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## FEMINIST LITERARY STUDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SLOVENE ACADEMIC WRITING

This article shows how approaches that may be defined as women's literary studies have developed in the context of the academy in Slovenia. It examines key works in the field and the inclusion of materials from women's literary studies in academic programs of Slovene literature and literary theory, as well as how baccalaureate, M.A., and Ph.D. theses reflect on the materials. Research achievements and projects focusing on women authors and portrayals and representations of femininity are also reviewed.

**Key words:** feminist literary studies, women writers, gender studies

### 1 Introduction

This article builds on “Feministične literarnovedne raziskave – tukaj in zdaj” (Research in women's literary studies—here and now), which appeared in the anniversary issue of *Jezik on slovstvo* in 2005. In that article, I first put forth certain difficulties in describing research on the texts of women writers, the portrayals of femininity and female characters, and also with terms for theoretical studies of the concepts and problems that arise when the crux of the matter is how gender differences are entered into literary texts. I proposed that the basic concept for such research could be termed women's literary studies.<sup>1</sup> I then enumerated important literary historical and theoretical contributions (by Marja Boršnik, Silvija Borovnik, Ženja Leiler, Neva Šlibar, Alenka Jensterle Doležal, Irena Novak Popov, Alojzija Zupan Sosič, Jelka Kernev Štrajn, Mira Delavec, Miran Hladnik, and Igor Grdina).<sup>2</sup> I grouped their research by topic (theoretical contributions on feminist theory, studies of images of femininity, female characters, new interpretations of canonized women writers and discovery of forgotten ones, and neglected creative writers) in order to show that all areas of women's literary studies had generated interest in Slovenia and elsewhere. In conclusion, I returned to the point that Silvija Borovnik had raised, that there had not yet been a symposium in Slovenia on topics in women's literary studies. I concluded that interest in women's literary studies was growing, and that the time for a large forum on the field was not far off.

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<sup>1</sup> That the name has become quite established is evident from the number of hits in Cobiss when it is used as key words. It is the second search result when “feministična” is entered in Google. In 2009, Andreja Babšek's article entitled “Feministična literarna veda” (Feminist literary studies) appeared. It was divided into two parts. The first appears to have originated as a seminar paper—the author summarizes Toril Moi's book *Sexual/Textual Politics*, and in part 2 presents Lilijana Burcar's dissertation, *Novi val nedolžnosti v otroški literaturi* (The new wave of innocence in children's literature).

<sup>2</sup> In the article, I unfortunately overlooked research by Milena M. Blažič, who deals with these topics in children's and young adult literature.



Seven years later we can state that women's literary studies have become a legitimate part of Slovene literary studies, as seen not only by the publication of scholarly monographs, but also of numerous articles, Ph.D. and M.A. theses, seminar projects, and other achievements.<sup>3</sup> There is great impetus for research in the context of higher education, including, most importantly, the existence of significant publications in national literary studies and mentors' inclination to favor the topic that a student wishes to pursue in order to complete his or her degree requirements.

## 2 Monographs on Slovene women writers

Let us examine scholarly monographs published during the past seven years. In 2009, Mira Delavec's monograph on the first Slovene female prose writer, Josipina Turnograjski, appeared. The author also published the complete literary archive of the writer, who died an untimely death, and facilitated further research by furnishing the manuscripts of books that had been available only in the manuscript division of the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

Collections of works by the following writers came out: Zofka Kveder, Ljubka Šorli in Mira Mihelič. The Slovene reading public rediscovered them in these new editions or editions that were the first in book form, like Marica Nadlišek Bartol<sup>4</sup> and Milena Mohorič's<sup>5</sup> short prose. The second book of Zofka Kveder's *Zbrana dela* (Collected works) revealed the canonized writer as an author of Central European standing (Zlobec 2011). Two anthologies that cannot be overlooked are *Antologije slovenskih pesnic* (An anthology of Slovene women poets), edited by Irena Novak Popov, and a selection of shorter prose by Slovene women writers entitled *Kliči me po imenu* (Call me by my name), prepared by Silvija Borovnik. For both, the fact that they included excellent commentaries was important. They were accompanied by prominent promotional events that garnered them attention in academia and the reading public. Sabina Ž. Žnidaršič published a book about Slovene women writers, Urška Perenič wrote about Milica S. Ostrovška and the works of Luiza Pesjak, written in German.

## 3 Subjects with feminist literary studies content at Slovene universities

In the 2005 article, I also noted that in subjects in the field of feminist literary studies were absent from Slovene programs. The situation changed significantly with the Bologna reforms, which spurred student interest, in particular among female students. On the first level, subjects with such topics are accredited only in the context

<sup>3</sup> Because of accessibility, I did not include data on program, baccalaureate, M.A., and Ph.D. projects in Slovene programs at universities outside of Slovenia. In addition to data from Slovene programs at all four Slovene universities, I also collected information pertinent to comparative literature, and literary theory at the University of Ljubljana, the Pedagogical Faculty in Ljubljana, the University of Maribor, and the Pedagogical Faculty in Primorsko.

