FEMINISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE – A LANDMARK OF IDENTITY

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Abstract: *After a period of struggle in the area of literary academic studies, children's literature has finally established itself in the domain and has been gaining popularity - with researchers and readers alike. This article aims at shortly discussing the history of children's literature and its affirmation as a valuable research field. Its main focus is on trying to answer the following question: can we talk about feminism in children's literature, is there such a thing? And if so, does it represent a landmark of identity in the broader context of the literature for children? The hands-on examples offered in this article come from the European space, namely public and private schools from Iasi, Romania.*

Keywords: *children literature, history, feminism.*

Children's literature

Ever since there were children, there has been children's literature. Long before John Newbery established the first press devoted to children's books, stories were told and written for the young, and books originally offered to mature readers were carefully recast or excerpted for youthful audiences. Greek and Roman educational traditions grounded themselves in reading and reciting poetry and drama. Aesop's fables lived for two millennia on classroom and family shelves. Thinkers from Quintilian to John Locke, from St. Augustine to Dr. Seuss, speculated on the ways in which we learn about our language and our lives from literature, states Seth Lerer (2004:12).

Literature precisely written for children did not exist as such in the history of literature; it developed gradually and over a long period of time. However, the printing press allowed the spread of literacy to the middle class during the industrial revolution and with it came the spread of books for children literature. Books for girls, however, were limited both in numbers and in variety of topics. It was far more difficult to interest readers in domestic affairs than in wars and other forms of adventure. Leading American writers for girls like Ewing, Linnaeus Banks, Anne Beale, Sarah Doudney, Emma Marshall, L. T. Meade, Adeline Sergeant, and Anna Sewell paved the way in children's literature targeting girls. Many of the first books for children in the beginning were *about* rather than *for* children, and were of more interest to adults than to those for whom they had been supposedly written. Zohar Shavit argues, on the basis of the rich and well-informed histories of children's literature available since the 1970s onwards, that there is a common historical model for all types of children literature, both in regards to their inception and their development. She claims that similar historical patterns can be found in all children literatures, disregard of nationalities or period of time and even disregard of the lack of system of children literature. In fact, Shavit states that "all systems of children literature known to us, without exception, pass through the same stages of development; moreover, the same cultural factors and institutions are involved in their creation".

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Shavit argues there is "a general model underlying the development of children literature" (Shavit, Zohar, 2009:28) with two main constituents: the link between what the child and childhood represent and the creation of specific texts for young ages. She underlines the relation between tedious books produced by the educational system, church based in the beginning and the appealing books that children really wanted to have and read. In Townsend's words: "It could…be said that the prehistory of children literature has two branches: the material that was intended especially for children or young people but was not story, and the material that was story but was not meant especially for children." (Townsend, John Rowe, 1996: 4.) But before children literature could begin to develop for real, it needed to be acknowledged as such and this took place after the Middle Ages, argues Philippe Aries in a much debated academic perspective on the notions of childhood and the child. Aries controversially stated that childhood did not exist in the Middle Ages and only came about in the seventeenth century, along with the modernization and development of Europe (Aries, Philippe, 1962: 17). Aries argues, in fact, that there was a true "discovery" (*Ibidem*) of the child and childhood at that point.

Without such seminal studies on childhood and the status of the child, a notion like the children literature could not have emerged. As John Townsend said: "before there could be children's books, there had to be children… accepted as beings with their own particular needs and interests, not merely as miniature men and women." (Townsend, John Rowe, 1996: 3) And this acknowledgment of the notion of the child meant the emergence of a new "addressee" (*Ibidem*) with its own literary desires and needs. And so the children literature emerged as a genre of its own.

Children's literature in the academic world

By and large, the field of history, like that of psychology, has been more receptive to the study of children and their literature than literary criticism has. Social and intellectual histories that discuss children often use children's literature as a source; they also provide some historical background that can inform other studies of children's literature and this paper looked into this domain as well, consulting consecrated authors like Shavit, Hunt, Townsend, Lerer and Aries.

