



## THE DIARY FORM AND GENDER AS SUBVERSIVE CATEGORIES IN DJUNA BARNES'S *THE LYDIA STEPTOE STORIES*

DJUNA BARNES'İN LYDIA STEPTOE ÖYKÜLERİ'NDE YIKICI KATEGORİLER OLARAK GÜNLÜK BİÇİMİ VE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET

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### Abstract

The American-English writer Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) has been an influential figure in the English modernist fiction. Her works challenge the conventional approaches to sex/gender categories through experimentation on the level of both context and form. Barnes's tendency to uncover the fluidity of subjectivity and disrupt the Cartesian understanding of the stable Self particularly shows itself in her problematization of genre categories. In other words, she offers a radical critique of "naturalized" gender/sex categories in her works by re-formulating a wide range of genres. Reading her three short stories, written under the pseudonym Lydia Steptoe, this study aims to explore how she plays with the diary form and why she locates it within the genre of short story. It argues that Barnes's "The Diary of a Dangerous Child" (1922), "The Diary of a Small Boy" (1923), and "Madame Grows Older: A Journal at the Dangerous Age" (1924) shed light on the feminist/poststructuralist notion of the subject-in-the-making through the re-appropriation of the diary form within the genre of short story. Her experimentation on the genre functions to lay bare the production and destabilisation of gender boundaries, and thus, presents diary writing as part of storytelling as a subversive act witnessing and/or contributing to the ontological becoming of subjects.

### Öz

Amerikan-İngiliz yazar Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), İngiliz modernist yazınında önemli bir isim olmuştur. Çalışmalarında hem içerik hem de biçim düzeyinde denemelerde bulunarak cinsiyet ve toplumsal cinsiyet kategorilerine yönelik geleneksel yaklaşımlara meydan okumuştur. Barnes özneliğin akışkanlığını savunma ve Kartezyen Benlik anlayışına karşı çıkma eğilimini, özellikle tür kategorilerini sorunsallaştırdığı yazınında ortaya koymuştur. Başka bir deyişle, Barnes'ın, eserlerinde geniş bir tür yelpazesini yeniden formüle ettiği, "doğallaştırılmış" toplumsal cinsiyet/cinsiyet kategorilerinin radikal bir eleştirisini sunar. Bu bağlamda, Barnes'ın Lydia Steptoe mahlasıyla yazdığı üç kısa öyküsünü inceleyen bu çalışma, yazarın günlük yazma biçimiyle nasıl oynadığını ve bu türü neden öykü türü içinde konumladığını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Barnes'ın "The Diary of a Dangerous Child" ("Tehlikeli Bir Çocuğun Günlüğü"), "The Diary of a Small Boy" ("Küçük Bir Çocuğun Günlüğü") ve "Madame Grows Older: A Journal at the Dangerous Age" ("Hanımefendi Yaşlanırken: Tehlikeli Bir Yaşın Güncesi") adlı öykülerinin, günlük biçimini yeniden ele alıp kısa öykü türü içerisine yerleştirerek feminist/yapısökümcü bir kavram olan oluşmakta-olan-özne kavramına ışık tuttuğunu savunmaktadır. Barnes'ın tür üzerindeki bu denemesi, toplumsal cinsiyet sınırlarının üretimini ve istikrarsızlaştırılmasını açıkça ortaya koyma işlevi görür ve böylece öykü anlatımının bir parçası olarak sunduğu günlük yazımını, öznelerin ontolojik oluşumuna tanık olan ve/veya buna katkıda bulunan yıkıcı bir eylem olarak sunar.

## Introduction

*“If challenging gender stereotypes is a major component in theorizing about androgyny, then few events provide a more concrete and historical instance of such need for revisioning than the Great War,”* says the critic Bockting (1997, p. 21). Despite the historical, cultural, and political attempts to draw rigid boundaries between the private/feminine space and public/masculine space, World War I called for collaborative support from all fronts, invigorating a fusion of masculine and feminine identity. Women were taking on masculine roles, places, and rights such as attending colleges, earning money from a variety of professions, and demanding the right to vote and engage in politics. The crisis of war thus paved the way for disclosure of the longstanding crisis in gender/sex discrimination. Modernist writers responded to this gender/sex-based predicament in various ways. Often compared to Virginia Woolf and praised by T.S. Eliot and James Joyce for her artistic talent, the American-English modernist writer Djuna Barnes appropriates the modernist style into her own use and plays with generic categories in order to destabilize the naturalized gender/sex categories. Although there are differences between the American feminisms and the feminisms of the continental Europe, Barnes’s escape to Paris and her development as a personal and literary figure in the Parisian milieu familiarize her with the continental literature and philosophy. Her texts attempting to voice the unvoiced and go beyond the naturalized categories render her a precursor to the French feminists who have been writing in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Translating Barnes’s *Spillway*, one of Barnes’s short story collections, the radical French feminist Monique Wittig points out that *“Barnes’ text is unique in the sense that it is the first of its kind, and it detonates like a bomb where there has been nothing before it”* (1983, p. 66). Her text *“cancels out genders by making them obsolete”* (1983, p. 64). Although Barnes’s fiction is known with lesbian themes, her use of lesbianism as a reference point is not binaristic. To Wittig, Barnes, similar to Marcel Proust, manages to universalize the feminine category by attributing it to both male and female characters. Rather than reversing the hierarchy and creating another line of binary opposition, Barnes opens a new space of signification where gender boundaries dissolve along with the genre boundaries. Barnes’s lesbianism anticipates Wittig’s use of ‘lesbian’ as a non-categorical reference point and Butler’s emphasis on the performativity of gender. Going beyond the established gender/sex norms, Barnes cancels out the gender categories altogether and focuses on subject-in-the making, repudiating any kind of identity driven by the patriarchal energy.

