



The Image of Woman by Three Contemporary Hungarian Women Writers: Réka Mán-Várhegyi, Anita Harag, and Rita Halász

Magdalena GARBACIK-BALAKOWICZ

Institute for Literary Studies, Research Centre for the Humanities (Budapest, Hungary)
magdagarbacik@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1910-5446>

Abstract. Since the turn of the millennium, the position of women writers in Hungarian literature has changed – they became more and more visible. We can speak of a real and increased interest in women’s writing. It is important that this change, which is of inclusive character, relates not only to the reconstruction of the literary past of women writers and the re-evaluation of the literary tradition but also to the interest in contemporary authors and their works. At the same time, the continuation of previous literary achievements of women is emphasized. Following a brief theoretical and historical introduction, the paper offers an analysis of three books written by women writers of the younger generation: *Mágneshegy* (Magnet Hill, 2018) by Réka Mán-Várhegyi, *Évszakhoz képest hűvösebb* (Rather Cool for the Time of the Year, 2019) by Anita Harag, and *Mély levegő* (Deep Breath, 2020) by Rita Halász. The paper explores the image of woman that can be found in the analysed texts, examines the social dimension of these texts as well as the ways in which they correspond with and answer to the discourse on social changes in today’s Hungary.

Keywords: Hungarian literature, contemporary literature, women writers, the image of woman, social changes

Introduction

The collapse of the communist system marked a change for women writers in all Central European countries, where for decades only a few women managed to enter literary canon. The 1990s saw expanded literary activity by women – women writers of older generations continued their work with increased interest on the part of readers and critics, but they were also accompanied by the younger generation, where many female authors made their debut. As far as Hungary is concerned, the

following authors should be mentioned here: Magda Szabó, Anna Jókai, Zsuzsa Rakovszky, who continued their work, and Anna T. Szabó, Krisztina Tóth, Virág Erdős, Agáta Gordon, and others, from the debuting generation. At the same time, the first monographs and anthologies on women's writing were published.

Hungarian feminist criticism is often called "belated" (Séllei 2007, 140; Várnagy 2011, 24–25). Like in all Central European countries, also in Hungary, feminist literary criticism gained importance only after 1989. But in the case of Hungary, we can speak of increased developments only after the turn of the millennium (with works of such authors as Nóra Séllei, Edit Zsadányi, or Györgyi Horváth). This belatedness is even more evident when we compare it with the situation in other countries of the Central European region. When the first translations of Western feminist criticism were published in Hungary, in Poland research using the tools of feminist criticism had already been conducted on a large scale and in a short time several major monographs were published.¹ It is important to remember difficulties that feminist criticism encountered in the region. It was (and still is) entangled in social, historical, and political changes that have taken place in Central Europe, and, therefore, the ideological context is imposed on it on a much larger scale than in the Western world. Feminist criticism is seen by right-wing parties as an alien ideology that threatens the identity and existence of the nation. Moreover, as Judit Kádár points out, not only did feminist criticism arrive in Hungary late, but at the same time there also arrived a critical debate about it (Kádár 2003). This situation meant that feminist criticism as methodology not only had to deal with accusations of political agenda, but it also had no time for the organic development of its own discourse. Another problem was the focus of analysis. As researchers point out, the process of examining women's literary works should not be limited to reconstructing women's literary past and to re-interpreting and re-evaluating the literary tradition. Feminist criticism should also focus on contemporary female authors, which will enable the faster inclusion of women's works in the literary canon and will help to identify continuity in their literary activity. In Hungary, many of the first contributions of feminist criticism focused on foreign (mainly English and American) authors² or on re-discovering the past, mainly nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women writers.³ As Roguska and Györke point out, contemporary Hungarian women's literature remains under-researched (Roguska 2012, 217; Györke 2020, 235).

With my paper, I would like to contribute to this third aspect of feminist scholarship. I will focus on contemporary women writers. But as many feminist

1 These monographs were: Janion 1996, Borkowska 1996, Kłosińska 1999, Kraskowska 1999.

2 The following publications should be mentioned: Séllei 1999, 2001; Szalay 2002.

3 The following publications should be mentioned: Fábri 1996, Borgos and Szilágyi 2011, Menyhért 2013.

critics point out, not all books written by women should be considered by definition as feminist or *écriture féminine* (see, for example, Borkowska 1995, 44; Várnagy 2011, 25; Györke 2020, 238). However, examining the works of female authors who do not identify themselves with feminist criticism, or who do not explicitly thematize it in their works, also brings valuable findings to feminist criticism.

