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REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE IDENTITY: CONTEMPORARY LATVIAN PROSE AND FEMALE LITERARY TRADITION

Anotacija
Nagrinėjant moterų kovą dėl tapatybės, identifikuoti du veiksniai kaip išskirtiniai moteriški – motinos–dukters ir šeiminio gyvenimo santykiai. Šie subjektyvūs veiksniai, kurių pirminiai interesai yra asmeniniai, ir poveikio šaltiniai, bet ne išorinis aktyvumas būdingas ne tik dabartinei Latvijos moterų prozai, bet ir ankstesnių kartų Latvijos moterų rašytojų kūrybai. Šitaip Latvijos moterų–autorių pasakotojai demonstruoja, kad moterų savimonė kyla iš problemiškos asmeninės aplinkos, bet ne iš visuomeninio gyvenimo. Ši moterų proza taip pat yra būtent moteriško pasaulio supratimo, ryšio tarp rašytojos gyvenimo patyrimų ir jos meno vertinimo rezultatas. Sutelkiant dėmesį į Latvijos moterų–autorių moteriškasias tradicijas, galima spręsti, kad tai kyla ne iš palaikymo ar lojalumo, kurį moterys rašytojos gali įrašti viena kita, bet greičiausiai dėl užtikrintumo ir tęstinumo.

PAGRINDINIAI ŽODZIAI: moterys rašytojos, feministinės literatūros teorija, šeimyniškumas, motinos ir dukters santykiai, moters kūnas.

Abstract
Examining the female struggle for identity, two of the subject matters are identified that are taken to be the distinctively feminine subject matters – the world of domesticity and mother-daughter relations. Those subject matters, in which personal and affection issues and not external activism are the primary interests, repeatedly appear not only in contemporary Latvian women’s prose, but also in prose of Latvian women writers of previous gen-
eration. Thus the narrators of Latvian women writers’ demonstrate that a woman’s sense of self derives from the problematic private sphere and not public life. Regarding that women’s prose also arise from a specifically female view of the world, the connection between writer’s lived experience and her art is analyzed. Focusing on the importance of the female tradition for Latvian women writers, it is stressed that it comes not from support or loyalty that women writers may have felt for each other but rather from confidence and continuity.

KEY WORDS: women writers, feminist literary theory, domesticity, mother-daughter relationship, woman’s body.

There is a strong tradition of female writers in Latvian literature that begins in the end of the 19th century with Aspazija (1865–1943), Anna Brigadere (1861–1933), Ivande Kaija (1876–1942), Zenta Maurina (1897–1978), Vilma Delle (1892–1980), Austra Krauze – Ozolina (1890–1941), Elina Zalite (1898–1955), to name a few, and in contemporary Latvian literature women writers dominate: Gundega Repse (1960), Andra Neiburga (1957), Nora Ikstena (1969), Laima Muktpavola (1962) Inga Abele (1972), Ilze Jansone (1982), Inga Zolude (1982) and others. What is the difference of women’s writing? What does it matter that many of the great writers have been women? What did it matter to literature? Are women presented differently in texts written by women? Those and other questions are explored by feminist literary theory that offers strategies for analyzing texts to emphasize issues related to gender and sexuality.

Feminist literary theory also maintains that women’s reading is of consequence. Although the effort to propose a definition of feminist literary theory threatens to simplify what is complex, feminist literary theories are theories of feminists struggling against masculinism and among themselves over the meanings of literature, reading, and feminism (Rooney, 2006). One of the forms that this struggle takes is the interrogation of tradition. Considering the multiplicity of feminist literary theory it has to be noted that feminist interrogation of literary canons and tradition has taken multiple forms: some critics have approached the problem by looking for marginalized or forgotten women writers in literary history in order to include them in literary canon, others have proposed counter-canons (Showalter 1985); yet others have mounted a sharp critique of the very notion of the tradition (Eagleton 1989). Yet, all agree that the female writers are more easily to be submerged in the river of literary history.

