

## Ildikó Váradi (Jyväskylä): The Status of Finnish Women Between the World Wars in János Kodolányi's Travelogue

In my article I will focus on the work of János Kodolányi, who was one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century in Hungarian literature. He was furthermore an important person in the history of Hungarian and Finnish cultural relations. My research deals with a lesser known part of his works, namely his connections to Finland and Finnish culture, in addition to the observations made during his trips to Finland.

János Kodolányi was in Finland five times between the years 1936–38. He wrote many articles for several Hungarian newspapers such as *Pesti Napló*, *Szabad-ság* and *Az Est* about the country and his experiences. His first travel book, *Suomi, a csend országa* (Finland, the Land of Silence), based on these texts, was published in 1937. Two years later he released another book about his travels, called *Suomi titka* (The Secret of Finland). Additionally, these volumes were published together in the book entitled *Suomi* (Finland). The first edition was printed in 1942, while the second was printed two years later.<sup>1</sup> Here we have to mention that these volumes strongly influenced and shaped Hungarians' image of Finland between the world wars.

Kodolányi in his travelogues analyzed among other factors the living conditions, cultural circumstances and traditions of Finnish peasantry. He reported on Finnish education policy and the different types of school systems. In addition, he also reviewed the main points of Finnish democracy and finally wrote about the relations between Finnish men and women, including the position of women in Finland.

In this article I will focus mainly on the social status and emancipation of Finnish women between the two world wars on the basis of János Kodolányi's travelogue *Suomi, a csend országa*. In my work I will try to answer the following questions: how the Hungarian traveller saw and perceived emancipation in Finland in his travel book; and what kind of impression he formed regarding Finnish women in the course of his travels. In addition to this, I would like to deal with the factors and elements which influenced Kodolányi's image of Finnish women. Here I have to mention that the brief length of my article does not allow me to analyze the authenticity of his image and idealized picture of Finnish women. I would like to interpret the position of women in Finland as János Kodolányi saw and became aware of it in his travel book.

I use two different approaches in my investigation. On the one hand, my analysis is based on the traveller's statements according to which femininity cannot be represented without interpreting its relation to masculinity. That is to say, in Kodolányi's book women are written about as in binary opposition to men.<sup>2</sup> It can be said that in his construction, women are interpreted in relation to how much they differ from the norms of men.

On the other hand, there is a crucial element that should be noticed when analysing the ideal Finnish woman in Kodolányi's travelogue. The image that Kodo-

<sup>1</sup> Ifj. Kodolányi János: Utószó. In Kodolányi János: *Suomi*. Budapest. Magvető Könyvkiadó. 1990. 273.

<sup>2</sup> Séllei Nóra: Mért félünk a farkastól? *Debreceni Disputa*. Debrecen. Alföldi Nyomda Rt. 2006. június. IV. évfolyam. 6. szám 10.

lányi had about Finnish women was influenced not only by the relationship between men and women, but also by his cultural tradition, or rather, by his own social environment, and the problematic socio-political conditions of Hungary between the two world wars.<sup>3</sup> For this reason I will refer to the status and conditions of Hungarian women in the interwar period.

In the travelogue called *Suomi, a csend országá* Kodolányi reaches the conclusion that the relationship between men and women, in addition to the rhythm of Finnish life and society, is influenced by symbolical acts and work. If this conclusion is taken into consideration, it can be supposed that Kodolányi's image of Finnish women and their social status is characterized by a certain dichotomy on the micro and macro levels of Finnish society.

As far as the status of Finnish women on the micro level goes, the writer was deeply and positively impressed by his visit to the Heinola women's teacher training school, and by his encounter with the pupils of the co-ed school of Hartola. He remembered this event with the following words: "The girls – blonde, well-built beauties, fit to be mothers, wearing national costumes – came blushing to the podium and stroked their presents, deeply moved. It was beautiful, sweet, and unforgettable!"<sup>4</sup> In Kodolányi's conception, Finnish women appear first of all in the role of a mother. Their duties include, for example, the protection of the home and family, as well as the education of children. In the case of the latter, the writer means the teaching of self-control, self-sufficiency and accommodating to the climate and work.

