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The Anti-Racist Overtones of a Feminist Historical Novel Tetralogy from the 1940s

Abstract: *Although the most popular Hungarian historical novels were written in the nineteenth century by the famous romantic writer, Mór Jókai, a revival of the genre occurred in the period following the First World War. Most of the authors, each influenced by a different worldview, were scouring the symbolic space of history for an explanation as to why Hungary had lost the war. “Our knowledge of the past, our cultural heritage is also a symbolic space that is the site of struggle for the self-representation of social groups, a space that is shaped according to the degrees to which certain groups have access to it” – states Györgyi Horváth in her work on the constitutive role of the historical narrative; this, of course, is also true of authors in the Post World War I Era. They represented their own social groups, which happened to be white, middle class, Hungarian men. Although the period between the two World Wars saw the rise of female authorship, and dozens of historical novels were published by women each year, almost all women writers conceived their novels from a dominant masculine perspective. In this paper, I examine one of the few exceptions, a tetralogy of historical novels by Lola Kosáryné Réz, written from the perspective of oppressed women, and I discuss her stance on the relationship between different ethnicities in discourses of war and responsibility.*

Although the historical novels of Mór Jókai, one of the greatest Hungarian novelists, were born in the nineteenth century, the quarter of a century between the two world wars witnessed the birth of the majority of Hungarian historical novels, with most of their authors, each influenced by a different worldview, trying to find an explanation within the symbolical space of Hungarian history for the country’s defeat in World War I. As the literary theorist Györgyi Horváth pointed out in her book on the identifying, constitutive role of the historical narrative, “[o]ur knowledge of the past, our cultural heritage is also a symbolic space that is the site of struggle for the self-representation of social groups, a space that is shaped according to the degrees to which certain groups have access to it” (Horváth 2007, 15). Self-representation was at stake also for novelists of the Horthy era that began in 1920, who represented their own social group, which happened to be white, middle-class, Hungarian men. Although the period between the two World Wars saw the rise of female authorship, and dozens of historical novels were published by women each year, almost all women writers conceived their novels from a dominant masculine perspective. In this paper, I examine one of the few exceptions, a tetralogy of historical novels by the popular contemporary novelist Lola Kosáryné Réz, written from the perspective of oppressed women, and I discuss how she redefined women’s roles and, in relation to that, her stance on the relationship between different ethnicities in discourses of war and responsibility.

The two contemporary best-selling historical novels, Zsigmond Móricz’s *Erdély* trilogy (Transylvania Trilogy), especially its first part *Tündérbert* (The Fairy Garden), published in 1922, and Irén Gulácsy’s *Fekete Vőlegények* (The Black Grooms) (1927), the plots of which take the reader to the sixteenth and seventeenth century respectively, are also conceived from a patriarchal perspective, abounding in negative female characters, who are unable to understand their male counterparts working for the good of the homeland and thus only are there to draw them back. In these novels, men are not listening to women, because what women say, as it is often emphasized in Gulácsy’s novel, is only “herspeech” and, as such, it is of no use. Most probably these two novels and Móricz’s cultural novel about the husband who blamed his wife for his spoilt life, *Az asszony beleszól* (She Sticks Her Oar In)

(1933), inspired the conservative feminist Lola Kosáryné Réz, who was already a popular writer of Catholic girl novels at that time, to create her historical novel tetralogy reflecting her own views. The first and last of the tetralogy's female protagonists, the two Katalin Patócsys, and the novel itself, *Asszonybeszéd* (Herspeech), are named after Gulácsy's novel. With this feminist tetralogy, Kosáryné wanted to enter the symbolic space of the Hungarian cultural heritage and represent women, or as she put it in the preface of the last volume, "[she was] looking for the soul of the Hungarian woman," because "what they actually know about her? Only what those with power saw or thought they saw and what men wanted to see, nothing else." Until recently, however, Kosáryné's attempt to enter the symbolic space of Hungarian literature remained unsuccessful, with literary critics failing to notice even that her volumes published in succession from 1942 to 1947 belong to a coherent tetralogy and with her works being banned after 1947. Up to 2010, when Kráter Műhely publishing house finally published her tetralogy as a whole, literary history had not even known about her most important work, in which she attempted a feminist reform of historical self-representation through rewriting the last three and a half centuries of Hungarian history.

