

Theme: Gender Education of Secondary Schools Students through the Subject “Albanian Language and Literature”

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“Differently from novels and essays, the textbooks have not the power to stir debates, objections or revolutions. They wisely convey the spirit of an era”

A witness to the evolution of the human societies, textbooks are at the same time transformational instruments: they also present a model of what the society is or is meant to be by its citizens.¹ It is a mirror, more reasonable than we could think, of the often abstract requirements of the policies and program in the sphere of education. By analyzing them, we have been able to get an overview of the society itself, its mindset, social problems, and gender profile. The article is aimed at pointing out what the high-schoolers learn from their textbooks about their being males or females?

Aubin 2006

• **“Albanian language and literature 10”**

In the Albanian language and literature books some gender stereotypes are noticed, because in most cases the role of a woman is limited to being a mother. Even if we see their professions, they are typical feminine. In the selected parts, in most cases, the woman comes as an object of beauty. She appears as such in the great Hugo’s works, through Esmeralda in “Notre dame de Paris”, Odette in “Love of a Swan” from Daniel Proust, and the Dulcinea del Toboso – the sweet and beautiful villager of Don Quixote. There are here and there gender portraits, a rich, knowledgeable and brave man and a frivolous, superficial woman who wants to achieve everything through her beauty.

When explaining the elements of the advertisement, our text did not escape the image of a smiley girl; the girl is beautiful, with a perfect, spotless and bright face, with her eyes closed and with her shiny lips and white teeth that catch the eye. The purity and the delicacy of a white and pink flower are compared with the young girl with a bright skin. On the other side, we see two cream boxes of a sweet color: the product that is being advertised. The girl is the subject of the advertisement. Female characters are at the centre of the promotion of the values and touristic riches of our country.

1- Georges Gusdorf, *Pourquoi des professeurs? Pour une pedagogie de la pedagogie*. 1963

“Albania, a new Mediterranean love” is the title of a TV spot which promotes Albanian tourism to the world. Albania is promoted in CNN through three TV spots. The first spot shows a family travelling through the cultural sites and beaches of Albania. Mother and young daughter are seen through the father’s eyes as they enjoy their holidays in Albania. The second 30 seconds long spot presents a young couple in love. We see, through the eyes of a young man, a young beautiful girl who is enchanted and intrigued by the beauties of Albania. The feminine beauty is the spirit of the publicity.

An explanation of the how and why

The “how” and “why” are illustrated through one of the key traditional roles of women within the family, cooking. It says: “It is certainly one thing to ask “how” a mother cooks everyday for her family (the means, ingredients, quantity, baking time, etc.) and another thing to ask “why” she cooks, the meaning of it, the motif and the meaning of her daily task. The vocative sentence: “Hey beauty? Look, there is 50%” discount here!” shows a detail which women are passionate about.

The text shows, without being able to avoid stereotypes, that shopping is more about them, girls. It would be better to address this call to a young man. This would orient the perception about boys and girls differently.

There are however elements from which we can benefit in order to input into young people the feeling for gender equality and impartiality. In the part on Domestic violence, Text analysis section, the young are asked to write a short essay: “Violence in today’s Albanian society”. This essay is a good opportunity to discuss the problems that violence causes to the Albanian society, especially violence against women and girls. Meaningful is also the comment about Barleti in the “History of Skanderbeg” saying that: a woman is good not only for her family chores but also for government tasks.

• **“Albanian language and literature 11”**

An exercise in “Literature 11” asks to “read the charts and create charts based on the preliminary data”; the charts present the HIV/AIDS endangered groups in Albania. That means reading about a big problem which destroys the life of young (boys and girls). The exercise on how to write a CV presents data about the life and work of Musine Kokalari. This is a careful choice as regards the gender aspect.

Although the subject of the lesson is how to create and structure a newspaper and to identify its sections, the choice of this article provides also for gender education. The article serves to raise awareness, to provide further information and to break previous taboos. This is as well considered a gender education-related objective. It’s not a coincidence the choice of a newspaper on whose front page is an article about family planning, use of contraceptives and the limitation of birth in intellectual families. To illustrate a newspaper article, the front page of a newspaper is chosen whose lead title is “family planning”.

