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## Article abstract

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## Jewish Mysticism as a Form of Feminism in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hungarian Jewish Literature: Anna Lesznai's Response to Otto Weininger

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### Abstract

This article examines Anna Lesznai's radical imagining of sex and its use for transcendental purposes that heavily rely on Jewish mystical ideas intertwined with Otto Weininger's theory of gender binarism. In her gender theory—part of feminist discourse at the turn of the twentieth century—Lesznai describes female love, using religious language and ideas from Jewish mysticism, especially those resembling Hassidic concepts, and ultimately compares sexual union to *yihud- unio mystica* with God. Working within the patriarchal understanding of the biological definition of gender and of the concept of "female difference," Lesznai's feminism rooted in the belief that certain personality traits and skills are inherently gendered, but she reverses the hierarchy by placing women in the position of power, thus turning Jewish mysticism and Weininger's gender philosophy on its head.

### Keywords:

Jewish Mysticism, Otto Weininger, Martin Buber, Hungarian Jews, gender theory, love, dialogue, Hassidism

### Introduction

Anna Lesznai (1895-1966) was a well-known Hungarian avant-garde artist and writer of Jewish descent. She lived in the Slovak speaking region of north Hungary (today Slovakia) before the end of WWI, and later on in Vienna and Budapest. She spoke German fluently but claimed Hungarian to be her mother tongue. Through family and friends, she became one of the few female members of multiple influential and progressive intellectual groups in Hungary.<sup>1</sup> Her literary work spans diverse genres. She wrote poetry, literary critical essays and to some extent pedagogical essays, diaries, and towards the end of her life, constructed a semi-autobiographical mega novel. She wrote on subjects including art theory, philosophy, and psychology as influenced by psychoanalyses. In the public debates of the turn of the century Central European modernism and expressionism, that she was a part of, sex and gender were important and sensitive issues (Hakkarainen 2019:179). Sexuality was at the core of these discourses where the gender definitions were set within the framework of essentialist categories of men and women linked with ideas about gender roles and

sexuality. Additionally, feminism<sup>2</sup> was an influential ideology at the time as well. Feminist discourses run in different strands some incorporated mysticism and emphasized the similarities or differences between men and women addressing issues of marital roles, sexuality, reproductivity and love. Within this context Lesznai's central questions were also related to gender. She was an essentialist feminist and modernist-expressionist thinker who engaged with contemporary ideas about women's place, role and identity. Her ideas centered around experiential and epistemological difference feminism. In this way, like other women she participated in the modernist discourse about femininity and sexuality, thus, partaking in discursive experimentation in the literary space (Hinrikus 2015:190).

Lesznai articulated her ideas mainly in her private writings of diary (a platform that was a "natural" stage for women's thoughts, consistent with other women writers at the time) through the years while other aspects can be inferred from her poetry.<sup>3</sup> A more systematic presentation is put forward in an essay about Erdős Renée (1878-1956) in 1910<sup>4</sup> and other important snippets are reflections with her conversation with Georg Lukács (1885-1971), among others. Her ideas are not introduced systematically or through a structured analysis mainly because of the crude style of the diary and correspondence genre. Therefore, her positions can be confusing, contradictory, and underdeveloped, and they naturally change over time as they evolve within diary entries. However, the richness of the material raises the question, as the contemporary editor and publisher of Lesznai's diary, Petra Török asks why Lesznai did not feel the need to turn these dialogues into larger studies (Török 2007: 148).<sup>5</sup> As Anke Finger in her recent book explains little work of women expressionist has been collected and it was difficult for female writers to establish themselves in the expressionist-modernist milieu (Finger 2023:43). The answer might be, as the Hungarian women's literature scholar, Judith Szilágyi (Szilágyi 2009: 338) points out, that rather than to provide a coherent philosophy, similar to other expressionist women intellectuals<sup>6</sup> influenced by the discrimination of sexism, she preferred to express herself in the private writing of diary with the personal aim of self-discovery via exploration of ideas to understand existence and her role and place in life. Hers are existential musings that help us see how an assimilated Jewish woman constructed her sense of self at the turn of the twentieth century while incorporating trendy ideas of the time, such as gender binarism and esotericism.

This article inquiries into Lesznai's representation of the experience of modernity via analyzing her constructions of gender.<sup>7</sup> Two influential sources are visible in the unstructured and unedited private writings collected from her diaries and letters that she used to for her gender construction: Otto Weininger's (1880-1903) gender theory as laid down in his book *Sex and Character* (Weininger 1903), fused with Jewish mystical ideas via mainly Martin Buber's (1878-1965) writings,<sup>8</sup> specifically, the Jewish mystical idea of *devekut* (clinging) and *yihud* (unity, uniqueness, bond with the divine) or in other words, *unio mystica* (mystical union). Particularly, the article argues that Lesznai addresses point by point the major gender theoretical ideas of Weininger countering them with her own reworked Jewish mysticism to create a feminist theory of gender. That is, Lesznai takes her mystical ideas from the Jewish tradition and her belief in gender binarism from Weininger, she turns them all upside down and puts women in the position of power in the male-female dialogue, which is the relational structure fundamental to her female-male connection. However, what makes analyzing her gender construction challenging is that Lesznai makes no explicit reference to Weininger in her writing. But when reading Weininger's book and Lesznai's notes together one can observe all the major themes, focal points, and logic from Weininger's book in her formulation of gender. Her construction of femininity and masculinity speak through Weininger's gender ideas. The fact that her gender theory is contained in her private letters and notes in an unsystematic fashion could be an answer why she did not reference Weininger at all. Nevertheless, she shows awareness of his writing consistent with her intellectual milieu of Central Europe at the *fin de siècle*. The influence of writers such as Weininger or Buber<sup>9</sup> are hard to determine due to lack of direct references, yet their ideas were so popular and widely circulated that it would have been harder to ignore them in Central European intellectual circles than to be aware of them.

Thus, the extent of Weininger's reception is naturally hard to define, but by tracing Weininger's ideas in Lesznai's personal writing, the extant of the dissemination of his theories becomes visible that illustrates how Lesznai's writings belong to *fin de siècle* feminism, even if they were not publicized, and in return this study helps rewrite the perimeters of feminist discourses. Also, in this way a discursive overlap becomes visible: a reaction, opposition, as well as divergence, but nevertheless, engagement in the feminist discourses. Thus, the presence of

Weininger's ideas "suggests that an important filter for his reception should be the 'experience' of gendered modernity..." (Hinrikus 2015:190). Mirjam Hinrikus continues that experience is discursive and gendered, thus, female writers give us insight into the cultural context of the *fin de siècle* in Central Europe amidst a negative reaction to the 'woman question,' i.e., their emancipation and visibility in the public sphere. Therefore, investigating Lesznai's view of gender provides a rare insight into the female experience of modernity, and specifically, into the Hungarian-Jewish female sphere of feminist thinking during the early twentieth century.