In his *Encyclopedia of Children literature*, Peter Hunt argues that children's literature should raise more attention from the academic world. He rightfully considers that it deserves the attention of the critics as its relation with adult literature is so complex. The area of children as present and future readers deserves attention as well. Children's literature has long been the Cinderella of academia, but it gradually gained more and more attention and nowadays it is generally considered worthy of academic recognition and institutionalized research. Although many serious books about children's literature "throw light on established ways of studying literature *tout pur*, conservative scholars and teachers, concerned about the dilutions of their topic specialisms and the blurring of canonical boundaries, have declared children literature to be a soft reading option, academically lightweight" (Hunt, Peter, 2004: 3). This opinion used to be the norm; however, slowly but surely it was proven wrong, as children's authors produced more and more qualitative work and became more connected to their readership, as well. In fact, this is true for older authors, as well, but it took time for their contribution to the field of literature to be truly acknowledged. Researchers studying the relationship between literature and literacy, about narratives and what they mean, are well aware about the place children's literature should have

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long gained in academia. However, debates regarding the status of the child, the notion of childhood or who should decide what literature exactly is to be included in children's literature compendiums are still continuing. Resistance to the notion of the "universal child" and to common assumptions of what is "normal" in interpretative reading provoke new questions, especially feminist ones, in ethnography, cultural studies and social linguistics. In all of these established disciplines there is a context for discussing the contents of children's books. But there is also the possibility for new perspectives which begin with books, children and reading. These have been slowly growing over time, but have not simply been accommodated elsewhere. (Meek, Margaret, 2004: 1-13)

Peter Hunt, reminding an audience in 1994 that the first British children literature research conference was in 1979, suggested that this research enterprise has "followed inappropriate models and mind-sets, especially with regard to its readership". That is, "we often produce *lesser* research when we should be producing *different* research". He advocated "the inevitable interactiveness of literature" and "the literary experience" as worthy of analysis. (*Ibidem*.)

In the 90s, critics like Lyon Clark, writing about the history of children's literature stated that at the time children literature emerged as a respectable-and exciting-field of literary criticism, partly due to the increasing interest in popular culture and the emergence of cultural studies, partly due to the study of the interactions between cultural institutions and texts (Clark, Beverly Lyon, 1992: 5). Lyon argued that the emergence of children's literature was to be as significant as that of feminism two decades before. In order to sketch the field of children's literature and of its criticism, three influential categories of people shaping the history of the field can be discussed. Over time and especially in America, children's literature has been influenced by librarians and those working with the books: publishers, editors, booksellers, teachers. Even now, librarians are responsible for a very high percentage of children's book purchases, so it is not surprising that librarians have helped shaping the field by selecting and purchasing the books and also by reviewing and judging them. Ever since 1882, when Caroline Hewins published in the United States her first list of books recommended for children, librarians have been compiling influential lists of what children should or should not read.

The second category, perhaps not entirely a stand-alone one, but influential nevetheless, is that of the teachers. All students, had, at some point in their lives, a teacher who inspired them to read and the situation is still valid today, despite the technological progress that threatens to make books obsolete.

The third category, in Clark's view, is that of literary criticism, not as old as the genre and not always as respected as it deserved, but having a major influence on children literature as such. During the 70s and the 80s, the field knew the publication of several journals - most of them still existing today - and of some important anthologies or studies of children's literature. Thus, the canon of children's literature was slowly created. In the eight and nineth decade of the twentieth century, some major works of literary criticism were published, succesfully applying literary theory to children's literature. Of course all approaches to literature are necessarily informed by theory, even if only convertly, yet a number of works are particularly attentive to recent theoretical developments.

One of the most significant studies in the field remains Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, published in 1984. Now considered a foundational text in children's literature studies, it reliies on deconstructive, feminist, Marxist and last but not least the psychoanalytic theory. Rose

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discusses some issues urgent for anyone studying children literature: the gap between the writer and the audience in children's literature, how adults construct childhood through children' literature, how children's literature brings together two concepts of origin - that of language and that of childhood, such that writing for/of one regulates the relationship with the other; and how children's literature and concepts of childhood are linked to colonialism (*Ibidem*: 17-18).

> Children's fiction is impossible, not in the sense that it cannot be written (that would be nonsense), but in that it hangs on an impossibility, one which it rarely ventures to speak. This is the impossible relation between adult and child. Children's fiction is clearly about that relation, but it has the remarkable characteristic of being about something which it hardly ever talks of. Children's fiction sets up a world in which the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver), but where neither of them enter the space in between. To say that the child is inside the book - children's books are after all as often as not about children - is to fall straight into a trap. (Rose, Jacqueline, 1993: 4)

Feminism in Children's Literature

Anita Moss observes in her introduction to *Feminist Criticism and the Study of Children's Literature* collection of essays on feminism and its connection to children's literature that there is a long acknowledged association between children's literature and women. This may stem from the fact that children get first in contact with stories, perhaps the first stage of children's literature, through a mother figure telling them bed-time stories or reading from their favorite picture book. Also, the ancient tradition of story-telling has a strong connection with matriarchal figures. However, Moss notes the existence of a negative attitude toward children's literature, disregarded as literature, precisely due to its connection with women (Moss, Anita, 1982: 2).