“Family planning, rural families twice as many children. Young couples are career oriented, lower birth rate in Albania. The new abortion control system.” Only 11% of Albanians use contraceptives. Women know little about protective measures. These are some of the titles and subtitles on the newspaper page which illustrates the topic of education. Another important moment in this text is the letter of the famous writer Remark to his girlfriend Marlen. It is a natural, real, beautiful letter to be read out loud. It is a letter of the feelings of the writer for the girl he loves. He calls her: “My dear heaven, hundred ardent kisses, etc.”

The topic “Writing a diary” shows the diary of a political woman during communism, who was not spared from the war of classes. It is a testimony of an exemplary violence. The author, who died at a young age, is the daughter of Liri Belishova, a political convict during the dictatorship. In “Albanian language and literature 11” Flaubert was sad because of his characters who he considered the heroes of an inglorious era, an era with no honest people, an era when all the ideal dreams of Emma in “Madame Bovary” were crashed by the rude and corrupted male world, represented by merchants, notaries, and selfish lovers who lead Emma to commit suicide. Students are asked to discover the social and marriage state of Emma; what is her education? What are her life experiences?

A topic of discussion is also the situation between Emma and her husband, two people who are fighting constantly. The young students should answer what causes these arguments:

- Lack of love?
- Misunderstanding?
- Different tastes and desires?
- Lack of wellbeing?
- Different interests?
- Different backgrounds?

Students should choose among the alternatives by illustrating them. Emma is a victim of her own dreams and of the spiritual imprisonment in the province. This exercise asks students to reflect about the question: Does Emma has the right to:

- Dream as a newly wedded woman?
- Ask for spiritual answers from her husband?
- Ask her husband to do and know everything that goes through her mind?

This once again allows students to express their thoughts about the existence of a limit that people set to their dreams. It is an invitation to discuss the sensitive issues of life as a couple.

How do you adjudicate Madame Bovary: guilty, innocent, neither guilty nor innocent? The students are asked to present at least two arguments for each choice. In the last section, students are asked to make a portrait of their parents in their daily life in the household, in relation to each other, in order to understand what their parents like and dislike about each-other. All arguments, reflections, and interpretations asked from high school students related to the above issues, are guidelines and lessons that they will need in the future in their married life. The correspondence between Flaubert and Louise Colet is one of the great riches of this kind in the world literature, which reveals, in addition to the trepidations of a spirit in love, the difficulties in the work and creative activity of the author himself.

Students learn from this text that the “Novels of the North City” from Migjeni are centered on the tragic figure of a woman in the Albania of mid ‘30s. The female character is presented in various situations, in various narrations, but with the same dramatic destiny;

“The student at home” is one of the best known prose pieces of Migjen. The protagonist, Nushi, who studied medicine in one of the European countries, returns home where he sees the false morality on which the family of the time is based on.

“...It is the end of the world here if you see a girl standing beside a boy. There [other countries] no one notices. Everyone minds his own business.”

Agia, Nushi’s sister, is engaged to be married and mourns her unhappy life.

...Agia is ashamed to tell him anything or tell him why she is crying. It is the embarrassment that a girl feels, especially engaged-to-be married girls, knowing that she is going to her husband’s home only to share the bed with him. She can’t know more; because she has never spoken to the man she will marry. They say that girls with no honor are shameless. The fables: the shame that doesn’t let one raise his voice in defense of himself.

These are Migjeni’s words about the hierarchy of the Albanian household of the time:

The head of the family, the father, is the pillar on which the family is established. He creates an atmosphere of fear. His word is law, and it should be listened to and obeyed. Nushi listens. His face is distorted when he hears his father’s words, but he listens anyway. His siblings also listen. They are standing around him all ears. Dare one not to listen. The mother hears from the kitchen the words of her husband and she is fearfully surprised by her husband’s great knowledge. An entire family, locked within the walls of the house and within a patriarchal environment, is prepared for tomorrow’s civic life.