Several recurring thematic groups can be noticed among the numerous works by women in contemporary Hungarian literature. The first consists of different variants of historical novels in which one of the main issues is the question of female identity. The historical novel and its variants have been constantly present in Hungarian literature since Romanticism, but in the 1990s this genre sought to find new ways for representing the past – we can mention here the works of János Házy, Zsolt Láng, László Darvasi, or László Márton. Continuing this historical turn, the twenty-first century novels written by women brought a revival in terms of both aesthetics and language. Moreover, one distinct topic (although not always explicitly expressed) is also present, namely the identity of woman understood as identity constructed by reflection accompanying her existence. Zsuzsa Rakovszky's *A kígyó árnyéka* (The Shadow of the Snake, 2002) should be recognized as a turning point for the works of women writers in Hungary at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although the novel cannot be considered as a purely feminist work, in a way it follows a path close to the objectives of feminist criticism in terms of both subject-matter and language – it presents a specific female life experience described from women's perspective.⁴ The individual perspective and the fate of woman marked by history is also the main theme in other novels by Rakovszky – *A hullócsillag éve* (The Year of the Falling Star, 2005) and *VS* (SV, 2011). Andrea Tompa also places the action of her novels in historical settings. An individual forced to confront a period of history that directly affects people's lives is present in all her novels.

Apart from great historical narratives, contemporary women's prose in Hungary is also characterized by a focus on everyday life, even mundane matters. In this case, the authors rather opt for short narrative forms – short stories and novellas – instead of epic structures. The stories are set in the present or the near past. They show problems of everyday life but at the same time present a multidimensional insight into female subjectivity. Those stories make us feel that it has happened or could happen to us personally; they portray the complexity of human relationships and depict the barrier we have in communicating with others, both on the personal and the social level. They often show claustrophobic environment and entanglement in toxic relationships. We should mention authors like Edina Szvoren or Krisztina Tóth.

Another theme characteristic of contemporary women's texts is the question of female body, carnality, and sexuality. The first step in taking up this subject on a

4 Rakovszky's predecessors, such as Erzsébet Galgóczi and Alaine Polcz, should not be forgotten.

wider scale was the feminist literary project called *Kitakart Psyché* (Uncovered Psyche) that explored female sexuality and body in two volumes: *Éjszakai Állatkert* (Night-Time Zoo, 2005) and *Szomjas oázis* (Thirsty Oasis, 2007).⁵ Of numerous works that deal with this subject, we should mention at least *Inkognitó* (Incognito, 2010) by transgender writer Tibor Noé Kiss. The novel describes the life and coming out of a transgender person in the 1990s Hungary. *Incognito* shows experiences that today's Hungarian society still knows very little about. The issue of LGBT is dominated by superficial images in the mass media and government campaigns. The recent developments of Hungarian authorities further demonize and marginalize this social group.

This brings us to the next group of texts that thematizes many types of border crossings: emotional, sexual, geographical, social. This group will include such works as *Trans* (2006) by Noémi Kiss or *Vonalkód* (Barcode, 2006) by Krisztina Tóth. Yet another important theme is uncovering layers of violence – both physical and social. Many female writers, among them Kriszta Bódis, Virág Erdős, or Agáta Gordon, give voice to the excluded ones contributing to the inclusive quality of contemporary Hungarian literature.

Looking at the contemporary literary scene in Hungary, I have tried to capture common elements in the works of women writers. Furthermore, in all thematic groups we can observe one shared theme, which is the image of woman. Although it is present in many works, I will focus on three of them: *Mágneshegy* (Magnet Hill, 2018) by Réka Mán-Várhegyi, *Évszakhoz képest hűvösebb* (Rather Cool for the Time of the Year, 2019) by Anita Harag, and *Mély levegő* (Deep Breath, 2020) by Rita Halász. The authors belong to the young generation of women writers, and the works analysed are their debut, either as the first novel (Mán-Várhegyi) or as their literary debut in general (Harag and Halász). All three fall into the listed thematic groups – border crossing, focus on everyday life, and violence. All of them have also received in the past years both critical and readers' acclaim.

In Between Worlds – *Mágneshegy* (Magnet Hill) by Réka Mán-Várhegyi

The novel starts with a quote from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* dedicated to Margaret Cavendish, the seventeenth-century poet, writer, and philosopher. This reference is important because it immediately indicates the theme of the novel – the novel will discuss not only women's writing interests but also the social, cultural, and economic situation of women who (would like to) engage themselves in writing or generally in creative work. Similarly to Woolf, for Mán-Várhegyi, the

5 The other two volumes covered the relationship between mother and daughter and between father and daughter.

two spaces are strongly correlated – the socio-economic situation of women in a given cultural context has a direct impact on their creative potential. In the novel, women’s attempt to break through the glass ceiling is portrayed in both scientific and literary fields, both by well-positioned protagonists and by women from lower social classes. The author admitted in an interview that the reason for choosing the motto was not only her sympathy for feminist literary criticism and Woolf’s work. She was intrigued by the comparison of a noble lady to a cucumber, which she felt made Cavendish both a tragic and comic figure and evokes empathy in the reader for this extraordinary woman (Mán-Várhegyi 2018b).