Although much has been written on Barnes's ideas about sexuality and gender in relation to her debut novel *Nightwood* (1937), the *roman à clef*<sup>1</sup> entitled *Ladies Almanack* (1928), and a few short story collections, such as *Spillway* (1962-originally in 1929) and the acclaimed verse drama entitled *The Antiphon* (1958), little attention has been given to Barnes's short stories, and more particularly the three short stories written under the pseudonym 'Lydia Steptoe.'<sup>2</sup> *The Lydia Steptoe Stories* was first published in a single edition in 2019. However, they were written almost one century ago, a few years after the Great War, and were published in consecutive years. "The Diary of a Dangerous Child" was first published in *Vanity Fair* in 1922; "The Diary of a Small Boy" in *Shadowland* in 1923, and finally "Madame Grows Older: A Journal at the Dangerous Age" in *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine* in 1924. They were all written in an ironic diary form more than a decade before *Nightwood* which was edited by T.S. Eliot himself. The first short story narrates a fourteen-year-old child's journey to be a virago by rejecting to be a wife and a mother. The story ends with her new decision to become a boy. The second story is about the production of masculinity through a fourteen-year-old boy within a phallogocentric family structure, and the third is the story of a forty-year-old widow who had chosen to be a wife and a mother but commits suicide to overcome her ontological crisis.

Daniela Caselli's work (2002) is the only article published on Lydia Steptoe's stories. Caselli analyses merely the first short story "The Diary of a Dangerous Child", scrutinizes "the mechanisms according to which childhood is furtively constructed as innocence" and explores "the never innocent processes of writing the child" (p. 204). Her study along with other introductions to the editions of collected stories does not elaborately underline Barnes's employment of diary as a literary form within the genre of short story<sup>3</sup>, which is a significant issue to be explored for a more subtle grasp of her disavowal of categories. That her works display "a manner and style of no particular era, and thus of any era" (Kannenstine, 1977, p. xvii) results from her experimental approach to linguistic and generic categories. Apart from writing in a

<sup>1</sup> A roman à clef is a French phrase that means 'a novel with a key' in which real people, places, or events are employed with false or fictitious names with the purpose of blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction.

<sup>2</sup> In his work "Djuna Barnes: A Bibliography", Douglas Messerli explains that *Spillway* was published separately by Faber in 1962 together with *Nightwood* and *The Antiphon*. It is a short story collection, but consists only of previously published stories, most of which had appeared in *A Book and A Night among the Horses* (1975, p. 16).

<sup>3</sup> Short story is accepted as a literary form relatively late: "Before the 19th century the short story was not generally regarded as a distinct literary form" (*Britannica*).

variety of genres, she is an expert in integrating genres: “A prose book, for instance, could feature passages of indented poetry; plays could be prefaced with character and setting descriptions elaborate enough to stand alone as separate pieces” (Shin, 2014, p. 20). Taking an interest in Barnes’s experimentation on the genre as part of her bomb-like modernism, this study aims to interrogate her integration of diary form and short story, and the subversive implications of this integration by arguing that this technique seeks and manages to reveal the performativity of gender-which has been discussed by many critics and theorised by Judith Butler decades later- through depiction of three distinct subjects-in-process.

Barnes’s works offer multiple definitions of femininity to bring into question any totalized notion of gender. However, her tone has been accused by some critics, such as Phillip Herring, of sounding too masculine to subvert the very ideologies she critiques (1996, p. 7-8). Her appropriation of a distinct kind of irony into her works seems to be the cause of this accusation or misunderstanding. In the Steptoe short stories, for example, she uses the diary form, conventionally claimed to be a feminine genre, in an ironic mode that appears to be a double-layered strategy. Barnes uses this form as a witness to the production and subversion of gender boundaries as well as a sublimated form contributing to the ontological development of subjects-in-process. Going beyond the radical feminist position of Adrienne Rich, who claims diary to be “*profoundly female, a feminist genre*” (1979, p. 217), Barnes’s use of diary-writing in her short stories presents her as one of the early practitioners of *écriture féminine*, a term coined by Cixous in the 1970s to refer to any writing that goes against the phallogocentrism. The term itself resists any definition or categorisation that might trigger dichotomous limitations, and it is characterized by a non-linear, fluid, and bisexual writing style. Barnes’s employment of this style in her short stories is a representative of her non-identitarian approach to subjectivity, as implied in her statement in *Ladies’ Almanach*, “I’m not a lesbian. I just loved Thelma”.

