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“The Woman Question” as Expressed in the Work of Slovenian Writer Pavlina Pajk, and the Presumed Influence of Western Ideas on Her Work

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Foreign literary influences, German and Western European in particular, played a pivotal role in the 19th-century Slovenian literary field. During this time, the first female Slovenian authors emerged. Among them was Pavlina Pajk (1854–1901) who continued the tradition of the sentimental novel. Her texts incorporate several topics and motifs associated with the novels of other Western female authors, in particular those of George Sand. Moreover, Pajk was the first Slovenian woman writer who, presumably influenced by Western ideas, started writing about “the woman question”. This article thus presents Pajk’s ideas concerning “the woman question” in her writings.

KEYWORDS: Pavlina Pajk; women writers; 19th century; woman question; Slovenian literature; influences

1. Foreign Influences on the 19th-Century Slovenian Literature: Western Influences on Female Slovenian Authors and “the Woman Question” in the Slovenian Women’s Novel

The development of Slovenian literature as a “small”, marginal branch of literature (Juvan 2008: 16) has been often shaped by its relationship with foreign literature. Due to political pressure from the Austrian Empire¹, Slovenian intelligentsia relied almost exclusively on German litera-

¹ In the 19th century, the Slovenian Lands formed part of the Habsburg Empire, in which German was the official language.

ture until the 19th century (Ocvirk 1975: 111). In the second half of the 19th century, after the Revolutions of 1848, Slovenian authors started looking for other sources of inspiration from elsewhere in Europe (Kos 2001: 118): French, British and Slavic in particular. The 19th century was also the period, in which Slovenian women started appearing in public life in the broadest sense of the term (cf. Vodopivec 1994). Moreover, the revolutionary year of 1848 was a “turning point in the history of Slovene women’s literature”, as around that time several female authors emerged and began writing in order to contribute to national causes with their writings (Mihurko Poniž 2008: 32).

The researcher Katarina Bogataj-Gradišnik raised the question of the reception of foreign women writers in the Slovenian Lands in the 19th century. According to her, the sentimental novel developed in the Slovenian Lands after the Revolutions of 1848, when the Slovenian national movement started (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 102). With regard to sentimental characteristics, Slovenian authors drew their inspiration particularly from English, German and French middle-class literature (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 107–155). They are assumed to have followed the example of Pamela from the novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* by Samuel Richardson (1740), which is said to have mixed with other types of novels in 19th century European lands. The most important characteristic is the education of the female protagonist, and her resulting move towards independence (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 138). Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) and George Sand’s *Le Marquis de Villemer* (1860) are, among others, also said to have followed this example. These two are examples that several female Slovenian authors, including Pavlina Pajk, most likely followed. However, it is difficult to determine exactly how much influence they had on the work of Slovenian writers, since many local and foreign influences intertwined, and German authors were the most influential (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 141). Several of Pajk’s works could be considered as modern variations on Pamela’s story, for they have the following motifs in common: the protagonists are all beautiful, educated orphans who earn their own money as a lady’s companion or maid (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 142). In the Slovenian women’s novel the protagonist almost always gets married. The deviation is represented by the loss of the aristocratic lover, who is replaced by a bourgeois scholar (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 143).

“The woman question” – which, in Bogataj-Gradišnik’s opinion, originated from the works of Madame de Staël – also appears in the Slovenian women’s novel. Female Slovenian protagonists, according to Bogataj Gradišnik, are educated women earning their own money. But they are still rather meek in comparison to the protagonists of the Brontë sisters, George Eliot, and George Sand. However, they still decide their own destiny by independently choosing their partners (Bogataj-Gradišnik 1984: 145).

