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GENDER RELATIONS IN MARTIN AMIS'S SELECTED NOVELS

Streszczenie:

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi analizę tematyki *gender* w twórczości brytyjskiego pisarza Martina Amisa. Przedstawione tu zostają różne wizerunki bohaterek i napięte, wręcz wojownicze relacje kobiet z mężczyznami. Przedmiotem badań są trzy powieści brytyjskiego autora, *Money*, *London Fields* i *Night Train*, w których ukazane są zarówno relacje bohaterki z bohaterami głównie w kontekście zbrodni i przemocy, jak również niejednoznaczny stosunek pisarza do kobiet i przedstawienie ich wizerunku w swoich utworach. Podczas omawiania tematyki *gender* w twórczości Martina Amisa przywołana zostaje z jednej strony krytyka feministycznych kół literackich a z drugiej strony przychylny brytyjskiemu autorowi opinie różnych analityków, recenzentów i teoretyków.

Feminism (endlessly diverging, towards the stolidly Benthamite, towards the ungraspably rarefied), the New Man, emotional bisexuality, the Old Man, Iron Johnism, male crisis-centres – these are convulsions, some of them necessary, some of them not so necessary, along the way, intensified by the contemporary search for role and guise and form.

(Martin Amis: *The War Against Cliché*)

In the majority of his works Martin Amis writes from a male perspective, pre-vaillingly about male characters, addressing an implied male reader, deriving the inspiration from male novelists, on the one hand, from a Victorian novelist Charles Dickens, and, on the other hand, from postmodern writers such as Nabokov, Bellows, Roth, Ballard, and drawing on male literary sources. Hence, it comes as no surprise that his novels have aroused lavish feminist criticism – vacillating between sweeping accusations of misogyny and obscenity to refined readings unveiling un-

conscious gender bias¹. Amis attributes his depiction of tempestuous gender relations and sexual matters to the contemporary era. Quoting Bellow's pronouncement that "ours is a sclerotic Eros" – an Eros that has grown unaffectedly hardened over time – he still holds the view that romantic love "will always be true, but it's harder for it to flourish"². Moreover, according to some critics, most notably, Brian Finney, the novelist is strongly convinced that in our media-saturated culture it becomes increasingly difficult to find any authentic experience³. The novelist also believes that sex offers him as a writer a tool "for revealing characters 'when they're not just going through the motions'. It's an idea where need and greed converge, and where tenderness is accidental, a rare thrill"⁴. Similarly to drink, sex is an "area where people behave very strangely and yet go on being themselves"⁵. Nevertheless, Amis's assertion of his writer's right to employ sex for its psychological analyses could be understood as idiomatic of the male writer's use of the pen as a phallic weapon⁶.

Notwithstanding feminist scathing criticism of Amis's fiction, in particular the objection of some critics, for example Maggie Gee, Helen McNeil, to the writer's misogynist attitude towards women and his simplified and conservative depiction of female characters, one cannot fail to notice the author's in-depth analysis of gender relations, the role of men and women at the threshold of the third millennium – the crisis of masculinity in the descending patriarchal society and the objectification and exploitation of women in postmodern consumerist, media-pervaded culture. There is no escaping the fact, however, that regardless of Amis's complex, profound examination of gender roles, his female protagonists are indubitably by far less conspicuous and recognisable than their male counterparts and therefore they could be frequently considered as types, predominantly negative ones, rather than genuine characters. The novelist confirms such a view of his heroines, asserting that he can see no place for a positive female role model in his fictive, comically-imbued world: "I'm writing comedies. Vamps and ballbreakers and goldiggers are the sort of women who belong in comedy"⁷. "Such women are types, the subjects of fictional narratives, genre-specific"⁸. In this regard feminist critics' objection to Martin Amis's black and white portrait of female protagonists could be to a great extent justified, yet I still believe that having analysed painstakingly his fiction and literary criticism, particularly those of his works in which homicide, violence, victimisation

¹ Finney, Brian: *Martin Amis*. New York: Routledge 2008. P. 139

² Stout, Mira: *Down London's Mean Streets*. New York: New York Time Magazine 1990. Pp. 48.

³ Finney, B.: *Martin Amis*. P. 139.

⁴ *Ibidem*. P. 36.

⁵ Haffenden, John: *Martin Amis: Novelists in Interview*. London and New York: Methuen 1985. P. 6.

⁶ Finney, B.: *Martin Amis*. P. 139.