In her eclectically constructed novel, Mán-Várhegyi presents the fates of several women who are very different in terms of age, social position, and life experience. The fates of the individual heroines, who can also be described as different types of women, intertwine and constantly influence each other. Moreover, the plot is placed in the broad context of the social changes of the 1990s and the turn of the century. As a result, we are not dealing with a monolithic image of woman and a totalizing narrative but more with a living mosaic where individual parts, though different, form a single image. The aforementioned dichotomy can be applied to all the female characters – the women in *Magnet Hill* are both tragic and comic figures. They all have something of the Duchess of Cavendish about them.

The first female character is Enikő Börönd, a feminist and sociologist who comes from a well-off Budapest family with academic traditions. The novel’s opening scene of a scientific conference seems to bring a clear picture of Enikő – a strong, courageous, modern, and successful woman who fights for equal rights on behalf of the weak. She seems to symbolize the changing position of women in a world ruled by men. However, the closer we get to know her, the more this picture changes. We become aware of the problems she faces, the sense of lack, unfulfilment, uncertainty, the constant fear that she will not be able to prove her worth. We see how she cannot cope with her family relationships, and despite efforts to cut herself off from the past, she repeats the same mistakes. When a friend offers to help her, Enikő comments on her divorce, pregnancy from a fleeting love affair, abandonment of New York for Budapest, and moving back in with her mother as follows: “I have to work through my traumas, my frustrations, my fears, my maladies and everything that is connected to my mother. You know, if I can do that, then finally I can have a clean slate, my writer’s block will go away, love and happy future will find me. I’ll let you know if things turn out differently” (Mán-Várhegyi 2018a, 150).⁶ Underneath these psychological platitudes, however, doubt can be felt as to whether this is possible at all. The ironic tone of these words suggests that Enikő, nevertheless, suspects that there is no chance of a clean slate and things will not work out differently for her. And this is indeed what happens. At the end, we do not see a happy and fulfilled

6 The translations from Hungarian literature are my own throughout the article.

woman and scientist but a woman who has given up and resigned herself to a fate below her dreams and aspirations.

The character of Enikő has a symbolic dimension also in another perspective – the confrontation of two worlds: a generations-long intellectual family from Budapest and the first-generation intellectuals who managed to escape from a small provincial town. In the novel, on the opposite side to Enikő, there stand both other women (for example, Regina, a sociologist from a provincial university) and men (for instance, Tamás Bogdán, who moved to Budapest from a small town in southern Hungary and with whom Enikő had an affair for some time). As a woman trying to succeed in the world of science, Enikő is seen not by her knowledge or her achievements but by her social background and the fact that she is a woman. She has been called the “flagship whore of the social sciences” (Mán-Várhegyi 2018a, 29) who – after all – could not have achieved anything without getting into bed with professors. This is the opinion of a young sociology student, Levente, a favourite of Tamás Bogdán, which is all the more significant because Levente himself wants to quicken his career by becoming acquainted with his professor. In this world, no man will hear that he owes his career to connections, acquaintances, or romance. However, such a harsh opinion is rooted in the reality of the hierarchical system prevailing in the scientific circles – Enikő was profiting from her origin whether she wanted to or not. The problems Enikő faces with her work (inability to finish her project) also raise the question of whether the life path she has chosen, i.e. a scientific career, was really her own decision or perhaps the pressure of her family and community.

Placing the plot in the academic world of sociologists is of particular importance and makes it necessary to look at the novel also from the perspective of social description. Mán-Várhegyi has a sharp eye and presents her observations in a highly ironic manner. *Magnet Hill* is full of mocking descriptions of academics. It is the social group that should be the one to actively work for social change and should carry the torch of education and progress. Instead, it appears to be the greatest bastion of the old world, maintaining an outdated social model that operates on the basis of hierarchical structure, prejudices, connections, favouritism. It is an environment full of stagnation and complexes in relation to the Western scientific world, trying to make up for decades of backwardness in a few years, but in fact it is closed and unwilling to accept what is new, different, and unknown. The picture of academia – and more broadly of the Hungarian intelligentsia – is extremely critical and indicates that this group actually produces more and more inequality and prejudice. As David Szolláth points out, social theory in *Magnet Hill* resembles the Bourdieuan field, “in which all players share common illusions and imaginings, thus contributing to the maintenance of the system” (Szolláth 2021, 212). Moreover, there is another accusation against this group: the self-centred academia and intelligentsia failed

to recognize the historically important moment of social change. This failure first resulted in the revival of national movements and then in their transformation into nationalist movements rejecting the values of liberal democracy (the theme of militant groups in Békásmegyer). This necessarily led to increasing social conflicts between different social groups.