### **Weininger's Gender as the Structure of Dialogue**

The Austrian psychologist Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character* about sexual desire and its relation to intellect, greatly influenced views on gender and had explosive impact on the era's scientific discourse about sexuality.<sup>10</sup> It proved popular ideas via psychology, biology, sexology, philosophy, backed with morality stemming from religion packaged in scientific language to offer 'scientific' theories to gender difference in accordance with the patriarchal and misogynistic ideas of the time (Hinrikus 2015:170). The book was not original in its claims and was filled with misogynistic and antisemitic stereotypes, pseudoscientific speculations about sexual differences. It lip serviced a sexist audience about the 'proper' place and role of women in society. Weininger's work is a response to the gender anxiety of his day in the wake of women's emancipation discourses, the changes of the conventional social roles. It also helped create a backlash against women's emancipation. That is, according to Hinrikus (Hinrikus 2015:180), Weininger's negative construction of femininity was a reaction to the feminist discourses about the emancipated new women and to suffrage placing sexual difference at the center of theories of modern life (Leng 2014; Schwartz 2005).<sup>11</sup>

Weininger explicitly states that "...this book is above all else intended to solve in theoretical and practical terms... of the Woman Question... The problem that I wish to solve in my search for clarity in the Woman Question is that of a woman's will to become internally equal to a man, to attain his intellectual and moral freedom, his interests and creative power. And what I will argue now is that [woman] has no need and, accordingly, no capacity, for this kind of emancipation" (Weininger 2005:58). That is, in order to refute women's emancipation discourses Weininger attacked women's moral capability and intelligence: "The complete female knows

neither a logical nor a moral imperative, and the words “law,” “duty,” “duty to oneself” are the words that sound most alien to her. Therefore, the conclusion that she lacks a suprasensory personality is perfectly justified” (Weininger 2005:161). There is a prevalent misogynistic binarism in Weininger’s gender theory, where he asserts that women are more controlled by their physical natures than men who are more capable of intellect. He creates abstractions, mindsets, of masculine and feminine that serve as antithetical points, and not bodies representing sexuality. In his dualist and essentialist theory of gender and sexuality he creates these two ideal types and assigns on the one hand, spiritual, ethical qualities to maleness and, on the other hand, claims that femaleness is entirely dominated by sex drive, and not capable of intellectual activity, morality or creativity. Additionally, women with their erotic power seduce men who are in eternal struggle with women because of sexuality (Finger 2023: 36). Therefore, men must dominate via patriarchal relations with women to remain true to their higher calling. But overall, for humans to be liberated they need to overcome and give up sexuality and procreation. Thus, he suggests eradicating sexual difference by eradication sexuality. That is, emancipation from femaleness is by no one having sex.

Lesznai engages with Weininger’s ideas as a way to engage with the dominant scientific (medical) discourse of the time on sex and gender. But while a lot has been written (Gluck 1985; Garloff 2016; Gilman 1995) about the Viennese intellectual and artistic circles of this time, less about their parallels in Hungary. Nevertheless, Mary Gluck writes about the Lukacs’ circle,<sup>12</sup> of which Lesznai was a part, that they subscribed to Weininger’s premise that women were not equal to men but were their polar opposites. However, unlike Weininger, “Lukacs and his friends invested these supposedly feminine, non-rational qualities with a positive valuation, arguing that women had privileged access to realms of insight and sensibility...” (Gluck 1985: 39). In Gluck’s view, Lukacs’ circle’s variations on visions of the feminine were endless and often contradictory. The group was preoccupied with questions of gender and debated the unique attributes of femininity and masculinity permeated by the notion of sexual polarity. This gendered vision of the world is fundamental to Lesznai’s view of humans as well. This essentialist binarism of Weininger assigns some special capability to women, as he put it: “Man and Woman, then, are like two substances divided between the living individuals in different proportions, without the coefficient

of one substance ever reaching zero” (Weininger, 2005: 14). Essential binarism is precisely the aspect Lesznai leans on in building her gender construction where she elaborates how the female identity is acquired.

For her, the idea that all women (a group based on their biological, essential and sexual difference) have one voice that is different from men's is fundamental. She assumes that women's different biology manifests itself in a different female essence and sexuality which comprise a women's sphere separate from men's. In other words, she believes in the structure of fixed sexual difference as a fundamental basis of differentiation that includes a gendered psychic and essential reality. She argues that the universal experience of living in the world as a woman, is the manifestation of their difference which leads women to a better knowledge of spirituality than men. Her views are part of an epistemological standpoint rooted in difference feminism unlike other feminist views that focus on women's societal positions in relation to men. For Lesznai, women's epistemology is inherently different from men's because it is not society that provides them with different experiences and knowledge, but rather women's innate biological, psychic, and essential nature. Her gender is an antithesis to Weininger's idea covertly referencing his misogynist theory of gender. Weininger asserts throughout his book that women are inferior beings in need of transformation who additionally must be morally saved by men. This idea “culminates in the notion that a woman's need for emancipation, and her capacity for emancipation, derives exclusively from the proportion of M [man, male] in her” (Weininger 2005: 57) because “Man possesses sexual organs; her sexual organs possess women” (Weininger 2005: 92). Lesznai's construction of the female addresses the same ideas as Weininger about women's character, morale, body, thinking, in a biological-essentialist way. But she turns them around proving his misogyny wrong by saying: “Woman creates but differently” (Török 2010: 88) “and in order to become more woman like, birthing is her sole most significant work in her life” (Török 2010: 416). That is, the female birthing capability, i.e. sexual organs, is precisely what makes her more and better than man. Moreover, in line with expressionists her women completely identify with female sexual functions (Finger 2023: 37).

In Weininger's thought, women sensitivity negatively affects their intellect, for Lesznai women's closeness to nature due to their sensitivity is the key to spirituality for both sexes. While

Weininger rejects love, Lesznai's recuperates love as a model for men-women's spirituality in that women's sexualized relation to the world is the gate for spiritual experiences for both sexes. Lesznai internalizes the gender inequality idea but uses it for women's advantage. She does so, by engaging with Jewish mystical ideas in her answer to Weininger's gender theory. Interestingly, it is not that Jewish mysticism is less misogynistic than Weininger's gender theory, but that Lesznai uses the abstract notions of Jewish mysticism's understanding of spirituality as a caveat for reversing the patriarchal gender dynamics present in both Weininger's writing overtly and in Jewish mysticism covertly (as it does not talk about women). For Lesznai, female identity is an essential absolute due to biological sexual difference that she claims also causes a difference in their experience of sex. Lesznai extends this to an epistemological difference as well by claiming that only women can get to know god through sexual love.

She adopted the logic that difference means different and inferior, but she subverted the patriarchal model by pointing out male difference from women. By redefining what the difference means, she engages the logic of argument of her time but associates female difference with superiority. She does not deny the difference of women's natural reproductive function but denies that this natural function makes them inferior. In this way, Lesznai adopts Weininger's notion of gender binarism in her gender theory (in addition to Jewish mysticism as an equally strong source) but opposes Weininger's assumption that biological difference indicates women's lack of intelligence, and instead she claims that women have exclusive epistemological capabilities. She explores how being a female determines the female role.<sup>13</sup> She asks, "Do the souls have gender, and would that influence their destiny? What is right for the woman: to be more womanly or more human" (Török 2006:88). Her conclusion is that gender is the most important factor because gender "difference is necessary for their more perfect union and complementation" (Török 2010: 88). That is, even though humans are humans, they are never without gender, although Weininger allowed that a man may have some "female" traits and a woman may have some "male" traits. For him, there is no "universal" human but a universal human female and male.