⁷ Bellante, Carl and Bellante, John: *Unlike Father, Like Son*. Bloomsbury: Bloomsbury Review 1992. P. 16. (Interview with Martin Amis from March 4–5 1992) (Interview with Martin Amis from 1985).

⁸ Finney, B.: *Martin Amis*. P. 141.

and atonement come to the fore, one can notice that female protagonists are enigmatic, unpredictable characters who successfully manage to outwit their male persecutors, all the more to release themselves adroitly from an apparently absolute control of the narrators or the author's alter-egos. Besides, to my mind, Amis's controversial and ambiguous depiction of female characters ought to be examined from some distance and ironical standpoint thanks to which the readers are able to understand more profoundly the writer's highly ambivalent texts. More importantly, having inspected closely the writer's consecutive novels and non-fiction, we may observe a gradual alteration from the novelist's perfunctory picture of female protagonists towards their more mature, complex and more elaborate images.

Miscellaneous critics, among others Brien Finney, James Diedrick or Gavin Keulks, confirm feminist critics' accusations of Amis's superficial, desultory portrait of female characters in his early fiction. They assert that in *Rachel Papers* (1973), *Dead Babies* (1975) or *Success* (1978) women are depicted from a male perspective and they are mostly directed to men. However, the British author rejects the charge of misogyny and prejudice against his heroines: "I don't think I've ever written about a woman with any hatred. I love my women characters, even the most scheming and tricky"⁹. Amis's female narratees function as types rather than fully developed characters. On the other hand, one cannot fail to notice that although his male protagonists come to the fore they are by and large presented in a negative light, usually pitilessly caricatured and ridiculed. Hence, the author purposefully marginalises, or delineates the schematic image of women, and foregrounds the wicked, degenerate male characters as the exposition of the villainous, corrupted side of the contemporary society. At the same time, he shows the crisis of masculinity, and the distorted, lampooned picture of his male protagonists reflects the dilemmas and fears of contemporary men being overwhelmed by the invasion of the feminist culture, the augmentation of women's role in every facet of life, prevailing in the realm of business industry, entertainment and media communication. In this respect the reality depicted by the novelist in such works as *Success*, *Other People* (1981), *Money* (1984), *London Fields* (1989), *Information* (1995), to name but a few, could be interpreted as the utopian vision of the patriarchal world where women are but male erotic fantasies, the figments of their artistic imagination or platitudinous companions to their lives. Nevertheless, such images shortly turn out to be misleading and delusive since most of Amis's heroines surpass or fall short of the expectations of the heroes, all the more flee from the control of male narrators, which shows the irreversible process of changing gender relations at the turn of the 21st century and the unfeasibility of returning to male paternalistic culture.

As was indicated previously, Amis's depiction of female characters and gender roles slightly fluctuates in various stages of his writing career. In his initial works the writer unveils a clichéd, facile, yet with a hint of irony and humour, picture of

⁹ Ibidem. P. 141.

women as victims of male tyranny, perversion, callousness and discrimination. Out of the three novels outlining strained gender relations, *Rachel Papers*, *Dead Babies* and *Success*, it is in all likelihood the last one whose both subject matter and style bring us closer to the comprehension and immediate experience of the arcana of the protagonists' world, the narrators' reciprocal relations and their attitude towards women. *Success* is a *dramatic monologue* of two feuding foster-brothers who address their stories to predominantly male readers. Gregory Riding's and Terrence Service's confessions unveil the depraved, licentious nature of the protagonists and the accounts of their love affairs, in particular the incestuous relationship with their step-sister Ursula, betoken their pathological narcissism.

James Diedrick attributes the last feature to Gregory, paralleling the protagonist's depiction of Ursula's response when he first caressed her to Narcissus's own motionless stare into self-reflecting waters, pointing out that it discloses more about his own desires than his sister's: "Ursula looked up at me encouragingly, her face lit by a lake of dreams"¹⁰. The critic remarks that this moment initiates some kind of narcissistic withdrawal from the larger world and other people that contribute to the ruin of Gregory's later life¹¹. As a grown-up man, he is reluctant to bear responsibility for the aftermath of his abnormal boyish erotic desires and to realise that these enduring intimacies with his sister have had a devastating influence on her psyche and personality, and consequently have driven her to suicide. The following citation provides a telling illustration of Gregory's callousness, insensitivity towards Ursula's despondency, and reveals his infantilism: "Why does she cry so much *now*? What else can she be crying for but the last world of our childhood, when it didn't seem to matter what we did?"¹²