The female’s world is illustrated in this story through Nushi’s mother and his sister, Agia. Neither Migjeni nor his character say much about the mother, except for two or three details, as if to show that her destiny was set the moment she was born to be her husband’s shadow. Migjeni’s attention is on Agia, a young girl who represents the new generation, which has the opportunity to change the flow of life.

Each of the male figures victimizes Agia even more through their actions. The father obliges her to get married, without caring about her happiness. Her husband is not able to make her happy. The boyfriend takes advantage of her hopeless situation, and her brother Nushi, who now knows life better, remains silent to his sister’s state.

The character of Age, this woman who dares only in secret, shows clearly that she is a victim of the false morality in Migjeni’s era.

Migjeni demystifies the reality of the time to nakedness, by shaking through his sarcasm such taboos as: the sister’s honor, subordination to fathers, relations of interest within the family, etc.

Migjeni’s messages relate to gender education, to women’s honor and oppression, and to the falsity of the society of the time.

- **“Albanian Language and Literature 12”**

A meaningful detail in this regard is the piece on the weekend spent on the mountains by a group of girls. Semela and her friend engage in an exchange of SMSes with one another. They are talking about an invitation to spend the weekend on the mountains with a number of girlfriends. Under this piece is found the Exercise no. 3: Read the following essay and analyze its structure on the basis of the above model;

The essay speaks about the media’s importance, and its influence on the people’s judgments and behavior, as well as their lifestyle. It also can change the young people’s mentality. By watching TV, young people start thinking, dressing, speaking, and thinking like the people they see on TV.

In the “Descriptive text” section, an exercise seeks from the students to do the following: “Analyze linguistically the following descriptive text”. And below it can be found the text and the description of women it contains:

“The new wife. The new wife is a lazy big-boned voluptuous feline woman with a wide slow-smiling mouth. Her eyes are black and shrewd like two berries, two shrewd black berries. She is a big woman with fine wrists and long plump tapering fingers. She eats her food with relish. She sleeps and eats and lazes. She sticks out her long red tongue and licks, the sweet mutton-fat from her lips. “Ah, I like that!” she says, and smiles and rolls her eyes. I watch her mouth mesmerized.

(In the heart of the country, J.M. Coetzee)

“...Even though very young, and as such highly unprepared to face the mothering duties, she was able to foster such a love in me that I could never forget it. Since then, I would be calling all the young mothers with the name of Xhixhe...”

Both accounts contain first a physical portrait of women and secondly a description of their womanly role.

Below the descriptive text, there are to be found the notes taken by the female member of a rafting team off Osum River. Albeit somehow unusual, the notes are taken by a girl who is part of a somehow masculine sport. A nice and educational detail in terms of the gender perspective... a rush of adrenaline down the meandering Osum canyons. It is a young woman, Era, who recounts her rafting adventures down the Osum canyons. The girl describes the adventure as a short movie that contains all the ingredients: drama, idyll, and heroism. “What I experienced down the canyons was indescribable,” Era tells.

The high-schoolers are asked to analyze the descriptive details of all these pieces of literature. In the comparison/contrast illustrative essay, students are asked to analyze the essay carrying the title “My Mother and Father”. The portraits of each parent provide insights into their moral values, affections, and strengths. These accounts can serve as a triggering factor for a wide discussion on girls and boys, women and men, mothers and fathers. They are favorable opportunities for discussing the traditional gender roles. The teachers should avail themselves of them in order to affect the gender molding of their students.

In the poetical text, it is interesting to note the beautiful piece of poetry “Love Song”, which is explained through an illustration of the lyric poetry written by Lasgush Poradeci. Lasgush stresses the thesis that there can be no lyrical aspect of life without love: “I believe in love. I have never been shocked as much as by love, I have never felt more elated as much as by love.” Lasgush speaks about love not as an emotional drive but rather as a basic vital force, a force both earthly and heavenly. The maid of the Lasgushian lyrical poetry is at the same time a sister, a friend, and a wife, whereas the relation with her is comparable to a flames and fire, and reaches high to the skies of sublime emotions.