2. Pavlina Pajk, “the Woman Question” and the Presumable Influence of George Sand

In her early work, Pavlina Pajk² “emphasized female sensitivity and criticized the restrictions on women’s freedom in patriarchal society” (Verginella 2006: 389). Later on, when she wrote for the literary gazette “Zora” (Dawn), her “literary creativity was released, turning towards romantic idealism” (Verginella 2006: 390). Her literary works mostly include sentimental novels and short stories. Pajk was also the first female Slovenian author, who started writing publicly about “the woman question”. She was probably influenced by the first wave of feminism that reached the Slovenian Lands through German speaking territories in the second half of the 19th century (Pešak Mikec 2003: 63). In 1884, she published an article entitled *Nekoliko besedic k ženskemu vprašanju* (Some Words about the Woman Question) and in 1894 she gave a lecture on the same topic at the Slovenian club in Vienna. Nevertheless, Pavlina Pajk did not demand the radical emancipation of women (Pešak Mikec 2003: 69–72). She adapted feminist demands to Slovenian conditions in order to contradict unfounded statements about female abilities originating from the differences in education and formation. She strived for elementary education for women of all social classes and she called people’s attention to the inequality of women. However, her view of the female condition was still a very traditional one because, in her opinion, the vocation of a woman was to become a mother. Only if she did not succeed, should she study and take up

²Pavlina Pajk was born in Italy, therefore her first language was Italian. She started learning Slovene at the age of sixteen.

a profession. Nonetheless, her public discussions “supported women’s involvement in Slovenian cultural and political life and helped pave the way for organized women’s activity” (Verginella 2006: 391). Despite being the first female Slovenian author to start writing about “the woman question”, Pavlina Pajk was not a feminist³. However, with her writings Pajk paved the way for other, more radical, Slovenian women writers and feminists, particularly Zofka Kveder (1878–1926) (Mihurko Poniž 2014: 85).

In 1876, Pajk published a long obituary of the French novelist George Sand in “Zora”. In the piece, she presented the author and her work. Aside from discussing Sand’s unusual (for a woman) way of life, Pajk also stressed Sand’s engagement in the emancipation of women, and consequent inclusion of this topic in her writings. A closer comparison of their prose writings shows that Sand very likely influenced the literary activity of Pajk (Badalič 2014: 152–159). In addition to the similar motifs, there are other indications within Pajk’s works, which show that she read Sand’s novels. There is a resemblance in terms of content and composition. Similarities can be seen in genre, motifs, setting, words and names (Badalič 2014: 152–153)⁴.

3. “The Woman Question” in Pavlina Pajk’s Works

The theme of “the woman question” started appearing in the novels of Western female authors in the first half of the 19th century. Eventually, it appeared within the works of the first female Slovenian authors, particularly in the works of Pavlina Pajk. Pajk included ideas concerning “the woman question” not only in her aforementioned article and lecture, but also in the majority of her works. She focused above all on topics, which were already known from Western novels, such as the novels of George Sand and Charlotte Brontë, namely marriage of convenience, women’s education and women earning their own livelihood.

³The first Slovenian feminist “who earned this title by holding provocative and bold views on the positioning of women in society” (Mihurko Poniž 2011: 333) at the end of the 19th century was the author and publicist Elvira Dolinar (1870–1961).

⁴For a detailed comparison of their works, see Badalič 2014.

3.1. Vindication of Marriage for Love

Similarly to George Sand, who strongly condemned conventional marriages in her extremely popular novels *Indiana* (1832), *Valentine* (1832) and *Lélia* (1833)⁵, Pavlina Pajk also disapproved of arranged marriages. She firmly supported marriage for love and therefore the right of a woman to choose her own husband, and this can be seen in most of her works. For instance, in *Dušne borbe* (The Fights of the Soul, 1896) the young and beautiful Feodora, similarly to Sand’s *Indiana*, is married to an older man – Emerih. She accepts getting married to him in order to comply with her father’s wishes. He wants to remarry after his wife’s death and cannot take care of Feodora any more. After her marriage, Feodora lives only for her husband and her home: she completely dedicates herself to housekeeping. However, since her husband takes more interest in his profession than in his wife, Feodora feels neglected and starts dreaming of a loving husband whom she finds in the person of Emerih’s much younger brother, Franjo. However, unlike *Indiana*, Feodora fights against her feelings for Franjo and even though there are no impediments to their love after Emerih’s death, Feodora rejects Franjo since she thinks that they have to atone for loving each other. Besides, she is not convinced that they would be as happy married as they are as friends.

