

THE CONTEMPORARY SLOVENE NOVEL AND GENDER IDENTITY

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Gender identity

Gender identity is tightly linked to the question of gender as a phantasm or a performance. These are signposts of important novelties in most recent Slovene novels (1990–2005): the centralization of female literary figures and the new emotivity. This new emotivity is introduced by certain a sincerity and sentimentality which modulate the assertion of un/successful intra/sexual communication with humorous-ironic-parodied distance. At the same time they color the auto-reflexive entanglement of female and male categories with a subtle intellectuality.

This article will consider how the contemporary Slovene novels illustrate the quest for identity and explore the distinction between identity issues and questions of gender identity. Further, it will pose the question of how gender representation in novels compares to gender differentiation in contemporary scholarly discourse. The first part of this essay focuses on scholarly aspects, while the second part brings into view representations of gender identity in contemporary Slovene novels. Let me reflect upon these issues by way of questions, since (gender) identity is essentially defined by questioning and elusiveness. Does gender itself already constitute identity? And if so, which explanation of sex is definitive: sex or gender? Can gender identity studies avoid sexual discrimination? Is it thus better to stress gender differences or, at least in scholarly discourse, try to overcome them?

Theories and definitions of identity are nowadays inextricably linked with gender identity issues. Hence, Judith Butler asserts that it would be wrong to consider identity apart from gender identity.¹ However, the fact that a person can be identified only when being ascribed gender according to conventional standards of social and gender clarity challenges this distinction. Consequently, the following is called into question: the extent to which the methods of social gender formation and division constitute a person's identity, internal balance,

¹ Judith Butler, *Težave s spolom: feminizem in subverzija identitete*, trans. Suzana Tratnik, Lambda 19 (Ljubljana: ŠKUC, 2001) 28.

and self-awareness. Is identity a normative ideal or rather an expression of experience?

The identity of an individual is essentially determined by gender and since gender itself already constitutes identity, gender identity is subject not only to sexual and racial differences but also to ethnic and cultural ones. But application of differences generates uncertainties: is a difference the subject of (gender) identity studies or a prerequisite for recognition? Should difference be understood as something definite, existing, and present in history and therefore considered as theoretical background? In *A History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault underlines the importance of effect and not origin in the framework of gender identity. Gender is thus not a given essential category but rather a product of discourse. Difference should be regarded as a prerequisite for recognition, "undefinable on its own, because the difference is not something that should be recognized but rather identified as an everlasting process."²

The claim that gender is biologically determined still dominates contemporary social reality, although scholarly discourse tries to overcome that notion on different levels. Upholding biological determination at the heart of gender studies is a means of gender discrimination, which marked social systems in the past. Segregation of people on the basis of biological determination is the central topic of sex. The term "sex" refers exclusively to biological differences, according to which a human being is defined as female or male. This duality is also a vital part of social gender, which, however, is not a mere reflection of biological sex. Gender therefore constitutes a term for distinguishing social differences and learned relationships between men and women, including the examination of roles, responsibilities, restraints, and needs of all kinds in the given social context.

The gradual shifting of focus from "women's" to identity issues reformulates the understanding of gender that is today not only characteristic of the feminist and post-feminist movements, but also of philosophical, sociological, anthropological, cultural, and psychological discourse, or a sort of eclectic collection of them all. What they all have in common is a dilemma arising from a simple question in contemporary

² Michel Foucault, *Zgodovina seksualnosti 2: Uporaba ugodij*, trans. Brane Mozetič, Lambda 11 (Ljubljana: ŠKUC 1998).

identity studies: How many genders are there? The most common answer—two—is a reflection of biological theory,³ which determines the actual gender on the basis of biological evidence. Already at the beginning of twentieth century biological sex was considered a constitutive and comparative part of social gender, opening up the following issues: Is gender derived from biological sex? Is gender an imitation of sex? Can we really talk about “given” sex and “given” gender without previously defining their origins and characteristics? These questions are answered by the difference between sex and gender, whose primary purpose was to contest the principle biology-is-fate. Butler upholds the difference between sex and gender by defining gender as social construct—that is, not merely and automatically derived from sex. Gender does not represent a fixed identity in a certain time and space and it therefore can not be a mere reflection of sex, the binary aspect of which also becomes irrelevant.

Post-feminist theory on gender, identity, and the “other” inherited from feminism the issue of whether there are one, two, or three sexes. Since further reflection upon the subject is going to comprise the binary aspect as a normative gender system in Western societies, a different classification of sexes varying from five to ten categories will be explained. The highest number of categories (ten) derives from theories which take into consideration family ties, while the theories concentrating upon human genitals enumerate five categories. Five gender categories in Western society take into account the biological aspect of sex: undoubtedly male, undoubtedly female, hermaphrodite, transsexual man becoming a woman, and transsexual woman becoming a man. When important family ties are included, the number of categories rises substantially: “straight” male, “straight” female, homosexual woman, homosexual man, bisexual woman, bisexual man, transvestite man, transvestite woman, transsexual woman, and transsexual man.

Diverse categorizations of gender explicitly support what I have already stated: gender discourse is a clear identification of different groups’ political influence. The more influence a minority group (e.g., women, homosexuals, transvestites, transsexuals) has, the more the narrow heterosexual scheme becomes questionable. Consequently, there

Also biological theory, a strict distinction of people on two genders, is met with a quandary in the case of hermaphrodites or non-typical sex organs.

is growing interest in the relationship and communication between the sexes in the last decades, while the relatively stable balance of power between men and women is predominantly influenced by the definition of the sexes. Deliberations about sex inevitably include the notion of power, since this is a vital part of sexual categorization—hence sexual categorization's power to differentiate and establish epistemological perception of self and others.