*The Lydia Steptoe Stories* particularly practice/parody “*journal intime*” which emerged in France in the early nineteenth century and was later categorized as a form of diary.<sup>4</sup> To Raoul, this form was encouraged to be kept by girls during transition from childhood to womanhood but denied to married women. It is distinguished by its focus on the Self and by the absence of an intentional narratee (1989, p. 57). While practicing diary as a sub-genre within the genre of short-story,

<sup>4</sup> Raoul specifically uses the phrase “*the journal intime*” in italicised form with quotation marks.

Barnes problematizes the categorisation of literary genres as feminine or masculine because of their restraining and inhibitive quality. Barnes re-charges “*journal intime*” with subversive energy, making it an example of *écriture féminine*. The three short stories generate a writing that is “*non-linear, unfinished, fluid*” (Jones, 1981, p. 100).<sup>5</sup> This form of writing resists all binaries charged with phallogentric logic. Diary-writing has this potential within itself because “*a diary can be kept regularly or irregularly, over a long or short period; the length and subject matter of its entries are variable; there are no rules to follow apart from the non-retrospective one of being*” (Raoul, 1989, p. 61). These qualities of irregularity and immediacy pertaining to diaries have been employed and subverted by Barnes in her literary diaries to combine them with her notion of fluid subjectivity.

The various ontological dilemmas expressed in the diaries<sup>6</sup> of the three protagonists can be explained through the characteristics of “*journal intime*”:

The two dominant themes of the “*journal intime*” are the uncertainty of the Self, which is exposed as a construct, and the relationship of this ‘Self’ and its life to writing, the trace. Here, the predilection of women for the intimate diary coincides for modern women writers with the search for a feminine voice, for a mode or style which can include what has been excluded from the dominant male discourse (Raoul, 1989, p. 62).

As one of these women writers, one of Barnes’s motivations in integrating diary and short-story has been this search for a feminine voice. As Linda Anderson puts it, “*the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself in re-writing the stories that already exist about her*” (qtd. in Raoul, 1989, p. 60). Placing diaries into the form of short stories has become a way to transcend the constructed stories about the Self. By integrating the private/ “*journal intime*” into the public/short-story, Barnes subverts the inside/outside boundary perpetuated by the dichotomous thinking. Short stories can be associated with public space as an act of story-telling. This form has been common among the public and has been one

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<sup>5</sup> In her article, Jones both explains and critiques “*écriture féminine* and femininity” by discussing how and why it is being “idealist and essentialist” (1981, p. 252).

<sup>6</sup> The words diary and journal are often used interchangeably. There are slight differences between them, but these are not the differences that Barnes applies in her stories. Yet it seems intriguing that Barnes chooses “diary” for the first two stories but “journal” for the third one. Perhaps it aims not to idealize one form over another. While diary is expected to be written more regularly compared to a journal, Barnes makes the diary irregular, but regularizes the journal. Despite relatively chronological regularity of Madame’s journal, she is not regular or “normative”.

of the earliest literary forms used throughout centuries. Yet short-story can also be considered as a subversive genre in that it has been neglected due to the hierarchy of genres as suggested by the critic Anne Besnault-Levita, who further points out that the connection between short story and gender is a fruitful territory (2007, p. 1). Practicing on the hierarchically neglected genres and overpowering the non-oppositional thinking through their combination, the Steptoe stories seem to accentuate Cixous's call "*Write your self*" five decades earlier (1976, p. 1). In a nutshell, the general motivation in these diary-stories has been to interrogate the relation between textuality and identity indicated by Barnes's re-location of the notion of subject-in-the-making within a performative genre.

### **SUBVERSION OF GENRE AND GENDER CATEGORIES: A "CHILD", "BOY" AND "MADAME"**

#### **"Child": From a Virago to a Boy**

Cixous and Irigaray, among many other (particularly French) feminists, build on the fact that women, including unmarried ladies (either virgin or non-virgin), prostitutes, wives or mothers, have been prevented from expressing their sexuality although they have historically been reduced to the position of sexual objects. Barnes includes these four types of women within the Steptoe stories in different contexts but with the same purpose: subversion of gender boundaries. "The Diary of a Dangerous Child" presents a protagonist, a fourteen-year-old girl named Olga who oscillates between the roles of domestic/wife-mother and the worldly/ wanton. She decides to be a virago proving sexual supremacy by using a whip over her sister's fiancé, who sees women as no more than sexual objects. However, she fails (and has to fail) as a virago because the text is not after reversing the hierarchy between men and women but to experiment with their constructed subjectivities.

