

BOOK REVIEW

Frauhammer, Krisztina – Pajor, Katalin (eds.). (2019). *Emlékek, szövegek, történetek: Női folklór szövegek*. [Memories, Texts, Stories: Women's Folklore Texts]. Budapest: Hungarian Ethnographic Society. 400. ISBN 978-615-80634-6-3

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The paradigm of feminist theory, along with postcolonial studies, has had a prolific influence on postmodern cultural and social science discourses since the 1980s. These trends, as we know, not only brought into focus subjects that were novel and less often discussed in previous studies (body, sexuality, violence, biopolitics, prostitution, madness, gender-based division of labor, alternative female and male identities), they also helped to raise awareness of the existing asymmetrical political, power, social and economic relations in the production of anthropological knowledge. In recent decades, all this has led to a wide-ranging critical rethinking, or at least a strong ethical, conceptual revision of scientific categories, methods, and representational practices, not only in ethnography/cultural anthropology but also in many other areas of social research.

From this – scientific and metacritical – point of view, the tome *Memories, Texts, Stories: Women's Folklore Texts* (2019), published by the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and edited by Krisztina Frauhammer and Katalin Pajor, seems a particularly exciting endeavor that could be of interest to the wider Hungarian scientific public. This book focuses on the analysis of women's folklore texts, i.e., gender relations constructed through various discursive practices – on topics that have not received enough attention within the disciplinary boundaries of Hungarian ethnographic research – and promises a textual folkloristic study of them. At the same time, all this carries within it, among other things, opportunities for (self)reflection in terms of research traditions and normative methodological and theoretical approaches of the given discipline.

The 400-page volume presents a selection of materials from a scientific conference organized by the Folklore Department of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society and the Folklore Department of the Institute of Ethnology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The book contains twenty-five studies which the editors, partly retaining the original thematic grouping of the conference, have divided into eight different chapters.

In the preface to the book, Krisztina Frauhammer briefly describes the Hungarian ethnographic history of women's research, the concept of the conference, and reviews the topics and research questions of the studies included in the volume. Even after having read this concise and meticulous introduction, the reader may wonder how these truly diverse studies – with divergent

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topic formulations, research methods, conceptual and interpretive-theoretical horizons, etc. – could be linked. It may seem that there is no organic connection between the studies of the volume, except for the women’s theme defined in a “loose,” very abstract way; the relationship between the individual chapters and parts of the book is not always cohesive, while on their own, the individual studies are generally important and profound writings.

The coherence of the volume perhaps could have been increased by an introductory study, which would theoretically – albeit schematically – position and frame the writings in the book within the disciplinary boundaries of folkloristic research. Such an editorial preface would have been particularly justified by the fact that, because of poststructuralist, postmodern, and especially postcolonial critique, contemporary feminist theories have increasingly shifted emphasis from monolithic, one-dimensional women-centered studies to the analysis of multiple or multiplicative inequalities (the interaction of discrimination mechanisms marked by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality) since the nineties. “Female” subjectivity, that is, the (homogenized and essentialized) experience of women, as a concept suitable for describing complex social relations, has therefore lost its former significance in recent decades, at least in the international literature. At the same time, by the nature of its topic, *Memories, Texts, Stories: Women’s Folklore Texts* seems to revitalize this analytical and conceptual perspective which, given the trends in international gender research, would have required an explanation.

In this respect, the problematization of the postulation of the subtitle is also justified. The acceptance of the categorical assertion that women’s folklore texts *exist ab ovo* (may) in itself raise a number of questions that may have been addressed in the introduction to the volume. Throughout the volume, the question remains open as to, for example, what makes a text “women’s” (feminine, or vice versa: non-women’s, masculine), or more specifically: in Hungarian folklore texts, what are the discursive codes, shifters, or markers (gender, social position, the content of the text, the gender of the reader, etc.) that determine whether it is a “men’s” or “women’s” text? In general, is it justified (i.e., rationally grounded) to talk about women’s folklore texts? And if so, how can the question of gender arise in relation to historical folklore phenomena, i.e., auto-referential texts in which past (non-textual) social reality is not accessible or only to a limited extent? What does the category of “women’s folklore” mean in the case of fictional texts and narratives where an organic connection between the real author outside the text and the gender roles within the text does not necessarily exist? What distinguishes this type of historical folkloristic research, which focuses on gender identity and discourses, from research in the history of mentalities that emerged within the discipline of history? In this context, where can we draw the disciplinary boundaries between historical folkloristics and contemporary historical research?

