

## WOMEN'S AND MEN'S STORYTELLING: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE? SOME OBSERVATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK STORYTELLING COMMUNITIES

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Gabriela Kiliánová\*

The question of the distinctive roles of male and female storytellers has been raised in folklore studies since the beginning of the 20th century. Discussing the difference between the so-called women's and men's tales especially in terms of Märchen, the genre which was obviously in the centre of investigation in European countries, scholars stress the distinct ways of storytelling, that is the different stylistic features of the stories. This is the argument made by M. Asadowski (1926: 61 ff.) in his classical work "Eine sibirische Märchenerzählerin", where he analyzed the storytelling repertoire of the female storyteller Vinokurova. He observed that one could hardly speak about specific women's Märchen in terms of preferring heroine tales, or a particular repertoire of stories. What makes a tale a woman's tale is mostly woman's point of view demonstrated in the performance of the story in various ways. For example: the focus on the destiny of heroines, more developed passages on the female life, detailed depiction of women's daily activities etc. The difference was seen mostly in the special elaboration of the stories. Similar conclusions were reached, later on, by other scholars such as Linda Dégh (1995: 62-69), or in the Slovak context Viera Gašparíková (1986: 149 ff.), to name only a few.

On the other hand, peculiar male and female repertoires in the narrative traditions were discussed. The question was whether a genre specialization could be recognized between male and female tellers. Here again Linda Dégh (1995: 66), Viera Gašparíková (1986:118 ff.) or Milan Leščák and Oldřich Sirovátka (1982: 116 ff.) observed that supernatural legends, ghost stories, and magic tales were more the domain of women than men. Men concentrate mainly on humorous plots, they more often tell humorous tales, anecdotes, jokes, and personal stories for fun, as Siegfried Neumann (1964: 74 ff.; 1970) also described.

Finally there has also been an ongoing discussion among the oral tradition researchers about the prevalence of male in comparison with female storytellers. Is storytelling mainly a male or female occupation? What is the activity of male and female storytellers at storytelling occasions like? Since the time of preoccupation with Märchen in the European science and culture, women have been recognized

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\* Sládcovicova 5, SK-811 06 Bratislava, Slovakia. Email: kilian@nu.svaba.sk

as the ideal storytellers. Storytelling should be the natural activity of women because of housekeeping, raising of children, because of home craft works such as spinning, quilting, knitting etc. This image which had been created by the educated elite in European societies even before the Brothers Grimm's collection was published, lasted for a long time. Only gradually and with strong support from empirical data from field-work, was this image of the predominance of female storytellers questioned and discussed. Oral tradition collections from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century often recorded the repertoire of more male than female storytellers. Thus the image of storytelling as a female activity was changed into the opposite direction: collectors stressed the role of male narrators in the oral tradition. However, the lack of female narrators in some collections could result from the different or difficult access of the male collector to women's storytelling as I. Köhler-Zülch (1991: 101 ff.) recently pointed out.

The question became even more interesting and challenging when the scholars crossed the borders of traditional cultures and tried to discuss the storyteller issue in the context of modern European societies. There was an assumption that there could be a different role of male and female storytellers in European narrative tradition on the turn of the 19th century and at the end of the 20th century. Thus the time, space or wider cultural context could have contributed to a different answer to the same question.

In my paper, I would like to describe and identify the role of male and female storytellers in contemporary communities in Slovakia.

In Slovak society the main modernization processes (technological and economic processes such as industrialization, urbanization, the collectivization of agriculture etc., and cultural modernization such as secularization, individualization, globalization of culture, changes in family organization and structure, in the male and female roles etc.) had a profound impact on the daily life of people quite recently, mostly in the second half of the 20th century. Thus researchers after the Second World War (the period of the main development of folklore studies in Slovakia) had the opportunity to investigate three generations of different cultures. Firstly: The old generation which lived almost their whole life in a traditional community, secondly the middle generation which was the bearer of the modernization processes after World War II and thirdly the young generation which was born in the period of the main modernization in Slovak society. So the question of women's and men's storytelling could be discussed in the cultural and social contexts of the ongoing profound changes.

