

Can Women Writers Further the Cause

INTERVIEW WITH THE
SLOVAK FEMINIST WRITER

JANA JURÁŇOVÁ



"I define feminist consciousness as the recognition of the fact by women that they belong to an inferior group, that as a group they suffer under disqualifying conditions, that their inferior status is not nature-bound, but socially constructed, that they must join their hands with other women in order to eliminate the disqualifying conditions and finally that they need to elaborate and present a counter-vision of a social order in which both women and men would be assigned autonomy and self-determination."

—Gerda Lerner, *Die Entstehung des feministischen Bewußtseins*

Unlike in many western European and Nordic, but also neighbouring, countries, feminist theory and gender studies in Slovakia did not emerge within social sciences but rather within literature and philosophy. How does this fact make Slovak feminism different?

Feminism in Western Europe and in North America did not emerge primarily from the social sciences, but rather from the great social movements. The 1990s were not a time of social movements and social changes; they were above all a time of regime changes. The change of regime in Central and

Eastern Europe made possible also the formation and constitution of feminist groups in the region. Most of them aimed their primary efforts at the necessary changes in consciousness, although their strategies differed.

In the Czech Republic gender studies were profiled mainly in the 1990s and focused on educational activities and setting up a library, but comprised other activities as well. In Poland many women's NGOs arose because of the pressure of the anti-abortion law. In Slovakia we felt the absence of a larger sphere of feminist thinking, literature, culture, politics, etc. So we started to publish the feminist cultural journal *Aspekt* in 1993 and its foundation can be regarded as the formal beginning of continuous gender studies in Slovakia.

Most of us were active in literature at that time, either as critics or authors, so naturally our first interest was literature. Those of us who are involved in the project even now very early grasped the fact that social sciences, and even more generally, social problems, are often to be regarded as the most urgent issues. So we started to do what we felt as the most important thing to do. For this reason we started initiatives dealing with such topics as violence against women, sexual minorities, human rights of women, gender sensitive pedagogy, etc.

The American scholar Norma L. Rudinsky writes in her book *Incipient Feminists: Women Writers in the Slovak National Revival* that "writing seems to have been a nearly automatic part of nationalist activity and nationalist women were almost required to try to become writers." It seems, however, that the women writers as a rule stayed away from politics. Wasn't this a handicap for the promotion of the rights of women?

The part of Slovak history that Norma L. RUDINSKY writes about—the XIXth century—saw its primary target in the development of national consciousness. At that time women were rare agents in political and social movements, because it was seen as contrary to "women's roles" to be active in these fields. Later on women like

Terézia VANSOVÁ, Ľudmila PODJAVORINSKÁ and Elena MARÓTHY-ŠOLTÉSOVÁ became actively engaged.

We must note, however, that these women could study only till the age of 14, as opposed to the full-scale education of men in those times. Moreover, they had to be powerful enough to go against the idea that women ought to stay at home and passively await their fate. Some of them, e.g. Hana GREGOROVÁ or Ľudmila PODJAVORINSKÁ, demanded the right to be politically active, but male politicians actively prevented them from doing so. Ľudmila PODJAVORINSKÁ wrote an open letter to the Slovak National Council after the World War I asking "our men" to accept the right of women to political engagement. But her voice wasn't listened to.

Slovakia had in those years many national and social problems that required urgent treatment and so ultimately the voice of the women's movement proved to be insufficiently strong and self-confident to break through. In those years women activists were constantly told that there are more burning issues than the issues of the women's movement. We were told the same in 1993 after *Aspekt* had been founded. But we did not listen to these arguments and it proved to be a very good idea. Needless to say, we were in a very different situation—having modern democratic freedom on our side. Women in the XIXth century were not free enough to be sufficiently self-confident. But we realise that we owe a lot to these women.

One of the most prominent Slovak women writers, Božena Slančíková Timrava (1867–1951), was a solitary saint. She lived and wrote in the countryside. In what way did she contribute to the actual empowerment of women?

TIMRAVA was a literary genius. The first shocking thing for many was that she was a really good writer and she was a woman. Her prose is free from gender stereotypes. She demasqued a lot of the myths connected with weddings, marriage, etc. She is one of the very few authors of her time who can be read with enjoyment even now.



of Human Rights?

Veronika Wöhrer states in her study, *The Tradition of Literature within Slovak Women's Organisations and Gender Studies*, that the work of the women engaged in the Živena Association (founded 1869), as well as around the journal *Dennica*, was largely influenced by Christian ideals, as many of the women activists worked in co-operation with priests and pastors. Can basic Christian ideals be an inspiration for feminism even today?