In her writing, she defines several essential distinctions between men and women. For her "man is closed, and woman is open" (Török 2010: 416). She claims that women also differ from men because "The female intellect is not suitable to understand differences but human

communities.... And generally, where men think abstractly...women are the cradle..." (Török 2010: 266). Since women are human-centered, they are the key to understanding men who are intellectual by nature. Whereas men tend to divide, women unite. Viewing human interactions through the structure of dialogue became a major trend in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Lesznai sought to find a positive in the biological difference of the female body so she reinterprets it in the dialogue to make women's relational skills role not only essential but more important than men's intellectual advantage. For her, the two genders are complementary opposites who are in a perpetual dynamic of dialogue on a dialectic end. In their relationship for "[t]he woman: the soul should follow the body.... The man: the body should follow the soul... They convince each other in the dialogue, but always only one the other. There is no possibility for intellectual unity; it is an eternal dialectic" (Török 2010: 287). Her understanding of soul is similar to an essence that is gendered. The gendered essences present in the female-male dialogue consists of the two genders trying to come to a common denominator which they can never do because they are dialectic opposites whose complementary nature is an essential necessity for the dialogue to take place.

### **Love as the Point of Difference**

Lesznai's female-male dialogue is very specifically based on her concept of gender differentiation between the two kinds of love. Lesznai claims that the sexes love differently that both are essential to the dialogue. Her gender construct is imbedded in the two words for love in Hungarian: *Szerelem* which she uses to describe female or erotic love, and *szeretet* which she uses to describe male love. The words are completely disassociated from their original meaning in Hungarian; the word *szerelem* in Hungarian typically means romantic love that may or may not include erotic love. The word *szeret* does not contain any erotic or romantic nuances, but is abstract intellectual and emotional, but never physical. Nevertheless, the verb to have sex - make love (*szeretkezni*) is derived from *szeretet* not *szerelem*. *Szeretet* is familiar and friendly love that is applies also to art or to god as well. It is an inferior love to *szerelem* but other than that she leaves *szeretet* a very undeveloped concept. But she very clearly articulates that in her mind, *szerelem* is women's love and *szeretet* is men's love. She conceptualizes *szerelem* as a physical power of women that gives them a higher access to esotericism. *Szerelem* in this way becomes a metaphor to express an emotion via the tangibility of physical love that one can grasp even if one does not feel it (Molnár,

2018). Sex is the acting out of the dialogue between the different gendered love of man and woman.

Her notion of gendered love is traceable to Weininger's view who distinguishes sharply between them. He asserts that male love aims for spiritual rather than a physical union, and thus it is unlike sexual desire (Pizer 2008: 124). Lesznai adopted this vision of gendered love and located the ultimate difference between men and women in their different capability of love. Like Weininger, for her women's love contains sexual desire, but she claims that this enables them to love with *szerelem*, the very love that is spiritual. Her rationale for her assertion that *szerelem* is more spiritual than *szereket* is that women can create life and because sexual love is relational to a partner and can therefore bring the partner with them to that physical/spiritual climax. While for her *szereket* is a passive type of love because it is not erotic and is not actively relational. Women express *szerelem* in dialogue with men, including them in the sexual and spiritual experience, while men lack the capability of *szerelem* because they can only 'intellectually' love (*szereket*). That is, like Weininger she redefines love by gendering it, but for her female love is self-less (as its aim is spiritual experience for both sexes) while also very much self-centered (as her body is its locus). In this way, Lesznai preserves Weininger created sexual differentiation but in an antithetical form. While Weininger talks about romantic love as the core of its gender and sex understanding, where male is love and sexuality is female; Lesznai takes the same idea but for her sex is the key to freedom and not to its loss. For Weininger, freedom is to sever emotional bonds and to disrupt the chain of procreation, while its opposite stands for Lesznai.

In this way, Lesznai rehabilitates the idea of love as a model of spiritual interaction. She describes the process of the spiritual experience as follows: "The woman's road is love (*szerelem*). In it she unites with herself, leaves behind the dualism of the soul and body that through love become one, whole and finished, that is godlike, one with everything." (Török 2010: 69). Women's thinking, feminine consciousness, women's logic and capability of analysis is love centered (used derogatorily in Weininger) but this very love centeredness shows women's higher capability of thinking and creating not just with their mind but with their whole body for Lesznai. That is, sexlessness is not the aim and utopia (as in Weininger), but sex is the key to a spiritual utopia (for Lesznai), and sexual pleasure is essential for spiritual fulfillment. Both man and women are sexual,

but unlike in Weininger, more full humanity lies with women not man, because birthing is the ultimate spiritual experience, yet only women can do it.

Further, Weininger's two categories of women: mother or whore, are linked undermining the tradition that reveres the mother and reviling the sexually active women. While Weininger connects the two binary categories of women as mother and whore and claims that motherhood is as sexual as whoring, Lesznai merges them positively, but for her, the whore is the female who likes sex which is essential for both men's and women's spiritual experience. A woman, for Lesznai who would not want sex, cannot be spiritual. Additionally, for Weininger, polyandry is the expression of female self-centeredness around her own body (Hinrikus 2015:182). This does not appear negatively for Lesznai either for whom sex with a man (the same or a changing partner) is about spirituality and not about sexual loyalties. Weininger's female polyandry is an expression of the women's incapability of love, for Lesznai it is women's great capability of love that endows women higher value. Weininger's women's narcissistic admiration of her own body, is turned into the female body as the very locus of spirituality, where her body is essentially the 'temple,' its preservation and care taking serves higher aims of spirituality in Lesznai.

Although, like Weininger, Lesznai views women as reduced to their sexual goals of physical love (*szerelem*) and childbearing, for Lesznai this is a positive, not a negative characteristic of women. She elevates female biological difference into a spiritual capability that men lack because they cannot bear children. As in female expressionist writing, where the female creation through birth appears and is equal and reciprocal to male creation through art, Lesznai carries this idea even further. By centering women's reproductive ability, Lesznai turns around the misogynistic nature of Weininger's gender definitions and the central element in male/female relationships. She argues against the notion that men are drained by the sexual demands of women, and that those demands are to be feared and possibly rejected. But instead states that the sexual demands of women are the means to achieve spiritual goals for men as well as women via physical-erotic dialogue. That is, she argues that female love, *szerelem*, is the only way men can reach divinity as well while *szerelem*, a weaker form of love, does not allow either of them to esoterically-spiritually experience the divine. She claims that men can also only reach the deity through relational-physical love (*szerelem*), and since they need to rely on women's capability of *szerelem*,

they can only reach the divine via women's help. In other words, she claims *szerelem* is the only way that either of them can reach god. In this way, women's biology and sexuality are not the source of inferiority, but men's lack of female biology and erotic love is men's inferiority. In this dialogue women are active and superior because "the woman is always responsible for the success of saving through love (*szerelemmegváltás*), because the woman's road is *szerelem*..." (Karádi 1980: 110). Women are love beings (*szerelmes*) and their female essence is *szerelem*. Men can reciprocate with *szeretet* in the gender dialogue, but its success is measured by women's *szerelem*. Saving denotes some kind of spiritual enlightenment where the human understands one's role and aim in life via having a love dialogue. In this dynamic, women are in the active and responsible role and men are in the passive recipient role. In this way, Lesznai empowers women by flipping the patriarchal model, although she still works with a biological definition of gender.