While Kosáryné decided on writing the first volume, *Asszonybeszéd* (1942), most probably during the 1930s and she did exhaustive research for its continuation, *Perceg a szú* (Scrapes the Beetle), she had less time for the last two volumes, *Vaskalitka* (Ironcage) and *Por és hamu* (Dust and Ashes). According to her grandson, Domokos Imre Nagy, Kosáryné "started to write [the third volume] around the time of the siege of Budapest" in 1945 and published it in the following year. Kosáryné finished the last one of the tetralogy "about half a year" and then at the request of the publisher she had to rewrite it in a smaller compass "in a few months" (Nagy 2010, 437). If she needed about half a year to complete one volume, then she must have started working on *Por és hamu* in the second half of 1945 at the earliest, but due to the rewriting, she must have finished it during the summer of 1946. Although the aesthetic quality of the volumes gradually decreased because of the fast work, the changing style of the volumes clearly show the impact of the historical events on her novelist strategy.

In 2010, the tetralogy, which depicts Hungarian history from 1585 to 1944 as a series of interlocking stories of the female descendants of the "ancient mother" Patócsy, was republished complete with an "Epilogue", the continuation of the genealogy, written in the 1970s and added to the last volume by Kráter Műhely publishing house. From the very first volume, the distinctive female genealogy of the novels confutes the view of Hungarians as a homogenous ethnicity. Those volumes Kosáryné wrote after World War II, have an openly anti-racist tone as her formerly implicit criticism of Hungarian chauvinism becomes explicit and stronger. The didactic aim of the work did not change, but its aesthetic value was weakened by the fact that while in *Asszonybeszéd* the reader could verify xenophobia to be wrong only through a series of correct categorical syllogisms, in *Por és hamu* the reader only had to believe the narrator or a positive character.

The first female protagonist of Lola Kosáryné Réz's first volume is a Hungarian noblewoman from the sixteenth century. Kosáryné, born into an intellectual-bourgeois family, probably chose a noblewoman as her first protagonist, because she shared the nationalist opinion of the ruling elite in the first half of the twentieth century, according to which in the medieval, feudal Hungarian society those women who belonged to the ruling class had more rights and greater independence than their counterparts living in Western and Eastern countries. At the end of the 1580s, Patócsy's mother explains this idea to her daughter in the following way: "I heard that life was even more difficult for the woman in the outer countries. Unlike the Turk and other pagan people, Hungarian men always appreciated their women. I, myself, ruled in our castle, while your father was away" (Kosáryné 2010/I, 25). The novel starts out from this disappearing state, a "Golden Age" of women, who could learn to read and write, manage the land in the absence of their husband, after the death of whom, widows

could inherit the land, and treating the sick belonged to women's competence. Due to the Ottoman wars and the subsequent spread of the "pagan" worldview Hungarian noblewomen lost their rights, and thus during the next four centuries the primary objective of Kosáryné's seventeen female protagonists became to reclaim them. However, in the end of the genealogy, the last Patócsy does not want more rights than the first one, representing a female subjectivity, who leaves public life for men and who could be content if her "herspeech" was being taken seriously, while she accepts patriarchal order (Kádár 2009, 73).

The first female protagonist from the early modern age was disenfranchised and thus deprived of her property, of the (fictive) castle of Dabas located in the Hungarian Bükk Mountains, which led to the impoverishment of her female descendants, who were forced to live in increasingly miserable conditions. Thus, already in the first volume, Kosáryné "democratizes" the nobility by shaping the destiny of her protagonists in a way that at the lowermost point of the genealogy, the central female figure becomes a serf because of her husband's serfdom. Kosáryné not only "declasses" the Patócsy family, but also deprives them of their pure Hungarian ethnicity. The first Katalin Patócsy dies of grief over the death of her husband and her female relatives take her daughter from Dabas to the North Hungarian region, which was free from Turkish occupation at that time and where the half-Saxon, half-Hungarian bourgeois Fülöp Muner takes them under his wings, enabling them to keep some of their assets. Muner marries the widowed mother of the first female protagonist, Krisztina Patócsyné Lábdy, while Muner's "miner-bourgeois" son marries the first female descendant of Katalin Patócsy, Krisztina Dabasy. The husband of the fourth female protagonist, György Gall János, is also German, a run-away butcher from Mannheim, who further worsens the situation of the family. The social decline of the family, however, is not caused by Gall's German descent, but rather by his aggressive attitude towards women. As we have seen above, already in the first volume published in the middle of World War II, Kosáryné makes the life of the reader prone to prejudiced thinking difficult in so far as suggesting that (German) origin in and of itself is neither good, nor bad, and to top it all, the last name of the German man implies he is of French origin. The great-great grandchild of Katalin Patócsy loses even her name, because she was still little, when Gall brutally murdered her mother, Margit Dóczy, and later she does not remember what her mother taught her. Looking at the notable male characters of German origin, although all the premises seem to be true, the syllogism typical of prejudiced thinking cannot be supported:

