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COMRADESHIP AND SISTERHOOD IN ENGLISH SOCIALIST-FEMINIST UTOPIAS OF 1880S–90S**

Ours is the world, despite all;
that is, for the worker and for woman.
(August Bebel 2009 [1904]: 346)

Abstract
The figure of the New Woman, being articulated in the second half of the nineteenth century, is “a feminist in search of New Women” and it is strongly utopian. Utopian works written by female and feminist writers were published from the 1870s: we can refer to such socialist-feminist works as Jane Hume Clapperton’s *Margaret Dunmore, or, A Socialist Home* (1888), Elizabeth Corbett’s *New Amazonia* (1889), Lady Florence Dixie’s *Gloriana* (1890), Isabella Ford’s *On the Threshold* (1895), and Gertrude Dix’s *The Image Breakers* (1900). The dreamlike new harmonies of the *fin de siècle* feminist utopias are also related to the socialist debates about “the Woman Question” which involved, for instance, Friedrich Engels, Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling, and August Bebel. Consequently, analysing the literary works, I discuss the current issues of distribution of female and male tasks, forms of comradeship, companionship and sisterhood presented in the framework of the ideal-utopian future communities.

Key words: New Woman, Woman Question, utopias, comradeship, sisterhood, *fin de siècle*

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1. Introduction: On the Woman Question

The second half of the nineteenth century, not only on the Old Continent but also in Great Britain, is marked by revolutionary tendencies. Focussing on the last two decades, the *fin de siècle*, feminism and socialism together present a unique blend of radical views but, as Sally Ledger says, their "tentative marriage [...] was far from a happy one" (Ledger 1997: 58). However, in this sentence, slight irony can be sensed since the comradeship of feminists and socialists was not claimed to be a bad match after all. In the sociological, political, economic, and journalistic writings on the status of women, the question of their emancipation — the so-called Woman Question — was frequently discussed. The question itself was placed in the framework of "general emancipation" that also involved women's emancipation as Marx and Engels claimed in 1845, quoting Fourier's "fantasies" in their anti-utopian critical work, *The Holy Family*.[1] In *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* (*Woman under Socialism*), August Bebel emphasises that "the complete emancipation of woman, and her equality with man is the final goal of our social development" (Bebel 2009 [1904]: 320). The author's ideas are prophetically revolutionary:

> The woman of future society is socially and economically independent; she is no longer subject to even a vestige of dominion and exploitation; she is free, the peer of man, mistress of her lot. Her education is the same as that of man, with such exceptions as the difference of sex and sexual functions demand. Living under natural conditions, she is able to unfold and exercise her mental powers and faculties. She chooses her occupation on such field as corresponds with her wishes, inclinations and natural abilities, and she works under conditions identical with man's. Even if engaged as a practical working-woman on some field or other, at other times of the day she may be educator, teacher or nurse, at yet others she may exercise herself in art, or cultivate some branch of science, and at yet others may be filling some administrative function. She joins in studies, enjoyments or

[1] The quoted Fourier passage goes: "The change in a historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women towards freedom, because in the relation of woman to man, of the weak to the strong, the victory of human nature over brutality is most evident. The degree of emancipation of woman is the natural measure of general emancipation" (Marx and Engels 1956 [1845]: 259).

> social intercourse with either her sisters or with men, — as she may please or occasion may serve. (Bebel 2009 [1904]: 315)

Bebel also realises that the state of women's awareness should be raised as every woman is "to prove that she has comprehended *her true place in the Movement* and in the struggles of the present for a better future" (Bebel 2009 [1904]: 345, italics are mine). The motto of my text gives Bebel's concluding statement about the comradeship of the working men and women, which, on the one hand, is truly enthusiastic, recalling the style of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and such energetic phrases in *The Communist Manifesto* as "let the ruling classes tremble at a communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working men of all countries, unite!" — citing one of the most frequently quoted statements in the conclusion (Marx and Engels 1998 [1848]: 30). On the other hand, Bebel is still speaking about a concept, *the woman*, which foreshadows the problematic place (cf. "the true place") of such an ideal "New Woman" and makes the conclusion sound abstract and utopian.