Similarly to Gregory, Terrence bears the mark of degeneracy and pathology. Nevertheless, his moral decay is linked with the rivalry with his foster-brother, his aspiring to obliterate the memory of his appalling childhood and to overcome the inferiority complex. Terry, analogously to Greg, treats women in a patronising manner and perceives them as sexual objects thanks to which he endeavours to test his male potency. In vying with Greg for the position in the family, society and for the attention of the opposite sex, Terry goes to great lengths to equal, or even to supersede his brother in wickedness and mercenariness when Gregory gradually descends in the social ladder. Terrence, out of sheer envy of Greg and curiosity takes advantage of Ursula, luring her into his bed, pressuring her to repeat sexual acts she performed on Greg and thus precipitating her self-destruction. As a form of gratitude, he offers a sort of mechanical reciprocation, not being cognizant that his sister derives no pleasure in his advances. However, when she finally approaches Terry, seeking sexual comfort and tenderness after being rejected by Gregory, their un-

¹⁰ Amis, Martin: *Success*. London: Penguin Books 1985. P. 68.

¹¹ Diedrick, James: *Understanding Martin Amis*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press 2004. P. 53.

¹² Amis, M.: *Success*. P. 117 (*italics in the original*).

ion is brief and culminates in a woman's despair¹³. Terry's relation of their concluding conversation prior to Ursula's demise demonstrates his own emergent sociopathology: "I merely pointed out, gently but firmly, that there was no sense in which I could assume responsibility for her, that you cannot 'take people on' any longer while still trying to function successfully in your own life, that she was on her own now, the same as me, the same as Greg, the same as everybody else"¹⁴.

Terrence's insensitivity to Ursula's anguish as well as his condescending, objectifying attitude towards other women symbolise the protagonist's yearning to cast off the burden of his traumatic childhood experiences, especially to efface the memory of his mother's and sister's maltreatment and successive killing by his tyrannical father. Terry, having fallen the victim to his father's sexual abuse and witnessed his sister's violent death, endeavours to eradicate his past and social background from his consciousness, particularly the trauma of domestic violence. As a result, he becomes utterly heartless and unsympathetic towards the suffering and wretchedness of the others. As for his contacts with women, specifically his incestuous relationship with Ursula and his partial contribution to her death, Terry paradoxically follows the example of his sadistic father. In this vein he embodies the product of the pathological misogyny and the prolongation of a patriarchal culture.

However, the motif of homicide, mostly when linked with pathology, sadism and violence against women, occupy to a greater extent other novels by Amis. As regards his early works, especially *Other People*, one may easily observe that the writer outlines the victimisation of female protagonists within the wider process of social decay. This novel echoes the process of moral degeneration of British young generation, yet here the female character comes to the fore, what is more, the narrative reality is viewed from her standpoint. Amis's book provides an absorbing illustration of blending the tradition of gothic fiction, the doppelgänger literature and feminist criticism. Mary Lamb/Amy Hide, epitomising the figure of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde is one of scarce examples of foregrounding feminine split personality in crime literature, especially in Amis's fiction. As was formerly stressed, in his novels, usually in the early ones, the British author focuses on male characters and exhibits the realm of men's culture, predominantly their degenerative and repellent aspect, however, this work initiates a shift of perspective, altering from describing an entirely masculine subject matter and male narration towards presenting a narrative reality in which women commence to play a substantial role yet frequently a negative one, and where both sexes vie with each other and struggle for their authorial autonomy, the most vivid illustration of which is *London Fields*.

Other People initiated the alteration of the novelist's interest in exclusively male culture and their micro-world towards the examination of feminine personality. Although after the publication of his novel Amis returned to the analysis of male

¹³ Diedrick, J.: Understanding Martin Amis. P. 54.

¹⁴ Amis, M.: Success, P. 207.

issues, in his successive works the female characters have appeared much more frequently and their role has become increasingly prominent. Notwithstanding this, some of his well-known books failed to escape severe feminists' criticism on account of the writer's alleged sexism, misogyny and his delineation of women pornography. The works that underwent the most excoriating reviews in feminist circles were *Money* and *London Fields*, though Amis refutes these accusations, considering them groundless, and asserts that the core of the criticism lies in the readers' confusion of distinguishing the voice of the narrator from that of the creator and their entire misperception of the authorial irony.