1 Mary Eagleton writes: “To talk of the female tradition of writing can reinforce the canonical view which looks upon literary history as a continuum of significant names.
Women have different stories to tell from their male counterparts and contemporaries. Linda Anderson notes that the woman writer, because she inherits “a plot which is not her own,” must discover “ways of contesting her own silencing” (Werlock 2000, 9), and one of the ways to challenge this silencing is using their own experience as a source of art. The subject matters in literature written by women writers that are perceived as distinctively feminine are, for example, the world of domesticity; the special experiences of gestation, giving birth, and nurturing; mother-daughter and woman-woman relations, etc. Benjamin M. Sutcliffe in “The Prose of Life. Russian Women Writers from Khrushcev to Putin” identifies five major interrelated topics in prose by Russian women authors from 1960s to 2000 as work, love, abortion, rape and cult of motherhood. Those are subject matters in which personal and affectional issues, and not external activism, are the primary interests (Sutcliffe 2009). Thus characters that women writers inscribe in their prose demonstrate that a woman’s sense of self derives from the problematic private sphere and not public life. The aim of the paper is to examine the female struggle for identity in contemporary Latvian women’s prose by close reading of texts and analyzing two of the subject matters that are taken to be the distinctively feminine – the world of domesticity and mother-daughter relations. Analyzing those themes as they appear in contemporary Latvian women’s prose, texts of Andra Neiburga, Gundega Repše, Nora Ikstena and Inga Abele. Also the interrelationships between contemporary Latvian women writers and women writers of previous generations, Regina Ezera, one of the most acclaimed Latvian women writers in the Soviet period and Latvian woman writer Ilze Skipsna writing in exile, are revealed.

Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own” (1929) can be considered one of the first texts of feminist literary theory. Woolf’s observation that, “if we are women, we look in past through our mothers,” in particular, strongly influenced Anglo-American feminist critics in search for female literary tradition in history, emphasizing that women writers look into past through their literary mothers (Woolf 2005). During the late 1960s and throughout 1970s works about women writers in English and American
literatures were published, situating writers into a context of female literary tradition. Those books are also considered founding texts in feminist literary theory: Mary Ellmann’s “Thinking About Women” (1968), Patricia Mayer Spack’s “The Female Imagination” 1975, Ellen Moers “Literary Women” (1976), Elaine Showalter’s “A Literature of Their Own” (1977), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “The Madwoman in the Attic” (1979). Building on the earlier work of Woolf, those works reveal the affinity, which women writers have felt for each other, and also the way the writing of one woman writer might have prepared the ground for another.

Feminist literary critic Ellen Moers, thinking about female tradition in literature, comes to a decision that to use the word ‘solidarity’ of women, sharing this tradition, would be misleading, for writing women have never felt much of a sentimental loyalty to their own kind – quite the contrary, Moers offers examples where women writers have been unsparing critics of each others work. However, the resource that women writers drew from the possession of their own tradition was not loyalty but confidence (Moers, 1977). In their critical trilogy “No Man’s Land” (1988–1994) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar describes the ways that in the twentieth century women artists were not only enabled but also daunted by the example of great female precursors, and how they responded with mingled feelings of rivalry and anxiety (Gilbert, Gubar 1994). However, Gilbert in her latest book brings to a point that almost all of the women writers are notably aware that they inhabit a canon (or continent or city) of literary women, “a corporate body about which they may have positive or negative feelings but about which they always have feelings.” (Gilbert, 2011)

Literary historian Elaine Showalter, acknowledged as one of the most important feminist critics in America, in her work “A Literature of Their Own” (1977), writing the history of a tradition among women writers, focused on rediscovery of lost and forgotten writers (Showalter, 1999), and Showalter’s latest work, the monograph “A Jury of Their Peers: American women writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx” (2009), the first comprehensive history of American women writers from 1650 to the present, emphasizes the necessity of writing women’s literary history that according to Showalter do not depend on the discovery of a great unique genius, but on “the establishment of the continuity and legitimacy of women’s writing as a form of art” (Showalter 1999, xxxiii). Female liter-
ary tradition depends on confidence and continuity. Those characteristics can be found also in recurring images, metaphors, themes and plots that emerge from women’s social and literary experience, subject matters that are distinctively feminine.

The World of Domesticity in Women’s Prose

The everyday is a concept that consistently is linked to women and female tasks, such as caring for others and maintaining a household. Everyday tasks that woman performs is a part of her daily life, however, usually in describing those tasks the negative adjectives such as: petty, small-scale, mundane, exhausting, repetitive are used. Contemporary Latvian women writers use depictions of domesticity as a way of discussing several different problems including how women’s lives differ from those of men’s, as well as forming strong bonds among women.