In sum, Lesznai embraced Weininger's definitions of male and female gendered traits, including those of love and sexuality.<sup>15</sup> However, she refuted his misogyny by ascribing spiritual value to qualities defined as female in her discussion of *szeretet* and *szerelem*. For her spiritual is higher than intellectual, and sex is spiritual not just erotic. In this way, she argues against Weininger's sexism -a popular and mainstream antifeminist trait at the time (Leng 2014) - using a positive view on sex as a source to prove higher female values. She structured her theory as an interpersonal dialogue where there was no access to the divine without physical dialogue with another person through sex. Her conclusion is that the gender dialogue between woman and man is therefore necessary before they can dialogue with god. Lesznai glosses over other possibilities, such as the traditional concept of interacting with the deity of prayer and study, as ways to connect to the divine, and only discusses *szerelem* as the way for both men and women and only together to connect to god. This is an original and radical position of Lesznai where not just woman can connect to the higher power and include their male partners, but that men can *only* achieve esoteric-spiritual experiences through women's inclusive love.

### Love and Jewish Mysticism

Lesznai's gender dialogue of love is populated with Jewish mystical ideas. While Jewish mystical notions focus on the dialogical interaction between men and god, for Lesznai, the dialogue takes place between the She and He before it takes place between the individual and the divine. Lesznai's

belief in men's and women's different capability to love is fundamental to her gender theory that is intertwined with her spirituality. In Jewish mysticism generally, the dialogue is traditionally between men and the divine women are only depicted as enablers for men to mimic *devekut*, the idea of the soul clinging to god. *Devekut* is a spiritual experience, not knowledge but practice centered. As Gershom Scholem (1897-1982) put it: "By the practice of *devekut*, thought is transformed into emotion... in other words, the insight which is won by *devekut* has no rational and intellectual content and, being of a most intimate and emotional character, cannot be translated into rational terms... The real mystery and esoteric wisdom is that of loving communion with God" (Scholem 1974: 218). Understanding is de-intellectualized in *devekut*, and sensuality becomes central that one has to experience by him/herself. In other words, *devekut* is not an intellectual wisdom to be transmitted, but an emotional task where one experiences the immanence of the divine that one 'understands' through feelings.

In Jewish mysticism, the final union, *yihud* or *unio mystica*, is attained via cleaving (*devekut*), the way in which the human soul attaches itself to the divine soul. It is also a process where one becomes a better version of oneself. The steps to *yihud* accomplished through *devekut* transform the self. Once attained, this mystical union also serves as a vehicle to better serve the community. *Devekut*, an ultimately personal experience, serves as an opening toward action that benefits others. In the contemporary Jewish mysticism scholar, Moshe Idel's view, "[i]n this process one interacts with the others. In this way, *devekut*, union with god, becomes union with other, and becomes other oriented. In the meantime, *devekut* is the experiences of the process of assimilation to the divine where the human soul cleaves to its sources, the divine" (Idel, 1988: xvii). Beside adopting notions from mysticism, Lesznai does not elaborate on conventional mystical ideas of *yihud* or *devekut*. She does not reflect on general Jewish mysticism either, but simply adopts concepts that she creates her own versions of and spin offs. Similarly, for Lesznai *devekut*, like *szerelem*, is a sensual and emotional experience. Her notion of *devekut* is also one of self-perfecting (*teljesedés*), but for her, the dialogue takes place through *szerelem* with men in order to achieve *yihud* (*megváltás* in Lesznai's words) with god. Jewish mysticism's *yihud* corresponds to Lesznai's *megváltás* (saving) that describes a close encounter with the divine, which is the very goal of her mystical experience. But *devekut* is defined by Lesznai as uniquely

female capability, and the subject is the man, before it is the deity. Her dialogue that happens through physical love is interpersonal, which she claims is necessary to experience the divine. That is, she is describing using her partner's body to have a dialogue with the deity, which is how the Jewish mystical concept of sex and *devekut* functions as well except strictly from the man's perspective.

Lesznai's theory includes both partners in this journey; through woman-initiated *szerelem*, both Man and Woman are transported to a unity with god. The idea that *szerelem* is more active and responsible in the mystical experience than *szereket* is unique to her. Her contribution of gendered love is not located in Jewish mystical thought. In Jewish mysticism there are at most some echoes of the idea that male mystics take on a female persona in order to connect most deeply with the divine (Fines, 1984). This follows the dominant paradigm of women being more docile and submissive, and therefore receptive to god. In Jewish mystical tradition the human role is more often described as incredibly active in partnership with the divine, but only for male mystics; women are not seen as the active partners to the deity. Contrarily, Lesznai posited *szerelem* as the way in which women can partner with the higher power and allow men to partner with god as well. In this way, she envisions men as reliant on women to experience the divine because lacking the capacity for physical-emotional love, they have no other ways to connect to the deity, that is, to have an esoteric-spiritual experience.

For Lesznai, the opposite and complementary male and female natures are essential to achieve the esoteric goal of *yihud* or *unio mystica*. She breaks down the process of achieving *yihud* into three stages. The goal of *szerelem* is saving (*megváltás*) the person from not being able to connect with the divine. One achieves unity with god (*istenbe bukni*, literally merging into god) through self-fulfillment (*teljesedés*) as the process of self-perfection through loving acting in accordance with one's given gendered nature. The process of fulfillment via *szerelem* saves (*megvált*) a person by bridging over or triumphing over the material (*empiria áthidalás*) and merging with the deity. As she put it: "There are two roads to -saving through love (*szerelemmegváltás*): if fulfillment (*teljesedés*) is not enough, that is how the deepest part of the soul unites with the divine; giving up fulfillment (*teljesedés*) it succumbs to the wish of the soul, that is intense and overstretched, bridging the material [physical world] (*áthidalja az empiriát*): in

order to unite with god (*belebukik istenbe*: literally merge into god)” (Karádi, Vezér 1980: 110). Saving (*megváltás*), fulfillment (*teljesedés*), and bridging over the material [world] (*empiria áthidalás*) are the stages of the process of *yihud/unio mystica* where the finite self merges with the infinite. The unity between humans and the divine is an active feeling, a female sensual reality called *szerелеm*.

Love is a central notion in god's relation to man according to Jewish mysticism. The Hassidic movement emphasized this relationship, believing that the human capacity to love is the means to connect to the higher power. Martin Buber— whose rendering of Hassidism was the major influence on the German speaking intellectual universe's perception of Hassidism (and Lesznai derived most of her views of Hassidism from Buber's writings)— describes Hassidism as a love affair with the world (Friedman 1988).<sup>16</sup> That is, the world was created out of love and one must perfect it through love. But love is not only a feeling, it is the godly in existence. Hassidism believes that it is possible to meet god through love because the divine is love; they are the same essence. Lesznai draws on this mystical notion of love but makes it gendered, saying that only *szerелеm* is godly, *szeretet* is not. In this way, *szerелеm*, the female love, endows woman with a special role in the mystical union with the deity. Therefore, Lesznai clearly demarcates the differences between male and female love as their role in the spiritual-mystical experience is very different: “[T]he differences between love (*szerелеm*) and love (*szeretet*): *szerелеm* wants to save the material, it hangs on to the material (*empiria*), that is why it is unique” (Karádi, Vezér 1980: 110). It is *szerелеm*, the female love, and not *szeretet*, the male love that is the means of fulfillment (*teljesedés*), meaning reaching one's human spiritual potential, the road to unity with god, and the way to overcome or triumph over matter (*empiria áthidalás*), the ultimate ideal of mysticism.

