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The Articulation of Lesbian Identities through the Paradigm of Visibility and Invisibility in the Hungarian Context

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Abstract:

The article discusses the articulation of lesbian identities in the contemporary Hungarian context through the analysis of several autobiographical texts written by Hungarian women. The analysis of the texts presents the construction of a lesbian identity by focusing on the process of coming out as a process of making one's lesbianism visible in the public sphere. Besides the topic of visibility, the analysis also includes takes account of the role sexuality plays in the articulation of these identities. I argue that visibility and invisibility do not always form a binary opposition, since their relation is defined by the character of the social context. Hostile social context puts them into opposition, but the tension disappears when lesbianism becomes completely integrated into society or into one's own identity.

Keywords: lesbian identity, autobiography, visibility and invisibility, sexuality



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Introduction

The autobiographical texts to be analysed appeared in the book entitled *Developed Self-Portraits- Autobiographical Writings of Lesbian Women*¹ that was published by the Hungarian lesbian association Labrisz in 2003. Before turning to the interpretation of the texts themselves, I will consider the process of their production and publication since they are part of the association's aim of presenting and integrating lesbian culture into the Hungarian culture.

Labrisz plays an important role in the construction of lesbian identity in Hungary. Formed in 1999 and with 27 active members, Labrisz organizes regular meetings, parties, excursions, festivals and also publishes books and leaflets. Its aim is '(...) to increase the visibility of lesbian and bisexual women; and to conduct a dialogue with a wider audience through publications, documentation and through the association's school program'.² By the publication of books, it specifically aims to prove the existence of a lesbian culture and also to make it available to a larger audience. *Lesbian Space/Power*³ (2000) is an essay volume about lesbian history and politics. *Against the Grain: Lesbians in Literature*⁴ (2001) contains poems and novels and *Developed Self-Portraits- Autobiographical Writings of Lesbian Women* (2003) comprises a large variety of autobiographical texts such as letters, diary and personal essays.⁵

The aim of the editors of the book as formulated by Anna Borgos (2003, p.7) in the 'Introduction', is to '(...) do something for the formation of a non-existent lesbian story, herstory'.⁶ By presenting the process of the formation of lesbian story/culture, the editors want to give voice to many different authors in order to show the heterogeneous character of lesbian culture: 'We want to present as many languages, historical periods, social classes and generations as possible. From the canonized Western lesbian writers to the diverse, even unknown Eastern experiences.'⁷ (Borgos, 2003, p.7)

The texts are divided into four chapters based on historical periods: beginnings, the first half of the 20th century, the second half of the 20th century and the contemporary period. The

¹ Translation mine, original title *Előhívott Önarcképek- Lesbikus Nők Önéletrajzi Írásai*

² <http://www.labrisz.hu/2/index.php?itemid=21&catid=3> accessed 28 July, 2006

³ 'Leszbikus tér/erő'

⁴ 'Szembeszél: Lesbikusok a szépirodalomban'

⁵ <http://www.labrisz.hu/2/index.php?itemid=17&catid=2> accessed 28 July, 2006

⁶ '(...) tegyük valamit egy nemlétező lesbikus történet, történelem létrehozásáért.'

⁷ 'Azaz minél több nyelv, korszak, réteg, generáció, megszólaljon benne. A kultikus nyugati lesbikus írók hangjai ugyanúgy, mint a különféle, akár névtelen kelet-európai tapasztalatok.'

first two chapters, ‘The First Traces’ and ‘Lesbianism and Intimacy’⁸ contain texts that belong to the Western literary lesbian canon such authors as Emily Dickinson, Colette, Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Radclyffe Hall. The third chapter, ‘Lesbianism and Political Identity: The Second Part of the 20th Century’⁹, is dominated by American authors: Joan Nestle, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Leslie Feinberg and Adina Abramowitz. In the fourth chapter entitled ‘Relationships, Crisis, Communities: Contemporaries about Themselves’¹⁰, the editors achieve the heterogeneity that is missing from the previous chapters, as the texts present the experiences of Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, American, Australian lesbians.

If we consider the nationality of the writers that appeared in this book, we, as readers, receive a peculiar picture of this lesbian cultural heritage. It seems that the past is formed mainly by British, American and French literary persons and activists and only in the present do Central Eastern European voices start to be heard. Thus this selection of texts divides Western from Eastern lesbian culture suggesting, particularly if we focus on the Hungarian authors, that Hungarian lesbian culture appears only in the late 20th century. A huge vacuum is constituted in the Hungarian lesbian culture as it seems it has no past only present since all the Hungarian texts are written by contemporary authors.