On the micro level, Kodolányi also connects the mother role with demographic aspects. He refers to this topic when he criticizes the Hungarian peasantry landowner's so-called self-destructing habit of raising only one child. In his opinion the "one-child moral" was one of the most powerful aspects of the crises that the Hungarian society and peasantry underwent in the 1930s. Referring to this behaviour, Kodolányi states that Finnish women – in contrast with Hungarian women – "don't bother about what others say when they give birth to their second or third child. (It's true that one can notice a certain decay in the circles of younger intellectuals, but still they cannot be compared to our "one child in a family" kind of mentality!)"<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while Finnish women in Kodolányi's travelogue appear on the micro level of the society as mothers and housewives, on the macro level their status changes radically. Here women gradually break with their passive role in the patriarchal family. We can say that Finnish women on this level of Kodolányi's illustration have a job, just like men, and actively participate in ensuring the living conditions of the family.

In his *Suomi, a csend országá* Kodolányi sees Finnish women on the macro level as free, independent and emancipated persons, who are treated equally with men. This impression is mainly influenced by the fact that in Finland women had a

---

<sup>3</sup> Harbsmeier, Michael: Az útleírások mint a mentalitástörténet forrásai. Gondolatok a kora újkori útleírások történeti antropológiai elemzése kapcsán. Fordította: Kármán Gábor és Klement Judit. *Korall. Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat* 2006. november. 26. szám 25. <http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00414/00018/pdf/025harbsmeier.pdf?contentID=18>

<sup>4</sup> Kodolányi János: *Suomi*. Budapest. Magvető Könyvkiadó. 1990. 51. "A leányok – szépen megtermett, anyának való szőke szépségek, nemzeti viseletben – pirulva járultak a dobogó elé, s meghatottan simogatták az ajándékokat. Szép volt, kedves volt, feledhetetlen volt!"

<sup>5</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 76. „nem török a fejüket azon, hogy mit fog szólni a »társaság«, hogy már a második vagy harmadik gyermekük jön a világra.” Majd kijelenti: "(Igaz, már kezd mutatkozni egy kis romlás a fiatalabb intellektuelek körében, de hol vannak ők a mi *egyke*morálunktól!)"

role and place in the society that only a man could have in Hungarian society. “Just like on the tram, where there are no male, but only female conductors, or in the restaurants and cafeterias which have no waiters or male receptionists, but waitresses and female receptionists, or at the barber’s, where there are nice, friendly and gentle women to serve you and no barber assistants, or the shops with their women assistants showing the merchandise to you, in the upper classes almost every wife has a job. It is quite natural that a woman, unless she’s too old or has a specific reason to stay at home, works normally, independently and has a job requiring just as much responsibility as a man’s job would. And in case she stays at home she considers the housework to be her duty.”<sup>6</sup>

In Kodolányi’s mind, work is very important to the Finnish women, not only because it can help them to be materially independent, but also because it is the basis of their spiritual and emotional self-realization. As a result of all this, “The Finnish woman doesn’t feel constrained, works independently and without complaints, contributes with her earnings to cover the expenses, doesn’t torment her husband with her personal problems, in fact she doesn’t even attach importance to them.”<sup>7</sup>

It can be concluded that in his travelogue Kodolányi analyses the status of Finnish woman in relation to the social and economic system of Finland. Kodolányi presents us with an idealized world where women can successfully reconcile their mother role with their career and profession. In this world, Finnish women have the same rights as men, and in addition the traditional gender categories fade away.

Kodolányi also presents the status of Finnish women in the academic world and cultural life. He introduces it by reviewing the work of the Finnish writer, Maila Talvio. Kodolányi’s opinion is that Talvio played an important role in the cultural and political progress of the Finnish nation. Moreover, according to Kodolányi she was an outstanding member of academic life and the political sphere. We are told in the travelogue that she had a significant role in educating and teaching the students of the university – the future generations. Here Kodolányi refers to how Talvio and her husband, J. J. Mikkola, held the famous “Thursday Seminars” dealing with literature and aesthetics, where Talvio actively lectured to students of both genders.

In Finland – as we can read in Kodolányi’s travelogue – women can educate themselves even at universities. The writer gives a glance at the living and studying conditions of a Finnish female student by presenting the case of Tytti Kannisto, the daughter of Lauri Kannisto. Tytti studied physics at the university and „she studies physics at the university and in her free time she puts on work clothes and tars bridges and paints the roofs of the houses along with the workers.” And, as

---

<sup>6</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 76. “Ahogy a villamoson nem látsz kalauzt, csak kalauznőt, ahogy az éttermekben, a kávézóhelyiségekben nem látsz pincért, »főurat«, és köszönőembert, csak »kisasszonyt«, ahogy a borbélyműhelyben kedves, udvarias és finom nők vesznek gondozásba, és nem borbélysegédek, ahogy a kereskedésekben nők teszik eléd az árut, és nem férfiak, a felsőbb rétegekben is a feleségek jóformán kivétel nélkül dolgoznak. Egészen természetes, hogy az asszony, hacsak nem idősebb már, és nincs egyébként is valamely különösebb oka rá, nem ül otthon, hanem végzi a maga rendes, független és a férfival egyformán felelősségteljes munkáját. Ha pedig otthon ül, akkor legalább annyit tart kötelességének, hogy a házimunkát maga végezze.”