A diarist vacillates between "I" as the subject of the utterance, 'I' as 'he-she' or object of the narration, and 'I' as 'you' or the addressee who receives and reacts to the account" (Raoul, 1989, p. 60). Olga, the diarist, locates her doubt about her woman Self as 'I' of the family and 'I' of her own Self within this vacillation. Her irregular entries fit into her ontological interrogation by blurring the logic of linearity. Olga's very first statement in the first entry on September first: "*Today I am fourteen: time flies: women must grow old. Today I have done my hair in a different way and*

asked myself a question: “what shall be my destiny?” (p. 1).<sup>7</sup> Olga’s emphasis on her new hair as a womanly precondition signifies the production of femininity as an act of mimicry. About mimicry, Irigaray suggests that “[t]here is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path’, the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry” (1990, p. 76). In Barnes’s literary engagement with mimicry, Olga makes a paradoxical claim upon her agency by conventionally mimicking women, but her desire to be a virago is, on the other hand, an over-identification with the role, yet this deliberateness has its own subversive quality:

[Y]es, I shall break the silence. For sooner or later they must know that I become furtive. I am debating with myself whether I shall place myself in some good man’s hands and become a mother, or if I shall become wanton and go out in the world and make a place for myself. Somehow I think I shall become a wanton (p. 2).

Olga tries to decide whether to be a mother or a wanton and present these two categories as opposite to each other. Her diary becomes the first witness to her decision to become a wanton. The definition of diary as “a specifically feminine experience of writing as process and voice-production” (Raoul, 1989, p. 63) seems plausible in the case of Olga who attempts to transgress the boundaries established by her father who “is a lawyer” and her mother who “is in society” (p. 4). As the metonymic extensions of the paternal metaphor, both parents desire to keep her within the conventional gender categories, but Olga locates herself beyond them: “there is something timeless about me, whereas my sister is utterly ephemeral” (p. 6). Thus, she locates herself within the Kristevan semiotic where there is no sense of linearity or clock time but the potential to reconfigure herself by challenging pre-established norms because “the sexed family imprints itself on the child’s sense of herself as a sexed being” (Jones, 1981, p. 254). Olga once again expresses the possibility of re-constructing herself, and she writes on October fourth: “I have succeeded. No one guesses that my mind teems. No one guesses that I have come into my own” (p. 5). Olga’s coming into her own space of signification recalls Butler’s argument that “female no longer appears to be a stable notion” (1999, p. xxix). Olga’s sister, as another female figure in the story, does not question her female subjectivity and is not aware that gender is “a kind of persistent impersonation”, to borrow the phrase from Butler (1999, p. xxviii). Yet Olga, like a gender nomad, seeks to explore

<sup>7</sup> All references will be made to Faber & Faber edition, which brought the stories together for the first time and published in 2019, by page numbers.

her sexual awakening without limiting herself to her constructed gender and sex. Her diary witnesses and contributes to this process.

While diaries in general lack plot or sustained characters, Barnes adds these two qualities by locating the diaries within the genre of short story. Yet Barnes's diary form is still enforced by its modernist self-reflexivity. Olga says, "[i]f the human eye were to fall upon this page I might be so easily misunderstood" (p. 4). The downfall that Olga's diary would bring upon her parents is the microcosmic effect of the macrocosmic influence Barnes's stories aim to generate on society in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Olga voices her pleasure in challenging the social expectations: "What shame I might bring down upon my father's head—on my mother's too [...] just by my tendency to precocity. I should be an idiot for their sakes. I will be!" (p. 4-5). This is indeed part of her ontological questioning and attempt to open up a new space of signification. In the story, specifically in the presence of Don Pasos Dilemma, the sister's fiancé, Olga mentions reading *Three Lives*, most probably by Gertrude Stein, which consists of three stories about three working class women. Although Olga does not come from the same class with these women, the stories share some similarities in terms of dealing with the production of femininity and the emotional battles the women go through in order to claim upon their desires in the early twentieth century. More relevantly, Barnes's possible allusion to this work suggests a radical connection between the use of diary form in a short story and the problematization of patriarchal categories. As Huff argues in relation to diaries, "their inherent generic qualities are subversive to the literary establishment and to the patriarchal social order" (1989, p. 6).

Towards the end of the story, Olga bribes the butler to give her note to Don Pasos Dilemma to meet her (the name of her sister's fiancé represents her own dilemma in following cultural roles), and she frightens their groom to give her a saddled horse. These not only display her material conditions of being by indicating her social class as upper-middle/middle but also reverses the hierarchy because as a woman, she prepares the trap to hunt a male figure. The "silver handled whip" under her bed, as a phallic symbol, is to be used for subjugating the fiancé, who is a sexually "dangerous man" to her own desires (p. 6). Virago and vixen are the two words that make her shiver: "[t]hese are my words" (p. 8). She says, "after whipping I shall wash my hands of him, but the psychology of the family will have been raised one whole tone" (p. 8). One minute is left to the midnight when she waits to meet Don Pasos Dilemma. Olga describes this moment as "standing between life and death" (p.



12). It is not the fiancé but her own mother who meets her. That her mother disguises herself as Don Pasos Dilemma appears to be the climax of the story that reveals the tailoring of diary form. The illusionary nature of appearance and identity is captured in Barnes's use of diary form. A diary;

[I]n its ability to bring together so many diverse and seemingly disparate objects, it illuminates these and our vision of them. The diary stands as an emblem for feminist practice. Not content to reiterate the patterns privileged by male dominance of the pen in art and criticism, feminism has sought to discern new combinations of meaning within the text (Huff, 1989, p. 8).

