

Early western slavic feminism in Central European literature

The 19th century was one of the most important centuries for progressive gender ideals in society because it laid the groundwork for women to participate more regularly in the public sphere. For the first time, female authors began writing regularly on topics for women themselves, and in doing so transformed literature into a platform for the early feminist movements across the United States, United Kingdom and France. These literary efforts would eventually eventually culminate in major victories for women's rights, such as suffrage in the early 20th century, and the liberalization of societally-imposed limitations to a certain degree. What the literature of early feminist history seldom includes and analyses, however, is the literary sphere of central european women, primarily in Russia and countries such as the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, both before and after independence for these countries were achieved in the first world war from the respective empires that ruled them. These central european women, emboldened by the strictly christian, conservative societies of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and German Empires that they lived in, followed suit of their western european sisters, and found a unique literary route to feminist enlightenment.

In this essay, I will discuss the roots of feminist literature, its defining role in creating the 'archetypical woman' in feminist ideology, and how central European literary approaches to feminism differed from those in western Europe and North America. I will also attempt to frame how the significant political shifts of the time affected women's rights, and the role of women in new, independent nations that, after the first world war, had a complete societal overhaul of what it means to be Czech, Polish, Hungarian, etc., and how this not only redefined national identity in these countries, but what it meant to be a woman of that nation.

Female literature of the 19th century began as an exercise not of rights advocacy, but of national pride, progression and cultural change. In fact, it is effectively impossible to understand the roots of Central European female literature without understanding the sociopolitical and cultural context of the time. While women had been inactive to one degree or another in the conservative literature of previous centuries, often being overlooked by the men of the time, women had yet to occupy a meaningful, significant role in Central European literature. The late 18th and early 19th century saw the beginning of a cultural and linguistic revolution against the Germanophone and Russophone Imperial powers of central Europe, kickstarting the rebuilding of Czech, Polish, Slovak Hungarian and many other national identities, with these cultural revolutions to one degree or another being responsible for the modern definitions of national identity in these countries today. For Czechia, this saw the Czech national revival, which sought to challenge Austria authority and modernize the Czech nation through a revitalisation of its language, history, culture and literature. In other corners of these massive empires, major political events such as the Hungarian revolution of 1848, also against the Austrian Emperor, and the November uprising of 1932 against the Tsar in Poland also kickstarted a new literary and social movement

to revitalize national identity in the face of Imperial subjugation. Both men and women in these scholarly nationalist circles realized that their hopes for preserving their history and eventually seeking nationhood lay in looking westward. The massive clash between conservative and modernist ideology in many spheres, including literature, was a defining element in the revival of nationhood.

Just as the developed Victoria societies of western Europe had seen a redefinition of women's roles in society and in scholarly spheres, so too did Central European nationalists see this element as crucial to opposing the conservative cultural domination of central European powers that ruled them. As a result, the beginning of this wave of 19th century female literature in central Europe came about not necessarily as a purely social ambition, but as a byproduct of a yearning for national identity. Women were crucial to this effort, not only as the teachers of language and keepers of tradition at home and in the community, but now as writers, working alongside men in increasing numbers as part of the revitalization of central European national literature.

An early example in Hungary could be Peter Bod's collection of Hungarian literary history, which unlike earlier publications, included the works of Hungarian female authors. Bod explicitly explains that the reasoning behind this relatively progressive change was that by encouraging Hungarian female authors to write by affording them the same recognition as their male counterparts, Hungary could soon become a nation that is similarly 'cultured' relative to western European nations, who had a "far larger proportion of 'women of learning' than his homeland" (Hawkesworth 2001, 87). Despite this, in many cases those who argued for the participation of women in literature were not those who claimed to be progressive, but those with a strong sense of conservative national identity, who argued that by virtue of women's roles in cultural and communal activities, their increased participation in literature and other cultural activities of promoting national identity were crucial (Hawkesworth 2001, 88).

The influences of western European countries and the push for a society with enfranchised 'women of learning', as Bod called them, became increasingly critical for political change in the early 20th century. In the last few decades leading up to the first world war at the turn of the century, feminist literature actively sought to accept the influences of nationalism within central Europe. Just as the literary scholars of the 19th century had sought to embolden women as a method of fighting for new, independent nations that were governed by Austria, Germany or Russia at the time, female authors began exploring new topics to meet this goal and in doing so entrench themselves as recognised authors alongside their male peers. At the end of the 19th century, Czech author Teréza Nováková popularized an approach to central European feminist literature with the 1894 publication of her book "Slavín žen českých", or "A celebration of Czech women". As the title suggests, the book was groundbreaking in its focus on notable Czech women throughout history in many fields. By highlighting the role of famous Czech women in

shaping the Czech language, culture, and overall sense of nationhood, Nováková's works led the new generation of central European nationalistic literature by using the concept of female empowerment as a representative principle of national independence and national pride.