In the XIXth and early XXth century, most intellectuals in Slovakia were inspired by Christian ideas; it was not something specifically connected with the women intellectuals of that age. Some of them were daughters, some of them wives of Lutheran pastors. Christian ideas bound them in their formulations and were a kind of autocensure they imposed on themselves.

Nowadays too we see genuine Christian ideals as inspirational in many ways. Jesus opened the act of baptism also to women—which is considered perfectly normal now, but it was revolutionary at his time in the Hebrew context. The roots of Christianity are much more democratic and even feminist than the Christian tradition as it was formed on the basis of St. Paul's theology and as it is presented to the public by the current officials of the Catholic Church in Slovakia. Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute but one of Jesus' apostles, as can be seen from the new reading of the ancient sources, which are regarded as very interesting and very friendly even from a feminist perspective.

Upon receiving the Nobel Prize for literature, Elfriede Jelinek commented: "When I get this prize as woman, I get it also because I am a woman. Therefore my joy cannot be limitless. If the prize had been awarded to Peter Handke, who deserves it much more than myself, he would have got it just because he is Peter Handke."



The literature written by women is still stigmatized, even in the case of a prizewinner like JELINEK. Women are still pegged as "the other" in a symbolic sense. JELINEK said it aloud and this was a very valuable political gesture on her part. These things must be said openly, because they exist—sometimes they are more obvious, sometimes less, sometimes they are not even recognized.

Aspekt runs the only library in Slovakia dedicated to women's and gender issues. What is your experience with this part of your project?

The library is only one part of our now quite wide educational and publication-based feminist project. In the library there are books on many topics, most of them in English, German, now many of them also in Slovak, and some of them in Czech. Visitors are mostly students and women from NGOs, but not only them. The books are much needed, and the person in charge of the library can also serve as a consultant in certain areas if needed.

The whole project has existed for 12 years by now. The journal, which was the first part of the project, finished in 2004. It fulfilled its role of the first brush with feminism in Slovakia. From 1996 onwards we have been publishing books; there are around 65 titles now, among them fiction, non-fiction and books for children. The role of the journal has been taken over by the webzine called *AspektIn* (www.aspekt.sk). We have organized a number of activities, book presentations, lectures and seminars. The most recent project is the project devoted to gender-sensitive pedagogy, which now begins in the framework of the project *Equal*.

Which recently published books dealing with the issue of women's rights would you recommend to our readers?

I can recommend all the books from our production. You can see the titles on the www.aspekt.sk website. There is the recently published book by the



Slovak emigrant Irena BREŽNÁ, written in German and translated by Jana CVIKOVÁ, as well as the book by the Swiss author Aglaja VETERANY. We are preparing the publication of several Slovak authors: Jaroslava BLAŽKOVÁ, Etela FARKAŠOVÁ, and Jana BODNÁROVÁ.

Already in 1932 there was a book published in Germany mentioning the 50 greatest women personalities of Europe of that age and Elena Maróthy-Šoltéssová was included. The short stories of the contemporary writer Etela Farkašová were published in German, Czech, Hungarian and Japanese translation. Can we thus speak of a certain "export" of Slovak feminism and its popularisation abroad?

I like the word *communication* better than the word *export* in this context. I think the Slovak case is not so unique. As a matter of fact, there are many more authors from Slovakia translated into foreign languages. Several anthologies of Slovak women authors were published in German; some of us are part of other anthologies. Women editors choosing women authors from Slovakia or from other post-communist countries have a special purpose in their mind when doing so—as is always the case with anthologies.

What was the decisive motivation that enabled you to discover your personal vocation of a gender activist?

I do not consider myself an activist of any kind. In the 1990s I felt a significant deficit in this field and that was why I started a feminist project. I am lucky not to be alone with this perception of things, and I was happy to find out that there was a group of inspiring women with whom I could communicate in a fruitful way right from the beginning and so it is until now.

Jana JURÁŠOVÁ was born in Senica, Slovakia, in 1957. She studied English and Russian at the Comenius University in Bratislava. She worked as dramaturgist in the Theatre for Children and Youth in Trnava and as a reporter for Radio Free Europe. In 1995 she became the co-founder of the feminist educational project *Aspekt*, in which she has been involved since then. She translated into Slovak authors like Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Judith L. HERMAN, etc. She is the author of fiction, dramas and children's books. Her email address is juranova@aspekt.sk.