<sup>4</sup> Marica Nadlišek Bartol, *Na obali: Kratka proza* [On the shore: Short prose], Trst: ZTT = EST, 2005

<sup>5</sup> Milena Mohorič, *Zgodbe iz tridesetih let* [Stories from the 1930s], Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2010.



of the Slovene language and literature programs at the Filzofsko fakulteta at the University of Maribor—to be exact, in the required course on “Women Writers, Literary Genres and Styles in Slovene Literature of the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” and “Nineteenth-Century Women Writers.” On the intermediate level, the course “Contemporary Slovene Women Writers” is accredited within the second-year Slovene language and literature program for teacher preparation. At the advanced level there is “Literature by Twentieth-Century Slovene Women Writers.”<sup>6</sup> In the Slovene program at the University of Primorsko’s Faculty of Humanities, three elective courses with the same title, “Women in Literature,” have been approved on the beginning and intermediate levels. In the University of Ljubljana’s Slovene program in the Faculty of Arts, there is a required course in the same discipline at the intermediate level. The title, “Gender and Slovene Literature,” indicates the feminist literary studies content. In the Faculty of Humanities’ Slovene program (literary studies track), a module on “Gender Studies in Slovene Literature” has been approved. It includes courses on “The Sociology of Gender,” “Postcolonial theory and gender studies,” “Feminist Literary Studies,” “Images of Women in the World of Myth and Their Reception in Slovene Literature,” “Representations of Gender in Slovene Literature,” “Gender Stereotypes in Children’s Literature,” and “Slovene Women Writers in European Literatures.”

There are no similarly titled courses with comparable content at the beginning and intermediate levels of the comparative literature and literary theory program or at the University of Ljubljana, Maribor, or Primorsko’s Faculties of Education.

#### 4 Baccalaureate, Master’s, and Ph.D. theses

A survey of the baccalaureate, Master’s, and Ph.D. theses in all of the above programs in Slovenia shows a high level of interest among students.<sup>7</sup> Studies of female characters in the classics (Ivan Cankar, Janko Kersnik, Ciril Kosmač, Bogomir Magajna, Ivan Mrak, Prežihov Voranc, Fran Saleški Finžgar, Ivan Tavčar, Gregor Strniša, and Ivo Šorli), as well as in contemporary prose (by Drago Jančar, Vinko Möderndorfer, Miha Mazzini, Boris Pahor, and Marjan Tomšič) predominate. There is less interest in female characters in works by women writers, yet some theses elucidate the prose of Zofka Kveder, Lea Fatur, Milena Mohorič, Suzana Tratnik, Berta Bojetu, and Nejka Omahen. Female figures are also the topic of research by period (e.g., Expressionism), narrative type (e.g., women writers’ short stories from 2000 to 2008; fairytales), or tradition (the Bible, Slavic mythology, etc.)

The number of student theses that survey the works of lesser known or long forgotten women writers is encouraging (Elvira Dolinar, Alma Karlin, Marija Kmet, Milena Mohorič, Marica Nadlišek Bartol, Maksa Samsa, Ljudmila Prunk – Utva). Literary studies have rediscovered them and assigned them an important role in Slovene literature. The theses are generally on the motifs, genre, and other features

<sup>6</sup> The academic plans posted on the Internet (accessed 26 December 2012) do not indicate whether the courses are required or elective.

<sup>7</sup> The survey of theses’ titles covers the years 2005–12 and is included in my article “Feministične literarnovedne raziskave – tukaj in zdaj” (Research in women’s literary studies – here and now).

of the works of well known writers (Lili Novy, Vida Jeraj, Ela Peroci) and contemporaries (Ivanka Čadež, Polona Glavan, Alenka Goljeviček, Erica Johnson Debeljak, Marinka Fritz Kunc, Maruša Krese, Majda Koren, Barbara Korun, Agota Kristof, Mojca Kumerdej, Neža Maurer, Svetlana Makarovič, Ida Mlakar, Marjana Moškrič, Desa Muck, Lila Prap, Dragica Potočnjak, Breda Smolnikar, Brina Svit, Brina Štampe-Žmavc, Anja Štefan, Zora Tavčar, Suzana Tratnik, Erika Vouk, Irena Žerjal). There are fewer theses in the field of feminist theory.<sup>8</sup>

The increased interest in women writers and research topics associated with women and femininity can be explained as a reflection of women writers' greater presence on the book market (promotional events are also important, among them book presentations, literary readings, roundtables, etc.),<sup>9</sup> articles and books on writers' works (anthologies and editions are important among them), and certainly the greater inclusion of women's writers and their works in university lectures. Thus it is probably no coincidence that most theses were done with female mentors that research women authors. Another reason is the preponderance of female students in Slovene programs. Further, the academic personnel structure in the field of Slovene literary studies is such that female instructors are in the majority, with the exception of the Slovene program in Koper and the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana.