I would like to argue that it is probably difficult to discuss this issue in general and perhaps more productive to do so in a particular cultural context.

Almost every year since the seventies, I have done fieldwork in various parts of Slovakia. I investigated the oral traditions in rural and urban communities. In this

paper, I would like to bring up examples from one rural locality.<sup>1</sup> Here, a narrative repertoire of 485 texts was collected from 59 (35 female and 24 male) narrators of all the three generations – adults, young people and children. I took advantage of the chance to observe natural storytelling situations and it was also part of my research routine to conduct interviews with narrators and their audience. Thus, I hope, my research has provided data which could allow me to discuss the question stated in the title: women's and men's storytelling: what is the difference?

I will focus on this problem from different angles: firstly from the point of view of the male and female activity in the storytelling communities, secondly from the point of view of the prevalence of the male and female narrators and from the point of view of genre specialization in the male and female storytelling repertoires.

I shall now describe three storytelling communities. One example is of mixed narrators and audience, the other two are of a women's group and a men's group. All observed storytelling communities belonged to separate courtyards in the village. The fieldwork was conducted from 1981 to 1983.<sup>2</sup>

The first example refers to a storytelling community which developed around the storyteller Rudolf (born 1910) in the courtyard "U Bereši". During the years of my research he was already a widower. He lived in his own original but reconstructed house with the family of his youngest daughter Anna. The house was an open hospitable place for neighbours and other visitors. I myself could profit from this hospitality being kindly invited by Rudolf and his daughter Anna to live in their house for several days during my fieldwork.

In this storytelling community Rudolf shared his performances with the storyteller L'udovít (born 1900) who came almost every afternoon from a neighbouring courtyard. During the week the audience consisted of 4-7 children, 4-5 female and some male neighbours (2-3) from the courtyard. Only at weekends could more male neighbours (3-6) follow the storytelling. However, men often prefer to play cards and they only sometimes followed the storytelling.

The male narrators Rudolf and L'udovít were often assisted by "fellow actors", the sisters Vilma (1944) and Mária (1941) who worked in the village and in the afternoons often joined in the performance.

In this group storytellers divided their roles and themes. Rudolf usually narrated personal stories about the hardships of life in the past, about his childhood, stories about his parents, events from the village, stories of the Second

<sup>1</sup> The village of Nová Bystrica in North-West Slovakia, a rural mountain region, 3,200 inhabitants (in 1981). Until the end of 1950's the main occupation of the population was agriculture and domestic industrial production. After the 1950's the majority of men of productive age started to work outside the village (workers in factories and mines), the women continued to work in the village, in agriculture and in local industrial businesses. The village is divided into "courtyards" which are small site units, built on land which belonged to one original settler. Today 8-12 families live in one courtyard. Courtyards are also basic units for social contacts and social activities in the village.

<sup>2</sup> The storytelling repertoire in the village of Nová Bystrica, the social context of the three storytelling communities and the regular storytelling performances are depicted in detail in Kiliánová 1989, 1999.

World War etc. I could observe that he also often told supernatural legends. In his repertoire one could find further funny stories from the village such as experiences from weddings etc. However, Rudolf's funny stories were only supplementary to L'udovít's narratives which mostly covered humorous themes. It was L'udovít who played the role of humorous narrator in this community. His repertoire included numerous anecdotes, jokes from the Slovak traditional cycle on Gypsies, narratives on his personal comic experiences and the like. Both storytellers were leaders in the group, however L'udovít had a stronger personality than Rudolf.

When the female tellers Vilma and Mária joined the group they mostly exchanged jokes and anecdotes with L'udovít and added witty comments. But as the sisters had an extensive repertoire of their own, they also narrated oral personal stories or legends, especially supernatural legends. In this way they supported Rudolf's narration.

However, the sisters were more active in their women's circle where they performed predominantly funny stories. The women's circle in the courtyard "U BerešI" used to meet on Sunday afternoon, in front of the houses or with Vilma or Mária, depending on the weather.