The second of the afore-said books deserves an in-depth analysis owing to its controversy over the gender matter and to its affinity with the murder story convention. There is no denying that the dispute over the novel had a pernicious influence on the popularity of the work and on the writer's thriving literary career as two women on the judging panel for the Booker Prize and one woman judge for the Whitbread Prize refused to shortlist it for the alleged sexist offensiveness¹⁵. Maggie Gee, a novelist and one of the two female Booker judges, strived to justify her objection to the novel by claiming that there is confusion in the function of the narrator, Samson, who sometimes is a norm and other times he participates in the book, ignoring the wilful perplexity Amis produces by opening the novel with a note from "M.A." who, as Sam's literary executor, is accountable for the text the moment when it appears and who, as Sam speculates, have shaped and manipulated him from the outset¹⁶. Finney remarks that other female critics, despite their praise of *London Fields*, also disapproved of its seeming misogyny. One of them, Penny Smith asserts that Nicola's presentation: "invites accusations of misogyny, even though Amis's apparent intention is for his female character to be read as a symbol of her age rather than a sign of her gender. Nicola is self-destructive, compelled not just to cancel love but to murder it"¹⁷. Finney adds that the critic perceives sexism in the protagonist's preparing to execute her by using a man's hands. By the same token Betty Pesetsky points out that the book makes its audience give some thought to: "the sneaking suspicion that a misogyny lingers here somewhere"¹⁸. According to the critic the misogynist overtone is visible in the author's portrayal of Nicola Six not as character or even caricature but as "another of Mr Amis's plastic women"¹⁹.

In addition, one may refer to Sara Mills' scrutiny of *London Fields* in her essay "Working with Sexism: What Can Feminist Text Analysis Do?" Unlike examinations of sexism which focus only on either a linguistic or ideological side, she draws the attention to the so-called "narrative schemata" – grammatical and linguistic

¹⁵ Finney, B.: Martin Amis. P. 143.

¹⁶ Ibidem. P. 143.

¹⁷ Ibidem. P. 143.

¹⁸ Pesetsky, Bette: Lust Among the Ruins. *London Fields*. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/02/01/home/amis-fields.html> (10.03.2009).

¹⁹ Ibidem.

structures that reflect particular representations of women that are inclined to become deterministic, making readers liable to view women from a certain angle. According to the critic in the narrative schemata Amis employs in his work when delineating Nicola's waiting for her death and seeking her murderer, the protagonist "wishes to be acted upon and paradoxically strives to bring that about"²⁰. Mills emphasises the sexist overtone of the narrative schemata in *London Fields* which inclines the audience to accept them as common-sense knowledge, and states that the role of the feminist critic is to reveal their constructed nature. On the other hand, Brian Finney observes that Mills aims at altering feminist critics' thinking "forward from blanket accusations of political incorrectness" to an exposition of "the way that texts offer us constructions which are retrograde"²¹. He asserts that it is exclusively up to the reader to either agree to sexist schemata or to object to them. He argues that Nicola's choice to become a victim and to engineer her murdering does not resent her female submission to patriarchy; instead, it indicates her manifestation of declining to live in a patriarchal world which is devoid of love and deep human feelings²².

Next to the scathing criticism of the alleged sexist and misogynist tones in Amis's fiction, it is worth paying attention to Fredrick Holmes's and Susan Brook's assessment of the novelist's treatment of gender issues in *London Fields*. The former literary judge concentrates on the writer's scrutiny of male characters and on masculinist world in connection with mass and popular culture. In his analysis, Holmes singles out Keith, the character exhibiting the most conspicuously a caricatured, hyperrealistic facet of postmodern pop culture. The critic notices that the protagonist fails to perceive the moral debasement of what he esteems, but, on the other hand, he stresses that the author does not offer any external base or alternative to mass culture from which it could be excluded. Nevertheless, bearing in mind Fredrick Jameson's notion of postmodern culture understood as "The consumption of sheer commodification as a process," Holmes asserts that it cannot explicate what (the) reading public consider(s) to be the novel's objective to deplore the cultural malady in which it takes part. Instead, the critic attempts to figure out this equivocal quality in *London Fields* by referring to Linda Hutcheon who maintains that the incorporation of postmodernism in the capitalist process of commodification does not reject, though it comprises, its political critique of the equivalent process²³. Holmes refers to Hutcheon's statement to elucidate the ambivalent reactions to Amis's satiric and ironic yet sexually biased representations of the images of mass culture, such as those of women:

²⁰ Mills, Sara: Working with Sexism. What Can Feminist Text Analysis Do? In: Peter Verdonk and Jean Jack Veer (eds): Twentieth Century Fiction: From Text to Context. London and New York: Routledge 1995. P. 216.