The other prominent female character is Réka, a sociology student from a poor working-class family living “at the end of the world” in the mythical Békásmegyer, who tries to enter the privileged world of the Budapest intelligentsia. Despite the fact that Enikő and Réka are divided by practically everything, their fates are similar in the end – from dreams and aspirations to resignation and apathy. The character of Réka can also be seen as a symbol of the change that Hungarian society was to undergo with the political transformation of 1989 and the opening up to the West – allowing career opportunities regardless of gender and origin as well as rejection of decades of established social divisions and roles. In the character of Réka, however, the author shows how deeply rooted intersectional discrimination is in Hungary, which takes place on the basis of gender and social class. A talented and ambitious young student, who dreams of breaking out of the backward environment of Békásmegyer, returns to where she came from. She does not manage to establish herself in the salons of the elite for long, not even after her affair with a lecturer.

The character of Réka gains an additional dimension through the autobiographical game the author plays with the reader – the same name, unknown “double surname,” sociological studies, but above all literary aspirations. Right at the beginning of the book, Réka confesses that she would like to be a writer and is working on her first novel. It may seem that *Magnet Hill* is precisely Réka’s book, from which she as the protagonist disappears after a few chapters. However, Réka is unable to choose the right structure for her book. As she states: “As a woman writing about a woman, I have several things to worry about, for example, that future readers – whether they will occur or not is irrelevant – will identify the protagonist with me. A special difficulty is that there is love in the story, there are emotions, the protagonist has a spiritual life, and therefore there is a danger that the novel will be seen as a light summer reading” (Mán-Várhegyi 2018a, 81). In these two sentences, the author, through the voice of one of her heroines, has summarized the stereotypes that women writers still have to battle against.

The mixture of tragedy and comedy, which evokes sympathy in the reader, also applies to other female characters: Márta, Enikő’s mother, on the terrace of a café indulges in sexual fantasies instead of focusing on her sister’s success; Zsóka herself, Márta’s sister, who has remained in her sister’s shadow and who has been trying to write her novel for decades, trembles over every sentence and word as to whether it is the right one; Regina, assistant at the University of Debrecen, learns style and English from a popular British fashion show and

tries to hide her provincialism at an international conference. All the women of *Magnet Hill* have one thing in common – the lack of a place where they would feel safe, fulfilled, or happy, which leads to frequent mood swings, depression, and mental problems. Women in this world are constantly trying to balance the desire for self-fulfilment with the expectations of family or society, often making wrong and irrational decisions. Once they are strong and powerful, some other times they are weak and submissive (in the novel, this often applies to the same character who in individual chapters shows us a different face, or rather reveals a face hidden behind a mask intended for society). Even if women dare to step outside the established framework of artistic or scientific discourse, to propose something valuable and innovative, they face ostracism or at least disapproval, which has a negative impact on their psychological life and their work. Like Enikő's groundbreaking interdisciplinary research and the book she would like to write, it seems more like a burden than a dream, and the more she wants to realize her dream, the more impossible it seems.

The role of irony in the novel cannot be overlooked. Irony is used both for the description of individual characters and for descriptions of collective events, where it serves as a mechanism to characterize the group as a whole. Just to mention a dinner scene, where the fate of the poor is discussed over roast pheasants, or the numerous descriptions of eminent scientists who have not published any significant work for many years or depictions of scientific conferences where all participants are interested only in coffee breaks. Moreover, the author extends irony to the concept of genre as such. The novel's eclectic structure reveals the disintegrating reality in which its protagonists are forced to live. This allows irony to be seen as a dominant feature of the novel, which thus becomes a critique aimed at society or, more precisely, at the particular group of society. Irony is also aimed at feminism and other fashionable turn-of-the-century theories (in addition to feminism, post-structuralism and deconstruction are mentioned). In one of the chapters, Bogdán, who is an opponent of feminism, is chased by his former partners, and they do not let him take respite, just like phantoms in horror films. The character of Enikő can also be interpreted ironically. Although she is trying to introduce gender studies in Hungary, she herself upholds the system against which she wants to fight; she wants to do research on poverty and at the same time she spends a fortune on a handbag in Vienna. These examples, however, should not be read as directed against feminism itself but rather against the problems feminism had (still has?) to face in Hungary, where it is usually interpreted by its opponents as an empty ideology (in the novel, this view is represented by Bogdán) or as incomprehensible (represented by Regina) as well as against focusing on the theory itself and applying it unreflectively, transplanting it from a Western context into the context of post-communist Hungarian society which will unlikely contribute to a quick solution of problems faced by society (the

character of Enikő). Still, in the opinion of students, i.e. the younger generation, feminism is unambiguously positive: “my life has changed on your seminars” (Mán-Várhegyi 2018a, 267). Thanks to this polyphony of views and irony, the author managed to avoid falling into didactic literature.