Barnes's use of diary form manages to reveal the fictitious nature of feminine identities and subvert the conventional categories. Olga's reaction to her mother reveals how she discerns new combinations of existence: "*I raised my silver mounted whip. I threw back my head. A Laugh rang out in the stillness of midnight. It was my laugh, high, drenched with the scorn of life and love and men. It was a good laugh. I brought the whip down*" (p. 14). Olga breaks the silence, as she planned in the first entry, with her laugh. She manages to disrupt the discourse with her laugh. Olga's deliberate mimicry of a *femme fatale* to create another space of signification in opposition to the patriarchal order is undermined by her mother. Yet on October twenty-seventh, nineteen days after this meeting, Olga claims for another subject position by rejecting motherhood:

I have changed my mind. I am neither going to give myself into the hands of some good man, and become a mother, nor am I going to go out into the world and become a wanton. I am going to run away and become a boy (p. 14).

Rather than accepting the patriarchal role of womanhood or the phallogocentric space of virago, Olga seeks to experience another form of subjectivity as a boy. Her realization of the possibility of transgenderism encourages her to reject any identity acknowledging or opposing womanhood from within patriarchy. Based on its culturally constructed nature, a virago implies another form of forced identity as problematic as wifehood and motherhood. By deciding to become a boy, Olga looks for subversion from outside patriarchy and proves to be a subject-in-the-making. As Jones puts it, "*In social, sexual and symbolic experiences, being a woman has always provided a means to another end, to becoming something else: a subject-in-the-making, a subject on trial*" (1981, p. 250). As a subject-in-the-making, Olga embodies Cixous's definition of woman as bisexual and dramatizes Butler's notion of performativity.

Thus, Barnes aestheticizes her discontent with any identity category and anticipates Butler's idea that identities are products of controlling regimes (1999, p. xxix). Olga's desire to become a boy raises up the interrogation about the relationship between gender performativity and diary-writing from the masculine vantage point, which will be answered through her "The Diary of a Small Boy" that deals with the production of masculinity.

### **A "Boy": "It Hurts the Wound in My Side"**

The way Barnes attributes the word "child" to Olga but "boy" to the boy by leaving him nameless — although both are fourteen-year-old adolescents — has the implications that Olga manages to be both androgynous and transgender by attempting to incorporate both aspects in herself. On the other hand, the "boy" does not manage to fully acknowledge his anima, to borrow a Jungian term, and cannot cherish his subjectivity as one-in-the-making-process. Olga's subjectivity involves the experience of a subject *"who 'trans-es' sex or gender boundaries"* (Gamble, p. 37).<sup>8</sup> Caselli argues that Barnes works on the trope of children in order to bring into question the production of innocence and experience in her texts (2002, p. 193), and Olga is dangerous *"because she cannot write herself as childish innocence"* (2002, p. 196). Barnes characterizes Olga as a gender-neutral (and experienced) child. She manages to escape from the subject positions offered by the patriarchal society. Her quest for an experiential subjectivity defies the givenness of any position. In Wittig's words, *"[at] least for a woman, wanting to become a man proves that she escapes her initial programming"* (1981, p. 547). Caselli argues that *"becoming a boy would mean embracing the traditional model of childhood;"* however, Olga's desire to become a boy, considering that the two stories form a pair, raises the necessity to account what happens on the side of boyhood/manhood. Barnes portrays both femininity and masculinity as an act of mimicry, as it is observed when the boy forces himself to embrace his culturally coded gender. This story, in that sense, both portrays the process of the gendered construction of childhood and shows how this process undermines itself. The boy's discrete interest in keeping a diary and fear to continue by labelling it *feminine* appears to be the dilemma Barnes incorporates to destabilize his gender.

<sup>8</sup> Gamble, in *Gender and Transgender Criticism*, notes that the verb "trans-es" belongs to the critic Jay Prosser.

The boy's realistic narrative style in his diaries accompanies his constrained and limited subjectivity, given that his first entry on August seventh begins with a relatively detailed observations of his outer world rather than inner world. Such observations are followed by his pivotal statement: *"I am fourteen years old. [...] I am told that I am not old enough to make any important observations"* (p. 17). This draws a sharp contrast with Olga's independent, autonomous pondering over her destiny. His teleological thinking is contrasted by Olga's heterogeneity and multiple subjectivities. The boy's masculine style of writing, *"a style marked by the pain of reduction"* is contrary to Olga's feminine style of writing as *"the style of live water"* to refer to Cixous's definition of masculine and feminine writing, respectively (1988, p. 25). In the observations he has written at the beginning, he mentions that his father reads Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and he admires his father, who is an epitome of masculinity. Not going further than mimicking his father's masculinity, the boy refers to his father and his own predicament in the same sentence: *"He is broad-minded. He takes in all human aspects. I wonder when I am going to be a human aspect"* (p. 21). The boy limits his concerns over his subjectivity within the masculine image represented by his father. His description of the mother figure presents her as a woman having internalized the male gaze, but there is indeed a double discourse in his statement:

If I say she is perilous, you get the feeling of trumpets and wars, and men riding down to doom. [...] and if I say she is rare, you'll get an idea that she hardly ever comes down for breakfast and that she is inarticulate, and that won't do at all. If I say she is stupendous, you'll think that she must be over six feet tall, that she speaks in a loud voice, demand Shaw at the theatres, and expects strength from men and implacable democracy from women. All these impressions would be wrong (p. 22-23).