Ann Ferguson considers the concept of an international lesbian culture controversial since

(...) the most likely model under which it could come into existence is a cultural imperialist one, of Western lesbian liberation movements importing our notions of the proper values for a lesbian culture of resistance onto other societies. (Ferguson, 1990, p.64)

If the past stands as a model for present lesbian groups, the structure of the book certainly confirms Ferguson’s concern of erasing national, class and race differences in the desire to construct an international lesbian culture. She does not contest the idea of an international lesbian culture. Before the development of this culture, there is the need to create space for the formation of ‘local lesbian, feminist and gay oppositional cultures’ (Ferguson 1990, p.64). If we focus on the texts written by Hungarian lesbians in order to conceptualise a Hungarian lesbian oppositional culture, one of the main common threads of these texts, the struggle to accept one’s

⁸ ‘Az első nyomok’, ‘Leszbikusság és intimitás’

⁹ ‘Leszbikusság és politikai identitás: A 20.század második fele’

¹⁰ ‘Kapcsolatok, válságok, közösségek: kortársaink magukról’

lesbianism, makes the oppositional character of this culture doubtful. As opposition would require assertive identity, the questioning of one's own identity shows the desire to be accepted by the heteronormative society. Among the ten selected texts written by Hungarian lesbians, there are only two that reflect upon activist work and lesbian culture. All the others are discussing the difficult road towards identification as a lesbian. It is a difficult journey caused not only by the fear of rejection by friends and family but also because it makes them very lonely. On the one hand the book succeeds in giving a diverse image of contemporary Hungarian lesbian culture. On the other hand, based only on the reading of these texts, it is difficult to see that there is a Hungarian lesbian culture and if there is at all, what forms this culture.

Visibility

As Rosemary Hennessy (1995, p.142) puts it, '(...) 'visibility' is a struggle term in gay and lesbian circles now-for some simply a matter of display, for the others the effect of discourse and complex social conditions.' Eric O. Clarke (2000, p.29) also states the importance of visibility for lesbians and gays:

(...) visibility signifies lesbian and gay efforts toward social enfranchisement in the largest sense. The quest for public visibility, however, has raised important concerns about the terms on which this visibility will be offered, and the terms on which lesbians and gay men themselves attempt to achieve it. By what processes of valuation does homoeroticism gain a visible public legitimacy?

Both authors analyze the visibility of lesbian and gay identities in the area of American popular culture and draw our attention to the possible drawbacks of gaining more public representation. The increase of visibility does not automatically mean a qualitative public representation. Eric O. Clarke argues that gaining public representation has some adverse consequences. Against a background of a heterosexual moral code of public visibility, only those lesbian and gay images are going to be promulgated which are as close to 'normal' as possible since these are the images that can be valorized when fighting for social enfranchisement. This negative effect is seen by Rosemary Hennessy (1995, p.143) in the consolidation of an 'an imaginary, class-specific gay subjectivity for both straight and gay audiences.' However, this effect is not limited only to popular culture since it 'also infiltrates the production of subjectivities in academic and activist work.'(Hennessy, 1995, p.143)

Labrizs is an association that is involved in activist work and it can be affected by the negative outcomes of visibility. The aim of the association is to promote lesbian culture by gaining more visibility in the sphere of the Hungarian culture. The integration of lesbian culture can give the association more confidence and power when fighting for social enfranchisement. In the fight for visibility, however, the association might privilege those lesbian images that in some respects confirm to heterosexual moral norms of society as argued by Eric O. Clarke.

In the following, I will concentrate on the analysis of the autobiographical texts written by Hungarian authors to establish how visibility articulates lesbian identity in the Hungarian social context. By visibility I understand not only the visual representation of lesbian identity but also the verbal formulation, its appearance through textuality. I consider that visibility takes place at the moments of coming out, and that is not a single act but a repeated one. From the point of view of the person coming out, it is a significant moment in the process of identity articulation, one which, might need to be reconfirmed again and again. From the point of view of heterosexual society, every instance of acting out one's lesbian identity and, most of all, making homoerotic desire visible in public places, is a moment of coming out. It confronts the heterosexual environment with something that should remain invisible according to their norms and values. Thus coming out is making the invisible visible.