Despite some shortcomings and the novel’s peculiar structural chaos – which, on a metaphorical level, can be read as a symbol of society’s decline and as poetics of self-reflection –, Mán-Várhegyi succeeded in two things. Firstly, she showed how women’s socio-economic situation influences their development and everyday life, and as a result determines their whole life, making it difficult, if not impossible, to break out of the ruts defined by their predetermined social status. Secondly, she portrayed two different social classes that in a dynamically changing world had to start not only to notice each other but also to respect and interact. Did it happen in the real world? Although the author set her novel at the turn of the millennium, it seems to depict an up-to-date picture of Hungarian society with strong stratification, ever-widening gaps between different social groups, and an invisible but still vibrant patriarchal culture.

Struggles of Everyday Life – *Évszakhoz képest hűvösebb* (Rather Cool for the Time of the Year) by Anita Harag

Anita Harag’s collection of short stories *Rather Cool for the Time of the Year*, similarly to Mán-Várhegyi’s novel, shows the image of woman from multiple perspectives. The protagonists of all thirteen stories are women, and the topics covered range from cancer, alcoholism, and senility experienced within the family to loss, grief, depression, and social alienation. The short stories reflect an everyday life full of nuances, entanglements with past events, and dependencies that are lost in a hasty generalization. However, unlike *Magnet Hill*, there is neither a strongly defined historical situation nor highlighted social transformations. There are no political references, explicit debates on social issues, or dramatic plot twists, which is perhaps why the image that emerges from the entire volume is so evocative and familiar. The collection tells the story of an average person, and yet it is able to show its social commitment. Each story is different, but they all share similar themes, characters, objects, places. Thanks to these thematic repetitions, we can speak of a specific relationship that arises between the individual stories, whereby the volume shows a broader picture of contemporary society. A certain image of woman can also be drawn from it.

The main motif is coolness, chilliness, sense of cold, which appears in the title of the entire volume (it is also the title of one of the short stories). Short stories deal with relationships marked by misunderstanding and lack of communication

between generations – grandparents, parents, children, spouses, and partners. Most stories are presented through the eyes of a child or a young woman. Although the protagonists are surrounded by family, friends, and colleagues, they remain lonely. The author has also incorporated coldness into the physical lives of the characters, which only intensifies the coldness on an emotional and psychological level. The water in a swimming pool is cold, the back of a chair in a waiting room is cool, or the look in a doctor's eyes is cold. The sense of coldness and remoteness is often complemented by the motif of silence, e.g. in “Huszonöt méter” (Twenty-five Meters), where the family is silent when visiting the father's grave, or in “Magyarul” (In Hungarian), where the protagonist wears headphones at work not to have to speak in foreign language with the colleagues.

However, women in their loneliness remain entangled in the system of social relationships (family, relationship, work). Harag interestingly shows how a woman's identity can be constructed by others, family or partner. An excellent example of this is the short story “A Láncíd északi oldala” (The North Side of the Chain Bridge). The protagonist and narrator gradually adopts the views and behaviour of her boyfriend. The girl tries to please the boy in everything, imitates his manner, does not allow herself to express her own opinion if it differs from his. We see the gradual assumption of power over the protagonist and making her dependent. The girl starts to violate her own norms, allows herself to be persuaded to do things she would never agree to on her own. However, those incidents are not great crimes – leaving the pathway on the Gellért Hill to get to the secret bastion, simulating illness at work to go to a café with a boyfriend, breaking into an abandoned and ruined house. From the point of view of the narration, the author applied an interesting technique. The girl, who is the narrator, hardly speaks at all, only constantly recalls the boy's statements. We are not quite sure whether the girl does not want to do all these things because she really does not feel like it, or maybe she has not had the courage to do them until now. From the few childhood memories she weaves into the story, we guess that she was taught to follow the rules. The story's closing episode of swimming in the icy Danube suggests, however, that we are dealing with a subtle but very real taking of control over the girl. This is indicated by the sentence-quote of the boy's words, which begins with the imperative in the first person singular and ends with the first person plural: “I am supposed to stop thinking, let's just run” (Harag 2019, 67).

Identity constructed through influence and relationship is also visible in the motif of woman taking her husband's name after marriage. The name has an identity-forming function here and the procedure of taking the husband's surname turns out to be a kind of abandonment of part of one's own identity. It should be noted here that this custom in Hungary can take on a form – one might say – of an extreme one: after marriage, a woman takes not only her husband's surname but also his name and adds only the suffix *-né* [Mrs] to her new surname. Her

maiden name and surname disappear. She becomes formally the woman of her husband: “We buried mum above dad [...]. I didn’t want to engrave what I saw on notices and documents from the bank, my father’s name and that né. My mum was someone more than my dad’s name and the né stuck to it” (Harag 2019, 99).