In their review of Bebel's book, more exactly of its first English translation published in 1886, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling also emphasised that the Woman Question was being strongly related to the economic basis of the "organization of society as a whole" (Aveling and Marx Aveling 1886). The review just slightly criticises Bebel's work (and the errors of the translation); instead it displays the status of women in the nineteenth century society. The Avelings harshly attack social and sexual inequality in marriage (being "worse than prostitution"), divorce, and education, placing special emphasis on sex education and co-education; the latter, as they refer to it, was already advertised in England by Mary Wollstonecraft back in the 1790s. They also urge that "we as Socialists" should get rid of the vague notions of *the woman* and the old, mythical understanding of womanhood. Emancipation and equality will bring about the independence of women, and in the perfect future, in the (utopian-) socialist monogamy, the equal partners will have "love, respect, intellectual likeness, and command of the necessities of life" (Aveling and Marx Aveling 1886).

2. The New Woman and Her Utopia

Although the above quoted review is strikingly open when sexual and gender norms are concerned, the utopian tone features throughout and all the supporting examples are literary ones. As the author couple claims, "Socialism is at present in this country little more than a literary movement" (Aveling and Marx Aveling 1886). On the one hand, the Avelings' statement criticises the small numbers of socialists' circles in England, on the other hand, it also refers to the importance of "circulating," the actual sharing of similar values and ideas. In several literary works written by women in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the question of the New Woman was thematised, where the authors move beyond the conventional understanding of solidarity in fellowship, comradeship, and sisterhood. The female writers question "old" readership: they are "feminist[s] in search of New Women" — as Matthew Beaumont points out — with the belief in the "inter-subjective solidarity of the ideal collective" (Beaumont 2009: 97–98).

The phrase "the New Woman" first appeared in journalistic pieces with a pejorative sense due to the hostility of the male dominant "discursive phenomenon" and it soon generated a "reverse" discourse. Sally Ledger remarks that in self-defence, the New Woman, being exemplified by the advanced women of the decades, began to speak on *her* own behalf (Ledger 1997: 10). Besides journalistic writings, literary works were published by a great amount of female authors in the 1880s–90s. The so-called New Woman novels show variety of forms (and genres), from educational novels and fantastic utopias through Gothic novels to atypical socialist-feminist novels. After this socio-political introduction, in my paper, I will analyse the radicalism of some selected *fin de siècle* novels and my main focus will be put on socialist-feminist novels: on Jane Hume Clapperton's *Margaret Dunmore, or, A Socialist Home* (1888), Florence Dixie's *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890), Isabella Ford's *On the Threshold* (1895), and Gertrude Dix's *The Image Breakers* (1900) with the aspects of family relations, gender roles, and sexual norms.

The *Fin de siècle* displayed the taste for utopias — either practical, or fantastic, and socialist ones. The end of the century was characterised by not only the disillusionment of the old, decadent values but also by the hope of the new age coming in the human attitude of "wishful thinking" (Bloch 1988: 106). In France and in England, Jules Verne and Herbert

George Wells popularised scientific romances, while other novelists published visionary and dreamlike works (e.g. William Henry Hudson's *The Crystal Age,* 1887), or socialist ones; the dream-narratives of the American Edward Bellamy (titled *Looking Backward 2000–1887,* 1888 and *Equality,* 1897) and William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) can be mentioned. Quite early, even in parallel with the male utopias and male dreams of transformation, feminist utopias appeared. In Elizabeth Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889), a suffragist imagines an ideal state with a petticoat government of women controlling the country that was originally Ireland, having been colonised by the female. It is a fantastic utopia, where, due to the usage of electricity, healthy diet (the Amazonians are vegetarian) and natural living, the citizens live longer and happier; moreover, their life can be prolonged in the process of "rejuvenation". While New Amazonia is a true female utopia, in her political and critical prologue, Corbett refers to the historical framework of her novel: she attacks a group of contemporary female-fellows who argued against the importance of getting the right to vote. In her prologue she differentiates three groups within "the feminine genus *homo*": the rich *ladies*, the rebellious self-conscious *women* and the exploited working *slaves.* The members of the first group, the *ladies*, do not work, living under their husbands' protection, while the *women* and the *slaves* struggle to earn their own livelihood. Corbett urges to unite the forces of the latter two groups, standing up for justice for their sex, with the help of MEN (capitalised) who support women, "promoting the general welfare of the nation" (Corbett 2014 [1889]), 28–32, italics in the original).