In this sense, the book contains not so much of the more general or generalizable findings that serve as a theoretical basis for subsequent gender-based folklore research. The reader gets a feeling that the organizers of the conference and the editors of the volume did not necessarily intend to build a theoretical framework at this early stage of the work; instead, they wanted to start an important dialogue, raise some questions, rather than provide explicit answers with a not so refined synthesis.

However, the analyses included in the book – despite the genre specifics of the case studies and their particular or individual research horizons – elaborate topics and empirical examples that can be used to revitalize Hungarian anthropological/ethnographic debates and discourses related to gender.



The first major structural unit of the volume (Historical Sources) contains four studies. The first of these is an excellent article by Ildikó Landgraf, in which the author, in contrast to the title of the chapter, deals not with the study of primary historical sources but rather with issues of institutional history and the history of science. Landgraf paints a portrait of three female researchers (Zsigmondné Gyarmathy, Zsófia Torma, and Mara Crop-Marlet), each of whom headed up various departments of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society established in 1889. She then describes the roles of women scientists, teachers, and (aristocratic) patronesses in the institutionalization of contemporary ethnographic collecting and research.

In the same chapter, Petra Bálint examines the records of 18th–19th century criminal lawsuits (from Heves and Külső-Szolnok counties) and the testimonies recorded in them. By analyzing everyday scenes (mundane conflicts), the text provides powerful examples of what kind of regulatory gender, sexual, and behavioral principles worked behind the norms violations (infanticide, husband poisoning, adultery, taking a lover, etc.) and the punishment mechanisms (physical and sexual abuse) in modern Hungary.

The first part of the volume concludes with an article by István Horváth and Imola Küllős. Both authors analyze an exciting, previously unknown Reform era manuscript, the so-called Urbarium of Liberal Women. Horváth briefly describes, and presents in the appendix, the actual source document created in 1835, which applies the linguistic and genre features of the centuries-old feudal power relations (between landlord and serfs) chronicled in the urbarium to ironically depict the – sexual – relations between contemporary men and women.

Imola Küllős provides a very thorough and complex cognitive linguistic, stylistic, and historical textual folkloristic analysis of the same manuscript, with special emphasis on the semantic stratification and multi-complex language games (which symbolically “subvert” and mock the relationships between men and women) of the allegorical piece of writing. In the context of the political pamphlet or lampoon written (presumably) by men, the author provides a detailed analysis of the genre history of the text as observed in 18th–19th century public poetry (complaints of husbands and maidens, woman- and slut-shaming, amusements in verse, sermon parodies, etc.) and folklore texts (tales of lying), as well as of its most important intertextual, stylistic connections. We can state, perhaps without exaggeration, that this is the only study in the volume that discusses the problem of culturally constituted meanings (from the point of view indicated in the title of the volume) in a narrower folkloristic, i.e., specifically language- and text-centric framework.

The second chapter of the volume deals with the role of women in folk religiosity. In describing various archival and other data and documents, the author of the first article, Jenő Szigeti, argues that it was the 18th–19th century household worship services, private piety practices (*praxis pietatis*), and the religious women who primarily organized them that facilitated the survival of the institutional framework of Protestantism in Hungary despite the expansive Catholic restoration. Éva Vörös, in her less scholarly, rather essayistic piece, provides examples of everyday sacred communication. She presents excerpts from the religious poems and rhymes related by a Transylvanian woman, Aunt Padzsi from Györgyfalva, which, according to the author, help the narrator to experience the sacredness of everyday life and to maintain their own mental hygiene. This structural unit of the book concludes with a study by Ildikó Tamás. The article introduces the reader to the revival movement of the Lutheran pastor, Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861), which led to certain elements of the pre-Christian Sámi faith – including (mythological and historical) female figures, female deities and symbols – being



incorporated into modern Christian theology and religious discourses. Tamás points out that these female attributes and spiritual notions still play a very important role in the ideological legitimation of contemporary Sámi ethnic identity-building projects, as well as political and artistic (pan-indigenous, neo-pagan, and other) movements.