Corporeality also plays an important role in the construction of identity. The experience of the female body is an integral theme of the short stories. Biological and genetic connection with parents is highlighted on many levels – from breastfeeding to the thought of a mother’s body already decomposing in the grave. Appearance is determined by genes, i.e. by parents, and when the relationship with them is not a happy one, the physical resemblance influences the perception of one’s own body. This is well illustrated in “Székesfehérvártól nyugatra” (To the West from Székesfehérvár), where the protagonist cleans up a run-down house after the death of her alcoholic father and tries to deal somehow with the complicated relationship she had with him. She finds old family photographs, and when she looks at her own reflection in the mirror, she says: “Now I neither love nor hate being so much like him” (Harag 2019, 33). In “Twenty-five Meters,” female corporeality is shown from several perspectives. It tells the story of a family relationship that includes the father’s alcoholism, the wife’s faithfulness for better or for worse, and then the husband’s death and the family’s attempt to work through the loss. But yet another element is the mother’s breast cancer. The narrator, when she is still a child, is aware of her mother’s attractiveness and builds her own awareness of female body and identity in relation to her. But her mother gets sick and loses her breast, which was an attribute of her femininity. We see how, along with the illness, it is not only the body but also the mental state that suffers. An attractive, proud woman is transformed by her illness (but also by her husband’s alcoholism and his death); she stops taking care of herself and becomes depressed. When choosing new clothes, she no longer chooses those that emphasize her strengths but those in which she can hide. Breast cancer is also the theme of “Családi anamnézis” (Family Anamnesis). Here, in turn, the protagonist’s life is filled with fear that, like her mother, she will also die of breast cancer. This is why she constantly undergoes all possible examinations. But instead of being calmed by the good results, she is becoming more and more obsessed. To get next referrals, she even plans to make up symptoms. The mother’s illness and death becomes the element that directs the daughter’s life and thus constitutes her identity.

In Harag’s minimalist short stories, suffering, fear, and trauma are hidden behind everyday situations that may seem insignificant to the outside observer. The lives of the protagonists are filled with loss, illness, misunderstanding, and conflict with loved ones. The plurality of perspectives presents a picture of the 2010s and the world that young women had to face on a daily basis.

How to Get Out of the Circle of Violence – *Mély levegő* (Deep Breath) by Rita Halász

Unlike the two books discussed above, Rita Halász's novel *Deep Breath* focuses on the fate of one woman, Vera, who decides to leave her husband along with two children. The story is seemingly banal, but it uses a socially important topic that has been breaking through into the public discourse in recent years, nevertheless manages to avoid stereotypical approach to the issue.

We meet Vera when she decides to leave her husband, Péter, and moves into her family home. Over the course of several months, she recounts her journey of trying to rediscover herself and her self-worth. The whole story is presented from her perspective. She intersperses current events with descriptions of past events, the recent ones, showing the gradual breakdown of her marriage, but also the remote ones, when as a child she observed and witnessed the relationship between her parents. On the one hand, we gradually learn about Péter's emerging aggression – from unpleasant remarks about her family through insulting Vera, bullying her and humiliating in front of the children to physical aggression. On the other hand, the story of a single marriage is brought up to the level of the entire society.

Vera's story depicts a common social model: a woman, just after graduation, gets married and has a child and after two-three years another one, for which reason she does not work for a few years, and one day it turns out that at the age of thirty she has neither a job nor work experience and is financially dependent on her husband. The story of Vera and Péter's marriage itself is a transition from youthful love to the boredom of everyday life, unfulfilment, and emptiness, the consequence of which is an increasingly destructive relationship. One day, aggression also appears. At first, only verbal, but it develops into physical aggression in a short time. It is interesting that despite the presence of physical violence the language of violence and its destructive power have been placed at the centre of the novel. Physical violence, although present, does not represent the form that it is usually identified with in social discourse, i.e. the extreme form. Thanks to this, *Deep Breath* shows a much broader picture of social relations entangled in violent behaviour as well as a picture of family violence, which at the level of social discourse is often denied, i.e. it depicts physical violence that is socially condoned. Exactly that kind of relativizing explanation of Péter's aggression is given by Vera's father: "In marriage, this and that happens. During an argument, a slap may be given. One slap is not a slap. It matters how somebody kicks you. It's not the same if he hits you from a standing position or off the bed" (Halász 2020, 14). After leaving Péter, Vera moves back into the family home, where her father lives alone after a divorce. Time seems to have stopped here. While trying to find a solution, which initially does not exclude being back with Péter, Vera analyses not only her marriage but also the marriage