The reason why the metaphysical status of *szerелеm* is different because in her theory, only women are the door to the divine. As she states: “*szerелеm* saves because it is concentrated and glowing through a material individual and like a lens, burns into god” (Karádi, Vezér 1980: 110). In Jewish mysticism the impulse is to overcome man's imprisonment within the self, to transcend the imperfection of empirical reality. Through prayer and meditation, one can prevail over the body (*empiria*) and unite with god in the spiritual sphere. Similarly, according to Lesznai, the fulfillment (*teljesedés*) of the I which leads to *yihud* through the dialogue of *szerелеm*. In the

dialogue the saving (*megváltás*) means one unites with the divine via bridging over matter (*áthidal empiria*). Women's love is the stage of mystical experience where one prevails over the material and meets the transcendental. For Lesznai, the deity can only be achieved in the direct relation to the male Thou, and in the encounter, something mystical happens to each person. In her dialogical relationship, life is no longer a biological fact but is pervaded by spirit. For Buber, revelation is an affair of here and now in the creative encounter between the I and Thou. This is so because god is in everything and has multiplicity of appearance. Similarly, for Lesznai, *szerelem* is more than just a feeling because *szerelem* can 'save' (*megvált*) the material.

This concept of divine omnipresence is explained through the metaphor of "divine sparks" that can be collected and returned to god through *devekut* and deeds performed with intent generally in Jewish mysticism. Sparks are the intangible essence. They are the divine presence in everything. In Jewish mysticism, especially in Buber's understanding of Hassidism, the I is the source of action, the one collecting the sparks. Hassidism emphasizes individual participation in redemption (*megváltás*) as god's partners. In Buber's view, Hassidism put the imperative of action on humans (Scholem 1974). They are not to wait passively, but to actively live *devekut*. As Michael Löwy says, "the message of Hassidism according to Buber was that man was not condemned to waiting and contemplation: redemption was his to act upon, by collecting and releasing the sparks of holy lights dispersed through the world" (Löwy 1992: 52). Humans need to actively prepare (*devekut*) for the meeting with the god in *yihud* by collecting divine sparks.

Lesznai adopts the notion of sparks, but for her, divine sparks are exclusively found in the *szerelem* dialogue. *Szerelem* is women's special capability to perceive god's essence, which is what makes up the transcendental sparks in the physical world. Thus, female participation in the *devekut* of dialogue with the male Thou is imperative because in Lesznai's words: "[t]his is our only gate: through this we enter eternity, this is our only root that unites us via blood and a strong rope to the eternal one" (Lesznai 1910: 40). She asserts that *Szerelem* is the only door to god for both women and men—the only way women can comprehend the essence of existence and connect the physical to the intangible eternal existence beyond them. Because *Szerelem* is women's corporeal experience of god, the divine and erotic love can only be accessed through the female body's sensuality: "[S]zerelem is the only eternal [essence] that we are allowed to see from

existence that may appear with hundred faces to others” (Lesznai 1910: 40). According to scholarship (Wolfson: 1997) for Jewish mystics, the esoteric is comprised in man. For Lesznai, it is up to woman to use the body to meet god in *yihud* and unite with the transcendental essence through *devekut*. Kabbalistic theosophy enabled the mostly male Jewish mystics to envision all things in the divine, allowing them to transcend the mundane and experience the deity. For Lesznai it is solely the female mystic herself who is capable of doing this.

In pre-Hassidic Jewish mystical movements, the concept of *Yihud* as a means to save (*megváltás* in Lesznai's theory) one's soul from a godless existence was exclusive to select and highly trained men. But Hasidism popularized the kabbalistic concept of *devekut* and *yihud* so that every man could achieve it in Gershom Scholem's view, “Hasidic *devekut* is no longer an extreme ideal, to be realized by some rare and sublime spirits at the end of the path. It is no longer the last rung in the ladder of ascent, as in Kabbalism, but the first. Everything begins with man's decision to cleave to God. *Devekut* is the starting point and not the end. Everyone is able to realize it instantaneously” (Scholem 1974: 208). *Devekut* and *yihud* were no longer a magical formula for the few as in earlier Jewish mysticisms. “The mystical ideology of the movement is derived from the kabbalistic heritage, but its ideas are popularized, with an inevitable tendency towards terminological inexactitude” (Scholem 1995: 344). Since it was a popular approach, it was simplified and was expressed in the everyday language of the uneducated.

The popularization and simplification of Jewish mystical ideas is reflected in Lesznai's usage and interpretations of them as well. She integrated the ideas of *yihud* and *devekut* into her gender theory with “terminological inexactitude” and made them subject to her essentialist understanding of the gender binary. For Lesznai, *yihud* or *unio mystica* is not an option only for elite men, but for all women and through women, for men. She empowered women by putting them in the position of actors and initiators of *yihud* and *devekut* by giving them the exclusive capability of *szerelem* via the body. In sum, for Lesznai, the female body is the site of *unio mystica* in sex and birthing; refuting Weininger's notion about masculine creativity as not full creativity, because ultimate creativity includes birthing, the act only females are capable of. Therefore, female creativity is of higher value proven via Jewish mystical ideas. Thus, Weininger's ‘secrets of

masculine creativity' are nonexistent, but very much reside in the female body, thus, they are female secrets of creativity.

### **Sex and Jewish Mysticism**

Lesznai's gender theory incorporates the erotic characteristic of *devekut*. She does not directly profess to this influence, yet it is strongly implied in her description of *szerelem*. The traditional doctrine of *devekut* contains a strong sexual and erotic element. For example, the eroticism in the Zohar (that she was an avid reader of) stems from its view of the sefirotic system, a description of god that runs on a series of sexual unions and erotic experiences between different *sefirot*, or emanations of the divine. The sexual tensions and unions are the role models for marital relationships. The best that a married couple can do is to imitate the sefirotic system's sexual union. Jewish mystical practice reflects a fundamentally positive attitude toward sexual practices. Even more, as Lawrence Fine (b.1946) says, "Kabbalists regarded married sexual life as partaking in a sacred mystery. Not merely fulfilling the essential mitzvah (religious obligation) of procreation or an opportunity to avoid sinful thoughts and deeds, marriage enabled the mystic to realize the sefirotic reunification of *Tiferet*, and *Shekinah*, and to mend the breach within god caused by human sin" (Jacobs, Fine 1984: 13). Sex had sacramental value for the kabbalists and for Lesznai as well. Sex and gender comprised a direct relationship to the deity, where sexual union is the metaphor for the union between humans and god. That is, in kabbalistic symbolism the body is central, as is heterosexual eroticism through the sexual contact of two bodies, though there is no equality of the sexes. Jewish mysticism acknowledges both the male and female aspects of the divine together in one.