Andra Neiburga’s short story “Push, Push” (2004) is a story about a woman who lives in remote countryside taking care of her old grandfather, alone dealing with the everyday realities of life. The story’s plot consists of woman’s walk to the store-on-wheels and back home. It is the world of domesticity that occupies most of woman’s life and thoughts. Woman’s day in Neiburga’s story is composed by small tasks of everyday that take up all her time leaving her with no time for ‘higher’ aspirations: “The floors. The dishes. Take the laundry down. Hang the laundry up. Put what’s dry into the wardrobe. The floor again. When did that happen?” (Neiburga 2004). The everyday in Neiburga’s story is depicted as soul-killing realm of the material, crass, and insensitive: “Others make art, write music, play theater, teach but you (meaning, I) push a wheelbarrow. Go ahead, honey, push. With your higher almafuckingmater, education. Life straps you down. If you kick too much, the strings will simply get tighter. So you better relax.” (Neiburga 2004) Thus everyday life in the story not only refers to daily life but also to a corrosive banality threatening the higher aspirations of spiritual or intellectual life. The narrator wants to reconcile with the given situation and intonation that dominates her monologue is full of bravado, however, it doesn’t sound as completely true because her everyday life is life’s necessity. There is the feeling of existential absurdity inscribed in the story: modern woman is punished with pushing a wheelbarrow through the beach sand (on her way back from the store-on-wheels), a tedious oc-
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cupation just like everyday tasks that are determined by basic needs of a human being – food, security, warmth, sex. The next level is connected with traditional feminine values – relationships, family, children, – this is the level that protagonist longs for the most: “A warm body next to you. So you can just stretch out your arm and touch and feel he’s there. There. Warm and breathing. Yours. Muttering something in his sleep. Feeling you are there and hugging you. Throwing a heavy arm around you. Or a leg, Doesn’t matter. Perhaps that’s where the meaning is.” (Neiburga 2004). Thus, Neiburga tells a story about woman who amidst mundane tasks of everyday life yearns not for higher intellectual and spiritual life, but for relationship.

Depictions of everyday life in the story are used also as an arena for talking about gendered quotidian existence. The narrator is struggling with her everyday in the country alone: “No guy? No. So what? I can manage. My hands are all cut up – see, here with a knife, here with an axe. And this came from that fucking metal broomstick that my ex left broken and sharp as a sword, I stumbled, good thing didn’t slash my belly wide open.” (Neiburga 2004) Woman besides washing, cleaning, cooking, gardening, preserving, etc. has to do all manly work in the house, too, because men are unavailable. In Regina Ezera’s novel “The Well” (1972) a young woman lives in a country house with her two children and mother-in-law, her husband is imprisoned for manslaughter. When the mechanism of the well is broken, Laura is the one who fixes it. Inta Ezergailis writing about Ezera’s prose, notices that men are often absent in her novels and stories either because they have been killed in World War II or drafted by the German forces and gone abroad, men have died, have divorced or abandoned their wives, the reasons constitute “a veritable catalog of social problems, new and inherited” (Ezergailis 1997). However, the narrator in Neiburga’s story had also experienced that having a man around can mean that she will have to take care of him too: “Don’t expect that a man will make it easy for you – at least that much I have learned from life.” (Neiburga 2004) It is also a story about men that are physically present but not really available to their wives.

Such situation is also inscribed in Inga Abele’s story “Marja is gone” (2004) where a woman lives with her family, husband and four children, in countryside dealing with tasks of everyday life. Abele, by depicting
domestic life of the narrator, shows how men and women’s lives differ. The narrator is a chemist with highest education who has given up her aspirations in order to follow her husband, forester, to the countryside, and while woman feels imprisoned in her tasks of everyday, her husband in the same situation has experience a greater freedom because he spends most of his time in his work as a forester leaving domestic tasks to his wife, who admits: “Yes, the forest is beautiful, but I haven’t really seen it, I only run in there to get berries... I live in the middle of a forest but I never have time to go to the forest, never like that man, my husband who spends there whole days – oh, happy he!” (Abele, 2004, 191) The narrator of the story is busy with taking care of her four children, garden and animals, while her husband spends most of the time outside the house, and workmen that repair the house snigger about his impracticality because the wife is the one who takes care of the farm.