The unbalanced distribution of power is one of the main reasons why modern man is still confined to the heterosexual scheme,⁴ despite the influence of various approaches to sexuality and theories concerning gender. The heterosexual scheme misinterprets gender as something definite (rather than variable), forcing it into an oppositional and hierarchical concept. This extreme classification of male and female sex, one being (completely) different from the other, is a rather rigid one, defining gender as a mere reflection of sex. If sex were forcibly made binary out of procreative necessity, if a system of heterosexuality were enforced (deliberately ignoring homosexuals, hermaphrodites, transsexuals, transvestites), such extreme gender differentiation would merely represent an uncritical and traditional reflection of sexual categorization. Furthermore, it is incomprehensible that as yet no scientific explanation exists of the differences either between men and women or between masculinity and femininity as two completely different concepts of life. When comparing rigid definitions of both sexes, the conclusion can be drawn that the description of masculinity and femininity derives from

⁴ Heterosexual matrix is an expression established by Judith Butler. With it she wants to rename the net of cultural motion of intelligence in which the bodies, both social genders, and wishes are naturalized. The expression derives from Monique Wittig's term "heterosexual contract" and Adrienne Rich' term "forced heterosexuality." The image and stylization of the body, and also gestures, are taught, as proven by different dress senses and behaviors in (mostly primitive) societies, but is also illustrated in the story of the two wild boys, Victor and Gaspar, from the nineteenth century (Elizabeth Badinter, "XY. O možki identiteti," *Apokalipsa* 72 [2004]: 168). They both grew up without any human contact. Gaspar wanted to wear girls' clothes because he found them prettier. When he was advised to show his manliness through his clothing, he refused. Victor was also a special case, as his strong sexual desires were not directed at any particular gender—his sexual desire was undefined, as he was not taught to distinguish men from women.

general and questionable stereotypes. Sexual categorization has always considerably influenced the distinction between male and female traits—our ideas about men and women as well as their social roles are predominantly stereotypical.⁵ Attributes commonly ascribed to women are still, for example, gentle, emotional, sensitive, affectionate, considerate, erotic, and talkative, while rational, influential, dominant, indifferent, courageous, and fierce are prevalent male attributes.

Studies have shown that overemphasizing gender differences reinforces stereotypes as well as amplifies set masculine and feminine gender delineation, thus maintaining the inferior social position of women. Stereotypes are deeply ingrained in the upbringing and personality of an individual, molding girls' identity on the basis of sex—i.e., the feminine gender scheme conveyed through stereotypes of women's roles in society. Since boys also construct a so-called masculine gender role under the strong influence of stereotypes, many commentators (especially from the period around 1970) point out an androgynous⁶ gender scheme as a psychologically healthy as well as an individually and socially viable one. The androgynous gender scheme was supposed to combine masculine as well as feminine categories of gender schemes, but as it later turned out, masculinity still prevailed. According to Kobal-Palčič,⁷ there is another drawback to the androgynous gender scheme: if androgyny is only a sum of stereotyped masculine and feminine gender schemes, then androgyny itself must be permeated by gender stereotypes. Cognitive psychology, through the study of gender stereotypes and schemes, advances towards sociological differentiation, according to which a person is born into certain sex whereas gender is acquired. This approach moves away from psychoanalytical methods,

⁵ Darja Kobal-Palčič, "Preučevanje kognitivne spolne sheme z vidika stereotipov ali z vidika samopodobe," *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 26.188 (1998): 248.

⁶ That upbringing is very important for balancing male and female characteristics was realized by the advocates of so-called androgynous schemes. For example, in the U.S., non-sexist schools were founded, where "androgynous" children were to be raised (Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1994] 25). They were usually raised and taught in equal situations (they did not even have separate bathrooms), but nevertheless often reacted stereotypically (e.g., boys did not want to wear the same jewelry as girls).

⁷ Kobal-Palčič 253.

which diverge from the sociological as well as psychological understanding of gender, concentrating only upon personality development through sexuality and rejecting gradual (social) gender acquisition. Psychoanalysis associates the development of human beings with their unconscious and sexuality, claiming that a lot of sexual desires are taboos suppressed into the unconscious.

Similarly to Freud, who did not want to ordain masculinity or femininity as normative, but only analyze them, Lacan also renounced the upholding of predetermined sexual differences and specific male or female instincts. According to Lacan, sexuality, played out through demand and desire, falls into the domain of instability. He claims that because of this each of the sexes begins to mythically and exclusively represent that which completes and satisfies its opposite. As soon as “male” and “female” categories start to represent absolute and complementary concepts, the sexes become subject to mystification. Thus, as Lacan affirms, psychoanalysis should not try to construct “male” and “female” categories as interdependent entities, fully convinced of their identity and each other, but rather point out these concepts’ phantom foundations. At this point, Lacan rejects the feministic notion of woman, claiming it beholds a deception—namely, a belief that a woman actually exists, and affirming that this applies also to men. Women and men exist only in the masquerade of sexuality.

Lacan’s theory of gender identity fictional interplay is broadened by Butler’s ingenious insight on gender in the post-feministic gender identity theory, which was elaborated upon at the beginning. She considers gender a variable, non-universal identity and a performance of socially constructed subjects in a given cultural context. Transvestites are not the only ones trying to imitate the other sex. We mostly all imitate “our” male or female sex, assuming that we are following the real and original ideal, even though the ideal itself is in fact a parody of the idea about natural and original.