In *Slučaji usode* (Chances of Fate, 1897) the 18-year-old Malvina gets married to a young and rich man, since her mother’s new family cannot take care of her any more. Even though she does not love her husband, she is not opposed to getting married. From her letters, her mother grasps that Malvina is unhappy because of her violent husband. When he goes into hiding due to bankruptcy, she finally finds her true love Otmar. Even though she has been widowed, she does not want to marry him. Malvina has become a mature and independent woman (she is 32 years old at the end of the novel) who does not need to get married in order to improve her financial situation (Mihurko Poniž 2014: 65). However, in the last scene, Malvina, who has been left a large fortune, wants to buy Otmar’s manor house and even proposes to him, which was probably a daring and radical

⁵The protagonists of *Indiana*, *Valentine* and *Lélia* try to break out of their roles. The theme of adultery in these novels was condemned by the Slovenian writer Josip Jurčič (1844–1881) (Mihurko Poniž, Badalič 2012: 85).

move for a woman in 19th century society (cf. Mihurko Poniž 2014: 66). It must also be noted that Malvina is two years older than Otmar, which could be also considered unusual for a contemporary couple, even though similar cases also appear in Sand's work⁶. In the same novel, Avrelija is married to an older, rich husband, whom she does not love.

The young Arabela (*Arabela*), when confronted with her uncle's decision to promise her to his son Samuel, firmly declares that the most important thing for their relationship is missing – her love for Samuel. She finally resigns saying, "As far as I see, my money is wooed and not my person" (Pajk 1885: 68). Once again, she claims that a marriage without love would be a misfortune (cf. Mihurko Poniž 2014: 62): "A mutual life of two married persons who do not love each other is worse than being tied to a corpse" (Pajk 1885: 390).

In *Roka in srce* Melita is indignant that her parents want to give her in marriage to an older man because her father lost his money on the stock exchange. Nevertheless, she accepts him, but she becomes indifferent and rude. Melita even makes a fool of herself since she is clothed and groomed as "a lady-in-waiting" (Pajk 1895: 25), which shows that her appearance has changed overnight in order to make her look like an adult woman: "Don't you see that they have made me older under compulsion? They have adorned me like a doll in order to become a worthier bride for an honourable groom" (Pajk 1895: 25). Leonora, a friend of her mother, tries to change Melita's mind by saying that her sacrifice will be returned to her a hundred-fold, and that anyhow, "sooner or later another man would take her away from home" (Pajk 1895: 26). Leonora's words, however, seem to be insincere, since she herself prefers to remain unmarried. Melita persists in her conviction: "I want to love my husband and to be loved by him. That is all I demand. (...) I do not love the marquis and I doubt that he loves me sincerely. I suspect that he considers me a toy" (Pajk 1895: 26–27). After her marriage, Melita confronts her husband and accuses him of buying her: "You wanted me and I had to go with you. In one word, as I see it, you bought me. For this reason, I do not love you as is my duty as your wife. Instead I just hate you" (Pajk 1895: 39).

⁶For instance, Madeleine from Sand's novel *François le Champi* (1847) is ten years older than François.

Other female protagonists more or less firmly repudiate marriage for financial reasons. Irma from *Odlomki ženskega dnevnika* (Fragments of a Woman’s Diary, 1876) rejects a captain to whom her stepmother wishes to give her in marriage, and Alenka from *Planinska idila* (Alpine Idyll, 1895) does not comply with the wishes of her uncle and aunt, refusing to marry her cousin since she does not love him (Čeh Steger 2014: 76).

In Pajk’s works, the theme of unmarried women also plays an important role. A rather critical discourse concerning the condition of unmarried women in society can be found in *Odlomki ženskega dnevnika* (Čeh Steger 2014: 76). After her stepmother reproaches her, predicting that she’ll end up an old spinster rather than a rich lady, Irma starts reflecting on the unmarried women who are despised and mocked by society. She thinks that, in order to fulfil the purpose of her nature, a woman has to become a wife and a mother. However, she comes to the resolution that girls who cannot find a loving husband should not marry through a fear of being single, since marriage without love could be a bigger misfortune than not being married at all:

It is no wonder that so many girls, in order to avoid being mocked for spinsterhood, get married without will, without love, reaping thorns where they once wished to gather the flowers of love. But poor fellows do not have a presentiment that the latter misfortune is bigger than the first one! Therefore, rather an old spinster than an unhappy wife! (Pajk 1893: 160)

Irma advocates the right to choose a partner freely (Mihurko Poniž 2014: 56): “I want to be as free in such an important step as I am in all other my acts” (Pajk 1893: 161). In the end, when she recognizes that the man with whom she is in love has to join the clergy, the protagonist seems to opt for seclusion in the countryside.

