realizing humanist subject may still create a space for silenced and marginalized female voices and how the representation of women's interests may be coupled with a decentered subjectivity. For instance, *Three Lives* questions the narrative tradition of progress governed by the subject while the characters of *Don Quixote* are contradictory mounds of text that create a differently conceived narrative process through constant contradictions.

In Chapter Five I read a contemporary Hungarian author from an American modernist writer's perspective. I examine the correlations of women's writing and feminine identity in one of the most typical works of modernity, *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein and in *Goat Rouge* [Kecskerúzs] by the Hungarian author, Agáta Gordon. Following postmodern feminist theories, I examine the process where the free interplay of signifiers allows the texts to voice a particular type of femininity marginalized by Western culture. This voicing in Stein's case is also meant in the literal sense of the word as vocal elements are amplified in the textual space. Similarly to *Tender Buttons*, Agáta Gordon's *Goat Rouge* [Kecskerúzs] is one of the literary works that highlight the rhetorics of the text and then tie this emphasis to a particular marginalized manifestation where the rhetorical relations of the text constantly prevent the reader from drawing a self-identical and coherent self-image.

Finally in Chapter 6, reversing the line of comparison, I interpret a contemporary American novel through a Hungarian modernist work. I will discuss Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* focusing on the issue of personal and collective narrative identity as it is formulated in the Hungarian context and translation. Understanding subjectivity as multiple and contradictory, I intend to illustrate that *The Namesake* recalls and recycles the tradition of omniscient narration which was employed by the realist fiction. The narrative mode of the Russian author, Nikolai Gogol is evoked and the reader is invited to comprehend *The Namesake* in the intertextual context of his prose fiction. Lahiri's narrative that focuses on the peculiarities of personal life is able to describe the process of assimilation and dissimilation. In the last part of this chapter and the final part of my book, I will compare *The Namesake* with the Hungarian novel *The Street of the Fishing Cat* [Halászó macska uccája] by Jolán Földes, which uses a similar narrative technique of detailed description for communicating the everyday life struggle of an immigrant Hungarian family living in Paris in the twenties.