Every German man is married to a Patócsy woman
A few of the Patócsy women's husbands are bad
Every German male character is bad

In the second volume published in 1943, Anna Ficfa stops the family's descent into the lower classes by being able to marry despite her being a camp follower. Her husband, Leopold Pfutsch, Viennese Austrian *profos*, a prison guard, is still of lower class and not even Hungarian. Even the nationality of Anna, for whom the last name Ficfa is only a nickname as she does not know the name of her ancestors, becomes questionable for a while. The only document that certifies her existence is Pfutsch's passport declaring that she is "seyn Ehe Frau, geb. Anna Vitzva" (Kosáryné 2010/II, 66). Earlier Anna could not care less about her nationality, but her slow social ascension reminds her of her being Hungarian and that she had "noble ancestors, who fought for the homeland" (Kosáryné 2010/II, 73), in spite of which she does not come back to the Hungarian area of Austria because she feels homesick but only follows her husband, who wants to obtain a piece of free land. Among families from Württemberg and Nuremberg, they are the first settlers in the deserted Buda after the Turkish occupation, and Anna becomes the second "ancient mother" who (together with her husband) reestablishes the family, almost destroyed due to the Ottoman occupation, and moves along

the genealogy. Anna Leopoldné Pfutsch, relying on memory fragments of her noble family's old culture handed down to her by her mother, becomes a decent Hungarian bourgeois woman of Buda, which is slowly rebuilt by hard-working foreign settlers. It is largely due to Anna that her husband, who did not speak Hungarian in the beginning, is assimilated into Hungarian culture so successfully that towards the end of his life he becomes a member of the city council. They give German as well as Hungarian names to their children, Gáspár, Gergely, Leopold, Melchior, Erhard and Georg, who, however, is most often called György within the family. Anna Ficfa's daughter, who follows her in the genealogy, still has a German name, Leopoldina Pfutsch. While Leopoldina moves back to the other main location of the tetralogy, Banska Stiavnica (Hungarian: Selmecebánya) in the north-western part of the Carpathian Mountains, the remaining craftsmen and merchants Pfutschs marry into German bourgeois families and play an important role in the growth of Buda-Pest, the two cities on the coast of Danube. In the nineteenth century Mihály Pfutsch Magyarizes (Hungarianizes) his name to Mihály Pala and joins the female genealogy as the second husband of Katalin Krammer and becomes a high-ranking city official and one of the organizers of the millennium celebrations.

The four volumes typically portray the negative male characters in a way that their non-Hungarian surnames cannot be linked to their negative traits, while some of their given names, following the determinism of the Latin proverb, *nomen est omen*, do reflect their bad character. The ancient villain, Menyhárt Medgyesi, who caused the death of Katalin Patócsy, is Hungarian and Kosáryné named him after a real person, the loathsome lord Menyhárt Balassa from the sixteenth century. Many of Kosáryné's aggressive and misogynist male characters are also called Menyhért or Menyhárt (the Hungarian versions of the biblical name Melchior) over the centuries, but not all Menyhárts/Menyhérts are of Hungarian origin. Anna Ficfa is not familiar with her past, but she knows that the Menyhárt name brings ill luck to the one who bears it. Because of her lower class status she does not know Latin, so she gives the name Melchior to one of her children, who behaves just as badly as the first Menyhárt, breaking in one of the parish churches in the downtown of Pest, before finding redemption and becoming a priest under a new name, Father Gellért, thus faith saves him from delinquency and the destiny determined by his original name. Menyhárt Fekete, husband of Katalin Luzsa, the female protagonist from the late eighteenth century, is also a violent man, who rapes his wife on their honeymoon, but later, influenced by her spouse, who is committed to the doctrines of Enlightenment, amends his ways.

Those men, who pose a threat to Patócsy women, play a negative role in public life, or to use V. Y. Propp's taxonomy, who are "aggressor" men, have the same given name and their surname tends to remain the same for several generations, as in the case of the Hlavata descendants. The first character with the name Hlavata, the son of a "brave and honest" midwife, who helps Katalin Luzsa, a female protagonist in "auxiliary" role, give birth to her children, appears in the third volume *Vaskalítka*, written during the war (Kosáryné 2010/III, 82). The midwife's only son, Flórián Hlavata is the book's first antagonist, who consciously plots against Hungarians. He is a secret agent working for Vienna Court at the end of the eighteenth century, when a group of Hungarian noblemen forming an alliance against Austrian oppression is prosecuted in the so called Martinovics trial, in connection of which Hlavata is looking for the letters of one of the defendants, Ferenc Kazinczy, whose character is modeled after the real life Hungarian author with a firm belief in the tenets of Enlightenment. Flórián Hlavata's loving mother, however, is completely unsuspecting of her son's despicable acts. Flórián's son, Elemér, who is also a spy, changes his surname to the Hungarian-sounding name Hangvölgyi to hide his "profession" and after the overthrow of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, is responsible for the execution of the husband of the eleventh female protagonist, who was forced into hiding because he fought in the revolution. Elemér