A good example of a regular women's storytelling community was the group which gathered around the female narrator Alojzia (1907) in the courtyard "U Holienky". Like Rudolf she was also a widow. She lived alone but was frequently visited by two, or sometimes up to five female neighbours. The main purpose of the meetings was embroidering, which was taught by Alojzia but the women also told stories, directed mainly by Alojzia. Her narrations concentrated on serious life stories and she was one of the most important interpreters of supernatural legends as well as fairy tales, in this village. Alojzia's storytelling was sometimes supported by her neighbour Anna (1931) also a talented storyteller with a well developed sense of humour. However, as I could observe, within this women's circle narrations were rarely of a humorous character, because of the dominant influence of Alojzia's serious nature. This attitude derived from her understanding of female social behaviour; in her perception jokes and having fun was the realm of men. This opinion was also sustained elsewhere, mostly amongst the older generation. But in reality both sexes told jokes. The research in the village indicated that women as well as men were active interpreters of humorous stories. What we had to conclude here was that the social norms and generally expected social behaviour of men and women regulated the role of storytellers in the case of humorous themes and especially of erotic and dirty jokes and stories. Female storytellers dominated mostly in female groups while male narrators dominated in male and mixed groups. Women performed humorous storytelling or erotic folklore in a sexually mixed and wider audience only on particular occasions (weddings etc.). It was also assumed that they were married.

The last example is a male storytelling group in the courtyard "U Tal'apky". Two narrators Štefan (1920) and Martin (1922) associated themselves with a male

audience from the middle and older generation. Štefan was the main narrator, while Martin acted as a prompter. As in many storytelling situations narrators often started with everyday discussions about recent events and then together they shifted to memories – stories and anecdotes. Both Štefan and Martin had a great sense of humour. The main purpose of the narration was to make people laugh. That was why the storytellers had a developed repertoire of humorous tales, anecdotes, and jokes. Both of them also knew some supernatural legends, but they performed them mostly in a humorous context. In this case the legends turned into parodies without any additional commentaries. The storytellers acted predominantly as humorists and thus fully met the expectations not only of the particular audience but also of the whole community.

Observations of these particular storytelling communities and the results of the whole investigation in the village have shown that one can hardly speak about the predominance of male or female narrators in general. In my fieldwork, as I mentioned above, I have even collected more stories from women than from men, a result which has obviously something to do with my better access to women's than to men's circles.

But the role of women's and men's storytelling could be depicted differently if we would follow the so-called best or leading narrators. During my field work, I selected ten storytellers from all 59 narrators in the village. The criteria were: active interpreter, stable audience, authority in the storytelling community, reputation as a narrator in the village or at least in some storytelling communities, good/excellent artistic abilities, developed narrative repertoire. The following step was to pay special attention to the chosen personalities and investigate them (sex, age, bibliography, character, profession, social status, social contacts, world view etc., its impact on the storyteller and vice versa). The ten selected narrators were seven men and three women. Four men were from the old generation, three from the middle generation. One woman was from the old, two from the middle generation.

I recorded 257 stories from men and 83 from women. The average male repertoire was about 37 stories, the average female repertoire was about 28 texts. The biggest repertoire came from a man: 54 texts. From the seven men five were recognized as humorists by themselves as well as by the audience. These five narrators had an average repertoire of 32 stories. They possessed repertoires with the following average genre composition: personal stories (predominantly humorous stories) *ca* 20, anecdotes *ca* 4, tales *ca* 2, historic or local legends *ca* 3 and ghost stories 5.

Two men were characterized as narrators-chroniclers. Their average repertoire was 49 stories. The average genre composition of the repertoire was: personal stories (of a more serious character) *ca* 30, anecdotes 4, tales *ca* 3, legends 3, ghost stories *ca* 8.

From the three women two were humorists, one a narrator-chronicler. The female humorists had an average repertoire of 29 stories. The average genre

composition of their repertoire was: personal stories 11, anecdotes 3, tales 4, legends *ca* 2, ghost stories *ca* 9. The female narrator-chronicler had a repertoire of 26 stories: personal stories 5, anecdotes 0, (magic) tales 4, legends 2, ghost stories 15.