²¹ Ibidem. P. 218.

²² Finney, B.: Martin Amis. P. 145.

²³ Ibidem. P. 145.

[Nicola] has more power and freedom than any of the other characters in manipulating and revising the ready-made scripts of society, but paradoxically the exercise of this freedom entails her own oppression. [...] the plots that she orchestrates necessitate that she enact and parody the very roles which feminists have rejected as limiting and destructive: those of Madonna and whore, which she plays for Guy and Keith respectively. Her detached awareness that these roles do not express her essential identity [...] do not [...] liberate her from them²⁴.

Ultimately, one may point to Brook's comments on gender roles in Amis's book, in particular to her response to Mills' and Thomas's criticism. She maintains that the lethargic, shapeless quality of Amis's protagonists contributes to destabilising gender identity by disclosing it as fictional and unsteady. Referring to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, she argues that "gender identity is the effect of a series of physical performances and linguistic iterations, with the result that it can be exaggerated and manipulated"²⁵. She demonstrates how Guy's and Keith's masculinity are constructs whilst Nicola's femininity is defined by her language and performance. Subsequently, Brook reacts to feminists' charges of sexism against Amis, referring to the novelist's argument against these accusations that Nicola wields power and control over male characters and the narrator, yet she finds it debatable, since "powerful women can be aligned with the castrating phallic mother, who is both fetishized and devalued"²⁶. According to the critic Martin Amis inadvertently arrives at such an interpretation while defending himself against feminist charges by telling Will Self: "The only aggressive feeling I have towards women is to do with their power over me. I've spent a big chunk of the last thirty years thinking about them, following them around, wanting to get off with them, absolutely enthralled. That's bound to produce a slave's whinny for mercy every now and then"²⁷. The analyst indicates that although the author's remarks are purposefully provocative, they imply that allegedly positive representations of potent and influential women can derive from highly ambivalent attitudes to women and femininity²⁸. Furthermore, by juxtaposing the text of the novel and his defence of it, she remarks that Amis's books agitate the discrimination between might and powerlessness, contrary to his perfunctory statements in interviews. The critic argues that the novelist's seemingly powerful characters are truly powerless as their actions are entirely supervised by the writer, nonetheless, the agency of author figures is questioned as well. As a conclusion, Brook points out that this work deconstructs concepts of authorial power and control: "Amis satirizes the abuse of power, and the plight of his manipulative author figures might be seen as self-punishment for his own authorial abuses. This interpretation further complicates the notion of power by suggesting that moral power

²⁴ Ibidem. P. 145.

²⁵ Brook, Susan: *The Female Form, Sublimation, and Nicola Six*. In: Gavin Keulks (ed.) *Martin Amis: Postmodern and Beyond*. New York; Palgrave Macmillan 2006. P. 89.

²⁶ Ibidem. P. 89.

²⁷ Ibidem. P. 89.

²⁸ Ibidem. P. 89.

might be gained through weakness or self-punishment"²⁹. In this regard the critic states that Martin Amis (or "Martin Amis") plays the equivocal role of sadist and masochist and therefore exerts power in contradictory ways³⁰.

The extensive analysis of gender matters outlined by Amis in his work reveals its highly controversial and disputable facet, comparable probably only to that of *Money*. Acrimonious discussions and miscellaneous critics' commentaries on *London Fields* are meticulously examined in the books and essays of Nicolas Tredell, Gavin Keulks, James Diedrick and John A. Dern to name but a few. In the scrutiny of sundry aspects of the work it is worth mentioning the books' millennial issues concerning mainly the correlation between the protagonist's death, the prophecy of nuclear holocaust and of the earth destruction. Penny Smith and Brian Finney suggest that *London Fields* is the indicator of the *zeitgeist*, it mirrors the crisis of contemporary civilisation, the degeneration of human values, as well as it heralds the forthcoming doom of the planet. The very figure of Nicola seems a contradictory one. On the one hand, being associated with the disastrous cosmic power and expressing her predilection for death, destruction and sexual turmoil, she constitutes a black hole who contributes to her own demise and lures the others, predominantly men, into her lethal trap. On the other hand, her self-destructive nature and death epitomise the planetary apocalypse, the decline of the earth and its nature of late 20th century³¹.