> Certainly the number of women engaged in writing children's literature in its three-hundred year history (and the feet that many of them published under their own married names, rather than adopting male pseudonyms) suggest that Professor Butler's point is valid. Most of us, moreover, have been educated by male professors to admire male traditions and to adopt a masculine voice when we write criticism. Recently, however, feminist scholars and critics have attempted to identify specifically female literary traditions, to forge a feminist aesthetic, to write in their own voices, and thereby to acquire more integrity as women, as writers, teachers, and critics. A variety of feminist criticisms can now be found—from the analysis of stereotypes, to archetypal, textual, contextual, and ideological investigations of literature.

Children's literature has been compared with feminist literature for several reasons, some of the major ones being that both include powerless characters who suffer from various reasons; sometimes the weak protagonists are empowered and change their destiny but rarely without exterior support. Furthermore, both children and female characters are perceived as inferior in the mainstream literature whereas the vast majority of children's books have male authors, a situation promoted by the publishing industry over centuries. Moreover, from the very start of their experience as readers, children encounter feeble female characters like damsels and princesses in distress, waiting to be saved by white-horsed princes as they cannot manage on their own. As Jack Zipes observes in his numerous studies on fairy tales, these help to shape cultural identities, morals and modes of behavior within society and the cultural artifacts that are

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fairy tales teach children social behavior, being immensely helpful in shaping the way they see the world. It is however true that the feminine characters are often persecuted in such fairy tales. "Gender roles are rigidly prescribed to women and men, girls and boys and this results in the proliferation of cultural attitudes particular to these gender roles" (Koslowsky, Julie, 2011: 37). On the other hand, feminist altered versions of fairy tales are being criticized for not being balanced and relevant, as they simply reverse the role of male and female characters, such as in contemporary children's books like *The Paper Bag Princess* or *The Breadwinner.* Although the protagonists represent empowered feminine characters, the idea is not to turn them into male characters just for the sake of it.

However, not all feminine characters in children's books are weak. Let us remember Gretel in *Hans and Gretel,* or Gerda in *The Snow Queen,* Jo in *Little Women* and Anne in *Anne of Green Gables*, or Heidi and Pippi Longstocking. Their occurrence is still small, though, when compared with male characters. For example adventure or school stories tend to have boys as main characters most of the times. As Ernst observes: "Girls are represented as sweet, naive, conforming, and dependent, while boys are typically described as strong, adventurous, independent, and capable." (Enrst, S.B., 1995: 61) Ernst analyzed the incidence of male versus female names in children's books and discovered that the ratio was two to one in favor of male names; furthermore she noted that gender stereotypes are predominant in children's literature. Moreover, characters like the one mentioned above are an exception – usually girls portrayed in children's books are naïve, weak and lacking in personality.

Authors like Bell Hooks considers that children's literature should strongly promote feminist values, as children are more malleable at an early age, just as Jack Zipes states regarding fairy tales. In her book *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, Bell observes: "Children's literature is one of the most crucial sites for feminist education for critical consciousness precisely because beliefs and identities are still being formed" (Hooks, Bell, 2000: 42). Children gather knowledge about the world, social norms and behavior, identities and other important aspects also through their literature; their educators and tutors should therefore have this in mind when selecting the books children will come in contact with. So that children become ready to understand ideologies of the world later on, they should encounter alternative ways of thinking, different beliefs and various perspectives and this can be achieved through the use of their literature. In John Stephen's words: "The principle aim in constructing a variety of subject positions for readers is to contribute towards a positive self-concept for children" (Stephens, John, 1992: 17). Reinforcing different roles for genders, other than the traditional ones, helps children broaden their horizon and develop correct gender attitudes. Moreover, "books containing images that conflict with gender stereotypes provide children the opportunity to re-examine their gender beliefs and assumptions. Thus, texts can provide children with alternative role models and inspire them to adopt more egalitarian gender attitudes." (Manjari, Singh, 1998: 3) Manjari also argues that sexism in literature may insidiously shape the way children perceive the world, reinforcing gender images, be it weak feminine roles or strong, insensitive masculine ones. Authors like Rudman and Fox argue these stereotypes limit children's freedom of thinking, of perceiving the world and of expressing themselves.