Gender does not only constitute identity, a place where we can seek refuge, but it also represents a notion we struggle against. The thesis of gender’s “chameleonic” nature should not lead to self-sufficient passivity, because the perception of gender as a scientific term on academic level makes it possible to escape the repressiveness still present in contemporary society. Social order in Western societies is based on racial, class, and gender differences. The outlook for the near future

regarding the desired equality of the sexes,⁸ thus remains bleak, since the repressive heterosexual matrix is still not able to provide it. Because there are no such criteria that would not impose further inequalities, the revolutionary concept⁹ of complete gender scheme eradication probably seems too one-dimensional. It is based on the loosening of heterosexual repressiveness, while at the same time bringing into view cultural possibilities of bisexual and homosexual behavior and identity. Accordingly, the eradication of heterosexual repressiveness would also mean the obliteration of social gender itself.

In the end we should consider the following: What changes are still possible and to what extent can we define gender as such? Since gender cannot be completely protean or fluid, it forms itself in the framework of technological, social, economic, and cultural constraints in a particular space and time. If an individual's identity is oriented towards an unknown goal, where a "secret desire" is influenced by different ideologies, we could acknowledge the post-feminist definition of gender as a chameleonic category. Correspondingly, Butler defines gender as a variable construct and neutral identity. According to this definition, gender should be understood as an effect and a product, sometimes transcending identity and at other times not attaining it.

The feminist paradox (mentioned at the beginning)—discourse about the dark continent¹⁰ and the shaping of female identity or, on the other side, the elimination of the female category out of fear of feeling inferior—is supplemented by the issue of minority gender groups

⁸ Also the equality of sexes (paradoxically) could not solve all sexual dilemmas, as "statements that people, races, and sexes are the same signal some disdain for or denial of the real phenomena and give a green light to imperialism more perilous than that which preserves the traits of differences" (Luce Irigaray, as quoted in Vladimir Biti, "Identiteta," *Primerjalna književnost* 23.1 [2000]: 15).

⁹ Several critics have discussed gender scheme eradication as the main culprit. Among them were Gayle Rubin (see Butler 85) and Judith Lorber. The former suggested sexual neutrality (Lorber 200)—if people constructed gender and exploited it, they can also deconstruct and stop exploiting it. Thus Elfriede Jelinek, winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize for Literature, has declared her position for sexual neutrality and immaterial existence in her repeated condemnation of sexual exploitation.

¹⁰ The "dark continent" is Freud's term, by which he labeled the unexplored phenomenon of womanhood.

(transsexuals, transvestites, hermaphrodites, and homosexuals). This paradox's ambivalence does not only cause it to be enigmatic, it also seems to make it very productive. How do we find our way out of the maze of gender confusion? The only answer is a paradoxical one: there is no need to find the way out, because gender issues are inevitable. As Judith Butler affirms, all we can do is to cause a growing unrest in the best possible way, by way of encouraging, confusing, and spreading the concept of gender.

The contemporary Slovene novel and gender identity

The protean nature of gender also brought “sexual confusion” into the contemporary Slovene novel, which started noticeably to reflect the changes of gender identity in the last decades. The most recent Slovene novels (1990–2005) are presented at the beginning for the purposes of clear analysis. Literary insights prove that already at the outset of the 1990s, postmodernism disappeared from the Slovene novel; its remnants are of an entirely formal nature and only highlight the absence of this literary stream. The prevalent characteristic of the Slovene novel (as well as the European one) is literary eclecticism,¹¹ a blend of different influences and occurrences. The most accurate definition of contemporary Slovene novel is therefore based on its most frequent model—a modified traditional novel including features of realism and reshaped in the spirit of modernism and postmodernism, recently emerging in the form of genre syncretism, the new role of the narrator, and an increased number of speech excerpts.

Despite the variety of novelistic poetics, a common feature of various novels (around 620 novels were published in Slovene from 1990

¹¹ Literary eclecticism is just a provisional term by which we can encompass the diversity of the Romanesque poetics of the most recent Slovene novel (Alojzija Zupan Sosič, *Zavetje zgodbe: Sodobni slovenski roman ob koncu stoletja*, Novi pristopi [Ljubljana: Literarno-umetniško društvo Literatura, 2003] 45). Because in the 1990s postmodernism started losing its power in Slovenia, we can nowadays observe different levels of presence of modernist or postmodernist practices—the most recent Slovene novels are a modified form of the traditional novel, but the paradigm is reshaped by different post/modernist transformations, mostly by the genre syncretism (i.e., several genres intertwined within one novel frame).

to 2005) can still be found. This common feature is distinctive of the period under consideration and may also be the herald of a new literary stream. I have called it new emotivity, or the perception of shifting (gender) identity as a reflection of a unique (postmodern) sincerity pertaining to relationships between the sexes, the theme of love, and references to literary tradition. New emotivity and sentiments are associated with reevaluated traditional views of masculinity and femininity, inevitably affecting the gradual dissipation of male authority and inducing interconnectedness of male and female categories as well as the shifting and elimination of social roles. New emotivity is revealed through the predominance of the intimate story—dedication to national identity was recently replaced by the pursuit of personal identity.

Changes in politics and society (achieving independence, changes in political system, accession to the European Union) hardly affected the contemporary Slovene novel: protagonists' concern for national identity gave way to the quest for construction of personal identity. Dedication to more particular themes (love is the most frequent theme in the contemporary Slovene novel) is one of the general characteristics of novel production, which confines experiences to smaller (social) groups and intimate issues of protagonists.