In the practical, less fantastic feminist-socialist utopias, the "gynotopic impulse" emerged and the new genre fused "the feminist and historical perspectives into entirely new forms of social interactions and gender relationships" (Beaumont 2009: 107). Special emphasis is laid on the "educative aspect" of utopia, which Ruth Levitas in *The Concept of Utopia* also highlights (Levitas 1990: 122): the novels teach the readers solidarity (comradeship and sisterhood), while raising their self-consciousness. These works present moments of revolutionary changes as well as examining the issues of gender and class politics. Ruth Levitas also suggests the use of the term "critical utopia", borrowed from Tom Moylan, and McKenna and also agrees on the transformative quality of such utopian visions, where, instead of "seek[ing] for a final, static goal [...] it is the process of transformation itself that is our task" (McKenna 2001: 8–9).

3. Mentors and Mothers

In Jane Hume Clapperton's less utopian, more practical novel titled *Margaret Dunmore, or, A Socialist Home* (1888), Margaret, the female protagonist dares to step beyond the boundaries and realises her utopian impulse. In the opening scenes, Margaret and Vera, two old school friends, now in their twenties, exchange letters about their prospects of marriage, then with a sudden turn, referring to Miss José's socialist influence on the heroine, the girls' letters discuss the possibilities of social reforms. Miss José, the well-educated French governess, proposes that the transformation of society and education should be started in the family since the English "home itself must evolve" (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 59). As she claims in a letter to her French comrade, Henri Martin:

> I hold that for true progress the first and most necessary step is the creation of a modern domestic system, favourable to the bringing into the world humanity of a new type. This humanity will spontaneously reject competition in industry, and rise above class distinctions. (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 22)

Thérèse José acts like a mentor in Margaret's life, "her true teacher in the philosophy which every being craves who has the intellect and soul to desire harmony, consistency, unity, in human life" (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 59–60). As a result, a group of men and women — two married couples with their parents, a mother with her two sons, a widower with his children, a young doctor and a housemaid with the initiators of the idea — build their own utopia, "a socialist home", forming a "provincial communistic" household (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 23). The large house, renamed "La Maison", has been bought and owned by the well-to-do middle-class woman, Margaret Dunmore (with her telling name, 'done more'), while the expenses of the experiment are financed by two-thirds of the annual income of the wage earners. The communal life in the house is cleverly organised and controlled, promoting healthy living, providing day-school for children (also open to the public for a considerable fee), distributing all the household chores, and eschewing all unnecessary luxuries and insensible money spending. The elected members, men and women, of the decision making committees (Finance, Amusement, Education, and Public Service Committees) operate well and even children are involved so that they can accustom to the socialist functioning of their Unitary Home.

After a time, babies are born in the newly organised household, and the nursery, the garden, the work-shop, the sewing-room, the library and the laboratory, besides the school-room, all have important roles in their education while the youth can choose their profession freely afterwards. The novel openly displays domestic conflicts; for instance, the shared rearing of children and the false expectations of men and women in marriage. One of the couples, the humble Vera and the authoritative Joe, needs considerable time to learn to mutually respect each others' preferences and become a real family, a valuable part of the community. The scientist Frank and the artistic Rose Ray have a happy marital life, bringing up their child, while Margaret has a strong intellectual bond with the man. It is not a conventional love triangle as the extra-marital relationship is strictly Platonic though Rose is rather jealous of her husband's other companionship. Rose — as Beaumont presents — is a sensitive musician, who is so deeply concerned about the social problems of her own time and she is on the verge of becoming hysterical due to the lack of "a practical outlet for her reforming spirit" (Beaumont 2009: 117). In the commune, she can free her previously suppressed volatile political energies and the couple together with Margaret are united in the nurturing of their "noble, tender, unselfish dream" about a perfect community (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 169).