A particular case of marriage without love is the marriage of the 29-year-old governess Evfemija in *Mačeha* (The Stepmother, 1883). Evfemija gets married just to fulfil the last wish of her protégée’s dying father, who dies six hours after getting married. The old man wanted that his 17-year-old daughter Elza would be well taken care of after his death. In the same novelette, as Elza comes of age, Evfemija tries to convince her to get married to the well-off engineer Piber, who asks for her hand. But Elza refuses the proposal, saying that she likes her “freedom too much to think about getting married” (Pajk 1895: 78). Furthermore, Elza has read

that conjugal happiness depends on the spiritual affinity between the couple (Pajk 1895: 80), which is the reason she cannot marry Piber. Despite this, when Elza realizes that Bodanski and Evfemija love each other, she writes to Evfemija informing her that she has changed her mind and will marry Piber due to his devotion to her, even though she does not “love him too much” (Pajk 1895: 158).

The 14-year-old female protagonist, Cilka, in *Obljuba* (Promise, 1894) makes an arrangement with the rich Gašper in order to find a job for her father. Cilka promises to get married to Gašper’s hunchbacked son Jurijček when she reaches the age of 19. When the time comes and she has to fulfil her promise, she realizes that she has made a big mistake, since she does not love Jurijček.

The topic of female beauty, or rather female ugliness, and its impact on a woman’s efforts to find a husband is also highlighted. For instance, Arabela (*Arabela*) is depicted as a physically unattractive young girl who, according to her uncle, without her money would not be worthy of a man’s notice (Pajk 1885: 3). Similarly, Sidonija (*Dušne borbe*) is even considered to be an ugly girl by her mother, who advises her to force herself towards men in order to find a husband. She is conscious of the fact that no man would ever marry her if it wasn’t for her big dowry, and she is sad since her mother wants to bargain with her “like one bargains for a stupid animal” (Pajk 1896: 287). While Feodora tries to persuade Sidonija’s mother, Vidmarca, that Sidonija does not need to get married, since she is financially well-off, Vidmarca angrily replies that she does not want her daughter to be an old spinster, since she would be a misfortune and a disgrace to her whole family. Feodora vindicates marriage for love and strongly disapproves of Vidmarca’s words: “Not every woman is meant for marriage. By all means, better an old spinster than an unhappy wife” (Pajk 1896: 290).

3.2. Female Education and Livelihood

The writings of Pavlina Pajk also include the topics of female education and livelihood⁷. In her work, the female protagonists are generally

⁷These topics are also very prominent in Sand’s *Le Marquis de Villemer* and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*.

well-educated women. Nevertheless, scarce or impractical education is referred to in several parts. As Čeh Stegar points out, “Educational or moral rules for 19th century bourgeois girls dictated living somewhat secluded from real life. Before marriage, they hardly appeared in public and they did not travel much” (Čeh Stegar 2014: 77). This can be seen, for instance, in *Roka in srce*. Melita has the chance to travel during her honeymoon and notices, for the first time, the beauty and curiosities of other places, while Leonora complains about her scarce knowledge of geography (Čeh Stegar 2014: 77). In the same novelette, when Melita speaks about marrying for love, Leonora thinks that Melita’s adult way of speaking does not belong with the light-mindedness of her young age. She attributes this to Melita’s inappropriate reading matter. In fact, she wonders if Melita’s speech is “not the result of reading exaggerated novels which talk about the satisfaction of two hearts in a small hut” (Pajk 1895: 27).

Several female protagonists in Pajk’s works are orphans (or at least without one parent) and therefore have to find a job in order to survive. Leonora (*Roka in srce*), a 55-year-old unmarried woman, started working at the age of 17 in order to take care of her mother and herself. Her work gives her a “feeling of freedom and self-confidence” (Mihurko Poniž 2014: 55): “I do my best and I work myself to death from dawn to night, Leonora frequently said to herself, but in doing so, I rejoice in the golden freedom. I think and I work as much I feel like doing so” (Pajk 1895: 4). This very character therefore “attests a different point of view on the unmarried woman, ‘an old spinster’, who was frequently exposed to mockery in 19th-century society” (Mihurko Poniž 2014: 55). Nevertheless, when she gets older and exhausted, she is invited by the marquis – Melita’s husband – to come and live at their place, where she is well taken care of.