In Ezera’s novel “Smouldering Fire” (1977) a similar situation is inscribed when on Sunday, while husband with his friends leaves to the woods to haunt for the whole day, wife Ritma, on her only day off from work, is left with all the housework that has to be done: washing laundry, cleaning, cooking: “A holiday for everyone – only not for her, no never for her... As though it ever occurred ever so briefly to any of them what she was thinking and feeling, what she desired and longed for. As though she were just a machine...” (Ezera 1977, 118) Ritma feels resentment in her household of husband and sons, similarly as the narrator in Abeles story “Marja is gone” who confesses that her feelings had become rare and comfortably usable like linen towels (Abele 2004).

However, for women the close circle of everyday also means the circle of their life. When in the end of Abele’s story “Marja is gone” the narrator realizes that she is pregnant with her fifth child, all her previous thoughts of misery and dissatisfaction are followed by feelings of content about the power given only to women – to decide “who will be born and who won’t... Those short moments taken together, in the whole life meant maybe couple of minutes, but they determined everything.” (Abele 2004, 198) Gilber and Gubar, writing about English literature, notices that the overlapping spaces of home and private life delineate woman as man’s fallible foil, limited to ‘natural’ talents to fornication and procreation. However, they conclude that women are also the prime movers of modernity.
as they maintain an undervalued yet key domestic arena within which the individual develops (Gilbert, Gubar 1979).

Latvian literary critic Ieva Dubina writes that Latvian women writers of the 21st century perceive literary work not only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but also in connection with realities of life about which the text reflects, simultaneously influencing, deforming and changing it (Dubina 2007, 73). Women’s prose arises from a specifically female view of the world, and women writers taking everyday as an artistic resource depict how daily life for women differs from that of men, as well as draw attention to the everyday tasks that women perform and that usually are invisible because of their ordinariness, and by doing that Latvian women writers inscribe women and their experience in culture.

M o t h e r s a n d D a u g h t e r s

In Latvia during 1990s several texts by women writers were published that included both elements of autobiography and mother-daughter relationship representations, for example, Agate Nesaule “Woman in Amber” (1995); Vizma BelSevica “Bille” (1992); Dagmara Kimele, Gunta Strautmane “Asja” (1996); Margita Gutmane “Letters to Mother” (1998), and others. Those literary texts, written from daughters’ perspective, explore daughters’ traumatic experiences in relation to their mothers, and in those texts mother hating and mother blaming dominates. Showalter writes that women’s literature dealing with ‘matrophobia’ (‘matrophobia being not the fear of one’s mother or motherhood but the “fear of becoming one’s mother” (Rich 1986, 235)) – is only a metaphor for hating oneself and that female literature has to go beyond this fear to a quest for the mother. Theories and beliefs about women’s subjectivity and how it is developed through relationships between mothers and daughters is founded on a basic belief that women are predisposed to fight and conflict with one another for power and control over their relationship. Such conflicts are the result of deep psychological processes by which mothers and daughters negotiate their relationship and identities. The most salient characteristic of this relationship is entangling subjectivities between mother and daughter, which blur the boundaries between their identities. These entangling subjectivities result in many deep feelings of guilt, responsibility, devotion, confusion, affection, and anger. As Adrienne Rich writes, it is easier to
hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her: “But where a mother is hated to the point of ‘matrophobia’ there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely.” (Rich, 235) The absence of male lead women in prose by Latvian women writers toward forming bonds among themselves, and mother-daughter relationship is the central theme in two of Nora Ikstena’s novels “A Celebration of Life” (1998) and “The Education of the Virgin” (2001), it is also an important theme in Gundega Repse’s novels “Red” (1998) and “Thumbelina” (2000).