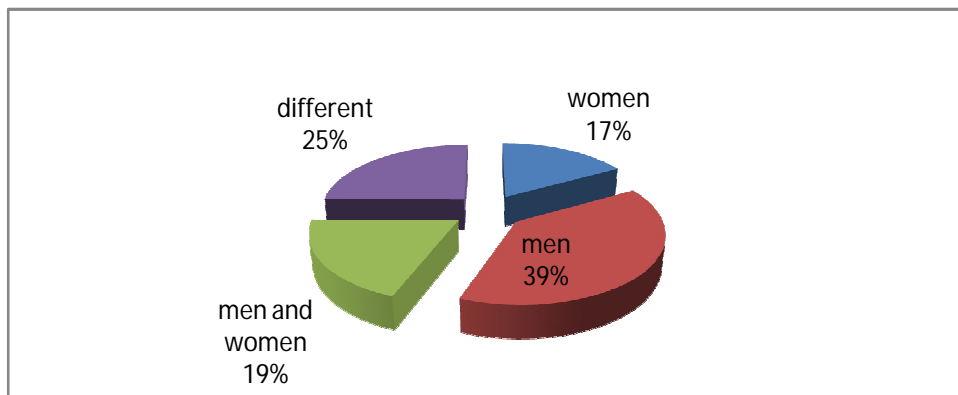
The talking Love, same as the talking Beauty, is strong and peculiar figures, originating from Lasgush’s special way of singing to love. Even when love song takes the form of a dramatic and painful dirge or when it turnings into a mirthful idyll, the Lasgushian poetries are marked by a deepness of emotion, sometimes going down deep and at other times rising to the skies. The emotions are deep and easily conveyable to the young people. In the “Learning discussion” section, students are asked to explain “the place of love in the Lasgushian lyrical poetry” and “the meaning of love as per the poetic concept of Lasgush”? “Poradeci raises a new cult: the one of women and love,” Ismail Kadare has said. This is a good opportunity for a debate with students concerning the pure feeling of love, which the binding strength of a couple in love and the thing that adds beauty to their life together. It is the right time to talk about the beauty of love, and everything inside it.

Illustrations in the high school texts from a gender perspective:

Illustrations occupy lots of space in the textbooks, as they are designed to support, complement, and often clarify the textbook’s contents. Obviously, their effect on the high-scholars is not the same as among the younger students, but the examples still have an important role to play. What is truly happening in our textbooks? Do they equally speak about females and males? Do they represent males and females in their traditional roles or in developing roles? Do they represent males and females in pre-determined professions, or do they break away from these traditional stereotypes? Do they seek through illustrations to help craft a different mentality, a new mentality concerning gender roles? Let’s look at the illustrations of the high schools’ textbooks by focusing on the place occupied by female persons.

• **“Albanian Language and Literature 10”**

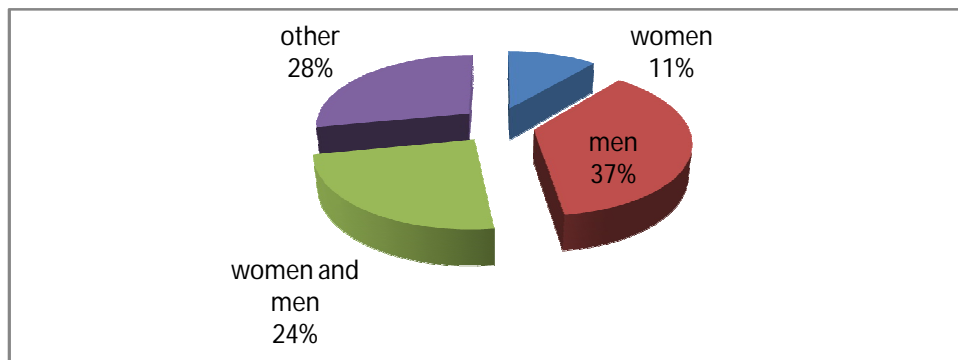
It has 278 illustrations in total. Out of these examples only 47 are with girls only, 108 are with boys only, and 54 are with boys and girls. The rest of illustrations, circa 69, are not part of our study target.