Hlavata/Hangvölgyi's illegitimate son, Menyhért Hangvölgyi chases away the thirteenth female protagonist, Kata Krammer from Selmecebánya before destroying her marriage in Pest. This Menyhért Hangvölgyi is on the side of the Germans in World War I, and then towards the end of the 1930s he joins the extreme right and becomes the founder and executive chairman of a Hungarian chauvinist organization that rejects Western culture. Two of his sons, Ond Hangh-Veölgyhy, who changes his name from the less elegant Hangvölgyi after World War II, and Tass, who changes his name to Stimmenthal out of respect for the Nazis, are both spies for the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party. Just like in the case of German characters, there are positive and negative Slovak characters as well in the tetralogy. The fact that not every Hlavata is a spy, because the Menyhérts belong to the category of wife-batterers destabilizes the logic of prejudiced thinking. Hlavatas are not connected through their being spies, but through their violent character, which is, however, not passed by heredity, but rather by following the bad example of the fathers, that is, by poor child rearing. Therefore, the reader, who might have concluded by this time that all Hlavatas are spies, has to revise the false conclusion that, due to prejudiced thinking, may have been drawn from the two true premises pertaining to those characters that are named Hlavata (later Hangvölgyi).

Every Hlavata (Hangvölgyi) is bad

A few bad men are spies

Every Hlavata (Hangvölgyi) is a spy

By the Hlavata–Hangvölgyi–Hang-Veölgyhy ironical name switch, the reader is also confronted with what kind of ulterior motives may be behind Hungarian chauvinistic use of names and arrogant Hungarianism.

Kosáryné developed the first Jewish character in the third volume of her tetralogy, *Vaskalitka*, early in the year of 1945, shortly after the period when the majority of Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz in the spring and summer of 1944. In the part of *Vaskalitka* that takes place during the Age of Reform non-Jewish characters bear no resentment against Jewish characters despite the fact that anti-Semitism was present already in the literature of the Reformation era, in the popular novels of András Dugonics and Ignác Nagy from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Kádár 1998). Kosáry depicted the situation of Jews in the early nineteenth century more ideally than it was in reality. In the story of Fanny Lócsei, the newly introduced character, Náthán, is a “Jewish peddler”, who initially goes about on foot, collecting bones and waste grease in his sack, and his lack of a surname also indicates ill fortune, but within a few years “he bought a cart, he became known everywhere and fewer pitted their dogs against him, and people were glad to collect the waste for him, and he brought soap in return. (...) Especially at urban gentry houses everyone welcomed that Náthán brought soap, because soap boiling is an arduous and dirty work and who can bear its stench” (Kosáryné 2010/III, 156) Women help him and other peddlers, by which they support the development of capitalism. Women like to buy candles and foreign textile goods, for which they pay with money, while their husbands, holding onto feudalism, have a hard time managing their businesses. Due to his diligence, Náthán soon becomes the innkeeper of the Körmötzy land, to the delight of his satisfied customers. His two sons, Chájim and Móric Weisz fight by the side of famous revolutionists, Kossuth and Görgey in the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, after which Móric has to emigrate due to his having been decorated by Kossuth. Náthán's daughter, Regina, is seduced and betrayed by Elemér Hangvölgyi, and after her illegitimate son is taken away from her, she emigrates to Paris, from where she supports her brothers working as a milliner. Chájim, who changes his name to the Hungarian-sounding Izsó, seeing the decline of the Hungarian manufacturing industry, opens a French wine shop in Pest, which becomes successful. Chájim/Izsó employs the husband of the twelfth female protagonist, Mari Körmötzy, after he cowardly deserted during