The self-orientation of post-modernist emotionality gradually wore off, the abundance of baroque and scientific notions clearly revealing the sources and inspirations of its writing, whereas post-post-modernist emotivity (new emotivity being a part of it) directed its irony and parody at interior and exterior literary stereotypes, concealing its sources. The focal point of new emotivity is a distinctive spiritual spleen, a sort of passive boredom—already present in the Enlightenment period as the apathy of modern man—oriented towards New Age hedonism.

Spiritual void and fatigue are reshaped and modernized in the turbocapitalistic trauma of failed communication, alienation and the fear of losing individuality being prevalent themes. In the era of "empty existence," devoid also of love, communication between the sexes is performed only physically. The notion of loss, suffering, and helplessness is all that is left in the disassembled and manipulated world. Thus, it is hardly surprising that this gives rise to erotic themes in the latest Slovene novels. The pursuit of identity mirrored in the opposite sex introduced love as the main theme of the contemporary Slovene novel. As a result,

the love theme became a prevailing dictate in the existential crisis,¹² moving away from the traditional concepts of love literature and at the same time reexamining traditional social norms (e.g., fidelity and motherhood). The gender identity crisis is generally incorporated into the relationship between men and women in the contemporary Slovene novel. Acknowledging the communication barrier between the sexes and undermining as well as breaking down gender stereotypes unveils the repressiveness of heterosexual norms, particularly unfavorable for minority gender groups.

Many female authors (as well as certain social changes) contributed to the different portrayal of sexes at the beginning of new millennium. Today female characters' central position in novels is becoming more common in world literature. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is being chosen by even those Slovene writers who had previously depicted woman only superficially, as frail companions to man, or as fatal beings guided by sensual and emotional impulse. In the last couple of years, women (noticeably) have made their mark in poetry (Barbara Korun, Taja Kramberger, Lucija Stupica, Maja Vidmar, Vida Morin-Pauer, Erika Vovk, Irena Žerjal), drama (Draga Potočnjak, Saša Pavček), and the novel (Berta Bojetu, Maja Novak, Katarina Marinčič, Mojca Kumerdej, Sonja Porle, Nina Kokelj, Jasna Blažič, Nedeljka Pirjevec, Vesna Milek, Marjetka Jeršek, Marija Vogrič, Polona Glavan, Tamara Doneva, Brina Švigelj Mérat aka Brina Svit, Suzana Tratnik, and others). Their influence is seen not only in the growing number of female characters, but also in novelties of theme and form. In contrast to a larger portion of female novelists, gender minority groups are still hardly represented in the contemporary Slovene novel. Women represent central¹³ characters in half of the selected novels (a woman is the protagonist in sixteen of thirty-five novels; a man and a woman, approaching events from two different perspectives, although equally, are central characters in two novels), whereas minority gender groups are scarcely represented (though compared to previous decades their presence has increased). A homosexual theme is present in eleven novels

¹² Zupan Sosič 2003, 49.

¹³ This observation on the central position of female characters is a qualitative one; it does not reflect the situation in all published novels in the last fifteen years. A strictly statistical consideration would miss innovativeness in handling of sexual identity. Popular, schematic, or merely epigonic novels merely repeat genre conventions and do not generally alter them.

(Berta Bojetu, *Filio ni doma*; Aleš Čar, *Igra angelov in netopirjev*; Franjo Frančič, *Sovraštvo*; Zoran Hočevar, *Rožencvet*; Ted Kramolc, *Tango v svilenih coklah*; Katarina Marinčič, *Prikrita harmonija*; Andrej Morovič, *Tekavec, Vladarka*; Vinko Möderndorfer, *Tek za rdečo hudičevko*; Andrej Skubic, *Fužinski bluz*; Brina Svit, *Smrt slovenske primadone*), while three novels are entirely dedicated to the issues of gender deviation (Brane Mozetič, *Angeli, Zgubljena zgodba*; Suzana Tratnik, *Ime mi je Damjan*).

Since literary character is a narrative element, effectively combining all literary elements into a whole, character selection carries great meaning. Accordingly, I consider a selection of different protagonists in the contemporary Slovene novel an interesting narrative novelty. Women are protagonists not only in novels by female writers, who generally place their confidence in the heroine, but also in works by male novelists. Changes of gender identity are therefore portrayed through the binaries of the heterosexual scheme, being occupied by stereotypes of masculinity and femininity: woman-dark continent, woman-*femme fatale*, woman-domestic angel, and man-Don Juan. The most common stereotype is that of a woman-dark continent, related to the notion of *femme fatale*.

Dark continent is a metaphor used by Freud for unexplored and undiscovered femininity. Today it signifies not only the awkwardness of the recognition that a woman is an unknown continent even to a specialist (psychologist, psychiatrist), but it also encompasses the ambivalence of understanding and acceptance of women. In the patriarchal system the terms "man" and "woman" have been identified as two completely different sets of ideas for the purposes of hierarchical interdependence; "man" has been proclaimed a ruling principle, supreme and superior. This enforced gap between male and female principles made men experience women as a blend of "lower," instinctive forces, simultaneously placing them into the mysterious undiscovered world, where they worshipped and deified women for as long as they remained enigmatic.