Visual Visibility

Most of the texts I am concerned with are introduced by a short biographical overview of the writer and a photograph. This mode of presenting the author almost disappears completely in the last chapter, the one devoted to the writings of contemporary lesbian women. From among the selected ten Hungarian lesbians, only one author makes herself completely visible by having her portrait next to her writing. This author is Ágota Gordon who published a lesbian novel entitled *Goat Lipstick*¹¹. All the other authors reveal themselves only by giving their names, with no photograph and no biographical sketch. A photograph would make them too visible, a risk that they are not ready to take. Their decision should be considered as a marker of the hostility of the Hungarian social context towards identities other than the heterosexual one. While the

¹¹ Gordon Ágota: *Kecskerűz*

publication of a text in a book subtitled *Lesbian Women's Autobiographical Writings* is an act of acknowledging and proclaiming one's lesbianism publicly, the text as a medium still can offer possibilities of hiding, of partial visibility by, for example, changing the names of the people mentioned in the text. With a photograph, visibility becomes complete. Text as a medium is safer than photography.

The fear of visibility as a topic appears with some ironic undertones in the writing of Judit Szabó entitled 'One Third of a Decade as a Homosexual Activist'¹² (2003, p.133). Having played an important role in the formation of the gay and lesbian NGO Rainbow in the 1990's, it seemed inevitable that after a time her face would appear either in the newspapers or in the TV. For a couple of years she had to take care to avoid the media since her brother/sister asked her not to reveal her face publicly until the spring of 1995. While publishing under the name of Judit Szabó still insured her some anonymity since it is a very common name in Hungarian, a newspaper photograph or a TV interview would have made very much clear who that Judit Szabó was. Her complete disclosure would probably have affected her family.

Textual Visibility

The act of publishing an autobiographical text in a book entitled *Developed Self-Portraits-Autobiographical Writings of Lesbian Women* clearly can be considered as an act of proclaiming one's lesbian identity, an act of making oneself visible as a lesbian. In case of autobiography, the narrating I tells the life narrative of the author. The narrated story is read not as complete fiction but as a story of what happened at particular times and place filtered through the subjectivity of the narrating I. Thus the reader expects a close connection between the narrating I who is telling the story, the narrated I, whom the story is about, and the author. The reader expects them to be one and the same, the difference being that they can be situated at different points in the of the author's life.

¹² Szabó Judit: 'Egyharmad évtized a meleg mozgalomban'

The Hungarian autobiographical writings that I am considering break the pact between the author and the reader implied by the genre of autobiography. As Helén B. Tamás (2003, p.81-82) formulates it at the beginning of her story in ‘The Stupid Faith Runs Over You’¹³:

I have to break the old codes of autobiographical writing, I should not give you any mass of facts, on the contrary, I can not publish any dates and real names this time. I have to even mutilate this *inner autobiography* by leaving out such periods of my life and feelings by which persons who are still living could be identified.¹⁴ (emphasis mine)

The mutilation of the inner autobiography confuses the reader and undermines the reader’s trust in the author. Not only is the reader told falsehoods, but a heavy self-censorship is put across: the author, conscious of the limits drawn by a hostile social context to the visibility of lesbian identity. This attitude, the fear of consequences, is even more understandable if we consider that Helén B. Tamás (2003, p.195) is one of a generation who lived most of their life in a society in which homosexuality was criminalised.

The Penal Code punished ‘unnatural perversion’ in case of a man in all cases and in case of a woman, if one of the partners was younger than 20. One of the defining elements of my identity was part of the Penal Code (...).¹⁵

And although homosexuality is no longer outlawed by the Penal Code, there is no need for Penal Code in a hostile social environment, even a democratic one: ‘I am too chicken for this democracy. By the time your civil rights are acknowledged, they can destroy your family life.’¹⁶ (Helén B. Tamás, 2003, p.202)

In the private sphere, visibility is also heavily under control since as the following extract from Helén B. Tamás (2003, p.197) illustrates, the act of coming out is sometimes not enough for recognition:

¹³ Tamás B. Helén ‘A sors buta lába gázol’

¹⁴ ‘Szakítanom kell a jól bevált önéletrajzi sémával, el kell hagynom az adathalmazt, sőt éppen, hogy dátumokat és valós tulajdonneveket nem közölhetek ezúttal. Sőt még ezt a belső önéletrajzot is csonkolnom kell az olyan időszakok és érzelmek vonatkozásában, amelyekkel ma is élő személyek azonosíthatóvá válnának.’