the Revolution in 1848 and consequently, his employer who was opposing Austrian rule let him go. Regina marries a wealthy milliner from Prague, moves back to Pest and becomes the beautiful woman from Paris in the eyes of the people. Around 1860, Regina visits her son, Menyhért, who is raised by his paternal grandparents, the Hlavata-Hangvölgyis and who, not knowing that she is his mother, shouts anti-Semitic slurs and throws mud at her. Apart from this incident, the Weisz family does not encounter anti-Semitism until the 1870s. Even then, Móricz is hopeful despite that he thinks that “(...) there are already people who hate us. These are the people who slowly lose the land, the money, the power, the press or who have never given rise to anything of value. They are jealous, hungry and weak.” However, he is also confident in that “Hungarians are fundamentally kind-hearted and righteous” and that is why they “will never do pogroms. Hungarians fret, get drunk and even sing “Ergerberger” [Hungarian anti-Semitic song], but it is nothing we should worry about, because then they sleep like a baby and that’s it” (Kosáryné 2010/III, 515). Probably, Kosáryné was not aware of the anti-Semitic sound of some of the Weisz brothers’ statements. “We get on in life a little too well” says Chájim, for instance, or “I don’t like their coming in (the immigration of Jewish people to Hungary) such a high numbers, either,” states Móricz (Kosáryné 2010/III, 514).

After the Holocaust and the sharpening of the Slovak-Hungarian conflict in 1945, Kosáryné might have felt that for having created negative Slovak-Jewish characters like Menyhért Hangvölgyi her standing against xenophobia and anti-Semitism was not clear enough, so in the name of her novelist strategy against prejudiced thinking, she started to develop explicitly positive characters of Slovak-Jewish origin in *Perceg a szű*. The national identity of the positive character, the maid Hanka, although her Hungarian is occasionally poor, is still ambiguous in the third volume, *Vaskalitka*, but in the fourth volume, she and her husband, János Kropata, are clearly Slovaks. Their son agitates for a “free Slovakia” already in 1912 (Kosáryné 2010/IV, 237), their grandson becomes secretary of state in Prague after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while their granddaughter marries a Hungarian man and moves to the Bükk Mountains. The half-Slovak, half-Hungarian son of this granddaughter, Mihály Dabasi, who works at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in Budapest and who is a brilliant young political scientist delivering lectures about problems of nationality for the Association for Foreign Affairs of Hungary (Magyar Külügyi Társaság), becomes the husband of the last female protagonist, Katalin Patócsy. Since the deportation of the Hungarian population of South-Slovakia had already been under way for at least a year before the treaty of the Hungarian-Czechoslovak population exchange was signed in the spring of 1946 (when Kosáryné was writing the last volume) and in September of 1946 the deportation of the Slovak population from Hungarian territories started as well, the way Kosáryné developed the plot, clearly demonstrating her belief that every person belongs to the nation, of which he or she claims to be a member, may even be considered a political protest against stigmatizing and punishing people on the basis of their origin.

In the fourth volume, Kosáryné developed several minor Jewish characters, many of which may be sketchy, but every one of whom plays an important role in making the life of the Patócsy women take a turn for the better. A Jewish man, Kondor Bernát, helps the fifteenth female protagonist, Krisztina Szalay, first with money so she could go home to Selmecebánya after World War I, and later with recommending a Jewish lawyer so she could buy a lot in Dabas, on the land of the first female protagonist. Later, in the spring of 1944, Krisztina hides her good friend Béla Weisz from the Arrow Cross officers on this land. Krisztina truly does not hold any prejudice against Jews, but she is still reluctant to face the responsibility of Hungarian people:

... I cannot believe that any Hungarian would have done such a thing [would have participated in the deportation of Hungarian Jews] in Hungarian villages and towns. Hungarians are kind-hearted and even if their hatred could be manipulated, because unfortunately they are ignorant and therefore credulous, Hungarians are not ruthless and abusive people, not even towards their deadliest enemies. But if such a thing had really happened, we would suffer terribly for it. We always suffer a hundred times for everything. (Kosáryné 2010/IV, 437)

Lola Kosáryné Réz, who was the descendant of partly German (Saxon) ancestors, lived in Selmezbánya, from where she was forced to emigrate to Hungary, voiced her tolerant views regarding the non-Hungarian ethnicities of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary already in her first works published after World War I. She won a prestigious award for her novel, *Filoména* (1920), the main protagonist of which is a maid from Upper Hungary (Hungarian: Felvidék, Southern Slovakia). The protagonist of her autobiographical novel, *Alom* (Dream), which she wrote after the dissolution of the Monarchy and published in *Nyugat* (leading Hungarian literary journal at that time), adopts the illegitimate son of a maid also of Slovak origin. In Kosáryné's most important work, in her novel tetralogy, her novelist strategy was formed by her intentions to contribute to the reform of women's self-representation in literature, but more importantly to contribute to the development of an open-minded mentality free of prejudice. Her son, Domokos, a great Hungarian historian in the twentieth century, was right when he stated that "[m]y mother believed in civil Hungary."

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