The next part of the book (“Midwives, Healers, Cunning Women”) includes articles examining the issues of gender roles in the context of the human body – especially the female body – and the related traditional and modern regulatory discourses (folk medicine, curing, public health). Annamária Kocsis introduces the 18th-century Hungarian-language herbarium of Anna Zay and Kata Bethlen and the recipes contained therein (related to gynecology, military wound care, plague prevention), which may provide important supplementary data for contemporary research on the Hungarian antecedents of modern body politics. Based on less focused and methodical research, Erika Koltay’s article presents quotes about several specialists of folk medicine (herbalists, cunning and wise women) in order to clarify, in specific community interpretations, certain (presumably) characteristic features of the personality traits of women healers. The final study of the chapter deals with the topic of formal control of the female body. Analyzing an interview with a midwife from Nagyatád, Fanni Svégel explores the different norms of behavior and value developed in relation to the female body in different obstetric practices (midwives, doulas, physicians) in different types of institutions (home birth, maternity home, hospital). The author argues convincingly that in the mid-20th century, despite the gradual standardization of health care, certain elements and regulatory rules of premodern and modern gynecological and obstetric culture were not isolated but complementary, existing in a kind of “hybrid” (mixed) form.

As in the first chapter, two of the three studies in the thematic block called Deportation, Emigration (by Csilla Schell and Balázs Balogh) are also analyses of archival sources – private letters and other ego texts (private notes, personal documents, wills) – from the point of view of communication theory and historical ethnography. The first study of the chapter, an article by Bence Ament-Kovács, presents the history of the deportation of four different German (Danube Swabian) women in Hungary, primarily focusing on descriptions of the consensual content and narrative components (confiscation of assets, humiliation, Swabian work mentality, intra- and extra-group solidarity) in the specific retrospective narratives. Csilla Schell continues with the same topic. The author analyzes, very meticulously, the private letters of German women in Hungary preserved in the estate of the well-known ethnographer and linguist Eugen Bonomi, with particular interest in the ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and gender specifics that determined the written communication of Swabian families displaced in the 1940s. Balázs Balogh, on the other hand, delves into the personal effects (letters, notes, and other documents) of a Hungarian woman from Transylvania (Ágnes Bükkös) who emigrated to the United States of America. Despite the scarce and fragmented source material, the author paints a very accurate and detailed picture of the dramatic decision-making situations at the individual and household level (emigration–remigration, acculturation–dissimilation, integration–disintegration, etc.) which most immigrants from Eastern Europe to the United States, including the Transylvanian Hungarian family presented in the study, had to face in the first decades of the 20th century.

The fifth chapter, Female Versions and Values, comprises four studies. The first of these is the work of Szilvia Czingerel, who paints an exciting anthropological portrait – based on contemporary press materials and diaries – of the first beauty queen elected in 1929, Böske Simon, who was of Jewish descent. Through the specific – and seemingly individual – life story



and event, the reader gains an insight into the far-right (anti-Semitic, nationalist) political and social atmosphere of the Horthy era, as well as the radical domestic and European transformation of the discourse of 19th-century conservative body politics (female beauty ideal, relationship to body and fashion). Next, Dóra Pál-Kovács, examining the 20th-century Hungarian dance tradition of Magyarózd, compares the women's and men's version of the slow lads' dance named szegényes in order to shed light on the gender division in Hungarian movement and dance culture and some of its characteristic features (local social embeddedness, functions, symbolic mechanisms). The other two studies of the block (by Viktória Földi and Katalin Pajor) approach the issues of gender and femininity in terms of identity change, group status, and individual career paths.

Like Balázs Balogh, Viktória Földi examines the phenomenon of labor migration and 20th-century emigration to the United States of America. At the center of her analysis is the 1930–1940 correspondence of a Palóc family from Mátraterenye (Nógrád county) who emigrated to New Waterford, Canada. Through an accurate and meticulous source analysis, the article seeks to answer the question of how translocal social, cultural, and economic exchanges were established by the emigrant Palóc woman, and how foreign emigration transformed or changed her female roles accepted in the traditional society of her home country. At the end of this chapter, Katalin Pajor analyzes a single interview (her own grandmother's life story), primarily from a narratological, thematic-semantic viewpoint. We learn that the narrative focus of this specific atypical narrative (barely or not at all covering the subjects of childbirth and childraising, marriage, private relationships, individual emotions, etc.) is primarily organized around the interviewee's teaching and pedagogical career (professional motivations, biographical turning points, role and prestige as a teacher), in which the motif of individual adaptation skills is one of the most emphasized elements.