The variant of this concept comes from Weininger's book, who proposed that every human is in possession of both male and female qualities.<sup>17</sup> As Sander Gilman (b.1944) puts it: "The desired end is the Aristotelian golden mean, with the male and the female qualities of both partners exactly balanced. This the very feminine male could find an ideal partner in the very masculine female or ... in the very masculine male." (Gilman 1995: 79). For Weininger, there is an ideal type of male and female that men and women can try to approximate where the male is active, logical, genius and moral; while the female is passive, illogical, talented, conformist. One can increase one's percentage of masculinity or femininity, but women's equality is not possible as their

femininity will always outweigh their masculinity. In his view, because women desire masculinity they can renounce sexuality to become more masculine. But in order to think and create, women need to overcome their femininity and become more masculine. Since for him, masculine femininity is rated higher than femininity of any sort, masculine women were considered intellectual and/or artistic, as he argues through the section titled *Emancipated Women* in his book. Lesznai adopts this idea that both sexes contain traces of both genders, i.e., that men contain femininity and women contain masculinity and that gendered male and female qualities could co-exist in a man or a woman. Although Lesznai discusses essential male and female natures, she also occasionally states that women can become more like men in certain contexts: for example, when they are asexual, do not birth, or post-menopausal and no longer capable of childbirth, they are more masculine (*férfiás nő*). She stipulates that although men may acquire female qualities, they can never become women as they cannot bear children.

In Jewish mysticism for *devekut* and *yihud/unio mystica* to take place, one had to have a sexual partner from the opposite sex (as per the Rabbinic legal and Jewish mystical imagination, this had to happen within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage). Historical Jewish movements of all eras and types frowned upon not getting married and remaining celibate. Rabbinic Judaism did not have issues with the body and sex but with uncontrolled sexual desire (Biale 1997:35). Jewish law has a positive, but regulated and utilitarian approach to sex. There is no exalted status of singlehood. The Zohar shows that even a mystic whose life's aim is union with God should be married and otherwise cannot achieve union with God. Jewish law views marriage as more than simply a legal channel for sex, but for the mystic, sex is the most important part of marriage in regard to their mystical-religious aims in life. As Pinchas Giller puts it: "Since [a] married couple's sexual life was a symbolic act, their intercourse [was] a parallel to the Divine union. Hence, paradoxically, it was through their own intercourse that they could cleave to the Shekinah" (Giller 2011: 115).

This idea of sex is present in Lesznai's thought as well. In her gender theory, *devekut* and *yihud* are imbedded in eroticism, that is, sex. She defined true *szerелеm* as "true erotica in experience" (Török 2010: 140). *Szerелеm* is experienced sexuality because *szerелеm* is not an abstract emotion but a sensual experience of sexual union. It is the spiritual in corporeal, just like

for Jewish mystics. Sex is the means to attain *yihud/unio mystica* where *szerelem* is a dialogue embodied as sex between the female I and the male Thou. However, Lesznai adapted mysticism's use of sex specifically to define the role of women and the female's unique capability of *szerelem*: "[W]e are the indispensable important priestesses- the conductors of the ritual" (Török 2010: 40). She described *szerelem* as the ritual act of lovemaking, and the central figure is the woman as a priestess of *szerelem* (*papnő a szerelemben, a szertartás vezetője a szerelemben*). Lesznai's thought claimed that *Szerelem* and not *szeretet* was the means to connect to god precisely because of its erotic and sexual undertones.

Although important, the metaphysical understanding of sexuality of Jewish mysticism was not romantic, because while the Zohar contains eroticism, it is austere (Idel 1988:151). Weininger, Rabbinic Judaism, and Jewish mysticism all draw on patriarchal traditions and caution against sexual transgression stemming from the view of women's bodies as a source of leading away from the divine. Additionally, according to Luis Jacobs (1920-2006), the attention in Jewish mysticism is "transferred from one's partner to the sacred unification of male and female within God. As such, one's sexual life served an instrumental purpose of an exalted nature" (Jacobs 1984: 113). The significance of Jewish married sexuality lies in men using their wives' bodies to have a mystical experience, not in the interpersonal connection between the spouses. It is a utilitarian and pragmatic view of sex and the body. There is a paradoxical ideal: the elimination of sexual pleasure is the spiritual goal and also, and the use of sexual pleasure for spiritual purpose. That is, sexual pleasure's goals are not to gratify the individuals or bring them closer to their partner; but to serve to bring them close to God and any pleasure that doesn't attain this goal is wrong. In this way it is not romantic.

This 'darkness' is not present in Lesznai's thought, most likely because she takes the female perspective. Lesznai displays a positive and central view of sex by putting women in the active, empowered role within the sexual encounter, yet hers is neither a romantic nor a feminist approach either. Lesznai inherits the gendered, utilitarian view of sexuality in Jewish mysticism, but reverses it, where women use the male body for their purposes, making women the instigating partner in sex. In Lesznai's gender theory, like in Jewish mysticism women do have a very strict role and their sexuality and body serve the specific purpose of mystical experience, yet they are

empowered to act. Another key difference is that they include their male partner in this mystical experience; it is not solely for their own spiritual fulfillment. Hers is a positive view of sexuality that endows women with agency. Nevertheless, she still views the body primarily as a tool for the mystical experiences of *yihud* and *devekut* (*megváltás* and *teljesedés*).

The reason why sex as a sensual/emotional experience is the central experience in Jewish mysticism is, in Joseph Dan's (1935-1922) view, because "[t]he starting point of the mystical attitude to religious truth is the deep doubt—or very often complete denial—that communicative language can reveal divine truth to a believer" (Dan 2002: 2). Language is not the vehicle of divine revelation to the people. The body's sensual and sexual experience is the "language" of communication. The ecstatic experience coming from sexual orgasm resembles the ecstatic spiritual experience of meeting god. Sex is perceived through the body, and the essential way in which all humans share experiences. For Jewish mystics, the souls are isolated in their own realms, and the meta-sensual and meta-intellectual perceptions or experiences aid one in their esoteric quest to reach the soul. As emphasized in Hassidism, many mystics believe that only non-linguistically through sensual sexuality can hidden truths be revealed, perceived, and understood. This distrust of linguistic communication is present in Lesznai's gender theory as well. She defined the esoteric dialogue as *szerелеm*, and *szerелеm* as physical eroticism and sex, which reflects the disbelief in the possibility of linguistic communication attaining union with god. For her, *szerелеm* determines women's spiritual role. The female body is the channel for experiencing higher realms, and sex is the means for it. Mystical unity, the ultimate knowledge of god, comes through women leading men into erotic love, the most intense love that is experienced through the physical reality of the body. In this way god and *szerелеm* are connected because its ecstatic experience belongs to the realm of mysticism and make humans god-like. Although the woman and man both share an ecstasy of union with one another which leads to *yihud/unio mystica*, the woman is in the special power role.

In sum, in her gender theory, Lesznai's radical imagining of sex for transcendental purposes is structured through Weininger's gender binarism and the notion of dialogue as a relational structure between two people. Lesznai utilizes *szerелеm* to denote feminine love that only women are capable of, and she describes it in mystical language using ideas especially

resembling Hassidic concepts, ultimately comparing sexual union to a union with god. In traditional Jewish mysticism women were excluded from the conversation around sex and gender. Sex was a way for men to achieve *devekut/yihud* through emulating the relationship of the sefirot and also clinging to one's wife as one should cling to god. Popular and anti-intellectual Hassidism emphasized the physical bodily experiences and interpersonal actions as a way for all men, not just for a learned elite like in previous Jewish mysticisms, to reach spiritual fulfillment. Thus, Hassidism's interpretation of *devekut* and *yihud/unio mystica* were a popularized and easily achievable aims for every male. Lesznai followed the traditional understandings of sex as a metaphor for unity with the divine, but added an interpersonal dimension to it through the notions of complementary opposite genders. However, because she defined *szerelem* as being an exclusively female trait, only women could perform this sexual aspect of Jewish mysticism. It was not a direct role reversal however, because *szerelem* was inclusive rather than exclusive, and women could grant men access to god in this way. While she doesn't explicitly compare her gender theory with that of traditional Jewish mysticism, one can infer that she preferred this female vision of being connected to the deity because it truly involves dialogue between whole individuals: intellectual, spiritual, and physical. Lesznai creates her own gender differentiation of two kinds of love and imbues only *szerelem* with the traditional mystical human agency in reaching god. Although Lesznai gets her mystical ideas from Jewish tradition, adopting Judaism's positive view of sexuality and reproduction, for her, to enter the spiritual realms one needs a woman's body, exactly the opposite of Jewish mysticism where women lack spiritual capabilities.