of her parents. She starts to realize more and more clearly how their relationship and the atmosphere in home have affected her, the decisions she has made, and the role she has taken on as a wife and mother: “If I’d been taught how to stand up for myself, how to argue, how to say no, maybe Péter wouldn’t – I stop here, I don’t know how to say it – maybe Péter wouldn’t have hurt me. But the only thing I’ve learned was how to shut up, because I was good when I shut up” (Halász 2020, 73). We observe how role models and patterns are invisibly reproduced, those at the most individual level but also those at the collective level. Vera can see what patterns she has learned from her parents. This recognition, though, does not mean that she is blaming someone for her own mistakes, such as the affair with a childhood friend. She admits them all and takes responsibility for them. This is one of the strongest features of the novel – the author has avoided presenting the story in black and white colours, and Vera herself is not a perfect female character. An element that rarely appears in books on this subject can be seen: Vera is an adventurous and lustful woman, who wants something more; she is not afraid to experiment and is capable of going to extremes. Behind the image of a woman determined by social expectations propagated by mass media and social media, which show an idyllic and perfect picture of family life, the novel reveals the reality, dilemmas, and desires of women, which are hidden behind the mask of “a good girl.”

The female models that Vera is confronted with are taken from the socio-cultural context. On the one hand, it is Saint Rita, on the other, a mermaid from Andersen’s fairy tale. The Catholic saint is the patron of marriages, of difficult and hopeless cases and is the model of marital virtues despite the unhappy and violent marriage that was her fate. The second model is promoted by the fairy tale of the mermaid who sacrifices everything for a prince. Not only does she abandon her world for him by taking on a human shape, but she also gives the witch her beautiful voice. She becomes mute. The novel shows how deeply rooted is the stereotypical role of woman as a mother – she should clean, cook, take care of the house, and devote herself fully to her family and husband while losing her voice in the process. We see this in many scenes, e.g. when Péter accuses Vera that she does not come from a normal family because her mother is not keen on cooking and cleaning, or in the scene when Vera accidentally overhears a conversation between her children and her mother: “I think dad would be a better mum than mum. [...] Why do you think so? – asks my mother. Because he likes to cook and sew our clothes. Mum doesn’t like to cook and she can’t sew. And because of this is someone a good mother? Yes. And not because someone loves you, cares for you and looks after you? I can’t hear what they answer” (Halász 2020, 154). We can see how imposed social norms and expectations deprive the protagonist of her self-worth and the sense of life: “Apart from my two children I have nothing, I am nobody, I have disappeared” (Halász 2020, 136). The culturally

constructed image is confronted with the devastating consequences it has on the lives of ordinary women. The propagated models are eventually rejected by the protagonist, and she creates her own image of woman-mother that is lacking the requirement of being perfect at the cost of losing her identity. When telling the fairy tale to her children, she comments on the mermaid's choice as follows: "She's doing a stupid thing. She shouldn't have given up her voice" (Halász 2020, 84). Vera decides to find herself and to maintain a balance between the various social roles she is challenged with. How they are to look is no longer accepted unreflectively – instead, as she states, "I'm experimenting" (Halász 2020, 193).

Deep Breath creates a complex and credible image of woman struggling for her place in the world. The novel shows that marital violence is not a marginal phenomenon and equally affects well-off families. However, it does not fall into shallow psychology offering an easy happy ending. It shows the difficult process of leaving a toxic relationship that does not end with a decision, a move-out, or even a divorce, but that is a long process marked by ups and downs. Thanks to its balance, *Deep Breath* becomes a universal and socially important story, skilfully fitting into the discourse on family violence and the role of woman in society.

Conclusions

As I have argued in this paper, representatives of contemporary women's prose in Hungary share a social commitment in their work. They can contribute to social discourses on different problems such as social changes, socio-economic determinants, or domestic violence. They undertake to talk about difficult, divisive, and complex social and psychological issues. They also answer the questions as to what the image of woman is like in the modern world, what problems she has to fight against, and how she deals with everyday problems. Thanks to this, Hungarian women writers bring valuable insight into the social context and provide diverse and multilayered perspectives on women's situation in today's Hungary.

Works Cited

- Borgos, Anna and Judit Szilágyi. 2011. *Nőírók és írók. Irodalmi és női szerepek a Nyugatban* [Women Writers and Writresses. Literary and Female Roles in the *Nyugat* Journal]. Budapest: Noran Könyvesház.
- Borkowska, Grażyna. 1995. "Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieca" [The Yeast Metaphor. What Is Women's Literature/Poetry]. *Teksty Drugie* vol. 33–34, no. 3–4: 31–44.