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Using children's literature to promote the development of identity

Someone working with children using children's literature, be it a teacher, a psychologist, a social worker etc., should carefully select books that are not biased regarding gender or characters' roles. Such books are not always easy to select, even if the financial means allows it. However, such books do exist and with the explosion of fantasy novels nowadays, more and more powerful female characters have emerged. These dystopian novels have already been turned into successful films that teenagers, for example, are familiar with. Often, such books and films are extremely popular with certain ages. Few children nowadays have not heard of Hermione Granger from the *Harry Potter* series, whereas adolescents are likely to favor Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* or Beatris Prior from the series *Divergent.* Using the original books in working with children or teenagers will mean introducing these empowered female characters to them; if they are already known, bringing them into class will only make the teaching more engaging to students. There is no clear balance regarding children's books that present strong female versus masculine characters. However, what a teacher could do, is to reach for that balance and select books that are either gender neutral or books that favor feminist ideals. A personal touch would be to ask for students to compile lists of books they like, or if they are very young to simply ask their opinion and then select among these – children will feel taken into consideration whereas the teacher still gets to maintain the equilibrium between pieces of literature too male-centered versus female-centered ones. Another good idea would be to look for books that do not present genders stereotypically.

In this respect, Manjari describes certain criteria as suggested by Rudman, who suggests using gender-neutral books in which characters have strong personalities whether they are boys or girls, in which achievement is not judged based on gender, characters may have whatever occupation they can cater for, they may dress and behave as they see fit, individuals are portrayed with distinctive personalities irrespective of their gender and there is little or no gender related language. However, Rudman suggests, books with an obvious feminist message are to be avoided (*Ibidem*).

After selecting the appropriate texts to use, a teacher or a person working with children using their literature should pay attention to how to use the chosen books so as to make the most of them and convey, at the same time, the intended message. Rudman describes, further on, the steps one should take in this respect, relying on the works of Lawrence and Temple, as well. First of all, he argues, it is important for one to realize the goal of such an interaction with children's literature. Next, there are a number of techniques that could be scaffolded, such as analyzing gender assumptions in the text; discussing the main characters and their portrayal; asking children to reverse the genders of individuals in the story, like a game; having children guess a writer's gender on the basis of a story they have just heard; asking children to use gender-neutral names in the stories or having children adopt the opposite sex's point of view about a very gendered issue. On a more personal note, a teacher may use a well selected book on the topic in class by simply presenting it: reading it aloud, using a recording, asking the students to read it in turns or even story-telling it. However, developing relevant and engaging class activities based on the selected book is of utmost importance. In fact, there lies the key to engage students into the story and to get them working on it. Such activities may include the ones mentioned above and many others. Some examples would be dramatizing the story and asking students to perform it; alter its beginning or its ending; offer alternative plots; create new characters or transform the existing ones;

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imagine the past of various characters and the facts that have led to their current personality; offer characters some advice and suggestions; create similar stories; make drawings based on the characters or their adventures and so on. Such activities help both with teaching a certain subject, for example a foreign language like in the case of the practical work related to this particular article, and with conveying the message regarding the identity and gender-based issues.

Children may do all these activities either individually, or in pairs, small groups or even as a class. However, pair and group work are the most suitable ones, as they offer the young both the chance to communicate and be heard, at the same time. The teacher should monitor the good development of class activities and even support them by asking "thought-provoking questions and facilitating student exchanges" (*Ibidem:* 6).

To sum up, the article pointed out the existence of a close relation between children's literature and feminism, a relation developed over centuries. It is also clear that children's literature is appropriate for classroom use and for many other types of activities, such as creative writing, drama or psychological sessions. When dealing with a children's book, one may use it in teaching a given school subject, such as English or History or in conveying an important message regarding personal choices, perspectives on the world, personality and ultimately, identity development. The earliest the start in this direction, the better, as young minds are molded from an early age. When dealing with the topic, one should pay attention to selecting the appropriate text and to developing the right follow-up activities – at the same time relevant and engaging for the young. Children's literature is gaining more and more in popularity, its scholars are getting the respect they deserve and the genre is becoming the landmark it should have been from the beginning. It is therefore useful to learn to make the most of it, both in teaching and in setting the good examples needed to shape the identities of the young.

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