In Ikstena’s novel “A Celebration of Life” mother had been absent from her daughter’s life, and memories about time that they have spent together are painful because in them mother’s absence dominates. Mother, Eleonora, in the novel had abandoned her daughter Helena for unknown reasons, and Helena is so deeply hurt that she continues to carry the abandonment with her, however, for Ikstena it is important to inscribe in the text that without the connection to mother, daughter can’t find herself and her place in the world: “Helena didn’t feel like a continuation that somebody will continue one day. Helena was like a trimmed branch that somebody was keeping in a jar of water, engrafting upon it different other branches, and waiting what will turn out. Maybe this was the moment to plant herself into ground where completely different laws of growing would be discovered.” (Ikstena 1998) Eleonora’s funeral turns into a celebration of Eleonora’s life, and through different stories that seven people who have been important in her life, tell, Helena is able to find and get to know her mother.

Mother in feminist theory is also defined as daughter’s first identity, pointing out that the connection between mother and daughter never cease to exist, but continues because of their shared gender identity (Gardiner 1985). French feminist Luce Irigaray, appealing to women to bring to light the unacknowledged mark women have left on history, to create alternative cultural representations of women, to describe the connection between different generations of women, writes: “Each of us has a female family tree: we have a mother, a maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, we have daughters. (..) Let us try to situate ourselves within that female genealogy so that we can win and hold on to our identity. Let us not forget, moreover, that we already have a history, that certain women, despite all the cultural obstacles, have made their mark upon history and
all too often have been forgotten by us.” (Whitford 2004, 34). While it has been assumed that separating from mother is necessary to become an individual subject, this assumption makes it difficult both for daughters to recognize mothers as subjects and for mothers to regard themselves as subjects. Following Irigaray’s theoretical approach with the key concept of female genealogy as an important site for female subject formation, the importance of mother-daughter bond needs to be valorized. When Helena in Ikstena’s novel “A Celebration of Life” looks at her dead mother’s face in the mirror, she for the first time discovers that they both look alike. Visual likeness is the starting point for writing her female genealogy: “They were alike, and it came as a surprise to Helena. And she really felt like a plant that has been cultivated indoors in a pot of peat and just now, at this exact moment has been planted into ground. Fragile netting of roots was breaking and splitting and painfully joining with soil... She will find herself, grow into and find herself, because maybe she will find Eleonora (...).” (Ikstena 1998, 18) Through daughter’s looking for the mother who had abandoned her, who had been absent in daughter’s life, Ikstena inscribes in the novel the importance of finding the mother in order for daughter to find herself.

The narrator and daughter in Gundega Repše’s novel “Red” is also looking for herself when searching for her mother Cecilija and listening to the stories that different people have to tell about her. Basing her identity in men of her life – her husband, her lover, and her friend, she had been running away from herself for the past eight years because: “Without the mother and Olimpija (the grandmother) I don’t have a ground underneath my feet. I feel like a synthetic accident that once had naively thought to be a honeyed, heavy pollen.” (Repše 1998, 114) Having lost both her mother and her grandmother, the narrator feels that she has also lost her fertility, the feeling that she is “a honeyed, heavy pollen”. That’s why it is important for her to return back to a place where she comes from; to a country and a town she has left and tried to forget not to feel the lack. During her journey the daughter finds a new connection with her mother and grandmother through valorizing their stories.

In another Ikstena’s novel “The Education of the Virgin” a daughter Asnate travels to a remote countryside in Latvia to look for herself. When Asnate gets off the train in the middle of a forest, the woman in charge of
the train station asks what is she looking for here, and Asnate replies that she is searching for meaning. Asnate’s journey is a journey towards the meaning of life which in the novel is inscribed as searching for the connections between her own story and stories of her mother and grandmother. Ikstena in the novel weaves three stories simultaneously: story of Asnate, woman of today, who is looking for her female genealogy, story of Asnate’s mother Astrida, a talented doctor in the Soviet times, and story of Asnate’s grandmother Arija, a young wife in Latvia during 1930s. Also Repse in her novel “Thumbelina” tells three stories belonging to three different women in one family: there is Stella’s, who is a daughter and granddaughter, story, her mother’s, who is a writer, story, and her grandmother’s story of her life in deportation in Siberia. Thus through search for female genealogies writers Ikstena and Repse also tell women’s history of 20th century Latvia and looking for herself for a female protagonist in their texts also means knowing her past, her history in connection to women in her family.