In response to the question of the father's mistress, Cousin Elda: *"Do you love your mother?"*, the boy immediately responds: *"yes. My father is a great man---"* (p. 28). He avoids verbally acknowledging any soft feeling to the extent that he performs a parody of machismo. In addition, he offers categorical portrayals of the women around him. The boy describes his feminist aunts sarcastically: *"[t]hey are awfully sure about criminal law and how much punishment men should get. They sit for hours talking of ways to make bad men sorry"* (p. 18). In contrast to the aunts, he presents Elda as *"looking every inch a woman"* (p. 21). Attribution of such subject positions to these women implies his sense of machismo. While the boy, on the one hand,

presents the aunts as dominant male-like figures, he depicts Elda, on the other hand, like a proper feminine, fragile woman in need of male protection. At the very beginning of the story, the boy asks for a gun to accompany Elda wandering around the forest in order to protect her as a male figure. The boy identifies with his father both in his desire for Elda and in his need to prove his male identity through machismo.

The boy's mother is overtly preoccupied with her son's future which presents her as a conventional mother figure. In relation to such mother figures, Irigaray notes that "[w]oman is deprived of the possibility of interiorizing her female identity. It is imposed upon her as pure exteriority. And that's one of the reasons why she herself, just like the society that defames her, privileges the mother-son relationship" (1990, p. 47). To describe her mother's reaction to the blow-up of the gun, the boy writes: "And her face was over me, looking as if the something terrible and tremendous that had been waiting for, had happened-then I forgot" (p. 29). The mother's concern is to find out if he has experienced his sexual awakening with Elda or not. This is a boyhood trauma encoded in the diary form. The mother idealizes her son and does not consider Elda as a proper fit for him and therefore tries to control his sexual initiation. This mother-son relationship as depicted by Barnes in the story emphasizes the burden of masculinity discussed by various feminist critics;

By virtue of affirming the primacy of the phallus and of bringing it into play, phallographic ideology has claimed more than one victim. As a woman, I've been clouded over by the great shadow of the scepter and been told: idolize it, that which you cannot brandish. But at the same time, man has been handed that grotesque and scarcely enviable destiny (just imagine) of being reduced to a single idol with clay balls (Cixous, 1976, p. 884).

The mother figure is the one reducing the boy metaphorically to "a single idol with clay balls" and Barnes portrays how the boy is subjected to over-masculinity. This is a monolithic form of subjectivity enforced by conventional gender categories. Yet it is subversive within itself and its subversive discourse lies in Barnes's disclosure of the mechanisms that engender the *child* in the first story. Barnes "deflates masculine discourses that pretend to stability and authority" (Broe, 1991, 177). The boy writes at the end of the story: "I am not going to write any more in my diary, it is a girl's pastime-besides it hurts the wound in my side" (p. 30). Despite his non-specification of what the wound is, his escape from encountering his wound that is made visible through his initial attempt to write a diary is significant. The diary makes him look at what is inside and question it. Its potential to hurt a wound implies

its capability to remove the inside/outside boundary, and thus, produce another space of existence that does not repudiate the other side of the Self. His diary seems to be the source of *jouissance*, the unconscious pleasure, for the boy because his resolution to avoid writing it is not his last sentence. He adds a note right after it: “P.S. My mother’s sisters talk more than ever about punishment for men-and it seems to be some man near the house here” (p. 30). In the presence of an overtly masculine father, a charming mistress, an overprotective mother, and men-hating aunts, the boy is confined to a limited subjectivity under the influence of not only patriarchy but also matriarchy, which reminds Wittig’s warning that “*matriarchy is no less heterosexual than patriarchy*” (1981, p. 545). The small boy’s disclaim of the diary as a feminine practice, despite his desire to keep one, portrays the boy as a representative of unaccomplished potentiality as well as the one resisting his position as subject-in-the-making.

### **A “Madame”: “I Cannot Put Pen to Paper”**

The Madame, named Alice, preferred to place herself “*in some good man’s hands and become a mother*” (“The Diary of a Dangerous Child” 2). To consider the three short stories as a tripartite work, the Madame, in this story, chooses the road not taken by Olga of the first story. Alice, a forty-year-old widow with two daughters, cannot decide if she desires to return to her youth or stay where she is, and works through her existential interrogation and sense of monachopsis in her diary. Her diary engages in, to use Huff’s formula, “*the same bridging of diverse areas of experience as does feminism*” (1989, p. 11). Her motherhood and difficulty in writing down her inner world seem to be interrelated, which opposes the conventional attitude to the female writing, and diary or “*journal intime*” particularly, “*for women, writing and actual motherhood are frequently perceived as mutually exclusive; a choice has to be made between them*” (Raoul, 1989, p. 60). In the story, Alice falls in love with her daughter’s fiancé and questions her motherhood. She cannot write this down in her diary. It is as if writing it would subvert her motherly position. Her first entry on September seventh begins with:

I must face the fact that I am no longer a young woman. I am a widow, mother of two thoroughly dressed, handsomely educated, spiteful daughters. Nevertheless I am starved. I am starved for youth. There must be, I tell myself, new worlds to conquer. There simply must be. It’s only right (p. 31).