The next section of the book, *Marginalized Life Situations*, examines the topic of gender and female identity in the context of ethnicity and migration. Gábor Biczó analyzes biographical interviews with four Vlach Gypsy women. According to his findings, new identity narratives (interpretations of women's social empowerment, community responsibility, increased self-esteem, and adaptability) have been emerging within the Vlach Gypsy community, leading to the gradual institutionalization of autonomous female subjects and identities as opposed to traditional Vlach Gypsy women's roles. Réka Kész sheds light on another aspect of the same problem, the issue of women's actions and roles. Her article presents the situation of Transcarpathian women employed (informally) in Hungary as elderly caregivers and the difficulties related to their status in the labor market, focusing primarily on conflicts of values and interests that characterize the interactions between Hungarian employers and employees of Ukrainian citizenship.

Within the discourse of feminist or women's history research, gender inequalities in the labor market have been perhaps one of the most researched topics since the beginning of scientific research. The fifth chapter of the volume, *Women in Socialism*, provides an insight into this issue. It paints a detailed picture of the living and working conditions of women in the 20th century and their difficulties in changing status, chiefly from the perspective of economic history and labor anthropology. However, while Katalin Tóth follows the status change of a female member of a rural working family (mother) as she becomes an agricultural entrepreneur in the socialist second economy sector of small-scale or backyard production, Eszter Bartha presents gender segregation in the context of industrial wage workers. To put it very succinctly, ultimately both studies come



to the conclusion that the structural (economic, political, ideological) features of the Kádár era, the reproductive work within the family (housework, childraising, limited leisure time, the financial/privacy concerns of single mothers) and the social norms that ensure male hegemony have fundamentally limited actual opportunities for the economic and social mobility of female industrial and agricultural workers. This chapter concludes with an article by Judit Dobák, which examines the spatial objectifications of gender hierarchies in the Diósgyőr Ironworkers' colony in Miskolc. With the help of mental maps, interviews, as well as archival documents, family photos, etc., of the former employees, the author explores the interesting issue of how the perceptions of differences between men and women are related to categories indicating other ethnic (Gypsy–Hungarian) or social (poor–rich) inequalities in the hierarchical spatial practices and spatial use of the members of the former ironworkers' colony (under post-industrial conditions).

In the last chapter of the volume, *Female Cultural Informants*, a study by Veronika Lajos looks at the issue of female gender identity in connection with the methodological and epistemological issues inherent in anthropological research. The author provides a thorough and extensive overview of the most important recent international research trends in feminist anthropology. Then, in the context of her own empirical research among the Csángó, she presents fieldwork and research situations that illustrate the intertwining of gender, ethnic, and social hierarchies that determine the cognitive and ontological position of the researcher and the researched subjects, as well as the situational and performative determination of female identity and gender norms (which changes from situation to situation). Laura Iancu's article approaches the same issue from a different perspective, through the encounters between female cultural informants and a woman studying her own culture. The author reflects on three important components of the fieldwork situation from a methodological and other perspectives: the statuses and roles that can be assigned to a researcher by the local community in a discursive way (disciple, interlocutor); the researcher's perception of informants; and the gender hierarchies within the examined society. The volume concludes with a particularly subjective, personal piece by Janka Nagy. In it, the author reflects upon her intense, intimate relationships with her own female interviewees, searching for the female, gender characteristics and narrative specifics of life story narratives.

In conclusion, it is safe to say that this volume could prove to be a very important piece, in several respects, of the inception and revitalization of Hungarian ethnographic/anthropological studies related to gender. On the one hand, the book approaches and discusses socially constituted gender relations (female subjectivity, women's roles and values, gender-based division of labor, sexuality, body issues) at fundamentally different levels of analysis (in the context of historical sources, religion, health and biopolitics, ethnicity, labor, anthropological field research). In this way, it can provide abundant examples and empirical evidence for other interdisciplinary studies in the future. On the other hand, one of the common features of the studies in this volume is that they all analyze oral or written sources, i.e., linguistic phenomena at the heart of folklore research (discursive markers, popular language codes, narratives, rhetorical elements, literary motifs and narrative strategies, textual meanings and connections). The problematization of these linguistic, textual dimensions – which determine the anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork and the entire process of scientific knowledge production – and the clarification of its epistemological issues and methods could become an essential task for contemporary scientific (ethnographic, anthropological, historical) discourse dealing with the contemporary phenomena of popular culture. The first step taken by the authors and editors of



the book – namely the effort to integrate the findings of gender studies and the feminist critique of science into today’s folkloristic analyses – could certainly contribute to the more precise definition of the disciplinary meaning, rules of use, and operational value of the concepts used in Hungarian cultural research, as well as to the addition of novel analytical aspects to the research traditions developed in the given discipline.

