

**WHY FEMINIST CRITICAL LITERACY MATTERS: THE REORGANISATION
OF CAPITALIST ECONOMIES AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIALLY
ENGAGED LITERATURE FOR YOUNG ADULTS**

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Abstract: The latest capitalist restructuring has resulted in new conditions of employment, seriously affecting possibilities for people's self-realization. Women have been hurt the most and face an increasing feminisation of poverty. This paper foregrounds the importance of literary socialisation in preparing young people to accept or reject neoliberal gendered scripts.

Key words: children's literature, critical literacy, gender, neoliberal capitalism

Introduction

The development of critical literacy is of crucial importance for fostering social awareness among adults and children, especially in times marked by the latest expansion and restructuring of capitalist economies. These processes are underlined by a new cycle of naturalisation and further entrenchment of structural inequalities, which rest in part on the re-modification and deepening of existing patterns of gendered exploitation. It is through the development of critical literacy, which usually takes place in formal educational spaces, that processes of emancipation and the fight for social justice can be encouraged or thwarted, depending on the policies pursued by those in charge of educational agendas. In Western hegemonic economies, two seemingly different, but in reality complementary strands of feminist analysis have informed state-sanctioned feminist pedagogical interventions into schooling and educational policies aimed at

young adults. These are liberal feminism with its focus on a formal equality agenda that simply adds women/girls in without problematising power binaries that emanate from constructs of femininity and masculinity, and the so-called “difference” feminism with its emphasis on the accommodation of the existing binary constructs of gender difference in such a way that negative attributes of femininity are given a positive connotation. Both strands end up by essentialising gender and are therefore complicit in reproducing gender binaries, either implicitly or explicitly (Stromquist 2006, Ringrose 2007).

Critical feminist pedagogy, by contrast, builds social awareness and critical literacies by taking into consideration broader socio-political and economic contexts, within which specific subject positions are constructed and naturalised. Its primary goal is to have “students understand both the concept of ideology and how it relates to their own lives” (Gonick 2007:434). For this purpose, feminist critical pedagogy not only facilitates students’ critical engagement with binary constructs of masculinity and femininity but also enlists strategies that help students to grasp broader structural inequities within which the binaries of masculinity and femininity both operate and originate. Furthermore, critical social literacies provide an understanding not only of how dominant discourses that produce and naturalise inequalities position and circumscribe us, but also of how they can be read against the grain and possibly parsed apart in order to be replaced by a transformative vision of an alternative social order. To this end, critical feminist pedagogy, among its other strategies, relies on alternative literary texts, which function as important tools of political intervention in times when femininity itself is being “re-articulated and re-traditionalised” within neoliberal economies (Gonick 2007:443). Given the increasing feminisation of poverty today, it is essential for critical feminist education to return to materialist theories of gender instead of continuing to align itself with postmodernist strands of cultural studies that insist on identities being simply fragmented and free-floating. The time has come to once again re-connect the dots in order to understand how the production of identities is tied to “institutional and economic restructuring, coupled with reinforcing cultural and ideological processes” (Coulter 2009:26) that inform the implementation of neoliberal socio-economic policies and the accompanying construction of very specific (gendered) identities.

New global economy, or globalisation for short, is one of the terms applied to contemporary capitalism, which over the last three decades has brought about “structural transformations in the organization of work, identities, resources and power” (Peterson 2003:46) and which is itself associated with “further consolidation and exacerbation of [...] relations of domination and exploitation” (Peterson 2003:9). Neoliberal restructurings of the processes of production and society in general rest on an increase in flexible and informal working arrangements, and consequently lead to a systematic decline in working conditions, job security, the earning ability of workers and the collective power of trade unions. The downgrading of manufacturing and the expansion of the service sector in the North have also led to an explosion of flexibilised and casualised part-time and temporary jobs in the formal sector, which has substantially decreased the actual earnings of workers who have to do more work for less pay under deteriorating working conditions (Sassen 1998, Peterson 2003). All of these structural reforms disproportionately affect women, especially already marginalised and poor women, as well as migrants and racialised others across the globe, thus contributing to their structural exploitation and spiralling poverty.