Margaret, as "a peerless woman", is the inspirational centre of the novel and she remains unmarried; she does not become a mother — as Miss José says, Margaret's baby is their "socialism of the new era" (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 22). Miss Dunmore also gives direction to the development of the group, guiding the talented men to find new solutions; due to her influence, Frank leaves behind chemistry and starts to examine "social economics" (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 157). In the last chapter, besides their well-working day-school, the Lecture Hall is opened to invite comrades to give lectures on social topics. The members of the audience (like at an open university) are welcome to learn about the principles of their utopian "scientific meliorism", relying on the results of the group's communal home experiment:

> [...] scientific meliorism — a subject which embraces the rendering of humanity gentle and refined; the enlarging and improving of domestic life; the rationalizing of education and training; the organising of industry, and the whole field of labour; and socialising of general society. (Clapperton 2017 [1888]: 204).

While Clapperton's intellectual utopian Margaret dedicates herself to the working on the new society, there are novels in which the female protagonist can achieve independence, a political career and marital happiness. In Florence Dixie's rebellious *Gloriana, or the Revolution of 1900* (1890), a brave woman, Speranza de Lara, dares to leave her brutal husband to start a new life and have a loving family. Her daughter, Gloria(na), at the age of twelve promises that she should change the world and fight for equal rights for women. And fifteen years later, beneficial changes are observed in England: the franchise is granted to all women and their educational opportunities are enlarged due to the foundation of the Hall of Liberty, while thousands of women joined the Woman's Volunteer Corps and the White Guard Regiment of the Women's Volunteer Companies (Dixie 2018 [1890]: 82–87). The utopian future has been realised by the great efforts of a young Eton graduate, Hector D'Estrange, who, having become the Prime Minister in 1900, is planning to introduce "his bill for the absolute and entire enfranchisement of the women of his country" (Dixie 2018 [1890]: 128) in the Parliament, which also entails the acceptance of female MPs and female students at Oxbridge. In the great speech about women's emancipation, he relies on the natural equality of the sexes:

> Slavery in no form is natural; [...] But if honourable gentlemen will believe me, Nature is stronger than custom, and more powerful than law. Nature is a force that cannot be repressed finally and absolutely. [...] Through countless years woman has been repressed. [...] Nature gives strength and beauty to man, and Nature gives strength and beauty to woman. In this latter instance man flies in the face of Nature, and declares that she must be artificially restrained. [...] To the subjection and degradation of woman I ascribe the sufferings and crimes of humanity, nor will Society be ever truly raised, or ennobled, or perfected until woman's freedom has been granted, and she takes her rightful place as the equal of man. (Dixie 2018 [1890]: 128–130)

At first, he fails then several years later, following adventures of fighting, treachery and attempted assassination, finally, he, more exactly she, achieves what she planned in her childhood. Truly, the remarkably talented Hector is not a man: he is Gloriana, who in her camouflage, under the guise of Hector, is making the future path for women's emancipation. Her,

or, his career is not a conventional one, thus, Gloria's is a man's story of development. In the novel, till the moment of Gloria's coming out, she is continuously referred to as a "he" — even in their conversation with *his* mother, when the reader is first informed about *his* secret.