The above-analysed Martin Amis's novel is not the author's solely debatable and contentious work. Taking into account the depiction of gender matters, male-female relations which are linked to the motif of power, violence and oppression, and the ambiguous portrait of women, *Money* has aroused equally heated discussions, predominantly among feminist critics and writers. In contrast to *London Fields* in which the female protagonist plays a crucial role both as a character and the cowriter of the narrative text, the novelist has singled out a man as his main character in *Money*, however, his life and actions are conditioned and determined by his relations with women who seemingly embody purely his erotic accessories and supplements to life. John Self is a pathetic, deplorable character who continually yet unsuccessfully attempts to demonstrate his male potency, and as a narrator he strives to exercise the control of all the narratees of the text. Despite his sadistic and misogynist inclinations, women constitute the indispensable part of his life, both its physical and mental side. The two major female characters that shape and influence Sam, Selina Street and Martina Twain, are utterly contrastive figures symbolising a feminine dichotomy as well as two dissimilar aspects of life. The juxtaposition of these protagonists is one of the recurring examples of Amis's portrayal of pairs of characters, among others Gregory Riding and Terrence Service, Mary

²⁹ Ibidem. P. 90.

³⁰ Ibidem. P. 90.

³¹ Tredell, Nicolas (ed.): *The Fiction of Martin Amis. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2000. P. 102.

Lamb/Amy Hide, Keith Talent and Guy Clinch, Mike Hoolihan and Jennifer Rockwell or the two brothers in *House of Meetings*. In their depiction the novelist exposes the complex, contradictory nature of a man. In *Money* the figures of Selina and Martina embody contrastive and disproportioned sides of Sam's world. Selina Street is the narrator's genuine addiction, her function lies in satisfying John's erotic drives which are paramount for him. Although he constantly objectifies his lover and denies her any respect, he increasingly becomes obsessed with her and finally fooled by her cunning game and manipulation. Martina Twain plays, on the other hand, an educated or 'reformatory' role – she attempts to save the protagonist from the baneful influence of porn industry by drawing his attention away from sexual matters towards literature and theatre. She endeavours to become his partner and intellectual educator, yet all her undertakings fall short due to John's utter resistance to literature and refined culture, and his predilection for erotic excess. The protagonist's preference for Selina over Martina indicates the triumph of degenerative, debased side of John, his fancy for debauchery and debasement over sophistication, spirituality and intellect, the qualities attributed to Martina Twain who is, as some critics, for instance, Richard Tod suggest, Martin Amis's alter-ego.

Regarding gendered readings of *Money*, one may perceive, similarly to *London Fields*, a feminists' extensive attack on the writer, the charges of applied sexism and misogyny. Among heterogeneous themes of the novel raised by reviewers, writers and literary theoreticians, it is worth referring to the most well-known opinions as well as to present the author's stance and observation on his work. First of all, the critics attract the readers' attention to the aspect of money as a point of reference to Self's attitude to women. In her examination of Amis's work Laura L. Doan remarks that due to the fact that Self perceives life through the prism of money, he divides women into two categories: whores and non-whores. The critic continues arguing, maintaining Selina's statement that "men use money to dominate women"³² and therefore he acknowledges women's greater potential for victimisation and submission, but his thought is not unsettling for him but rather makes him wonder that women are worthy of it: "it must be tiring knowledge, the realization that half the members of the planet... can do what they hell like with you"³³. Thus, the critic asserts that according to Self masculine identity is shaped entirely by women who are content to get "goped or goosed or propositioned" and not loved³⁴. Additionally, she points to a passage in which the first thing Self ponders on when meeting a woman is the question "will I fuck it?"³⁵ Commenting the scene she states that: "By substituting 'it' for 'her', Self, like the pornography he devours, denies woman personhood, placing her in the ultimate state of disempowerment and disembodiment"³⁶.

³² Amis, Martin: *Money: A Suicide Note*. London: Penguin Books 1985. P. 90.

³³ *Ibidem*. P. 14.

³⁴ Tredell, N.: *The Fiction of Martin Amis. A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. P. 78.

³⁵ Amis, M.: *Money*. P. 222.

³⁶ Finney, B.: *Martin Amis*. P. 142.