When examining the feminist literature of the 19th century in central Europe, it is important to bear in mind that the work of late 19th/early 20th century feminist authors came about not only as a byproduct of political aims of the scholarly circles of the time, but also came about as a refinement of existing literature similar to the work of Peter Bod. In Poland, one of the most crucial literary pieces for the birth of Polish feminist literature was Jan Sowiński's "O uczonych polkach", or "About Polish Scholars". Similar to Bod's collection of the works of Hungarian writers of the time, including women, Sowiński not only included the biographies of 50 different notable female Polish authors, but went even further in how he designed his manuscript. Similar to Bod's ideology of looking to the learned women of western Europe for inspiration regarding a more modern Hungary, Sowiński looked to their feminist literature. His primary inspiration for the formation of his manuscript came from another manuscript published in 1811 known as "De l'influence des femmes sur la littérature française", or "The influence of women on French literature". This book, written by one of France's only noted authors of the early 19th century, Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, focussed on the state of opportunities for women in French literary culture, and the restraints which are placed on women who seek to be writers or to work in publishing. By drawing inspiration from such works for his own manuscript, Sowiński created a precedent of highlighting notable literary achievements regardless of gender which authors such as Nováková were later able to refine into feminist, nationalist literature at the end of the century.

Though central European feminist literature had emerged as its own entity on the back of various national independence movements leading up to the 1920's, the rise of fascism in central Europe spearheaded in Germany rapidly redefined the landscape for women's emancipation. A consequence of this was the reversal of decades of feminist emancipation progress as a result of Nazi German expansionism into central Europe, and eventually with the outbreak of the second world war. Women, despite being politically active in places like Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary as a result of the "modernized nation" model inspired by progressive western European nations, were now subject to the ideas of the Nazi party surrounding the role of women in society. Beginning almost immediately after the election of Hitler as German chancellor in 1933, his 1934 statement that "a woman's world is her husband, her family, her children, her house" would become a defining factor not only of women's daily lives in central Europe during the central world war, but would also dictate the censorship of feminist literature during this era (Guenther 2004, 94).

While women were indeed often confined to the role of a housewife in pre-war central European societies, they could be educated, have careers in fields such as literature, and could be politically active, especially after enfranchisement at the end of the first world war in many

newly-independent central european states. Nazi German ideology, however, refuted this, and posed the first major ideological challenge to central european feminist literature and rhetoric since the pre-WWI imperial eras. For the Nazis, a woman was nothing more than a man's wife. She wasn't even truly afforded the role of head of the household, unlike other western societies such as America which confined women to the home, but in doing so made them the masters of domestic life. Her jobs, as a housewife, were to assist their husbands in any way necessary, maintain a clean and respectable home and to give birth to healthy, ethnically pure and medically sound children who conformed to the ideal aryan image. As a result of this, female literature after WWII began was completely dictated by a Nazi German, anti-feminist mindset.

In literature, which by this time was tightly controlled, women only had value in supporting the war effort and strengthening the image of a strong German nation, excluding any other central european women from the ideas defining womanhood in Nazi-occupied europe. The few female-focussed publications that existed were officially sanctioned works such as "Das Deutsche Mädel", a magazine aimed at teenage girls and young women which encouraged girls to conform to the ideals of a strong, German woman. While they did advocate that women should be focussed on working in ways to support the war efforts, such as in factories, and being good housewives and eager mothers, such publications also used the exceptions to Nazi ideology on femininity to emphasize the superiority of German womanhood. According to Rupp, such publications often highlighted the stories of famous female Germans of note, who may have worked in fields ranging from medicine to aviation, and in doing so co-opting the basic ideals of female empowerment as a tool of redefining femininity in literature and enforcing the concept of German racial superiority (Rupp 1978, 45).

Consequently Nazi German and afterwards, Soviet propagandization of women's emancipation for racial or political purposes would effectively stall the progression of women's rights in central europe until the fall of communism in 1991. In this period, women's literature could not exist beyond the political sphere, and was much more unwillingly tied to it through state censorship. This relationship between female central european literature was completely different from the political role female literature played in the modernisation of central european peoples and eventually their independence at the end of the first world war.

Even though their contexts and outcomes may have been completely different, they did share some common grounds; the idea that central european femininity needed to be celebrated led to the existence of a slowly expanding group of female authors who were often part of the upper class of society at the time and therefore were exposed to and drew their influence from foreign ideas. In the late 19th/early 20th centuries these influences would have been from western Europe and the United States, and then after the second world war central european femininity would have been, through Soviet-controlled literature, tied to the idea of Russian femininity, and

simultaneously a pan-slavic femininity that emphasize certain ideas of slavic womanhood and common western slavic traditions, with women as keepers of those traditions.

Once again, however the political shift of central europe from being in the Soviet or Russian sphere and returning to a western european political sphere has caused the upsurge of feminist activism in central europe to ideologically root in feminist writings from North America and Western Europe, with political issues such as abortion becoming crucial goals for women's rights activists in countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic. Even though the independence of central European countries from communism has now lasted 30 years, we are yet to see a resurgence of recognisable central european literature. Even then, the question still remains: in a world dominated by ideas of racial relations, and the acknowledgement of the colonial exploits of white, european nations, is the idea of central european femininity, just like western european or north american femininity, becoming obsolete? As female literature in central europe develops, will the focus become more a matter of white femininity and the femininity of people of color who have begun to migrate to central europe from the middle east and africa?

Central European female literature, though not as comprehensively studied and understood as the early feminist literature of western European countries, given the roots of what is now considered first wave feminism, became crucial not only to defining the concept of a central European woman which fought to survive through several wars and occupations. Not only is it important for modern day academics to understand central european female literature throughout history because of its relevance to strengthening modern day senses of independent national identity and an independent sense of western slavic femininity that doesn't rely on western european or Russian ideals, but it is important to understanding how women can use their positions as teachers of culture and tradition to fight for a more equal gender relation in central european countries, and reframe the entire concept of national independence and identity as a fundamentally gendered concept.

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