Mother-daughter relationship both as a search for mother and conflict between mother and daughter is important also in the prose of Latvian women writers of previous generation, for example, Ezera in “Bella’s story” from the short story collection “By Quiet Waters” (1987) depicts a dominating mother that keeps her grown-up daughter in a short leash, dominating the relationship by manipulating the sense of guilt and responsibility, while in Ezera’s novel “Moonless Night” (1971) Ezera shows mother-daughter relationship that is characterized by a strong wordless bond.

Latvian exile writer, Ilze Skipsna, in the novel “Beyond the Seventh Bridge” (1965) inscribes mother-daughter relationship in connection to exile problematic. The daughter is trying to run away from her mother, however, running away from her mother is only as a metaphor for running away from herself. Mother is daughter’s connection to her past — home, homeland and childhood, the connection that simultaneously doesn’t allow assimilating in the new country absolutely necessary for the daughter to live a full life in present. When the daughter wonders, who will be the one to help her find her true identity, the first person that comes to her mind is her mother. Thus the daughter recognizes that ties with her past could be tied only through her mother.

According to Irigaray, in order to give a new notional content to mother-daughter relationship, mother should be represented as a mother and
as a woman at the same time. What is important – in order for daughter to feel secure and stable in the world – she has to know her mother and her mother’s world; she has to take over her mother’s experience and knowledge (Jones 1985). Remembering not just the mother – child dyad, but also the mother by herself, for herself can be found in Skipsna’s short story “Conception” which takes place in mother’s funeral morning. Through mother-daughter communion in the story, daughter’s identity is found and connection with previous generations is strengthened as well. By inheriting mother’s knowledge that one needs to laugh while kneading bread dough so that dough joyfully rises, daughter finds a channel to “the generations of bread laughs where mothers and daughters could meet anew” (Skipsna 2003). Also Ikstena’s novel “A Celebration of Life” and Repse’s novel “Red” daughter’s search for mother in connected to funeral rites when daughter starts her journey towards her identity through looking for female genealogy after mother’s death feeling that without her female genealogy – her beginnings and her own prehistory, a woman is atomized in the masculine society.

Mother-daughter relationships in the texts by Latvian women writers are inscribed as ambivalent – either mothers have abandoned their daughters (Eleonora in Ikstena’s novels “A Celebration of Life”, “The Education of the Virgin”), died in daughter’s childhood (Repse’s “Red”), they are present but unavailable (Stella’s mother in Repses “Thumbelina”), or dominating and all-knowing (Ezera “Bella’s story”, Skipsna “Beyond the Seventh Bridge”). However, dramatizing the conflict between mother and daughter, in Latvian women’s prose ultimately daughter’s search for her identity through looking for her mother and for her female genealogy through her is revealed.

Female Literary Tradition

The connection between mother-daughter relationship and female literary tradition can be made, as Virginia Woolf has observed by saying that: “If we are women, we look in past through our mothers.” (Woolf 2005) Andra Neiburga in her story “I See Myself” (2004) writes about a young poet meeting an older women writer. When the two women meet, they find that it is impossible for them to communicate; their conversation is meaningless, dissatisfactory and artificial. However, when the young wom-
an leaves, the old one hugs her at the door and through the short physical touch, the only real connection between them happens. The story’s title “I See Myself” signalizes that both women see themselves in each other. The young poet in the loneliness and artificiality of the old writer sees her possible future if she follows her aspirations; and the old one sees her youth in the person of the young poet. Neiburga’s story could also be interpreted as a story about female literary tradition that doesn’t depend on sentiment or loyalty (those feelings are absent from the interaction between the two women writers), but rather on confidence and continuity. Confidence because there is this older woman writer who had followed her talent (As Woolf writes that for the woman writer of today the road was cut many years ago by many famous women, and many more unknown and forgotten (Woolf 2005).) and continuity because there is this younger, aspiring poet, who wants to pursue writing and who also wants to meet the older writer, acknowledging her need for female literary tradition. 