In the New Woman novels, male characters are not models or mentors: instead of the fathers, women play the important roles — men are only friends, partners, or comrades. In addition to Gloria and her mother, Speranza, there are two other outstanding female characters in Dixie's work. Gloria's alterego is the clever, well-educated and boyish looking Léonie, who is employed by Gloria's enemies to destroy her. Nevertheless, "the female Judas" goes through a great development and in a fateful heroic act dies, saving Gloria's life. Hector/Gloria's right hand is Flora Desmond with "bright independent spirit" and "dreams of a bright future, an adventurous career" (Dixie 2018 [1890]: 35), who, having had no other alternatives, escaped from her mediocre home into marriage. However, after the bankruptcy and suicide of her husband, Flora dedicates her life to the reforms and she initiates the rebellion, leading the women's troops — the "élite army of suffragists" (Beaumont 2009: 112) — to rescue Hector/Gloria after the trial. After Gloria's death, Lady Flora carries on her reforms and she is appointed the second female Prime Minister. The new nation's, more accurately, the Imperial Federation's important monument is the marble gravestone of the three comrades: the married couple, Gloria, Evelyn and Flora (who was secretly in love with the man). In a feminist novel, female characters should work on their prospect and in the studied works, the female protagonists have indeed succeeded in building a new world, a *true* utopia. Gloria's life-story ends in her marrying her best friend, her ex-comrade, Evelyn, the Duke of Ravensdale; meanwhile, with her experiences and struggles under the pretence of being a man, she has also written her own fictitious, male story, where her genius "triumsphantly established the fact of woman's equality with man" (Dixie 2018 [1890]: 324).

4. Comrades and Sisters

In Isabella Ford's *On the Threshold* (1895), the female protagonists spend a few months in London as art students: the narrator, Lucretia studies music, Kitty, her younger friend creative arts (both are in their early twenties). The protagonists are full of volatile spirits, believing that the world can

be and should be made a better place. Ledger calls the reader's attention to the middle-class status and the bohemian attitude of the young ladies (Ledger 1997: 55), who, for the first time in their lives, leave their parental homes, experience liberty, and have the possibility to express their own opinions. The narrator depicts the beginning of their voyage: "We were, in short, as absolutely ignorant, and self-opinionated, and, I suppose, as uninteresting, as are most well-brought-up young Englishwomen of twenty-two and twenty-four" (Ford 1895: 10). In their self-education, they choose what to read: Mill's *Subjection of Women* and Shelley, then later Ruskin — philosophical, poetic and art critical works. At the same time, greatly due to their lack of experience, they are quite naive to think about the world in simple moral terms, dividing their acquaintances into either good or bad. In the process of their upbringing in London, they are to come across hypocrisy, corruption, ingratitude, crimes, and depression though they keep their lively spirit and belief in man throughout. Lucretia thinks that caring women can change the world, and they swear to do it, sealing their oath with a kiss: "We seemed to be on the threshold of a great unknown world, and we were filled with awe, though our faith and courage, like our ignorance, were great, boundlessly great" (Ford 1895: 52).

Ford definitely shows uneasiness when describing the lifestyle of the public houses and the horrible situation of the poor lodgers in London. The novel discusses such issues as prostitution, emigration, generation gap, and bonds between girls (with some hints at Lucretia's lesbianism) in the socialist framework. In the decades of the 1880s and 1890s, when new socialism emerged, its ideas attracted lots of women who wanted changes and aspired to equality and independence. In *On the Threshold*, new socialism is presented by the younger girl's (Kitty's) admirer, Estcourt, whose ideas recall Owenite influence.[2] Estcourt is an idealist, putting his faith in "a more spiritual society [...] that will bind everybody together as comrades" (Ford 1895: 34), but what he reaches for is the publication of his revolutionary poems about freedom. Lucretia and Kitty quickly become involved in the meetings of the Socialist Debating Society. In the society, they have conversations on the best way to reform the world, supporting the idea of friendship between men and women, which is the way of transforming the world (cf. "one of the leavening forces of the world" (Ford

[2] About Robert Owen's impact on feminism in nineteenth-century England see Barbara Taylor's remarkable monograph titled *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (2016).

1895: 28)), and it is more important than falling in love. In the socialist meetings with a dozen men and half a dozen women, gender roles are also discussed and, while they agree upon sharing chores in the co-operative household, some of the members think that women are more conservative and more spiritual than the acting, working men. Lucretia proudly asserts that "we were all Socialists, more or less, and any disagreement amongst us concerned merely the particular manner in which we believed our ideal future would be realized" (Ford 1895: 30).