The male humorists were from the old as well as middle generation. The female humorists only from the middle generation. Even though the repertoire analysis of the ten best narrator personalities was only one of the many clues to our problem it showed some general tendencies in narrative communication.

As we all know, the role of a storyteller depends not only on his or her possible repertoire and on his or her artistic abilities, but also upon the expectations of the audience and society. According to social norms in the investigated village, the society expects men to be more active in various forms of entertainment, and dominant in sexually mixed groups. Even though the modernization processes in this region started nearly thirty years before my field work the male and female behaviour roles still preserved many features of former gender roles from the traditional (patriarchal) society. It is not surprising because the sociological investigations could often prove the long lasting influence of the traditional cultural patterns on contemporary European societies (Gerhards and Hackenbroch 1997: 410-415). Concerning Slovakia the sociologists could still confirm the prevailing influence of traditional gender roles on male and female behaviour in the 1990's (Bútorová 1996). The different possibilities for men and women to perform their storytelling had influenced (among other factors) their development as narrative personalities and brought the prevalence of male leading narrators in comparison with female.

In the contemporary situation, when the narrative communication only partially includes traditional oral genres, the performance is usually oriented on the one hand towards serious tales such as personal experiences, true stories, legends, modern urban legends etc., and on the other hand towards humorous themes such as humorous personal stories, jokes, and anecdotes. Even though in most cases the male and female storytellers in the investigated village had a mixed repertoire the best narrators of humorous stories from the society's point of view (and also my own view) were men (for example L'udovít or Štefan) while the best performer of magic tales and ghost stories was a woman (Alojzia). Thus the results of contemporary investigation still support the idea of genre or theme specialization between the male and female narrators.

Due to social "pressure" one can observe the prevailing division of roles between the sexes in performances at least in the context of a mixed audience. Women's storytelling activity still seems to be partially limited by social rules which expect women's orientation towards women's circles, smaller groups and intimacy of performance. This tendency is stronger especially in the case of performance of humorous and erotic themes. In other words, the impact of the "new women" role in modern society can be only partially followed in the narrative communication of contemporary Slovakia.

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## ABSTRACT

The author discusses the different roles of male and female storytellers in the contemporary storytelling communities in Slovakia. The main questions raised are as follows. What is the difference between women's and men's storytelling? The author approaches the problem from the point of view of male and female activity in the storytelling communities, from the point of view of prevalence of male in comparison with female narrators and from the point of view of the genre specialization in the male and female storytelling repertoires. The final question is whether modernization changes have already influenced the narrative communication in Slovakia. The questions are discussed on the basis of empirical data from one rural community where the author conducted field work from 1981 to 1983.

The author came to the conclusion that the different possibilities for men and women to perform their storytelling had influenced (among other factors) their development as narrative personalities and brought the prevalence of male leading storytellers in comparison with female ones.

The results of contemporary investigation still support the idea of genre or theme specialization between male and female narrators. Even though in most cases male and female storytellers in the investigated community had a mixed repertoire the best narrators of humorous stories, both from the society's and the researcher's point of view, were men while the best performer of magic tales, legends and ghost stories was a woman.

Due to social "pressure" one can observe the prevailing division of roles between the sexes in the performance, at least in the context of a mixed audience. Women's storytelling activity still seems to be partially limited by social rules which expect women to perform within women's circles, smaller groups, in an intimate environment. This tendency is especially stronger in the performance of humorous and erotic themes. In other words, the impact of "new women" role in modern society can be only partially followed in the narrative communication of contemporary Slovakia.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Autorin untersucht die unterschiedliche Rolle männlicher und weiblicher Erzähler in zeitgenössischen Erzählgemeinschaften der Slowakei. Dabei wirft sie folgende grundsätzliche Fragen auf: Wie zeigt sich der Unterschied zwischen dem Erzählen von Frauen und Männern? Die Autorin behandelt diese Frage unter den Gesichtspunkten männlicher und weiblicher Aktivität in der Erzählgemeinschaft, der Dominanz männlichen Erzähler im Vergleich zu den weiblichen unter Genrespezialisierung in männlichen und weiblichen Erzählrepertoires. Abschließend wird gefragt, ob die modernisierungsbedingten Veränderungen bereits die Erzählkommunikation in der Slowakei beeinflusst haben. Diese Fragen werden auf der Basis empirischer Daten aus einer ländlichen Gemeinde diskutiert, in der die Autorin von 1981 bis 1983 Feldforschungen betrieb.