The ambivalence of the dark continent stereotype is thus veiled and concealed, whereas the binary aspect of the domestic angel stereotype is recognizable from the outside. This ironic stereotype of women, biologically defined as more suitable to do housework, was elaborated upon by Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One's Own* is the best example) and represented with a word phrase that brings together two

contradictory concepts. It unearths the repressiveness of the heterosexual scheme through an image of a virtuous, subservient, compassionate woman who is falling apart and silently (so she would not disturb anyone while doing her housework) reigns supreme over the household. By using this ironic phrase, Wolf tried to unmask the domestication of women that justifies the mission of a housewife by disguising her in an abstract and ideal image of a woman.

Both stereotypes, the dark continent and domestic angel, often inextricably linked also in traditional world literature, mirror the transformation of a kindly/enforced domesticated woman to a sacral image of mysterious angel. Sexual stereotyping, in particular the dark continent and domesticated angel, is severely condemned by two central anti-utopian novels, Berta Bojetu's (*Ptičja hiša*, *Filio ni doma*) and Miha Mazzini's (*Satanova krona*).

Berta Bojetu (1946–97) dedicated her novels, to the negative critique of contemporary/future society, choosing the prevalent genre of antiutopia.¹⁴ The typical anti-utopian surveillance of intimacy is placed in the pathologically alienated society and relationship between men and women. Repressive society (an island in *Filio ni doma*, a remote mountain village in *Ptičja hišica*) tries to disintegrate people's personalities in various ways—namely, with a schedule of sexual encounters, segregation of men and women, and by taking away their sons. The role of a woman is, similarly to that in Margaret Atwood's *A Maid's Story*, constrained to her womb, ironically stereotyping a woman's confinement to the kitchen, living room, and bedroom. Bojetu has skillfully avoided the binary concept of masculinity and femininity by using the symbolism of a bird, rape, and a house, thus defining femininity as the yearning of women as well as of men. Allegorical and parabolical readings in her novel therefore do not condemn men,¹⁵ but rather blame the ruling principle and its destructive characteristics: possessiveness and the aggression associated with it, social climbing, acquisitiveness, the supremacy of rationality over emotiveness, and so forth. The multi-layered message, told from a woman's point of view, is not sexually

¹⁴ Both Berta Bojetu's novels are contemporary anti-utopian novels, syncretic in genre, for in them alongside the dominant anti-utopian forms we find a parable; romantic novel, psychological novel, socially critical novel, developmental novel; a diary and a family chronicle.

¹⁵ Zupan Sosič 2003, 90.

defined, despite the tendency to depict dominant female characters: violence terminally destroys both sexes, depriving them of love as an ultimate human value.

Miha Mazzini (*Satanova krona*, 1993) depicts grotesque personal relationships in a less stern, sometimes even humorous way. Sexual opposition in the narrative is outlined by a complicated love relationship between the protagonist (colorist-D) and his beloved Eve. Why does this love story also comply with the anti-utopian principle of the inability to love? The protagonist's introverted nature, concealing misanthropic and puritan attitudes, is not only a lighthearted idiosyncrasy, but also an invisible consequence of a strict hierarchical organization, enforced rules, overwork, continuous surveillance, and alienation.¹⁶ In this society, where one fears to lose individuality, people have lost their social sensibility. Because courtship seems interminable and "unprofitable," and including another in one's own erotic world appears to be dangerous, men opt for obedient, predictable, and practical women—androids. Men consequently try to elude the despair of love by preferring robots, which in *Satanova krona* seems an ironic (more than tragic) solution.

In the anti-utopian novels discussed, the problematic issues of roles of the sexes pertain to love relationships and family. Bojetu and Mazzini unveil these roles through the stereotyped woman as the dark continent and domestic angel. Both stereotypes are inextricably linked, unmasking a woman as an unknown, unfathomable, mysterious, and domesticated being. In literature, the stereotype of a woman as the dark continent is closely associated also to the stereotype of *femme fatale*. These associations maintain mysterious and ethereal nature of women and eradicate her domestication by way of attributes of fatality, demonism, and adventurism. Fiction about the countryside with fantastic elements, (Feri Lainšček, *Namesto koga roža cveti, Ki jo je megla prinesla*; Vlado Žabot, *Volčje noči*) have reaffirmed the dark couple of gothic novel from the eighteenth century: a passive man and *femme fatale*. This mysterious pattern preserved tragic failure in love. The reasons for that can be traced back to the twelfth century European myth of romantic love, while the perseverance of the *femme fatale* stereotype transcends the influence of capricious enchantress on an unprepared, usually "pure"

¹⁶ Zupan Sosič 2003, 95.

man. Contemporary interpretations¹⁷ of the *femme fatale* concept offer an insight into the formation of male identity and social/cultural authority. Male identity is thus put to the test by a *femme fatale*, not as much an actual image of a woman but rather her phantom. A *femme fatale*'s aspirations for freedom, affluence, and independence are invoked by forces that jeopardize the protagonists in a novel. Accordingly, we should ask ourselves why male individuality is endangered so rapidly and why are men depicted as motionless victims of erotic urges, desiring to burn out masochistically in an unfathomable erotic flame. What does the popularity of the *femme fatale* actually mean and could a "female" version of *homme fatale* be found in an image of Don Juan (which is, however, less present in the contemporary Slovene novel)?

Literary characters' attitude towards stereotypes is closely connected to their new emotivity. New emotivity derives from a more subtle (as in older novels) perception of (gender) identity transformations and self-reflective. It overturns traditional notions of masculinity and femininity and at the same time deeply penetrates into the most intimate existential issues. The preservation of unbending, unyielding identity¹⁸ and its division of male and female roles results in personal breakdowns on a narrative level or in becoming a target of derision and parody on the level of narrative perspective. A character's breakdown on the narrative level is mostly caused by compliance with patriarchal concepts which also induce unyielding stereotypes—the most dramatic one being the connection between a woman—the dark continent and a woman—*femme fatale* in the novels about the countryside with fantastic elements (Feri Lainšček, *Ki jo je megla prinesla*, *Namesto koga roža cveti*; Vlado Žabot, *Volčje noči*; Marjan Tomšič, *Oštrigeca*).