She keeps strongly to Weininger's hypothesis' categories to define man and women through sexuality, but unlike in Weininger's thought where this becomes negative for man and women, satisfaction of the sexual drive and reproduction are connected but are not derogatory for women, only for men who only possess a sexual drive but no reproductive capability. That is, she inverses Weininger's views about emancipated women as an aversion lacking intelligence. Thus, unlike for Weininger, nor sexuality neither reproduction as a climax of sexuality is evil. The sexualized female is not a negative idea (as in Weininger), but essential for spiritual experiences (similar to Jewish mysticism). The opposition within the gender binary does not create a battle between the sexes (as in Weininger) but promotes cooperation, as men need the female for their

spiritual experiences, and vice versa. The sexes do not fight but cooperate in order to experiences the spiritual (similar to Jewish mysticism). Therefore, woman and men are not in a perpetual state of hostility with each other. Further, Lesznai's alludes to Weininger's typology of sex and gender, but she does emancipate her woman from the patriarchy by creating an antithesis to the patriarchal ideology. She does reaffirm the essentialist-biological definition of sex and gender, but via her antitheses she criticizes it at the same time. Just like Weininger, she adopts the simultaneous raise and humiliation for sex/gender, but for her not woman but man is inferior and spirituality dependent on women. Thus, her gender construction through patriarchal Weininger's notions is not in accordance but in opposition to them. His sexual difference and battle are made into her sexual difference and cooperation. In other words, she works within the patriarchal structure of female difference and biological definition of gender so popularized by Weininger's 'scientific' theory, but she reverses the gender hierarchy turning Jewish mysticism's and Weininger's gender binarism on its head. She has an empowering view of womanhood where the female body is a source of a key spiritual capability.

## Conclusion

The article discussed the influence of Weininger and Jewish mysticism on Lesznai's gender understanding, and how she reimagined them in ways that center female traits and experiences. Through the concept of dialogue, she reframed the kabbalistic theory of "sex as a gate to god" as an interpersonal notion, where the dialogue between woman and man, is essential. Lesznai's gender theory clearly displays influences of Weininger's gender binarism and Jewish mystical ideas rooted in Hassidic mysticism popularized by Buber. Her theory centers on the word love that she defined as erotic female love: one, the only way in which women can connect with god and achieve *union mystica*; and two, the only way in which men, through the help of women, can connect with god. Lesznai claimed that the female physical and sexual experience of the divine is more powerful than the male intellectual or religious experience of god because it comes from an emotional-physical dialogue with another (and opposite) person, not a solitary act. She further rationalized the superiority of female love over male love because the female physical and sexual experience of the higher power produces new life (birthing), whereas the male experience of god is self-serving. In her gender theory she avoids the dangers of other difference feminisms because

she puts women in the power role by giving them epistemological, experiential, and spiritual privileges, advantages, and exclusive abilities.

Lesznai also avoided talking about rights and social norms (the major feminist discourse of the time argued by equality feminists), and in this way her difference feminism lip-serviced the patriarchal status quo by biologically defining women's role, aim and fulfillment in life. By arguing that essential gender differences are innate and by promoting a complementary view of the two genders, she played into the status quo of the time, even if in her epistemological theory she flipped the power dynamics of gender roles. That is, she in accordance with her cultural milieu created theories about the boundaries of gender roles discarding the hostility of Weininger and his time towards women, but still used familiar traditional assumptions to describe them. In other words, Lesznai still adopted the popular idea of masculinity-femininity on an antithetical scale in every human, where women and man are abstracted to an essence that defines their role. Thus, her texts mobilized antipatriarchal gender role understandings among female writers, who experimented in writing with the relationship between the female and male, destabilizing Weininger's misogyny and construction of femininity (Coffman, 2018: 4). In this way, her writing was serving a feminist purpose, even if privately, as she engaged with sexual theories and inversed the gendered power relationship, elevating femininity specifically because of biological determinism of reproduction, and challenged the patriarchy by claims that men are incapable of ultimate creativity.

Hungarian scholars studying Lesznai have acknowledged that Jewish mysticism was a major source for her ideas. Nevertheless, none of them systematically analyzed these trends. As the contemporary Hungarian literature scholar, Szilágyi states, "the influence of Jewish mysticism and Buber on Hungarian intellectual history was much stronger than it is known today" (Szilágyi 2009: 140). Vezér also claims that Jewish mysticism influenced Lesznai, and György Fehér mentions in his recent study that some of Lesznai's thought resembles Scholem's discussion of Luria in his book on Jewish mysticism (Fehér 2007). Lesznai herself says in a letter to Aladár Komlós (1892-1980): "I have read a lot about Kabbalah and the Zohar, and nothing attracts me more, I do not feel at home anywhere more than in Jewish mysticism." (Török 2010: 245). Additionally, she reflects in her diary on the conversations about *szerelem* she had with her friend

Georg Lukacs who was greatly influenced by Buber, especially that Lesznai read about Hassidism via Buber. (Lesznai and Lukacs exchanged letters between 1908 and 1921.

Although throughout her writing Lesznai makes several references to having read Jewish mystical texts, as Erzsébet Vezér (1915-2003) points out, it is undeniable that Lesznai was also exposed by Georg Lukacs and Balázs Béla (1884-1949) to Hindu and Buddhist stories and ideas that were popular at the time. She continued her esoteric discussions within her social circle, whose own ideas were rooted in diverse contexts and sources. Vezér believed that Lesznai's interest in Oriental mysticism was most likely motivated by Lukács (Vezér 1974: 57). Similarly, Györgyi Földes (2009) argued that Hinduism, especially, tantric Hinduism where sexuality accesses one's cosmic nature and where two opposites are united, influenced Lesznai's view of physical love. Ultimately, however, it is impossible to dissect which religious tradition influenced Lesznai most, especially given that mysticisms display similar notions across different religious traditions.