<sup>7</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 80. “maga sem érez megkötöttséget, munkáját önállóan és nyafogás nélkül végzi, keresetével hozzájárul az élethez, nem gyötri férjét egyéni bajaival, sőt nem is tulajdonít azoknak nagy jelentőséget.”

Kodolányi adds: “In a large restaurant female students wait on tables along with the regular waitresses.”<sup>8</sup>

With this example Kodolányi tries to point out, on the one hand, that Finnish girls at universities perform equally as well at their studies as men do in Hungary. On the other hand, he emphasizes that Finnish girls work because this is how they can create the necessary conditions for their studies. Furthermore, he declares that after these girls have obtained their university degree or established a family their place in life is not limited to the family and private life: “The girls get married, give birth to babies, and work in their own specialty in the Finnish way, just like every other Finnish woman.”<sup>9</sup>

The travelogue suggests that education, and particularly higher education in Finland, was characterized by the equality and emancipation of women. This was especially compared to the situation in Hungary, where higher education and the intellectual labour market worked in a gender-specific manner.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Hungarian women hardly went to work or were employed in their own field after having graduated from university. Even if they worked, they only did it temporarily whilst they still were not married. Referring to this, the Hungarian historian Gábor Gyáni pointed out that between the two world wars the women of the middle class in Hungary were simply supported by men.<sup>11</sup> As opposed to this, the social ambition of Finnish women was not hindered by such obstacles as their roles in the family as mother and housewife.

According to Kodolányi, Finnish women additionally have equal opportunities in work life. Kodolányi clearly articulates his opinion on this subject by presenting the status and living conditions of servant-girls in Finland. The travelogue suggests that in Finnish homes the housemaids are treated in the same way as other people. Moreover, the relationship between them and the families they work for is extremely friendly. The equality between the servants and the employer and the respect the servants are treated with is immediately noticed by the Hungarian traveller. Kodolányi recalls this with the following words: “When I went to visit a writer the housemaid also hurried to help me out of my coat in the hall. Upon entering the house, the nice and pretty girl greeted me courteously, shook hands with me and introduced herself. On a different occasion I wasn’t surprised when the housemaid, wearing a folk costume, shook hands with me and introduced herself. I introduced myself, too.”<sup>12</sup>

In order to see more clearly the reasoning behind Kodolányi’s view on the status and conditions of Finnish servant-girls, we need to observe the rights and conditions of the Hungarian servants. Employing a housemaid in Hungary between

---

<sup>8</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 54–55. “egyetemi hallgató, fizikus. Szabadidejében munkásruhában hidakat kátrá-nyoz, háztetőt fest a munkásokkal.” Majd Kodolányi megjegyzi: „Egy nagy étteremben egyetemi hallgatónők pincérkednek a pincérlányokkal együtt.”

<sup>9</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 27. “a lányok férjhez mentek, gyermekeket szültek, és dolgoznak a maguk munkakörében finn módra, mint ezek a nők valamennyien.”

<sup>10</sup> Gyáni Gábor: Magyarország társadalomtörténete a Horthy-korban. In: Gyáni Gábor – Kövér György (eds.): *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig*. Budapest. Osiris Kiadó. 1998. 287.

<sup>11</sup> Gyáni 1998, 287. and Hámori Péter: Női szerepek és szociálpolitika Magyarországon 1920–1944. *Korall* 13. 30–48.

<sup>12</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 52–53. “Látogatóban voltam egy írónál. Az előszobában a szobalány is elébem sietett, hogy lesegítse a kabátomat. Amikor beléptem, a kedves, csinos leány kecses bókkal köszöntött, kezet nyújtott és bemutatkozott. [...] Egy másik alkalommal már nem lepődtem meg, amikor a paraszti ruhában elém jött cselédlány kezet nyújtott és bemutatkozott. Bemutatkoztam én is.”

the two world wars was a common phenomenon. It was quite normal that 15-20 year old girls moved from villages to bigger cities (including the capital city) in order to find employment in the homes of the middle class. Subsequently, they usually worked as servants until they got married.