The protagonist, the Author, in Ezera’s novel “Betrayal” (1984) writes letters to a young, aspiring women author Irene. The narrator sees the younger woman as herself and, at the same time, senses her as different. The relationship between the Author and Irena is also characterized through Irena’s acquaintance with Author’s daughter who died in childbirth. After the daughter’s death, her friend Irene becomes like a surrogate daughter to the Author. As Ezergaile points out, the idea about the young writer as her daughter, possibly is Author’s attempt to achieve the unity of both roles: writer’s and mother’s, thus, by writing letters to Irena, Author makes a risky investment in the future of female literary tradition (Ezergailis 1997). However, the Author also sees her young self in Irena: “And suddenly I was overwhelmed by strange, almost unreal feeling that Irena – it is myself.” (Ezera 1984, 96) Both the young poet in Neiburga’s story and young writer Irena in Ezera’s novel are inscribed in the texts as searching for, rather than struggling against their female precursors.

Ikstena has written Regina Ezera’s biography – “Being with Regina” (2007), and the title of Ikstena’s book relates to the title of the Ezera’s novel – “Being” – that she was writing, but never finished, thus speaking about another continuity of female literary tradition. Reflecting on common aspects in their experiences as writers, Ikstena has said that in “Being” she wrote not only about life of another women writer, Regina Ezera,
but also about her own life as a writer: “And not because I dominate the
text, but because there are similar categories or experiences in our lives. I
don’t want to single out the life of a writer as something higher, but there
is certain specificity – the possibility of seeing reality for its own sake have
been taken away from you. All the time you look at reality as a fact that
you will have to recreate in literature.” (Kleins 2007) Ikstena about writing
her novel “The Education of the Virgin” and the energy of the text has
said: “I like Virginia Woolf very much. Or Karen Blixen. Text takes you
energetically. Genius story-tellers! And in “The Education of the Virgin”
I wanted to tell my experience passionlessly. Of course, when you use your
own experience you can’t do it passionless ...” (Kleins 2007) Saying this
Ikstena situates herself in a larger female literary tradition that includes
not only Latvian women writers but also other women writers that she
admire, as well as Ikstena also finds a connection to this female literary
tradition through the fact that she, like other women writers before her,
recreates her lived experience in art.

Inga Ābele writes: “I know only that what I feel. (..) So I have come to
the conclusion that, in my case, woman in the beginning had dwelled in
the text, then this text had re-created the world around her, and in this
world now lives the woman and the texts lives in her.” (Abele 2003, 11)
Abele’s work of documental prose “To the East of the Sun, to the North of
the Earth” (Abele 2006) is written in the form of diary entries and speaks
about writer living in her text. In this work Abele is so honest and so open
that she becomes vulnerable, not being afraid of revealing an image that
would not correspond to the one of an acknowledged writer. Later in an
interview Abele about this work would admit that it is impossible to talk
about a literary ‘I’ in this text, because it is herself and her lived experience
(Repse 2012, 101). Susan Gubar had written that for the artist, the sense
that she is herself the text, means that there is little distance between her
life and her art, and “the attraction of women writers to personal forms
of expression like letters, autobiographies, confessional poetry, diaries,
and journals points up the effect of a life experienced as an art or an art
experienced as a kind of life (..)” (Gubar 1985, 299). French feminist and
writer Helene Cixous emphasizing the connection between woman’s body
and women’s writing had written: „Woman must write her self: must write
about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been
derived away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement…” (Jones 1985, 85). In many prose texts of Latvian women writers the distance between writer’s own experience and her text is diminished, meaning that Latvian women writers experience their bodies as available medium for their art.

Ikstena has said that actually all the literature is about our experience connected to the three most important concepts: life, death and love. Ikstena’s story “Still Life with Death” (2004) is a story about mother-daughter relationship written from daughter’s perspective whose mentally ill mother chokes on a piece of bread and almost dies on her arms. Ikstena in the letter to her friend and literary mentor, writer Dzintars Sodums tells about a similar incident in her own experience: „My mother almost smothered in the arms of my father and I, but in some miraculous way we were able to respire her. Now she partly lives at home and partly in Tvaika Street, that’s how mad house is called here.” (Ceplis 2007, 31) Ikstena in the story “Still Life with Death” has recreated her own experience into prose, and in another letter to Sodums she writes: „You are right – if one writes what one knows, has experienced, then there is no need to hide behind invented corners. Although I must say that I had more joyful heart when I was writing my „pļuktvaserus” (light water), not the “groundwater”.” (Ceplis 2007, 31)