1996. *Cudzoziemki. Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej* [Female Foreigner. Studies on Polish Women's Prose]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich.
- Fábri, Anna. 1996. "A szép tiltott táj felé". *A magyar írók története két századforduló között, 1795–1905* ["Towards a Beautiful Forbidden Landscape." The History of Hungarian Women Writers between Two Turns of the Century, 1795–1905]. Budapest: Kortárs.
- Forgács, Zsuzsa, Agáta Gordon, and Kriszta Bódis. 2005. *Éjszakai állatkert. Antológia a női szexualitásról* [Night-Time Zoo. Anthology on Female Sexuality]. Budapest: Jonathan Miller.
- Forgács, Zsuzsa Bruria. 2007. *Szomjas oázis. Antológia a női testről* [Thirsty Oasis. Anthology on the Female Body]. Budapest: Jaffa Kiadó.
- Györke, Ágnes. 2020. "Contemporary Hungarian Women's Writing and Cosmopolitanism." *Porównania* vol. 27, no. 2: 235–246.
- Halász, Rita. 2020. *Mély levegő* [Deep Breath]. Budapest: Jelenkor.
- Harag, Anita. 2019. *Évszakhoz képest hűvösebb* [Rather Cool for the Time of the Year]. Budapest: Magvető.
- Janion, Maria. 1996. *Kobiety i duch inności* [Women and the Spirit of Otherness]. Warsaw: Sic!
- Kádár, Judit. 2003. "Miért nincs, ha van" [Why There Is Not If There Is]. *Beszélő* vol. 8, no. 11. <http://beszelo.c3.hu/cikkek/miert-nincs-ha-van> (Last accessed 31 May 2022).
- Kiss, Noémi. 2006. *Trans* [Trans]. Budapest: Magvető.
- Kiss, Tibor Noé. 2010. *Inkognitó* [Incognito]. Pécs: Alexandra Kiadó.
- Kłosińska, Krystyna. 1999. *Ciało, pożądanie, ubranie. O wczesnych powieściach Gabrieli Zapolskiej* [Body, Desire, Clothing. On the Early Novels by Gabriela Zapolska]. Krakow: eFKA.
- Kraskowska, Ewa. 1999. *Piórem niewieścim. Z problemów prozy kobiecej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego* [With a Feminine Pen. On Problems of Women's Prose of the Interwar Period]. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza.
- Mán-Várhegyi, Réka. 2018a. *Mágneshegy* [Magnet Hill]. Budapest: Magvető.
- 2018b. „A kérdést az uborka döntötte el” [“The Question Was Solved by the Cucumber”]. Interview by László Kőszeghy. *Élet és Irodalom* 23 November. <https://www.es.hu/cikk/2018-11-23/koszeghy-laszlo/a-kerdest-az-uborka-dontotte-el.html> (Last accessed 31 May 2022).
- Menyhért, Anna. 2013. *Női irodalmi hagyomány. Erdős Renée, Nemes Nagy Ágnes, Czóbel Minka, Kosztolányiné Harmatos Ilona, Lesznai Anna* [Women's Literary Tradition. Renée Erdős, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Minka Czóbel, Ilona Kosztolányiné Harmatos, Anna Lesznai]. Budapest: Napvilág.

- Rakovszky, Zsuzsa. 2002. *A kígyó árnyéka* [The Shadow of the Snake]. Budapest: Magvető.
2005. *A hullócsillag éve* [The Year of the Falling Star]. Budapest: Magvető.
2011. *VS [SV]*. Budapest: Magvető.
- Roguska, Magdalena. 2012. *Los niespełniony. O poszukiwaniu tożsamości w węgierskiej prozie kobiecej* [Unfulfilled Fate. On the Search for Identity in Hungarian Women's Prose]. Warsaw: Katedra Hungarystyki Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- Sélei, Nóra. 1999. *Lánnyá válik, s írni kezd. 19. századi angol írónők* [She Becomes a Girl and Starts to Write. Nineteenth-Century English Women Writers]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó.
2001. *Tükröm, tükröm... Írónők önéletrajzai a 20. század elejéről* [Mirror, mirror... Biographies of Women Writers from the Early Twentieth Century]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó.
2007. *Miért félünk a farkastól? Feminista irodalomszemlélet itt és most* [Why Are We Afraid of the Wolf? Feminist Literary Approach Here and Now]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó.
- Szalay, Edina. 2002. *A nő többször. Neogótika és női identitás a mai észak-amerikai regényben* [The Woman Repeatedly. Neo-Gothicism and Female Identity in the Contemporary North American Novel]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó.
- Szolláth, Dávid. 2021. "A kritikai realizmus jelentősége ma." Krusovszky Dénes, Akik már nem leszünk sosem és Mán-Várhegyi Réka, *Mágneshegy*." ["The Importance of Critical Realism Today." Dénes Krusovszky, Who We Will Never Be and Réka Mán-Várhegyi, *Magnet Hill*]. In *Reáliák. A Magyar Próza Jelene*, eds. Sarlota Deczki and Melinda Vásári, 208–218. Budapest: Kijárat.
- Tóth, Krisztina. 2006. *Vonalkód. Tizenöt történet* [Barcode. Fifteen stories]. Budapest: Magvető.
- Várnagy, Márta. 2011. "A női irodalom és a feminista irodalomkritika Magyarországon. Hangok és visszhangok" ["Women's Literature and Feminist Literary Criticism in Hungary. Voices and Echoes"]. *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat* vol. 1, no. 1: 23–35.