In Feri Lainšček's novel *Ki jo je megla prinesla* (1993), a *femme fatale* is a woman immersed in mystery and involved in relationships with passive men, the most frequent literary characters of traditional Slovene novels. Men are emotionally unstable and naive, with no particular purpose in life; they are guided through life by women, who are mysteriously incomprehensible and irrational, mostly because they yearn for something better.¹⁹ It is thus clear at the outset of the novel that a love

¹⁷ Kavčič, Vrdlovce 183–85.

¹⁸ Zupan Sosič 2003, 49.

¹⁹ Zupan Sosič 2003, 67.

relationship between such opposing characters can drive men only to spiritual and physical breakdown.

Even the horror fiction in the novel *Volčje oči* (1996) by Vlado Žabot preserved a tinge of mystery of the literary relationship between a *femme fatale* and a passive man. However, it unmasked Jemima's seductive appearance and revealed it as evil in the form of a vampire or wolf. This unequal relationship (*femme fatale*—unsuccessful man) mirrors ignorance and the misunderstanding of the opposite sex in Slovene novels. When the central characters are men, they are possessed by misogyny combined with adventurism, implied by demonic women.

The preservation of traditional gender identity is not problematic only on the narrative level, but also on the level of narrative perspective, where self-irony is applied to outdated notions. Many novels have kept a distance from sexual stereotypes, mostly those in which a skeptical contemporary subject constitutes the central literary character. Accordingly, in Vinko Möderndorfer's *Tek za rdečo hudičevko* (1996) a woman is still a devil, a combination of erotic explosiveness and cruelty, but the first-person narrator nevertheless recognizes that his lost love Irena was only a phantom of his male erotic fantasy. He ironically mocks his futile pursuit of her through the whole novel, satirizing many attributes of gender identity: men's sensitiveness and competitiveness when experiencing orgasm, which leads to women's simulation of erotic pleasure, a redhead as a sex machine, experienced yet innocent woman as men's ideal, the image of men's/women's jealousy and possessiveness, and men's fear of independent women. Despite the harsh critique of the female world, the narrator sides with women. That can also be seen in the rescuing of a man and woman from failure in love. The woman (even despite being seriously ill or maybe especially because of that) courageously breaks off the relationship, whereas the man cannot leave it behind with dignity.

Gender identity in *Tek za rdečo hudičevko* is considered from a male point of view, while in Milan Dekleva's *Pimlico* (1996) both perspectives, male and female, are present. The female character is an even more positive one because as a sculptress she creates new life and differs from her lover Matjaž, who is a depressed failure. This humorous and cynical ridicule of men's frailty is similar to that in Zoran Hočevar's *Šolen z Brega* (1997). Because everyman Janez Kolenc missed a lot of life's opportunities, he strives for—even more than for solving a family

conflict or repairing social damage—a fulfilling life with an interesting woman in his old age. But this is when he realizes that his fear of individualistic women derives from his own lethargy—he is conscious of the fact that getting to know his own sex means overcoming his fear of the opposite sex.

The existential anxiety of gender identity is at the heart of identity issues in most Slovene novels. A character's identity crisis derives mostly from an interdependent wrong/negative self-image, ambivalence, and the absence of successful communication with the opposite sex. Since contemporary characters' identity issues are mostly concerned with sex, the basic existential question of how to live is equated with Miller's *How to love?* In Andrej Skubic's *Grenki med* (1999) the dubiousness of love is divided into two questions: What can we do with a woman anyway? is the question of young men which undermines women's confidence and molds it into the existential question How to keep a man? The traditional image of gender is most fatal for men: machismo, male chauvinism, and the inability to express feelings are remarkably similar to the formula of emotional expression in Scottish prose of the younger generation (love/emotions=embarrassment; the exceptions are bestial drunkenness and watching soccer.²⁰ Women no longer burden themselves with the classic image of being a quiet companion to man, but as they cannot form any deeper love relationships with the frustrated "urban knights"²¹ they are equally painfully unfulfilled. The difference between them is, however, that men desperately strive to remain "manly" and do not know that women have long since seen through them in their Sisyphean efforts; women, on the other hand, find it much easier to accept their own femininity. Even in the novels of younger authors, womanliness cannot shake off the touch of demonism and dangerous

²⁰ Tina Mahkota, "Nove barve škotskega kara," introduction to Janice Galloway, *Dihati moraš, to je vsa skrivnost* (Ljubljana: Študentska založba, 2000) 297.

²¹ Sexual equality in the novel touched only the social layers of adolescents, for men accept the new forms of womanliness only in the public sphere (work, parties) but in intimate encounters find the women (for their likeness to men) weird. Despite their richer erotic fantasies, men are sexually more tolerant and act as "urban knights" because they respect the traditional codex of the romantic rules (e.g., the protagonist Duane does not confess his feeling to Jenny so as long as he does not find out that she is no longer his friend's girlfriend).

fatality, yet at the same time it loads itself into stocks of enviable and fascinating power.