The young Elza (*Mačeha*) prefers freedom over marriage to Piber in order to be able to write, but Evfemija, her stepmother, does not take her seriously. Evfemija even dissuades Elza from her idea, saying that her vocation is not to become a writer, since her character is too unsteady for such a serious work. Instead, according to Evfemija, she should instead get married (Pajk 1895: 79–80). Elza finally resolves that she would not make any progress in her writing career if she was married to the unwitty Piber. When Elza falls in love with Bodanski, Evfemija tries to discourage Elza once more with regard to her writing, claiming that educated men want

to have a simple, diligent wife who devotes herself to housekeeping and children since, in her opinion, a man's time is too precious to care for home matters (Pajk 1895: 110). Besides, Evfemija reads Elza's texts and she considers them "exaggerated throughout" (Pajk 1895: 111). Evfemija continues: "For now, give up all writing and dedicate yourself to your groom, your future husband. Later on, when you are older, start writing again if you still wish to and if you have enough time" (Pajk 1895: 111). Even though Elza defies Evfemija, declaring that she will do the housework by day and write by night, the narrator does not mention Elza's aspiration for writing novels any more following her marriage.

At the very beginning of the novel *Slučaji usode*, the family of the state official Kolar is introduced. The focus is only on the female members of the family, and reveals the problems of female education, the exploitation of women in the private sphere, and their will to change their roles (Mihurko Poníž 2014: 67). In fact, the family is on the verge of despair due to financial problems. For this reason, and since they have education, Malvina's half-sisters want to find jobs. However, their father doesn't allow them to work since, in his opinion, they would tarnish the name of their forefathers in doing so. He states that only when he dies will they be allowed to earn their own livelihood. His wife tries, unsuccessfully, to persuade him otherwise: "What should the girls become then? What should they do at home, when they have learned their profession, if you do not allow them to find a job as we have decided?" (Pajk 1897: 28). Malvina, in contrast, is obliged to find a job, since her husband has left her with a baby. She goes to Graz, where she works very hard in order to sustain herself and her child. When her child dies, she starts working as a *dame de compagnie* and even supports her family⁸.

3.3. Other Topics Concerning "the Woman Question"

Other topics concerned with the freedom of women and their right to make their own choices, in particular those regarding religion and beliefs,

⁸The orphan Ada in *Blagodejna zvezdica* (Beneficent Star, 1881) also earns her own livelihood as a maid.

can be found in Pajk’s work. For instance, Arabela’s mother, a Jewess, gets married to a Christian and is consequently severely punished by her own family: her husband is killed while she is locked up in the attic. Judita, in the eponymous novelette *Judita* (1896), is influenced by her nihilistic step-mother, but Viljem patiently changes her religious points of view.

In the novelette *Uslišana* (Fulfilled, 1900), the idea of freedom is depicted in the wish of Nadica to ride a bike but, since she finds it indecent for a young girl, her aunt does not give her permission to ride alone. Nevertheless, Nadica achieves her goal.

4. Conclusion

Pavlina Pajk’s ideas with regard to “the woman question” were probably influenced by the texts written by Western female authors, those written by George Sand in particular. A more detailed analysis of her texts shows that Pajk focused specifically on marriage of convenience, female education and on women who earned their own livelihood. Pajk is in favour of marriage for love. Even though the majority of her female protagonists seem not to be as radical as the heroines in the novels of other Western authors, characters like Malvina (*Slučaji usode*) or Melita (*Roka in srce*) do dare to break conventional rules and oppose their husbands. The importance of female education is also highlighted. In some texts, the author even alludes to the scarce education of women and its impact on their everyday life. The topic of education is also closely linked to that of women who earn their own livelihood, since educated or unmarried women have a better chance of finding a job. Furthermore, Pajk dwells on other themes connected to female freedom such as religious beliefs and other physical activities, such as cycling. Nevertheless, her ideas were not as radical as those of the Western female authors of the time since, in her own work, she probably took into consideration contemporary Slovenian cultural circumstances and her own traditional beliefs.

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