On the whole, this *new* socialism is rather utopian: it talks about reforms, not real acts.[3] But the two young girls try to act and save a poor and uneducated maid-of-all-work, Beatrice, even selling their valuable jewellery, but they fail. Beatrice Ratcliffe is introduced as the first female character though she is not a heroine in the narrative. The narrow-minded Beatrice is an average working woman of mediocre looks with a meek and servile attitude and her life is only about hard work, hard words without any pleasures. She escapes from her newly found household, having been fired from the previous one, and finally she is killed by her brutal boyfriend on the street. Not only Beatrice's life is destroyed but also Miss Burton's, the teacher. Miss Burton, who is a socialist, also experiences the inequality between men and women; according to her, comradeship is impossible as men do not hate women, "only despise them" (Ford 1895: 61). However, she is socially concerned and regularly visits the poor in London and, helping them, she writes journalistic pieces about the life in London slums. As a result, she is forced to depart: she emigrates to the United States to start a new life. Miss Burton plans to open a school for poor children but she dies before realising her dream. Ironically, both the lower-class Beatrice and the educated clever Miss Burton are exploited by a man and their emotions cause their fall.

The novel does not provide much information about Lucretia's and Kitty's parents but their few statements reject the new, mainly socialist and feminist ideas. The old way of thinking is also exemplified by the spinster Aunt Henrietta, but the Aunt also utters the most insightful ideas about womanhood, rebellion and independence. Colm Tóibin accentuates the importance of aunts in Victorian fiction: "The novel in English during the nineteenth century is full of parents whose influence must be evaded or

[3] Some reforms aim at to abolish philanthropy, industrialism, class distinctions, dress codes, top hats, even to get rid of the words, "capitalist" and "respectable", "by abolishing all idle, able-bodies loafers and paupers" (Ford 1895: 30).

erased, to be replaced by figures who operate either literally or figuratively as aunts, both kind and mean, both well-intentioned and duplicitous, both rescuing and destroying" (Tóibin 2011). Here, the old lady is still Victorian, being keen on having her beloved possessions around; she especially loves her cosy pieces of furniture. When she invites young Mr Estcourt, she is worried about the time of the dinner and the young socialist man violating the dress code.[4] In their conversation, the man reveals how he detests philanthropy, while the Aunt sticks to the old values. The Aunt is rather sceptical about the new schemes: she has seen so many reforms but the world still remains bad. However, she wants her niece and Kitty "to have more freedom that [she] had in [her] young days [...] too much discipline is bad for women, it makes them rather helpless, and [...] it is time [...] men came in for your share of it" (Ford 1895: 179). Aunt Henrietta still believes in marriage; more exactly, she accepts it and considers it as the best choice for all women. Interestingly enough, she is unmarried, as marriage also means that a woman "has to give up very much" and she thought that it could have been a "little too much" for her (Ford 1895: 107).

In one of the central scenes, the Aunt is explaining the importance of settling-down in a woman's life. Lucretia sees it as a process, like a long, narrow street spectrally lit, "leading to death and darkness", while she has

> [...] a longing, a great, burning longing, for a real life with real people in it; [...] with real thoughts; and for a real love which would care for all troubles, not merely one's own troubles, and which would help towards bringing in light to all the dark, miserable places in the world? (Ford 1895: 134)

The aged woman reveals that in her "wicked, rebellious" youth she also wanted to transform the world but, as she admits, a woman's life is dedicated to self-sacrifice: "women, of course, can never be happy in this world" (Ford 1895: 135). Then Lucretia has to read out loud a book on female education about "the necessity for gentleness and submission [...] and the beauty of complete self-sacrifice" (Ford 1895: 137). This episode explicitly shows how self-obedience has been propagated to young women for centuries.

[4] One of the funniest sentences, displaying the clashing of life styles, is said by the Aunt: "for Socialists don't approve of late dinners, do they?" (Ford 1895: 167).