Her starvation for youth implies a very crucial lack during her coming-of-age. The play *Frühlings Erwachen* (*Spring Awakening*) is one of the books she burns, buries, and mutilates. However, its message of “*flames in her soul*” (p. 32) suggests that her youth must have suffered from a Victorian mentality ignoring female sexuality.<sup>9</sup> The play was published in 1906 as a critique of the sexually oppressive culture of the nineteenth century. Due to the dramatization of erotic fantasies and its controversial subject matter such as puberty, sexuality, rape, child abuse, homosexuality, suicide, and abortion, it was banned and censored in Germany (*Guardian*, Thorpe). The message in the play threatens the stabilisation of her Self:

My God, as I sit here I realize that I am perishable! O if that brute of an Einstein has only taken a fancy to my relativity! Time and space are my enemies [...] If it were not for time, I should not be dangerous, and if it were not for space, I should not feel so limited! How cruel is reason! How sharper than a serpent’s tooth is meditation! How subtle is the lack of reason! (p. 33-34).

Alice, acting as a mouthpiece for Barnes in this excerpt, explicitly challenges the Cartesian understanding of time, space, and Self as stable concepts. Instead, she introduces a Nietzschean perspective which problematizes the binary logic established upon the supremacy of rational thinking that entails repudiation of the “Other”, namely, nature, body, woman, homosexual, and animal, etc. Alice’s desire to “*exert her womanly impulses*” and “*to be a psychic*” (p. 35) is accompanied by her passionate attachment to the park, where she regularly watches her “*reflection in the water thinking on the inhumanity of man*” (p. 36). Alice’s regressive attitude problematizes her social identity as implied in her interrogation of her subjectivity by pondering over her reflection. Her “*thirst for her daughter’s life*” (p. 41) can be related to Irigaray’s comment on mother-daughter relationship because “*the mother-daughter relationship reminds woman, women, of their lack of subjective identity, and arouses affects for which there is no corresponding cultural organization*” (1990, p. 47). Alice’s love for her daughter’s fiancé-to-be is, therefore, a regressive fantasy. She longs for a transparent, fluid, and multiple Self “*encased in her implacable years*” (p. 42). It necessitates an uncensored writing in her journal to welcome the rupture in her life charged with the pre-Oedipal energy. Therefore, she voices her struggle with the pen:

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<sup>9</sup> It has been employed as an adjective referring to the mentality ignoring sexuality rather than a reference to the era because the play was written by the German dramatist Frank Wedekind in Germany. However, Barnes’s allusion to the book with her own English background might have referred to conformism of the Victorian era.

“I have made a perfectly ghastly discovery! Oh! I can’t write it...The ink has dried on my pen for the hundredth time. I cannot put pen to paper” (p. 40). Putting pen to paper means carving out another Self from within:

The specular and speculative narcissistic nature of the act of diary-writing enables the Self to be simultaneously desiring and desired, watching and watched, inside and outside, judging and judged. The diary itself represents both a return to the womb, the ultimate refuge (Didier 87-115) and the birth of the book, associated with the production of an autonomous Self (as writer-mother) (Miller) (Raoul, 1989, p. 60).

This statement recalls Cixous’s idea that “*the woman who writes cuts herself out a paper phallus*” (1976, p. 884). Alice’s writing her new Self down on her journal takes her not to the youth, but the womb, the archaic state. She gives birth to her journal with its subversive potential, and it demonstrates her attempt to locate herself outside the phallogocentric logic. Her only sentence in the final entry on September nineteenth is “*I have killed myself*” (p. 42). Studying other works of Barnes, the critic Diane Warren highlights “*the importance of the perception of death to the construction of individuality*” (2008, p. 101-102). This diary-story can be evaluated within the same context because Alice’s death means dying to carve out a new subjectivity. In addition, to consider her diary stylistically, Alice’s regular, linear diary writing from September seventh to September nineteenth, except for one day which is September sixteenth, is disrupted first by the rupture in her life by Prendaville Jones. September sixteenth is the day the entire family meets Prendaville Jones, the fiancé to be, and the turning point in Alice’s life that causes a rupture in her subjectivity and in her diary simultaneously. Another rupture comes with her death, representing her resistance against a linear existence and introducing a new space of signification.

As a result, *a dangerous child’s* quest for transgenderism in the first story, the small boy’s unconscious desire for, yet conscious rejection of, diary-writing in the second story, and the old Madame’s death for a new birth in the third story have been reflected upon through their irregular and semi-regular diary-keeping. The private diaries have symbolically been made public through their representation in short stories. Barnes’s joint emphasis on the performativity of gender and genre propounds her critique of any categorisation and boundary both in form and context; hence, it presents her as a precursor to the poststructuralist feminist notion of the subject-in-the-making.