The period the girls spent in the city had a great impact on both their material situation and social existence. In addition, this employment position had an important role in the socialization of the girls, because it taught them the patriarchal power relations inside the family. Furthermore, it taught them how to behave as a mother and what was acceptable both in their own family and the society. In addition, in Hungary the state tried to maintain the patriarchal society by laws. According to a law from 1876 the servant could not be considered as an independent subject. The employer had the right to control her, using corporal punishment in disciplining her as if she were a family member.<sup>13</sup>

Therefore, we can see that Kodolányi's perception of Finnish women and their emancipation was greatly influenced by his own cultural and historical traditions. This included the social conditions of Hungary in the 1930's and especially a critical attitude towards Hungarian middle class women. Kodolányi constructed an image of Finnish woman in contrast to one of Hungarian woman.

The Finnish women presented in the travelogue have exclusively positive features, while the Hungarian women are characterized in a negative way. According to Kodolányi, Finnish women are "healthy women moving calmly, wearing flat-soled shoes and no lipstick or nail polish. One can easily notice that they all work. Since I'm used to the decorative, artificially thin women of Budapest, these simply clad, and calmly walking women, healthy at first sight, who have no idea of the temptation of their sex-appeal, have a strange impact on me."<sup>14</sup> While the Finnish women are nice, silent, modest, cheerful, proud, self-confident, and take part in sports regularly, Hungarian middle class women are spoiled and indulge in a life of idleness. They also expect "men to jump to serve them if they need something. If they want to take a seat one has to grab a chair for them. If they want to put on their coats one has to help with that, too. If they need water one has to pour them water."<sup>15</sup>

In conclusion, it can be stated that Kodolányi, in his analysis of Finnish women, removes himself from the patriarchal social norms of the interwar period in Hungary and the feminine patterns befitting them. He achieves this by discussing the role of women as being organically part of the socio-economical system.

## Bibliography

Buikema, Rosemarie: *Windows in a Round House: Feminist Theory*. In: Buikema, Rosmarie – Smelik, Anneke (eds.): *Women's Studies and Culture. A Feminist Introduction*. London. Zed Books. 1995. 3-13.

---

<sup>13</sup> Gyáni 1998, 339.

<sup>14</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 81. "Egészséges, nyugodt mozgású nők, lapos sarkú cipő, rúztalan ajak és festetlen körmök... *Valamennyien látszik, hogy dolgozik*. Mesterségesen soványított *pesti* dísznőinkhez szokva, furcsán hatnak rám ezek az egyszerűen öltözött, nyugodtan járó, a szexepil szédületét nyilván hírből sem ismerő, első látásra is egészséges nők."

<sup>15</sup> Kodolányi 1990, 81. "a férfiak azonnal inasként ugorjanak, ha valami kell nekik. Ha leakarnak ülni, nosza, széket alájok. Ha a kabátjukat fel akarják venni, hamar felsegíteni rájuk. Vízet akarnak: ide a kancsóval, és tölts nekik! *És vége-hossza nem volt a síránkozásnak.*"

- Butler, Judith: *Hankala sukupuoli: feminismi ja identiteetin kumous*. Suom. Pulkkinen, Tuija – Rossi, Leena-Maija. Helsinki. Gaudeamus. 2006.
- Gyáni Gábor: Magyarország társadalomtörténete a Horthy-korban. In: Gyáni Gábor – Kövér György (eds.): *Magyarország társadalomtörténete a reformkortól a második világháborúig*. Budapest. Osiris Kiadó. 1998.
- Hámori Péter: Női szerepek és szociálpolitika Magyarországon 1920–1944. *Korall* 13. 30-48.
- Harbsmeier, Michael: Az útleírások mint a mentalitástörténet forrásai. Gondolatok a kora újkori útleírások történeti antropológiai elemzése kapcsán. Fordította: Kármán Gábor és Klement Judit. *Korall. Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat* 2006. november. 26. szám <http://epa.oszk.hu/00400/00414/00018/pdf/025harbsmeier.pdf?contentID=18>
- Ifj. Kodolányi János: Utószó. In Kodolányi János: *Suomi*. Budapest. Magvető Könyvkiadó. 1990.
- Kodolányi János: *Suomi*. Budapest. Magvető Könyvkiadó. 1990.
- Sélei Nóra: Mért félünk a farkastól? *Debreceni Disputa*. Debrecen. Alföldi Nyomda Rt. 2006. június. IV. évfolyam. 6. szám.