Further, several scholars<sup>18</sup> have used the angle of Lesznai's femaleness as the key to her writing, claiming that there is a female identity ingrained in Lesznai's work and that her work is female writing (*női írás*) that is manifested in her ideas of love-panteism (*szerelmes panteizmus*). In disagreement to these claims, the article shows how Lesznai's exposure to Jewish mysticism and contemporary German-language philosophy were more influential to her work than the suffrage movement or other feminist figures of expressionism and modernism with their obsession of sexuality in the monarchy. She was enthralled by the writings of Buber's Jewish mystical texts, like many secular German-speaking Jewish intellectuals at the time and was also greatly influenced by Weininger's gender theory. These were trendy subjects during the monarchy and post-monarchy period, especially among secular and acculturated Jewish intellectuals like her who had roots in Vienna (where she lived between 1919-1930), Budapest (where she lived between 1930-1939) and the countryside of Hungary (where she was born and raised between 1885-1919) simultaneously. She combined these trends in her thinking about sexuality and gender, so her conclusions were more the result of synthesis and reimagining than the product of a larger feminist movement, even if it is hard to decipher which source had the most impact on her work. Through analyzing Weininger's, Buber's Jewish mystical influences on her gender theory, the article

showed how Lesznai used the mystical experience of sex as a woman-led gender dialogue for empowerment. In this way, her gender theory reverses the hierarchy of the male-female and is articulated in religious-mystical language.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Such groups included the *Nyugat* [West] journal (1908-1941) where she published her first poems, and the *Vasárnapi kör* [Sunday Circle] (1915-18) where she gained the friendship of Georg Lukács (1885-1971) and Béla Balázs (1884-1949). Through her second husband, Oszkár Jászi (1875-1857), she became affiliated with the progressive journal *Huszadik Század* [Twentieth Century] (1900-1919).

<sup>2</sup> Some feminist fought to win voting rights for women and eradicate the social difference that exists between man and woman. Equality feminists reacted against the female-specific laws of the time that were based on the idea that women have natural differences from men that go beyond biological difference, such as intellectual, rational, artistic, and spiritual capacity and they argued against the idea that women's natural differences prevented them from exercising certain rights. First wave feminism raised “consciousness” (Barett 1987: 32) to gain recognition of the collective understanding of women's experiences taking the specific female condition into account (Louis 2005: 68). Lesznai did not situate herself within the discussion of suffrage and did not participate in any official or public position in the feminist movement. She was interested in individual spirituality but not in its social implications or the socio-political-legal position of women.

<sup>3</sup> As Földes Györgyi has done in her article “‘Hogy engem lássál nézd meg kedves a kertet:’ A női én és a metafizikai én Lesznai Anna lírájában.” In edited by Varga Virág and Zsávolya Zoltán, *Nő, Tükör, Írás: Értelmezések a 20. Század első felének női irodalmáról* (Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2009), 347-369.

<sup>4</sup> She was a Hungarian female writer of Jewish descent who was famous for her open eroticism in her writings.

<sup>5</sup> All translations of Anna Lesznai, Éva Karády, Petra Török, Erzsébet Vezér are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> There were other female Jewish writers in Hungary at the time, but only Lesznai created a complex, albeit unsystematic, notion of love influenced by Jewish and popular notions of gender in her private writings, and, thus, contributed to difference feminism of the era. Though most of her feminist thought is contained in her private personal writings (that were largely private until their publication in 1980), she contributed to the feminist conversation at the time via her correspondence and dialogues with key intellectual figures, and with her presence and influence in the central intellectual and artistic circles mentioned above.

<sup>7</sup> Her gender theory is from the pre-nineteen thirties, while her later love theory is from the nineteen thirties and forties and lacks the esoteric mysticism of the earlier version.

<sup>8</sup> His writings on Hassidism include: *The Tales of Rabbi Nachman (Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman)*, 1906. *The Legend of the Baal Shem (Die Legende des Baal Schem)* 1908. *My Path to Hasidism. Recollections Mein Weg zum Chassidismus. Erinnerungen* 1918. *The Great Maggid and his Succession (Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge)* 1922.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud's influences are also somewhat visible in Lesznai's writings, but the limits of this paper do not allow to explore this aspect. Freud also wrote about eros, the sexual drive, and love in his *On the psychopathology of everyday life* (1901) or in *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego* (1921). Freud also read Weininger's popular book in its dissertation stage.

<sup>10</sup> Weininger engages with Jewishness too, but the limits of the paper do not allow this aspect of his book to be analyzed here.

<sup>11</sup> Leng argues that the public debate was preoccupied with the question about what and who is a woman, her rights, place and being, that peaked from the 1880ies to WWI in Central Europe. As a part of the debate sexology emerged as well that discussed sexual differences defining women by their maternal capacities and associated qualities of love and scientifically proving the necessity of the hierarchy of the sexes (Leng 2014:227). Weininger's book entered this public debate at its height with the new idea of "innumerable gradations, or 'intermediate sexual forms'" (Weininger 2005: 13). Moreover, Weininger's misogynistic theory tried to dominate the debate with quite some success (Schwartz 2005: 347).

<sup>12</sup> He was a Marxist philosopher, similar to Lesznai, from a secular affluent Jewish background. He and Lesznai were lifelong friends. They were part of different progressive intellectual and artistic circles at the time in Budapest, most notably the Sunday Circle (Vasárnapi Kör), that Lukacs lead.

<sup>13</sup> She equates gender and sex and has a bipolar biological definition of them.

<sup>14</sup> The central idea of her understanding of dialogue could also originates in the thought of Martin Buber's philosophy of "I and Thou" (Buber 2010), but the limits of this paper do not allow to explore this idea. For Buber the "I" can only get to know the "I" through the "Thou" in dialogue, though dialogism was prevalent in modernist circles otherwise as well. In Buber's view, one cannot exist in a solipsistic universe and human relationships are necessary for human self-discovery. To this end, dialogue "implies turning toward the other, regarding the other as the very one he or she is" (Moore 1996: 105). Through the relationship to the other, one not only gets to know oneself, but also discovers deeper essences about life and the transcendental. In Lesznai's thought, the "I" is female, the "Thou" is male, and the subjects are opposite and complementary in nature, interact through dialogue. They turn to each other in order to discover themselves as woman and man. Gender dialogue becomes the structure of the process of self-discovery and fulfillment of one's spiritual potential.

<sup>15</sup> Lesznai does not address at all Weininger's view on Jews and Judaism or his influence on the Nazi propaganda. Weininger's Jew as the feminine other reverberating racist conservative German characterization of the Jew is completely missing from Lesznai. That is, she does not reflect on the pro-aryan polemics of sexuality of Weininger, only on his anti-feminism and even that she does clandestine.

<sup>16</sup> Buber in his book, *Hasidism and the Modern Man* provides ample evidence for this argument. Already Gershom Scholem has claimed that Buber's view of Hassidism is romantically and emotionally based (Scholem: 1974; 2012: 15)

<sup>17</sup> Weininger hypothesized that homosexuality is an outcome of one's strong masculinity or femininity and that human sexuality is on the borderline of bisexuality. For Weininger (and Freud) bisexuality and androgyny were key points of the debate of sexuality. (Helt, 2016:116)

<sup>18</sup> Fábri, Anna. *'A szép tiltott táj felé' a Magyar írónők története két századforduló között (1795-1905)* (Kortárs Kiadó, 1996). Jéga-Szabó, Krisztina. "'Csak a kezdet és nincs vég,' a történeti idő konstrukciója Lesznai Anna Kezdetben volt a kert című regényében." *academia.edu*, [https://www.academia.edu/27579201/Csak\\_a\\_kezdet\\_és\\_nincs\\_vég\\_a\\_történeti\\_idő\\_konstrukciója\\_Lesznai\\_Anna\\_Kezdetben\\_volt\\_a\\_kert\\_című\\_regényében](https://www.academia.edu/27579201/Csak_a_kezdet_és_nincs_vég_a_történeti_idő_konstrukciója_Lesznai_Anna_Kezdetben_volt_a_kert_című_regényében). Zsáányi, Edit: Tű és a Toll." *Irodalom Történet* 37/87 (2006): 119-127.