In the novel, Kitty admits the importance of sisterhood, probably sensing her friend, Lucretia's attachment: "women's love for each other is endless, boundless; you know it is" (Ford 1895: 186). She also differentiates women and men: the former are like passionate and wild "spirits of the woods", while the latter, being controlled by laws are regulations, are rather shadows, empty creatures (Ford 1895: 187–189). That is, men traditionally and habitually are to live in certain chosen roles, accepting their walls and barriers, while women, the *outcasts*, are likely to pretend keeping the patriarchal rules but inside they can keep their fiery spirit alive that is the source of potential changes and overall social reforms. All the women are caring creatures in the novels; however, they cannot liberate themselves or others. Beatrice and Miss Burton fall — these two female life-paths fail together with Kitty's nursing her father. Her planned marriage to the socialist Estcourt presents the limited options for Lucretia and underlines the *threshold state* of female independence. The narrator closes the story-line with the hope of a new dawn, flashing in her comrade's lovely eyes.

5. Lovers and Companions

Sally Ledger says that while "New Woman characters are pathologised as 'lesbian'" by male writers, in feminist fiction, the so-called "'romantic friendship' model of same-sex female relationships" was presented (Ledger 1997: 124–125). In Ford's *On the Threshold*, though Lucretia and Kitty enjoy intimate companionship and in Dixie's *Gloriana*, the boyish Léonie gives her life to save the heroine, all narratives customarily end in heterosexual relationships (partnership or marriage). Dix's *The Image Breakers* (1900) is the novel that, in a feminist-socialist framework, focuses on the questions of the true partnership. The title of the novel refers to the 'iconoclastic' acts of the central female characters, who do not accept and this way destroy the traditionally accepted models of partnership.

In *The Image Breakers*, conventional sexual and gender roles are challenged from the very beginning when a feminine anarchist Charles Whiston is introduced and Rosalind turns out to be publishing socialist articles under a man's name (more exactly, simply using the signature R. Dangerfield). At their meetings, the socialist men and women believe in comradeship, brotherhood and sisterhood as companionship is more

important than love or marriage. The young Leslie still lives "in a world mainly populated by maiden aunts" (Dix 1900: 15). and she is supported by her Aunt Letitia and Aunt Julia in London where she studies economy. Then she meets the wealthy woman Rosalind Dangerfield, who is married to Herbert Dangerfield, the mill-owner capitalist. Having joined the socialists, Rosalind leaves her husband to work together with Justin Ferrar (also known as Alvan) and with the other "comrades" they together live in the countryside, in a utopian "communal village", a self-supporting colony, based on Fourierism (Dix 1900: 52). Unfortunately, the experiment fails and the couple, being accused of "free love", has to leave the settlement. As Rosalind explains:

> We have broken the laws of the world, not merely for our own selfish indulgence, but in obedience to something higher. [...] our great desire is to help others to substitute better ideals than those of ordinary marriage. (Dix 1900: 275)

Here, in the question of sexual relations, from the second half of the nineteenth century, the socialists are also influenced by Robert Owen's ideas and by the "Owenite marriage doctrine — with its emphasis on voluntary sexual liaisons and the equality of both partners within them" (Taylor 2016: 138–139). Justin, having recovered from a serious illness, moves away from his Owenite principles and becomes a "fanatical mystic socialist" (Ledger 1997: 57). Rosalind feels that love, more exactly her passion, has destroyed their comradely companionship and she does not believe in their bright future any longer. She is looking for true companionship and even tries to get intimately connected to Leslie, "the girl she had loved" (Dix 1900: 289). Finally, the young woman decides to get married, and Rosalind remains alone. Having lost her faith in the socialist future advertised by Justin, she starts to work at a factory "as a *hand*" (Dix 1900: 376, italics in the original) to have first-hand experience and get related to the working women. Meanwhile, she seems unable to forgive herself for being an adulteress and, ironically, she keeps living together with the socialists to guarantee her capitalist husband's safety.