The global restructuring of the capitalist economy has an especially negative impact on the employment possibilities, earning capacity and sustainable livelihoods of all women – for unlike men, women are already positioned differently within gender-segregated labour markets and households, due primarily to the patriarchal nature of nation states and the globalised capitalist system. In this socio-political context, women have been or *in the post-socialist states are being increasingly constructed as secondary and disposable earners who merely supplement rather than complement men’s wages* (Fussell 2000). Especially in the capitalist system, still marked by a prevailing breadwinner model, women’s gradual entry into the formal labour market has been marked by their partial inclusion and structural marginalisation, as women have been relegated primarily to low-paying, low-skilled and low-status jobs. Since its inception this system has thus “constructed women’s labour through ideologies of femininity as supplementary, pliant and patient” (Pettman 2003:159), as devalorised semi-skilled or unskilled work and as unpaid and invisible reproductive household work, which has in turn confined women to the lower ranks of decision-making and excluded them entirely

from the echelons of real power. Neoliberal reforms feed on the existing structural hierarchies and inequalities of gender, which they recompose and aggravate to produce new forms of “cheapened and submissive female labor” (Runyan 2003:145).

While women are forced to struggle with diminished work opportunities and face the increasing feminisation of poverty and survival, young people are also being drawn into these gender scripts. Literary socialisation of children and young adults plays an important part in preparing the young to accept or reject the gendered scripts naturalised by contemporary socio-economic discourses. As literary texts are themselves forms of social practice, they share in the construction of social reality, usually either by upholding and legitimising the existing relations of power and gender or by exposing and challenging the very reproduction of structural inequalities. Therefore, working with alternative or so-called “disruptive texts” (Yeoman quoted in Hurley 2005:229) of contemporary realistic fiction is of crucial importance for facilitating reflective reading and thereby cultivating critical literacy on the part of children and young adults alike. It is precisely in this respect that the importance of feminist critical literacy comes into full view. By providing a critical analysis of the structural forces that shape and condition our gendered subjectivities, feminist critical literacy is indispensable in helping us to both recognise structural inequalities and problematise the way these are engendered and perpetuated by the new round of globally restructured and very specific socio-economic systems. Feminist critical literacy thus not only provides an insight into the constructedness of gender binaries but also enhances an understanding of how mechanisms that are inherent in the globally re-constructed capitalist economy prop up and refurbish binary constructs of gender. To develop deliberative skills and reflective reading among young readers, critical feminist pedagogy inevitably relies on situated knowledge, and it functions best when it is based on textual readings, which in turn expose and de-naturalise seemingly neutral scripts of gendered power relationships.

One such recent textual intervention in the field of children’s and young adult literature is Barbara O’Connor’s U.S.-published book *How to Steal A Dog*, which builds its narrative on what are deemed to be “socially significant events” (Tyson 1999:156). Specifically, the book draws the readers’ critical gaze towards the increased feminisation of poverty and survival, shedding light on the way women are forced to struggle with

diminished work opportunities, marked only by a dramatic growth in devalorised and flexible part-time or temporary jobs that severely affect their chances of survival as well as those of their children and other dependent family members. For this reason, the novel introduces the intertwined story of a mother and daughter, with the child protagonist functioning as the main focaliser. The re-invention of the mother-daughter dyad and its insertion into children's literature, as pointed out by Hillary S. Crew in her seminal work *Is It Really Mommie Dearest?*, functions as a ground-breaking literary device. Rather than suppressing or absenting the parent figure, which is a traditional paradigm still found in mainstream children's literature, O'Connor's narrative also foregrounds the importance and significance of a mother-daughter relationship, thus assigning value to co-operation and attachment, while still providing "literary experiences" and "agency" for the child protagonist (Crew 2000:13). Formerly obscured but now resuscitated and re-instituted mother-daughter relationships in contemporary children's literature are important as a form of social setting, for it is within them that young girl protagonists encounter and learn to "contend with the intertwined issues of power and gender" (Crew 2000:4).