11th Class

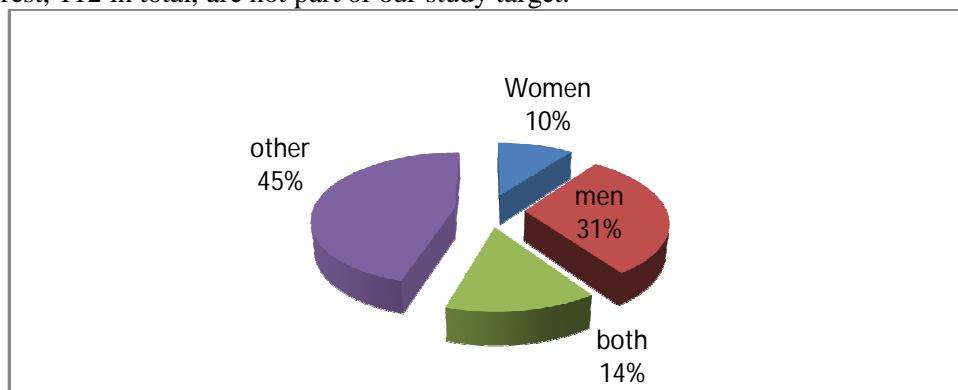
• **“Albanian Language and Literature 11”**

“Albanian Language and Literature 11” has 171 illustrations. Out of these examples only 19 are with girls only, 63 are with boys only, and 41 are with boys and girls jointly. The rest of illustrations, circa 48, are not part of our study target.



• **“Albanian Language Literature 12”**

Have 195 illustrations in total. Out of which 25 are with women only; 75 with men only; 35 with men and women jointly, and the rest, 112 in total, are not part of our study target.



Conclusions

Textbooks have a special role to play in making a difference between the “education for subjugation” and the “education for empowerment” of boys and girls. Notably, high school textbooks may be divided in three categories: The textbooks of mathematics, physics, informatics, earth sciences, technology have impact whatsoever on the gender education. They carry no elements related to gender equality. In the textbooks of “Career Education”, “Civics”, and “Biology”, there are topics related to gender education. The history texts are far from presenting women in developing roles. As historical figures, women are often overlooked in comparison to their male counterparts.

In the textbooks of Albanian Language and Literature, there are exercises and demands that require debates and discussions that are related to the topics and sections under review, and also deal with gender problems, such as violence, women discrimination, gender equality, etc. In conclusion, we can say that textbooks in a differentiated way, meaning not of them at equal degree, are making efforts to help young people deal with their gender orientation. The frequency of appearances of the female persona is lower than then of males, sometimes, we can notice this phenomenon also among the textbooks that are designed to help solve the gender problems.

In general, textbooks are faithful witnesses of the Albanian reality and social life. It is undeniable that, compared to years ago, the textbooks are making increased efforts to promote the gender equality aspirations, and also the ambitions for breaking away from the old mindsets, the desire to change the traditional stereotypes and to orientate young people towards gender equality in all the life fields. In view of the real problems of the Albanian society, the gender issues need to be emphasized further, and it is imperative for the textbooks to escape gender deformations. They need to be denounced any time they provide a housewife perspective for the young women, turning the dependence on strong men into a desirable dream for them.² It must be emphasized also the teacher’s stand toward the gender deformations a textbook may contain. The reaction, and his or her approach, to these deformations are very helpful for a fair education of the young people. If the textbooks promote the concept of girls being second-hand people, and nurture the feelings of subjugation, solitude, and loss, the teachers need to uphold and emphasize the contrary.

Actually, it can be said that despite their efforts the textbooks should focus more deeply on the gender phenomena.

- 2- The Gender Alliance for Development Centre; Gender Perspectives in Textbooks; Tirana 2008

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