¹⁵ ‘A büntető törvénykönyv a férfiaknál minden esetben, a nőknél akkor rendelte büntetni a ‘természet elleni fajtalanságot’, ha az egyik fél húsz évnél fiatalabb volt. A személyiségem egyik meghatározó alkotóeleme tehát büntetőjogi kategóriának bizonyult (...).’

¹⁶ ‘Nyúl vagyok én ehhez a demokráciához is. Mire az ember elismerteti a törvényes jogait, szétzilálhatják a családjá életét.’

Zita listened to me and then she said that she did not condemn me for being homosexual but she would like if I did not talk about it anymore, if she didn't have to take it into consideration. This was the pattern of my every friendship and relationship with my relatives.¹⁷

And later on, talking about one of her lesbian relationship she says:

We would go to visit each other's relatives. Nobody asked about the nature of our relationship but this wasn't offensive. We could consider that they regarded our relationship as a marriage about which there was nothing to say because it had already been contracted and it works well.¹⁸

In the first extract, the visibility achieved by coming out is momentary because the coming out is not acknowledged by her addressee. Zita's reaction shows how visibility depends on recognition whether negative or positive since without it the lesbian identity can be easily pushed back into the closet. However, the second extract is partially in contradiction to the first one because she seems not to mind that her lesbianism is silenced as long as her lesbian relationship can go on. Both extracts exemplify the relational character of coming out and visibility. A refusal to recognize can easily nullify the moment of coming out. The solution found by Helén B. Tamás to the invisibility imposed on her by her surrounding friends and relatives is to play along with it as long as it does not affect her relationship with her lover and there is a silent acceptance. The relationship is not denied entirely only its visibility is forbidden.

Narrating Sexuality

The issue of visibility is connected to sexuality in the writing of Mária Papp entitled 'I remember'¹⁹. She describes how she wanted to express her homoerotic desire in public places like pubs and streets without the fear of punishment. Caressing the lover's hand, and small kisses are considered to be natural gestures that, however, are allowed in public only for heterosexuals public places. The secret holding hands in the pocket and finally the kiss on the street are all seen as courageous acts coming out, of acting out one's lesbian identity:

¹⁷ 'Zita meghallgatott, aztán azt mondta, hogy nem ítélt el amiatt, hogy homokos vagyok, de jobban szeretné, ha többet nem beszélne róla, ha neki nem kellene tudomásul vennie. Ez volt a sémája minden baráti, rokoni, emberi kapcsolatomban...'

¹⁸ 'Jártunk minketők rokonaihoz is; soha egyiküknél se hozták szóba a kettőnk kapcsolatának természetét, de ez nem volt bántó. Vehettük úgy is, hogy olyannak tekintik, mint a házasságot, amiről nincs mit mondani, ha már megkötött és kielégítően működik.'

¹⁹ Papp Mária: 'Emlékszem'

(...)- and I kissed you. In my “home town”, on the street. There was a time when I thought that I would never dare to do that. Love is the boss. It does not matter any more that someone could see you, you only feel that you need, you need to hold your lover’s hand.²⁰ (Papp, 2003, p. 216)

Sexuality plays a central role in the narration of the writings I am considering. There are some differences in the mode of narration of sexuality that can be attributed to generational differences. In the writings of Helén B. Tamás and Sarolta Gábor who belong to the first generation, being over 50, sexuality becomes an issue between the age of 15 and 17 when they try to conform to the heterosexual norms of dating. What undermines their imposed heterosexuality is a strong and close friendship with another girl that turns out to be more than friendship. This story stands at the core of their self discovery and their lesbian identity.

Relationality constitutes an important element that articulates lesbian identity. In case of visibility, as presented by Helén B. Tamás in the scene with Zita, relationality refers to the need for acknowledgement. In case of sexuality, relationality refers to the ‘(...) significant other(s), those whose stories are deeply implicated in the narrator’s and through whom the narrator understands her (...) own self-formation.’ (Smith and Watson, 2001, p.65). It is the significant other, another woman, who makes the narrator realize her true sexual identity.

In the writings of the younger generations who are between 20 and 35, the narration focuses on desire itself. Lesbian identity is articulated through sexual desire that is expressed through sexual remembrance or memory. The narration is infused with images of past desires which now, in the narrating time, attain a re-contextualization as re-actualisation. While the older generation posits the narrative of sexuality in a social context, the younger generation tends to neglect the social environment focusing entirely on their personal feelings and desires. The narrative thus becomes embedded in bodily desires which are highly eroticized.