Even if O'Connor's story is not told from the subject position of the mother, she remains an important presence. Her voice is "not absented, suppressed or objectified" (Crew 2000:25), as a result of which her social reality and the hardships she faces cannot be avoided or entirely evaded by the girl protagonist either. Her mother's reality affects her too and the hardships her mother undergoes are seen reflected in her own mind. According to Maria Nikolajeva, such a narrative strategy, where the events are reconstructed, commented upon and filtered through the child's insightful or naive perception before they are "released to the reader", results in the creation of "subjective realism" (1998:229), which in children's literature represents a significant break away from an adult, authoritarian narrator and consequently from didacticism. At the same time it also signifies the onset of a narrative which places emphasis upon the child being steeped in a very concrete reality that inevitably rests on an exploration of its "socio-political and psychological ramifications" (Zipes 1990:7)

Literary text as a political intervention

How to Steal a Dog opens with the father suddenly walking out on the family and a young girl, Georgina, and her family being evicted from a flat, as they can no longer afford to pay the rent. Plunged into abject poverty and struggling with homelessness, the mother and her children live in a car, wash in public restrooms and stave off hunger by feeding on junk food and scraps of left-over restaurant food. In one of the descriptions of her miserable existence, which points to the lack of a supportive social net in a society of ever more competitive, atomised and alienated individuals, the girl protagonist studies her face “in the mirror of the bathroom at McDonald’s” and comments on her poverty in the following way:

My hair hung in greasy clumps on my forehead. Creases from the crumpled-up clothes I had slept on were still etched in the side of my face. I rubbed my hands together under the water and ran my wet fingers through my hair. Then I used paper towels to scrub my face and arms. The rough brown paper left my skin red and scratched (O’Connor 2007:47).

The mother, meanwhile, takes on two minimum-wage jobs, which is all she can get, and puts in extra hours working late into the evening. Yet in spite of her efforts and her increasing exhaustion, she cannot make ends meet, let alone save enough money to put down a deposit on a new flat. Her meagre savings are all too easily eroded by unexpected maintenance and other costs necessary to keep the essentials of life in place. To ease her mother’s stress and help her raise the money needed to secure some accommodation, the girl devises a plan to steal a dog. She hopes she will be able to collect the reward money once the dog is returned to its owner. She carries out the deed, but wrestles with her conscience and eventually restores the dog to its rightful and loving owner without claiming the reward money. In the end, the family move in with a woman the mother meets through her work, with whom they start to share a house – “a tiny white house with a rusty swing set in the red-dirt yard and a refrigerator with no door sitting right up on the front porch” (O’Connor 2007:47) – and help to take care of her baby and contribute to the rent. Together these two women, who keep several jobs going between them in order to scrape a living, create a makeshift community. This helps them to fight poverty more effectively, but they can never really overcome it as they still belong to the

newly-created and structurally abandoned underclass or, in Sassen's words, "serving class" (2000:510).

It is thus no accident in *How to Steal a Dog* that Georgina's mother is forced to take on two part-time, low-skilled and underpaid service jobs and work long hours in order to be able to afford to make basic provision for herself and her children. As noted by Peterson, in the North neoliberal globalisation has brought about a "shift away from material and labour-intensive production to information and knowledge intensive production" (Peterson 2003:52). This has led to the downgrading of manufacturing, but also to a rapid expansion and reconfiguration of the service sector. Knowledge-based production has put in place a new hierarchical division of labour and skill evaluation, which can be witnessed, for example, in a sharp income polarisation between overvalorised "skilled and high waged professional-managerial jobs" in the banking, insurance, legal, health and education services and devalorised "semi-, unskilled and poorly paid jobs" (Peterson 2003:52) in telemarketing, data processing, bank telling, cleaning, laundering, food production and retail. While the upper tier of information- and knowledge-intensive production such as software development is occupied by elite male professionals with access to education and additional training, a phenomenon Chang and Ling call "technomuscular capitalism", it is women who are disproportionately channelled into devalued and low-paid, labour-intensive service jobs, a phenomenon Chang and Ling characterise as "a regime of labour intimacy" (quoted in Pettman 2003:160).