## 5 Research projects and meetings

One of the achievements in women's literary studies was the University of Nova Gorica's successful grant application under the European Cooperation in Science and Technology program. The four-year project (2009–3) is entitled “Pisateljice v zgodovini – na poti k novemu razumevanju evropske literarne kulture” (Women writers in history—towards a new understanding of European literary culture).<sup>10</sup> The researchers' goals are revisions and new contributions to the history of women's writing, with special attention to questions of reception of women writers, their influence, and their

<sup>8</sup> Because there are fewer, I cite them here: Dragica Sternad Pražnikar's *Feministična literarna veda in možnost ureditve njenega področja: Diplomsko delo iz literarne teorije* (Feminist literary studies and the prospects of stabilizing the field: A baccalaureate thesis in literary theory, 2006), Matej Jazbinšek's *Histerične ženske v slovenskih romanih: Možnosti feministične literarne vede: Diplomsko delo* (Hysterical women in Slovene novels: The possibilities of feminist literary studies: Baccalaureate thesis, 2007), Marija Remškar's *Freudova teorija histerije v dramatiki: Histerija – feminismus – gledališče: Diplomski seminar* (Freud's theory of hysteria in drama: Hysteria – feminism – theater: Baccalaureate seminar thesis, 2007), Irena Svetek's, *Écriture féminine in poststrukturalistična teorija: Doktorska disertacija* (Écriture féminine and poststructuralist theory: Doctoral dissertation, 2007), and Sara Marinkovič's, *Psihoanaliza, écriture féminine in Berta Bojetu: Razširjeno seminarско delo* (Psychoanalysis, écriture feminine, and Berta Bojetu: Expanded seminar thesis, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Miran Hladnik states that in 2010, forty percent of novel writers were women. See: “Nagrada kresnik 2010,” In *Sodobna slovenska književnost (1980–2010)*, ed. Alojzija Zupan Sosič, Series Obdobja, 29, Ljubljana: ZIFF, 93, and on the Internet.

<sup>10</sup> The European Commission administers and directs the program as a whole, and it finances most of the coordinated activities, including participation in its agencies' and bodies' meetings, from funds for international cooperation.



roles as authors, readers, translators, and cultural chroniclers and conveyors. Further questions have to do with women writers and the process of canonization, and their absence from literary history. Empirical data on reception are entered into the digital database WomenWriters, the Reception of their Works. In September 2010, in the context of the project, the University of Nova Gorica, in cooperation with the project Ljubljana – World Cultural Capital of the Book, organized a scholarly meeting on “Nineteenth-Century Women Authors in the Literatures of Small Nations.” At the symposium, four Slovene and seventeen foreign scholars presented on lesser-known women writers, and on the reception of canonized women writers in the literatures of small nations.

In recent years, two symposia on the hundredth birthdays of creative women writers have been held in Slovenia. In 2010, the University of Nova Gorica organized a symposium on the poet Ljubka Šorli. In 2012, the Slovene PEN club hosted a meeting on Mira Mihelič’s drama. New views on Zofka Kveder was the topic of a Prague symposium on the eightieth anniversary of her death in 2006.

The mentorship of junior scholars is surely crucial to the future of women’s literary studies. At the University of Nova Gorica, a program financed by the Republic of Slovenia’s Agencija za raziskovalno dejavnost (Slovenian Research Agency) provides me with two research assistants who will write dissertations in the fields of women’s literary studies and gender studies.

## 6 Women’s literary studies and gender studies

In other countries, gender studies are an established humanities discipline, and they are becoming a more attractive research approach in Slovene literary studies (Zupan Sosič 2005, 2005a, Koron 2007, Mihurko Poniž 2008). Its breadth is surely an advantage; it is not limited to female characters, women authors, and representations of femininity, but analyzes different gender identities. And yet this advantage can be a danger to women’s literary studies, because their subject matter will be inserted into a wider context and thus lose its specificity.

## 7 Conclusion

At the end of this survey I would like to return to Silvija Borovnik’s thoughts, in which she reflected on the past condition of research on creative women writers: “Among topics in Slovenia that are purported to lack seriousness and reputedly unworthy of attention, we still have research on so-called women’s literature, which I would term research on the works and contributions of Slovene creative women writers throughout history” (BOROVNIK 2003: 334). The inclusion of such subject matter and topics in all four Slovene programs in Slovenia; numerous baccalaureate, M.A., and Ph.D. theses; and financial support for research in women’s literary studies attest to that changes that have taken place during the past decade. However, the current situation in the humanities, in particular cuts to both teaching and research activities, threatens the funding of all that is on the margins—subjects we continue to see as en-



richment and not as a sine qua non of literary studies. Therefore, a great deal remains to do for researchers in the fields of women's literary studies and gender studies.

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