Although a winner in certain tests, woman is confronted with similar questions even when defeated. What does victory in the “battle of sexes” mean to a woman, if in it she loses a lover, her wish actually being only to love? Yearning for (spiritual) love could be understood as the focal Romanesque distinction between the sexes, where the male literary characters are inclined more towards the sexual differentiation reflection, for they comment on and define the social standing of women, and excuse their own rigid roles with patriarchal laws.

When throughout history men experienced woman as something different, their fear of women actually meant the fear of losing social or personal supremacy and value. In his historical novel *Galilejev lesteneč* (1996) Dušan Merc points out how consideration of only biological sex and complete denial of social gender actually represent social perversion. The main characters in the novel are women, oppressed as witches, and the author shapes the position of social minorities as in postmodernist historical novel, on the background of the apocalyptic vision of the world and in opposition with historiography.²² His female characters, with their independence and experience, become the victims of men’s suspicion and their unfulfilled and denied sexuality, most apocalyptically depicted by the Inquisition mechanism. That the critique of social perversity always reflects the critique of sexual identity is confirmed by stereotypes of a dark continent and the domestic angel, which in *Galilejev lesteneč* merge into a threat to men’s vanity and redirect themselves into an aggressive display of man’s (with heterosexual matrix confirmed) power. With its drastic description of violence, this historical novel calls attention to the dangers of sexual stereotyping.

The most ironic portrait of sexual lapses and unreliable sexual identity was written by Maja Novak in a contemporary crime story, *Cimre* (1995). Not only is her syncretic crime story interesting because of the reversed sexual roles, but also because of the basic messages, which often enrich more novels written by female authors than those written by men. They expose the experience of the opposite sex: if men perceive women with a compound of too low (women as instinctive and inferior) and too high expectations (women as ethereal, ideal), then womens’

²² Zupan Sosič 2003, 102.

characters show a different sensitivity to such absurd disproportions, although they typically direct the critique of sexual confusion towards their own gender. Like Bojetu, Novak furnished the gallery of distinct female characters with Kozer-like cynicism and auto-reflexive comments. In the world of depressed recluses, autocratic psychopaths, naive weaklings, sensitive individualists, and possessive mothers, the men also get their share of caricaturing; the neuroticism of both sexes exceeds the basic genre form of a crime story. New personal characteristics of the detective (an emotional side, occasional irrationality, quixotic features, interest in housekeeping), and the legacy of a crime story of the golden era, mainly of Agatha Christy, together with the search for the true identity, constitute an accurate scheme of sexual-role interchange. In it the unequal relationships are the consequence not only of sexual, but also of social, geographic-linguistic, educational, intellectual, and religious differences.

The second prominent novelty in the most recent Slovene novel, one which is connected to sexual identity, is narrative in nature—the increase of female literary figures as main characters. This occurrence is conditioned by the greater number of female novel writers, and it introduces diversity of sexual perspective and its motifs to the world of fiction. The changing sexual hierarchy and greater aptness for modification of the heterosexual matrix creates more freedom for the women in *Cimre*, which also holds true for the novels *Vladarka* (A. Morovič), *Črni angel, varuh moj* (S. Porle), *Tao ljubezni* (A. Blatnik), *Noč v Evropi* (P. Glavan), and *Kalipso* (V. Milek). Female central characters are no longer confined in intimate societies, but are living out their inner restlessness by changing places, people (lovers), and habits. An intense insight into their own enigma is provided by the entire journey, as the most mobile chronometer—it is their enigmatic nature that presents a greater problem than the unfulfilling opposite (male) sex. In the times of altered sexual roles, a woman has become a prisoner of her own freedom and (still classic) concept of man, which, in the romantic sense, makes her unable to move forward. In the literature of exhausted existence she wanders in the world of drugs, consumerist fancy, and perishable emotions. Most astonishing, however, is the seeming inability of even the intellectual heroine to resist the stereotypical notion of the “right” man, and so she continues succumbing to the Don Juan stereotype. This stereotype is less present than the aforementioned stereotype of woman, yet it relates to the active male principle. Destructiveness of the sexual

stereotypes is greatest if the active male principle collides with the stereotype of the passive female principle, which is most painfully experienced by the female literary figure.

Emotional numbness resulting from still active sexual stereotypes displays itself differently in novels with children or a juvenile perspective. The most optimistic view of relations between the sexes is found in Florjan Lipuš's novel *Boštjanov let* (2003). The search for one's own identity is closely linked to changing the traditional sexual roles. The child Boštjan already sees that the only escape from a perverted relationships is in friendship, not hatred between the sexes. The adolescent boy instinctively feels that it is the erotic love which is the right way out of the limiting (family, village, church) tradition, and at the same time an opportunity to change traditional behavior: he is not ashamed to show affection and care; he tries to break the tradition of silence and establish genuine communication with women, he is interested in herbs (in the traditionally regulated village this is, for example, considered predominantly a female characteristic), he is attached to the old house (house being a symbol of shelter and the mother), he enjoys walking and observing nature, and treats a girl as his friend. With the vision of love (perhaps only as the object of desire) exceeding outdated traditions, Lipuš (born in 1937) joined contemporary Slovene novelists in airing out stereotypes of "male" and "female" principles.²³

Recent Slovene novels have heard the cries of sexual identity, and this is evident not only in loosening of the traditional sexual roles, but also in the softening of hetero-standards with homosexual²⁴ motives and themes. In the recent years not many novels of this kind have been published, but their number (in comparison with the 1980s) has nevertheless increased. Eleven novels with homosexual motifs and three with homosexual themes have been published from 1995 to 2005. Homosexual motives are highlighted from different perspectives, and

²³ Zupan Sosič 2003, 80–92.