Disproportionately locked into deskilled, low-wage and devalorised routine jobs in the service sector, women have once again been marginalised and invisibilised as capitalism's "other". This time, however, there is a crucial distinction. What were formerly mostly full-time, salaried, and protected jobs in the service sector – which offered liveable wages and upward, although restricted, mobility – have been replaced by flexibilised and casualised part-time jobs. These do not pay sufficient wages to support either oneself or family dependents, which in turn forces women to seek multiple part-time jobs in order to generate sufficient family income. This, however, can be a feat that a multiple part-time job-holder, who usually has to travel long distances between one workplace and another, may not necessarily be able to achieve in spite of monumental

efforts, precisely because her combined meagre earnings can still easily fall short of a subsistence wage. In the novel, in order to support herself and her children, Georgina's mother is holding down two part-time and inevitably precarious jobs at the poorly-paid end of the service sector. As she toils away and is rewarded with a mere pittance, she has to endure difficult and hazardous working conditions. Working hard for low wages in what is also unstable and unprotected part-time work, Georgina's mother still cannot cover even her most basic expenses, a situation her children do not appreciate:

Her voice started getting louder until she was hollering again. "You think all I got to do is snap my fingers and bingo!" She pounded on top of the car. "THERE'S the rent and there's the deposit and THERE'S the gas for the car," she yelled. "And snap, there's electricity and water and phone. Not to mention food and clothes and doctors and STUFF. She kicked the car when she yelled the word "stuff" (O'Connor 2007:44).

The gravity of their financial situation is further compounded by the fact that, as a part-time worker, Georgina's mother can easily be laid off. Part-time workers are constituted as a reserve army of flexibilised and non-unionised labour and are consequently subject to little or no job protection, and often poor work safety and employment standards. One day, Georgina's mother is indeed fired from the dry cleaners, and she bitterly complains that it was 'cause I was late once or twice' after having to drive the children to school or 'cause I don't use that pressing machine fast enough' (O'Connor 2007:58). The pressure to secure a minimum income while having to persevere at multiple underpaid part-time jobs constitutes a source of permanent stress for women and takes a heavy toll on their health and overall well-being. Georgina, too, can't help but notice "how her mother's blue jeans h[ang] all baggy, dragging on the asphalt parking lot as she walk[s]" and how "she [is] getting skinnier" by the day (O'Connor 2007:48). Just as significantly, as a part-time worker, Georgina's mother is compelled to work long and irregular hours, usually with no fixed daytime schedule. So it is often "way past dark" when Georgina can hear "Mama's shoes click-clacking on the asphalt as she [makes] her way toward the car" (O'Connor 2007:8) her face "tired" and "worried" (O'Connor 2007:69). The novel thus demonstrates that as a part of neoliberal restructuring, women have been re-hired under new conditions of employment and

pushed into the gender-segregated labour market of increasingly part-time and dead-end jobs in the expanding service and communications sector, which drastically reduces their earnings while requiring them to put in the same or even greater amounts of work.

Under the gendered regimes of global capital, women are being systematically confined to increasingly deskilled and insecure as well as decentralised and flexibilised part-time and temporary jobs that do not offer sustainable or liveable wages. Yet at the same time, and in the face of alarming cuts in state social provisions and welfare programs promoted by conservative neoliberal agendas, women are culturally expected to keep their households going and secure the survival of their family members at all costs. Cutbacks in social welfare provision also mean that eventually “social services are shifted from the paid to the unpaid labor of women” (Peterson 2007:72). The burden of social reproduction and caring work is transferred from the public to the private sphere, which steps up the pressure for all women regardless of their class differentiation, resulting in intensification of women’s invisible domestic and care work. As women are forced to take up the burden of care in the wake of dismantled social networks, they are simultaneously left stranded to cope on their own under increasingly deteriorating economic and working conditions.