It is tempting to suggest that Doan makes an accurate observation of the protagonist's objectification of women and viewing their value in terms of money and sex, yet she obviously misperceives, analogously to the criticism of *London Fields*, a noticeable balance between a highly biased narrative voice and the ironic authorial tone. Amis invariably emphasises a self-reflexive facet and a sardonic tone of his novel by means of which he creates the distance between the author, narrator and characters. As a vivid illustration of this process, he refers to the conversation between John Self and the Martin Amis figure about the role of the hero in a contemporary literary text. As Finney remarks, Doan accuses Self of sexism and assumes that this testifies to Amis's own sexism³⁷.

The grotesque and satirical tone of *Money* and *London Fields* leave space to a more meditative yet simultaneously ironic timbre in *Night Train*. In sundry essays, papers and interviews with Martin Amis Natasha Walter, Allen Barra, Elsa Simões Lucas Freitas and other critics stress the writer's altering attitude towards his protagonists and the narrator – instead of his imposing tone and sadistic treatment of the narratees, he offers his characters more autonomy and the status of Mike Hoolihan as a narrator seems to be equal with that of the author. This illustrates a significant change and a turning point in Amis's outlining author- characters' relations, especially with respect to the writer's attitude towards his female protagonists. The novelist portrays the two heroines through the prism of their professionalism and intellect instead of their physical attributes, which is confirmed by the above-mentioned critics. More importantly, Mike Hoolihan is given much dignity and respectability, which is extremely rare in Amis's fiction and betokens not solely a strong position of Mike as a feminine character but also her elevated status as a narrator. Nevertheless, one may observe that the behaviour of the protagonist, her crude, indelicate language, distant, seemingly unemotional attitude towards her work, fellow officers and investigated criminals, as well as her very name, imply asexual, or even masculine qualities. Mike Hoolihan is devoid of typical feminine features, both physical and mental ones, such as beauty, subtlety and sensitivity, in contrast to Jennifer Rockwell. Taking into account her relations with men, one is tempted to suggest that despite her sexual and emotional contacts with her male partners and friends, Mike appears to be mostly attached to Jennifer whose tragic preposterous suicidal death leaves the narrator anguished and perplexed. Although the novel does not imply Mike and Jennifer's sexual relations, one may risk stating that Hoolihan has some lesbian proclivities, yet her attraction to and feeling for the astrophysicist seem purely emotional, but it is the spiritual, not physical closeness which she seeks in relations with people.

In *Night Train* Amis endows his female protagonists with depth and sagacity, in contrast to the caricatured, pathetic characters from previously analysed novels, however, he still denies them power and agency. Both Jennifer and Mike are

³⁷ Ibidem. P. 142.

doomed protagonists. The inscrutable suicidal death of the former may mirror the dark, impenetrable side of human psyche and the protagonist's refusal to live in the calamitous contemporary age whilst the professional failure of the latter constitutes her lack of poise as a narrator as well as her defeat as a detective and a writer incapable of deciphering the conundrums of a postmodern mystery story.

All told, gender problems constitute one of the crucial elements of Martin Amis's fiction. In his almost every novel one may witness references to gender and sex matters. The turbulent male-female relations, usually perceived by the implied male readers, become highlighted in those works which deal with crime, homicide, victimisation and atonement in which the writer, on the one hand, schematises the image of women as innocent victims of male violence, tyranny, sexual abuse or mercenary seductresses, and, on the other hand, he excels at delineating a complex, profound portrayal of women as professional detectives and intellectuals. However, Amis's prose stirred up a great controversy, mostly among feminist critics, on account of his applied sexism, when examining female characters, the ambiguous relations between the author, usually male narrators and female narratees, which, with reference to a crime fiction ideology, reflects a murderer and murderess propinquity, and the addressing his novels to predominantly male audience. As a defence against these charges, Amis invariably accentuates the role of the authorial irony which mirrors the distance between himself and his narrators, and which constitutes, in my opinion, the key to understanding and more profound interpretation of the author's depiction of tempestuous and highly disputable male-female relations. On the other hand, the novelist's attitude towards female protagonists and gender concerns on the whole still remain problematic and equivocal when we point to his remark on this issue in *War Against Cliché*: "Sexism is like racism: we all feel such impulses. Our parents feel them more strongly than we feel them. Our children, we hope, will feel them less strongly than we feel them"³⁸.

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³⁸ Amis, M.: The War Against Cliché. P. 9.

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