In Regina Ezera’s novels “Smouldering Fire” (1977), “Violence” (1982), and “Betrayal” (1984) dominate such forms of writing as forewords, notes, letters, diaries, reflections, and fragments. In the novel “Betrayal” Ezera has included prototypes and themes from her own experience including such painful events of her life as death of her daughter, but the main theme of the novel is the struggle to find a balance between motherhood and artistry: “Must I be deeply ashamed that I am not an ideal wife because for the ideal wife children come first, while for me, I’m afraid (why do I write “I’m afraid”?), in the first place is my “work” (why do I put it in quotation marks?)” (Ezera 1984, 223) This confession corresponds to Ezera’s own experience as Ikstena in her biographical work about Ezera “Being with Regina” writes:

Thirty eight years young Regina during the day had finished her duties at home (..) in the evening she closes the cell door behind her. Here everything be-
longs only to her – her notes, the book shelf, typewriter (..) so young she already has had so much – two husbands, three children. Full-time writer’s life – publications, books, gatherings, meetings with readers. Full-time family budget life – she is the main earner. Full-time home life – cleaning, cooking, ironing, washing, sewing, taking care of, weeding, preserving etc. (Ikstena 2007, 40)

Thus the Author’s voice in Ezera’s novel “Betrayal” conveys her lived experience. However, Ezera doesn’t give the Author a name in that way also generalizing woman writer’s experience.

Themes that have been important for Latvian women writers of the previous generation also appears in works of contemporary Latvian women writers, and the narrators of texts by Latvian women writers demonstrate that a woman’s sense of self derives from the problematic private sphere and not public life. While everyday and the world of domesticity, concepts that are linked to women, traditionally implies passivity that exists alongside corporeality that in Western culture is connected to women, Latvian women writers use everyday life as an venue for commenting on often overlooked women’s issues, such as absence and indifference of men in women’s lives, gendered nature of quotidian and the importance of everyday life in women’s experiences.

Another theme that reappears in prose by Latvian women writers of different generations is representation of mother-daughter relationship that contains a story of women’s search for her identity. Mother-daughter relationships in the texts by contemporary Latvian women writers, as well as in prose of Latvian women writers from earlier generation, are inscribed as ambivalent, thus dramatizing the conflict between mother and daughter and also revealing woman’s search for herself through searching for her female genealogy.

Orientation on women’s lived experiences that are personal and subjective repeatedly appear in prose by Latvian women writers of different generations. However, while contemporary Latvian women writers continue the thematic concerns of earlier women authors, they do not echo (and if they do then for the most part it is unconsciously) women writers before them or identify with them as a source of inspiration. One of the reasons why the themes that contemporary women writers explore in their prose and that are important for female writers today, have also been the
themes that concerned earlier Latvian women writers, is the sometimes close connection between woman writer’s own experience and her art. Thus importance of the female tradition for Latvian women writers is found not in support or loyalty but in confidence and continuity.

**Literature**


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MOTERŲ TAPATYBĖS REPREZENTACIJA: ŠIUOLAIKINĖ LATVIŲ PROZA IR MOTERŲ LITERATŪRINĖ TRADICIJA

Santrauka

Stipri moterų rašytojų tradicija latvių literatūroje prasidėjo su XX a. pradžia. Latvių moterų prozoje moters tapatybės klausimas yra labai svarbus, tačiau moters tapatybė ir moteriškumas nėra apibrėžtos ir pastovios, bet nuolat kintančios kategorijos. Feministinės literatūros kritikai įžvelgia išankstinį fatalinį nusistatymą. Literatūros istorijoje moterys rašytojos lengvai paskęsta literatūros istorijos upėje, todėl labai svarbu atskleisti moterų literatūrėn tradiciją, įtrauktą į moterų rašytojų pogrupius, kurių narės buvo sąmoningos, pamėgdžiojo ir buvo remiamos ankstesnių moterų rašytojų. Pastarosios savo ruožtu buvo pavyzdys ir emocinė parama savo skaitytojoms ir tėsėjoms.


Latvių moterų rašytojų prozai būdingi keli aspektai: nuslėptų moterų istorijų pasakojimas ir démės asmeninei ir subjektyviai moterų patirtčiai. Taigi, moterys rašytojos rašo apie moteris, kuria savo istoriją (angl. herstory) kaip alternatyvą vyrų istorijai (angl. history), tokiu būdu jrašo moteris į istoriją.