This is the grim fate Georgina’s mother too has to face. Working the long and “segmented and irregular hours associated with part-time work” and lacking accessible childcare (Caragata 2003:564-565), Georgina’s mother struggles to get by. Sometimes she is forced to leave her children to take care of themselves; on other occasions she takes her younger child to work with her. Doing two part-time jobs, working late into the night and struggling with lack of sleep while trying to fit in a myriad of domestic and child caring tasks makes for an impossible schedule. Georgina’s mother is dismissed from her morning part-time job for arriving late “once or twice” (O’Connor 2007:58) and is in no position to complain. Neoliberal agendas promote a retrenchment of social services in favour of their privatisation and, as pointed out by Peterson, insist on the construction of individuals as entirely self-sufficient and therefore in no need of public assistance, regardless of their actual social circumstances and structural deprivation (2003:158). In this way, as noted by Caragata, social issues are being deliberately and increasingly “individualized and personalized so that they become problems resulting from personal

deficit and pathology rather than seen to be effects of marginalization from both social and economic life” (Caragata 2003:570).

Thus, what in Georgina’s mother’s case should be also acknowledged as a “public responsibility for child care” is “translated into a personal and individual problem for the mother”, who thus merely undergoes “a personal crisis” while the severity of “the public issue fades from view” (Caragata 2003:571). Once the negative outcomes that neoliberal reforms have for the already marginalised and disempowered are given an individual twist and interpreted as their own personal problem, the people affected, such as Georgina’s mother, are effectively silenced and rendered isolated in their economic plight. Georgina’s mother cannot escape this kind of labelling or the fate that originates from her deepened structural marginalisation. Left to struggle on her own and against all the odds, she is pushed further to the margins of society and effectively excluded from it. Her poverty and endless struggle to make a decent living, her increased domestic workload and the long working hours she puts in, in exchange for the meagre pay a part-time job will yield are rendered invisible.

Conclusion

By making use of such contextual readings as these, critical feminist pedagogy can direct students’ attention to the way new economic arrangements and their accompanying socio-political systems feed on gendered and other structurally intertwined inequalities, which they also deepen and exacerbate. It is exactly at such a juncture that sharing disruptive texts of contemporary realistic fiction with young readers can play an important part in helping them to develop critical literacies that are based on an understanding of how such binaries and related assumptions are constructed. In O’Connor’s novel *Georgina’s mother* stands for a wider group of women in a similar situation. Her abject poverty is a structural feature and the end result of neo-liberal policies that worsen the already low status of women in the segregated capital-driven labour market. A novel like this, which obviously focuses on significant social events by keeping the mother-daughter relationship in full view, can be instrumental in fostering critical literacy. It can help young readers to explore and question unjust social

arrangements by connecting the issues, such as those of poverty and gender, raised in the fictional world to the social realities and deprivations of their own everyday life.

This can be conducive to the realisation that the reasons for our own systematic poverty and gender injustices do not stem from our own character deficiencies or personal limitations, as the official discourse of neoliberal self-blame would have it, but lie in the structurally entrenched inequalities and stratifications maintained and naturalised by the existing socio-economic arrangements and their accompanying ideologies. Barbara O'Connor's novel works towards this end by making visible the newly created identity positions global capitalism has put in place for adult women and women-to-be. The novel shows that the new economy worsens the already precarious position of women in the labour market and in their own households by flexibilising the increasingly cheapened or feminised labour force and constituting it as an "invisible and disempowered class of workers" (Sassen 1998:91). On the whole, economic restructurings have culminated in the so-called "structural abandonment" of women, worsening their poverty and contributing to their exclusion from the public sphere. All of this is not only reflected but also succinctly illustrated in Barbara O'Connor's novel.

Engaging

readers in a dialogue with each other on the basis of extended text analysis and inviting them to relate their own experiences and responses to the wider social patterns of their immediate environment can be highly productive in heightening young adults' awareness of the social issues and power relations that frame their social realities, define and limit the possibilities of their becoming, and consequently have repercussions for their daily lives. Feminist critical pedagogy that uses interventionist literature to foster critical literacy can therefore function as "a catalyst", which on the one hand, according to Tyson, enables youngsters and teenagers to "gather information from their worlds, the world around them, [in order to] construct [...] meanings that extend [...] their understanding, responses and participation", while simultaneously also enabling young readers to "develop and enhance the capacity to locate themselves in their socio-political places and spaces" (1999:158). This kind of "conscientisation" is one of the possible strategies for addressing and challenging notions of gender and poverty and the first step

towards facilitating and “develop[ing] a critical framework for personal, communal and civic social action” (Tyson 1999:158–159).

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