There is a common pattern in the narrative of sexuality that appears in almost every text except the following: Agáta Gordon ‘Rókus’, Rita Béres-Deák ‘Without Title but not without Recommendation’ and Klára Fenyvesi ‘My Story’²¹. The common pattern is the struggle with a sexuality that does not fit into the norms required by society. To illustrate this dangerous

²⁰ ‘(...)- és megcsókoltalak. Saját “szülővárosomban”, az utcán. Volt idő, mikor úgy hittem, hogy eddig sose jutok el. A szerelem nagy úr. Már nem számít, hogy valaki megláthat, csak érzi az ember, hogy muszáj, muszáj megfogni a kedvese kezét.’

²¹ Gordon Agáta: ‘Rókus’, Béres-Deák Rita: ‘Cím nélkül, de nem ajánlás nélkül’, Fenyvesi Klára: ‘Az én történetem’

sexuality, I will analyse the text written under the penname Buccser entitled ‘Communication’²². The text is written in two voices that are separated by having different typographical styles, and the second voice sometimes changes from first person narration to third person narration. The one in italics, the second voice, always undermines, teases the first voice and makes ironic remarks. Lesbian desire and love are depicted as scary and confusing. At the same time, however, lesbian love is also considered to be one kind of love among others. The confusion is created by not conforming to the heterosexual norm.

(...) and at this moment it was clear to me that that I was in love for the first time in my life. And to top of it all, I was in love with a woman.²³ (Buccser, 2003, p.227)

On the other hand, there is the other problem: we are both women. (*This is only her fault, I am sure I can't be a faggot. Come on, Buccser, you should admit that you had fantasies about women before. Yes, but I have read that everybody has homoerotic fantasies and that doesn't mean anything [...]*)²⁴(Buccser, 2003, p.228)

In the end she is playing with the idea of suicide in a state of complete drunkenness only to wake up the next day, on a sunny July day with birds singing outside her window to admit she is condemned to life, to this life: ‘This is it, Buccser, this is your punishment, not death. A life of suffering.’²⁵ (Buccser, 2003, p.233). Acceptance of this sexuality constitutes an important phase in the narrative of the articulation of lesbian identity as its integration into the identity is crucial. If not, as Buccser says ‘a life of suffering’ is waiting for you.

Conclusions: Complete Invisibility

To conclude, I would like to reflect upon the writing of Agáta Gordon entitled ‘Rókus’. Her text reads as a short story inspired by the author’s life. The story evolves around the trip taken by the main character to the funeral of her husband. On the train, the wife runs into her ex-lover who is also going to the funeral. This meeting brings back some memories about their relationship and

²² Buccser: ‘Kommunikáció’

²³ ‘(...) , de ebben a pillanatban világos volt, hogy életemben először szerelmes vagyok. Ráadásul egy nőbe.’

²⁴ ‘Másrésről ott a másik probléma: minketten nők vagyunk. (*Ez is az ő hibája, én tuti nem lehetek buzi. Na, Buccser, valld be, hogy fantáziáltál már nőkről. Igen, de olvastam, hogy mindenkinek vannak homoerotikus fantáziái, ez még nem jelent semmit [...]*)’

²⁵ ‘Ez van, Buccser, ez a büntetésed, nem a halál. Szenvedhetsz egy életen át.’

she also evaluates in the light of the old one the new one. Both of the wife's relationships are lesbian ones, and the husband was living at the time of his death with another man. The story stands out from the other texts by the way the main character narrates her lesbianism by completely integrating it into her identity. She accepts it completely and so does her close circle of friends. Her lesbianism and her husband's homosexuality are never an issue.

This brings me back to the question of visibility and invisibility. Considering my interpretation of Agáta Gordon's autobiographical short story, I argue that invisibility of lesbian identity cannot be interpreted in every case as an erasure of lesbian identity. Invisibility is not all the time the oppositional term for visibility. They form a binary opposition when lesbianism is considered to be an issue in a hostile social context or on a personal level, when lesbianism constitutes a problem for the person herself and she tries to deny it by rendering it invisible. The hostile social and personal context renders them into binary opposition but they cease to function that way when lesbianism no longer counts in the sense that it becomes 'natural' part of the heterogeneity of public landscape. It is completely integrated into the social context. Thus, paradoxically, complete acceptance, full visibility makes lesbian identity invisible.

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