The other heroine of *The Image Breakers* is the rebellious and independent Leslie Ardent, an artist, whom the masculine Redgold woos and wants to marry. Redgold is a reformer and a politician but, regarding his marital ideas, he sticks to the old-fashioned conception of marriage. He is convinced that after their marriage Leslie should not work and he wants

the woman to stay at home, dedicating herself solely to him and their would-be family. Redgold does not think much of women's independence, and even though he values Leslie's cleverness, he takes her for "a foolish child" (Dix 1900: 253) on several occasions. Due to the man's authoritative and "tyrannous" behaviour, the woman, though she truly loves Redgold, cancels their wedding as she cannot be the man's "free, happy comrade" (Dix 1900: 263). The woman thinks that she has made Redgold free, letting him accomplish his political dreams with another woman more fitting into his future career. Losing the man then later her job (and her income as well), Leslie escapes to Aunt Julia in the country to gather her strength. She is broken-hearted and disillusioned and the aunt who lives with her brother does not ask tormenting questions: she "grew reconciled to the fact that she had refused the destiny of *nice situations* for which she had prepared her to become a lady-artist in London" (Dix 1900: 341, italics in the original). Then, when the man finds her and asks her again, this time respecting each other's desire for freedom, she accepts his proposal. In the last scene of the novel, the self-determined, "quicksilver-like"[5] woman is looking in the mirror:

> The smooth surface of the glass it held was like life — life in which one sees one's self. Suddenly as she stood there she drew a deep breath, still gazing into the mirror, and beside her own face, rosy with the wind and the sun, lo! the face of the man also. (Dix 1900: 392)

This future marriage portrait presents an ideal bond between a man and a woman: a utopian, perfect one, having been articulated by the Avelings in the conclusion of their Bebel review. As they envisioned, in the future, the married partners share "love, respect, intellectual likeness, and command of the necessities of life" (Aveling and Marx Aveling 1886).

[5] In a socialist meeting, a man fantasises about the difference between men and women as "men were like many waters — sweet and salt, clean and foul — they'd all blend. But women were either oil or quicksilver, and you'll never mix 'em — never! The quicksilver woman was a new and fascinating discovery" (Dix 1900: 36).

6. Conclusion: On Sisterhood

In the conclusion of *The Image Breakers* "the belief in the possibility of social transformation through socialism has been more or less abandoned", as Sally Ledger claims (Ledger 1997: 58). Ford's heroines seem to get stuck *on the threshold*, while the other New Women, Margaret and Gloriana, succeed in accomplishing their aims. All the novels display the struggles of the antis, the rebellious sisters for emancipation, their desire for reforms. According to Eve Bannet, the narratives are revolutionary since "they involved a clearly defined strategy for bringing about social change [via] social action" (Bannet 1991: 197). The heroines of the analysed socialist-feminist novels are metaphorically standing on (and crossing) the threshold of a new life, or a new home, or a new world: their individual development is embedded in the altering age, of which the boundaries are blurred. Rita Felski in her *The Gender of Modernity* highlights the transforming quality of the nineteenth-century female narratives. As she claims, in the female novelists' works written in the second half of the century, "the narrative of long-term evolutionary change was replaced by an impassioned description of the founding moment of the revolutionary body, as a spontaneous process of self-creation almost *ex nihilo*" (Felski 1995: 165). The central characters are not orphans but they leave their families, so the parents cannot protect them any longer and do not support their "independent" daughters financially and emotionally. Consequently, the New Women help each other like sisters and are supported by their aged female relatives, in particular their aunties, who act as step-mothers or mentors.

Moreover, the readers are also invited to take part in the heroines' educative path that directly influences their worldviews. Cora Kaplan in her "Pandora's Box" emphasises the importance of self-education in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as reading meant

> [...] a critical link between the psychic play of reason and passion and its social expression. New social categories of readers, women of all classes, [...] are described in this period by contemporaries. Depending on their political sympathies, observers saw these actively literate groups as an optimistic symptom of social and intellectual progress or a dire warning of imminent social decay and threatened rebellion. (Kaplan 1991: 866)

The analysed novels offered the female readers the opportunity to get connected, to think individually and also collectively about the actual issues of "the woman question", socialist reforms and social development. The reader comes across several female biographies and realises which options could be taken by a woman at the *fin de siècle.* The socialist-feminist works helped the female readers to formulate their questions, search for their possibilities and try to find their own way, thus enlarging the scope of a *literary sisterhood*.

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