## Conclusion

This study has tried to explore Barnes's critique of gender boundaries with a special focus on her appropriation of the diary form. There has been a feeling of strangeness and estrangement associated with Barnes's short story collections. This feeling is reflected in *The Lydia Steptoe Stories* through a simultaneous problematization of genre and gender boundaries. Barnes appropriated the characteristics of regularity and immediacy, which pertain to the diary form, to represent her protagonists' fluid subjectivity. Writing and/or struggling to write about their ontological dilemmas in their dairies, the child, the boy, and the Madame all attempt to challenge their constructed subjectivities in different ways. Each follows a non-phallogocentric agenda, which presents the short stories as earlier examples of *écriture féminine*. In other words, by re-appropriating diary form as a conventional literary form within the hierarchically neglected genre of the short story in order to question gender/sex categories, Barnes lays bare performativity of these categories with particular attention to the relationship between textuality and identity. Her Steptoe stories, therefore, can be considered as a precursor to the poststructuralist feminist notion of subject-in-the-making and can be further elaborated on from a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective and posthuman feminism in future studies to demonstrate how they can further be read as a radical subversion of subjectivities in the 1920s.

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### Summary

The American-English writer Djuna Barnes (1892-1982) has been an influential figure in the English modernist fiction. Her works challenge the conventional approaches to sex/gender categories through experimentation on the level of both context and form. In other words, Barnes's idea of fluid subjectivity shows itself in her works through the problematization of not only gender categories but also genre boundaries. In most of her works including *Nightwood*, *Ladies Almanack*, and *Spillway*, she offers a radical critique of *naturalized* gender/sex categories by reformulating a wide range of genres.

Barnes's *The Lydia Steptoe Stories*, written consecutively every other year one century ago, was compiled for the first time in 2019 by Faber & Faber. This research started with the simple question of why the publishing house must have brought them together in one edition. With this question at the background and with a particular focus on the form, it continued with the question of how and why she plays with the diary form and locates it within the genre of short story and what this play tells us about the subjectivity she delineates in her stories. It argues that Barnes's three short stories "The Diary of a Dangerous Child" (1922), "The Diary of a Small Boy" (1923), and "Madame Grows Older: A Journal at the Dangerous Age" (1924) build a connection between the performativity of gender roles and genre categories and represents feminist/poststructuralist notion of the subject-in-the-making through the re-appropriation of the diary form within the short story.

In terms of both content and form, the first short story narrates a fourteen-year-old child's journey to be a virago rejecting to be a wife and a mother. She decides to be a virago proving her sexual supremacy by using a whip over her sister's fiancé, who regards women as no more than sexual objects. She fails and the story ends with her new decision to become a boy. Olga's irregular diary writing parallels her irregular experience of multiple identities. Olga's desire to become a boy, considering that her story forms a pair with the second story, raises the necessity to account what happens on the side of boyhood/manhood. Accordingly, the second story is about the production of masculinity through a fourteen-year-old boy within a phallogocentric family structure. The nameless boy shows a discrete interest in keeping a diary yet fears its emasculative potential and calls it a *feminine* practice. The boy's unaccomplished potentiality and realistic narrative style in his diaries accompany his constrained and limited subjectivity. The final short story narrates the tale of a forty-year-old widow, Alice, who has chosen to be a wife and a mother but falls in love with her daughter's fiancé and goes through an ontological crisis. The day she falls in love and the day she commits suicide are the only days missing from her diary.

In this respect, Barnes uses the diary form, conventionally claimed to be a feminine genre, in an ironic mode that appears to be a double-layered strategy witnessing to the production and subversion of gender boundaries. She realizes this by making the simultaneous use of the techniques of diary form and short story. Written in the form of diary, the three short stories generate a writing that is *non-linear, fluid, irregular and immediate*. Especially the qualities of irregularity and immediacy pertaining to diaries and those of plot and teleology pertaining to short stories have been employed and abused by Barnes in a way to turn the diary form into a sublimated form. Barnes's use of diary-writing in her short stories presents

her as one of the early practitioners of *écriture féminine* contributing to the ontological development of subjects-in-process. The diary form is distinguished by its focus on the subject. Placing diaries into the form of short stories has become a strategy for Barnes to transcend the constructed stories about the self. Short story has been a genre narrating the conventional perceptions of gender roles from generation to generation for centuries. By integrating the private/diary form into the public/short-story, Barnes subverts the inside/outside boundary perpetuated by the dichotomous thinking. Barnes's motivation in these diary-stories seems to be interrogating the relation between textuality and identity as indicated by her re-location of the notion of subject-in the-making within a performative genre.

As a result, the dangerous child's quest for transgenderism in the first story, the small boy's unconscious desire for, yet conscious rejection of, diary-writing in the second story, and the old Madame's death for a new birth in the third story have been reflected upon through their irregular and semi-regular diary-keeping. The private diaries have symbolically been made public through their inclusion into the short stories. Barnes's joint emphasis on the performativity of gender and genre presents her as a precursor to the poststructuralist feminist notion of the subject-in-the-making and inspires further research to be conducted from the perspective of the relatively recent fields such as a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective and posthuman feminism.