²⁴ A survey of Slovene homoeroticism shows that there are less lesbian motifs than gay: only five out of twelve treated novels contain a lesbian motif: *Igra angelov in netopirjev*, *Vladarka*, *Fužinski bluz*, *Sovrašivo*, and *Ime mi je Damjan*. In all of these novels (except *Ime mi je Damjan*) the lesbian scene is a test of friendship and its upgrade.

they are bound by a common affiliation to younger protagonists and spaces of (partially) confined type (prison, boarding school, institution, parish).

The majority of novels treat homosexuality evenhandedly, though from a heterosexual perspective, as a distraction to heterosexual conventions. The perception of homosexuality in Slovene novel (as in the media) is increasingly approaching what one might call normality, having advanced from stereotypes to secrecy and medicalization, and finally to initial forms of normalization. The path towards normalization leads through testing of the hero's identity, where homosexuality is presented more as an exceptional, sometimes even imposed experience, and less as a sexual practice of the literary personae. The transience of the homosexual experience is usually narrated in a traditional way: as in the past it is bound in the contemporary Slovene novel to adolescents and/or residential institutions (e.g., student apartments, prisons). The most contemporary homoerotic motif resembles the Slovene homoerotic literary tradition in that it is episodic, but in some novels homosexuality is an asylum against the roughness of heterosexual society.

It was the experimentation of the adolescents that contributed mostly to the normalization of the novelesque portrait of homosexuality, and because of that the homosexuality of this kind still is found within the normalization measured to suit heterosexuals, who consider same-sex orientation merely a transitional phase of the sexual development. From such traditional perspective it differentiates itself only on a more contemporary approach in some novels (e.g., *Angeli; Smrt slovenske primadone*), which equal the homosexual and heterosexual love in the direction of reevaluation. Reevaluation is taking place through the prism of skepticism, where also homoerotics (as heteroerotics) communicate universal truths: love as spiritual-sensual obsession drives the literary characters into insoluble existential crises mainly due to their unawareness that its core is being sapped by the diseases of the present-day, boredom, and inter-gender communication blockade.

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POVZETEK

SPOLNA IDENTITETA V SODOBNEM SLOVENSKEM ROMANU

Spolna identiteta postaja danes jedro identitetne problematike. V znanstvenem diskurzu jo predstavlja sodobna teza teorije spolov, v kateri je družbeni spol razumljen kot konstrukt, nenehno spreminjajoča se kategorija in performans. Judith Butler, pomembna raziskovalka spolne identitete, meni, da vsi oponašamo "svoj pravi spol" v prepričanju, da se zgledujemo po izvirnem idealu, čeprav je sam izvirnik že parodija na idejo o naravnem in izvirnem.

Spolna identiteta je v sodobnem slovenskem romanu zadnjih let (1990–2005) presvetljena skozi razvijanje osebne oz. intimne zgodbe, ki je skupna značilnost najnovejšega slovenskega romana. V njej se spremembe spolne identitete zarisujejo skozi binarnost heteroseksualne matrice (vprašanja spolnih manjšin so zelo redka – homoseksualna tematika se pojavi v romanih Zgubljena zgodba, Angeli in Ime mi je Damjan – nekaj več romanov pa se posveča homoseksualni motiviki), ki jo prevprašujejo stereotipi ženskosti in moškosti: ženska-temni kontinent, ženska-hišni angel, ženska-femme fatale in moški-don Juan. Najpogostejši je prvi stereotip, ki se povezuje tudi s predstavo usodnostne ženske (npr. v romanih Ki jo je megla prinesla, Volčje noči, Kraljeva hči, Igra angelov in netopirjev, Galilejev lesteneč, Carmen, Tek za rdečo hudičevko, Kalipso), v katerem lahko prepoznamo fantazmo moške erotične domišljije, predvsem pa strah moške literarne osebe pred individualistično žensko. V času spremenjenih spolnih vlog ženska ni več hišni angel (npr. Vladarka, Črni angel, varuh moj, Tao ljubezni, Noč v Evropi, Kalipso), a ker jo obvladuje enigmatičnost lastnega in nasprotnega spola, postane v svetu "prazne eksistence" ujetnica lastne svobode in (še vedno klasične) predstave o moškem.

Pomembni novosti najnovejšega slovenskega romana sta povezani s spolno identiteto, ki postaja (skozi ljubezensko zgodbo) jedro identitetne problematike. Prva inovacija je pripovedne narave: povečanje deleža ženskih literarnih oseb kot osrednjih likov, ki ga pogojuje tudi večje število romanopisk, prinaša v romaneskne svetove pestrost spolne perspektive in motivike. Če doživljajo moški ženske literarne like kot spoj prenizkih (ženska kot nagonsko in neenakovredno bitje) in previsokih pričakovanj (ženska kot eterično, idealno bitje), pa so ženski značaji bolj zagledani v predstave lastnega spola, čeprav jih zanima tudi moški, predvsem kot prijatelj in ljubimec. Izpovedovanje medspolne komunikacijske blokade zaznamuje nov tip iskrenosti, kjer spoznavati svoj spol pomeni biti odprt za drugega. Ko tovrstna iskrenost razkrinkava represivnost heteroseksualne matrice s

humorno, ironično ali parodično razdaljo, se obrača v smer nove emocionalnosti, posebnega čustvenega razpoloženja besedil, ki je zaznamovano z avtoreflesivnostjo lastnega (romanesknega) sentimenta in subtilno intelektualnostjo.