Die Autorin kommt zu dem Schluß, daß die unterschiedlichen Möglichkeiten für Männer und Frauen, als Erzähler hervorzutreten, unter anderem ihre Entwicklung als Erzählerpersönlichkeiten beeinflussten und die Vorherrschaft bei den führenden männlichen Erzählern mit sich brachten.

Die Resultate zeitgenössischer Forschung stützen immer noch die Vorstellung einer Genre- oder Themenspezialisierung unter männlichen und weiblichen Erzählern. Obwohl das Repertoire der männlichen und weiblichen Erzähler in der untersuchten Gemeinschaft in den meisten Fällen gemischt war, waren aus Sicht der Gemeinschaft (und auch der Forscherin) Männer die besten Erzähler humoristischer Geschichten, während eine Frau am besten Zaubermärchen, Sagen und Geistergeschichten vortrug.

Aufgrund des sozialen 'Drucks' kann man die herrschende Rollenaufteilung zwischen den Geschlechtern während der Performanz zumindest im Kontext einer gemischten Zuhörerschaft beobachten. Die Erzählaktivitäten der Frauen scheinen teilweise noch immer durch soziale Regeln eingeschränkt zu sein, die von Frauen eine Ausrichtung auf Frauenkreise, kleinere Gruppen, auf Intimität des Vortrags erwarten. Diese Tendenz zeigt sich besonders stark bei der Performanz humoristischer und erotischer Themen. In anderen Worten: Die Auswirkung der Rolle der 'neuen Frau' in der modernen Gesellschaft kann in der erzählerischen Kommunikation der heutigen Slowakei nur teilweise beobachtet werden.

## RESUMO

A autora discute a diferença entre contadoras e contadores nas comunidades eslovacas contemporâneas em que se contam histórias. A principal questão levantada é a seguinte: qual a diferença do reportório dos contadores e das contadoras? O problema é abordado do ponto de vista da actividade masculina e feminina nas comunidades narrativas, do ponto de vista da prevalência de narradores masculinos em relação aos femininos e do ponto de vista da especialização de género dentro dos reportórios de cada um dos grupos. A questão final é se as mudanças operadas pela modernização influenciaram já a comunicação narrativa na Eslováquia. As questões são discutidas com base em dados empíricos obtidos numa comunidade rural em que a autora realizou trabalho de campo de 1981 a 1983.

Conclui-se que as diferentes possibilidades que os homens e as mulheres têm de narrar as suas histórias influenciou (entre outros factores) o seu desenvolvimento como narradores e fez com que os contadores suplantassem as contadoras. Os resultados da investigação contemporânea apoiam ainda a ideia duma especialização de géneros ou de temas entre homens e mulheres. Embora na maioria dos casos os contadores e contadoras da comunidade investigada tivessem um reportório misto, os melhores narradores de histórias humorísticas eram – quer do ponto de vista da comunidade quer do da investigadora – os homens; enquanto a melhor narradora de contos maravilhosos, lendas e histórias de fantasmas era uma mulher.

Devido à pressão social, pode observar-se que prevalece a divisão de papéis entre os sexos, pelo menos dentro do contexto duma audiência mista. A actividade narrativa das mulheres parece ainda ser em parte limitada por regras sociais que estas esperam das mulheres que actuem num círculo feminino, em grupos pequenos e na intimidade. Tal tendência é mais forte no caso da narrativa de histórias humorísticas e eróticas. Por outras palavras, o impacto do papel das “novas mulheres” na sociedade moderna é apenas parcialmente seguido na comunicação narrativa da Eslováquia contemporânea.