

THE THEME OF THE UNWED MOTHER IN SLOVENE LITERATURE

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Marriage laws and customs almost universally condemn births out of wedlock. The form and degree of this condemnation vary, however, from society to society, as well as from time to time and among different strata of the same society. Impulses, a confused mass of feelings surrounding the sexual relationship, as well as the feeling of mystery about procreation, interact with social forces embodied in institutions and in the religious or other beliefs acknowledged in a society. Historically, illegitimacy has been dealt with very harshly in many societies. The same medieval ignorance which caused women to be burned as witches, imposed various primitive measures on unmarried mothers, and their offspring suffered social as well as legal disadvantages.¹

In the twentieth century some European countries, such as Sweden, Norway, and the USSR, have tried to eradicate legal and social distinctions between children born in or out of wedlock. In the US some more liberal measures in dealing with the problem have been undertaken through adoption, foster homes and assistance to unwed mothers. The increasing demand for adoptable infants has tended to lessen the censure of such mothers who perform the social function of providing childless couples with babies. However, the attitudes to unwed mothers still echo the prejudices of tradition,² and although in our times these women do not face absolute social ostracism and physical torture, they are still considered an undesirable element in society. Sociologists typecast them according to current trends in psychology and sociology as social misfits of varying sorts.³

Since the unwed motherhood is a universal social, economic and moral problem and since the fate of unwed mothers is full of drama, tragedy and horror, it is not surprising that it has offered material to artists and writers all over the world. The motif of the unwed mother has found its way also into Slovene literature. In the following we will examine three portraits of unwed mothers, each of them representing a different era in Slovene history and social consciousness. The first one is a romantic, faceless, softly

carved cameo, created by Francè Prešeren in his poem "Nezakonska mati"; the second is a composite face of a frightened, semi-insane young woman, shown through an impressionist-symbolist haze in the stories of Ivan Cankar; the last is a larger-than-life sculpture of a healthy, brave woman--a portrait whose realistic features make a statement surpassing the immediacy of its geographic and historic limitations. It appears in the story "Samorastniki," published by the realist Prežihov Voranc just before World War II.

The first portrait of an unwed mother in Slovene literature, Prešeren's "Nezakonska mati,"⁴ is painted as a romantic mother-and-child idyll. The girl-mother, serene, loving and sweet, represents more the universal idea of motherhood than a particular situation in which an unwed mother and her child found themselves in Slovene society in the first half of the nineteenth century. The facts given about this woman do not define her as an individual but as a type. These facts are: she is a very young girl; she comes from a conventional family headed by a strict father, a family in which a mother may cry over the misery of her child but does not dare to defend her; she has relatives, most likely brothers and sisters⁵; her personal tragedy follows the beaten track--her lover has disappeared, leaving her to her fate⁶; this fate is also meted out in an established pattern: physical punishment and ostracism.

The lines describing the reaction of the girl's lover and those reporting the reaction of the surroundings to her pregnancy are the most realistic parts of the poem. The verses expressing the young mother's love for her baby--not necessarily a son, as the translation offers--are the most idealistic, though the most moving. The girl's fatalistic hope that the same God who feeds the birds under the sky will also provide for her child is the dream of a loving mother. It gives no hint of what is in store either for her or for her illegitimate child in the harsh reality of the nineteenth-century Slovene society.

"Nezakonska mati," written in the 1840's, was not a provocative, direct accusation of Jansenist society and its hypocrisy. However, it was a brave deed in the days when only pious literature was distributed for general consumption in Slovenia, when Prešeren's magnificent love poems were

considered corrupt and evil, and when sex in any form was never mentioned. According to the Slovene literary historian Anton Slodnjak, this poem defied "Jansenist narrow-mindedness and false bourgeois morality more courageously than did 'Nova pisarija'⁷ or any other of Prešeren's poems."⁸

According to some literary historians, "Nezakonska mati" grew out of Prešeren's relationship with Ana Jelovšek. Prešeren met Ana, a working-class girl, when she was only fifteen. She was serving as a nursemaid in the house of Prešeren's employer, Dr. Crobath. It was in the year 1837 when Prešeren had finally realized that Julija Primic, the woman of his dreams, was definitely lost to him forever. In despair, and probably to irritate the high-class Julija, he began to court the beautiful servant girl, who used to be Julija's mother's protégée. The relationship developed further, and Ana bore Prešeren three illegitimate children. Many literary historians up to the present time have pitied Prešeren for his involvement with Ana; they have pointed out that he was caught in a situation from which he could not extricate himself because of his honesty. Ana was his burden. She has been described as young, ignorant, simple-minded; her desire to get married to Prešeren has been interpreted as nagging; even her search for understanding and peace of mind in the confessional has been shown as disrespect for Prešeren's beliefs. Ana has also been blamed for giving her children away to foster homes, while Prešeren has been excused from any wrongdoing on account of his spiritual superiority to Ana and his limited financial means. Most literary historians and critics seem to agree that Prešeren did not love Ana, that he stooped to her in despair. They see the proof of this in the fact that Prešeren did not dedicate any love poems to Ana. They do not consider the poem "Nezakonska mati" a portrait of Ana, but Prešeren's vision of an ideal unwed mother, such as he would have wished Ana to be. Ivan Prijatelj goes even further: he denies Ana even this kind of presence in Prešeren's art. He considers people who see any traces of Ana in "Nezakonska mati" naive.⁹

Half a century after Prešeren's time, the fate of the unwed mothers in Slovenia remained unchanged. Because of geographical limitations and the proximity of people in small villages, an unmarried woman had no opportunity to hide

either her pregnancy or the birth of her baby. Neither homes for unmarried mothers nor adoption agencies existed in Slovenia. Until the end of World War II all such mothers went through the same kind of experience, although the harshness of their fate might vary slightly from village to village. As soon as a pregnant girl was caught in her "shame" she was at least beaten and sometimes tortured in elaborate ways, full of medieval cruelty. She would go through her pregnancy like a social outcast. After she had given birth, the baby was her sole responsibility. Only a few girls were determined enough to sue the child's father for support. Social ostracism and hatred were transferred also to the illegitimate children. Sometimes they were marked for life at the very start by priests who baptized them with strange Greek and Latin names.

Ivan Cankar, the champion of all the oppressed and downtrodden, was moved and enraged by the suffering of unmarried mothers and their children. A great number of poets, artists and vagabonds in his stories are illegitimate children, doomed at birth, misfits forever. In these stories the emphasis is on the fate of the child, therefore the mothers appear only briefly and remain nameless. Like Prešeren's, Cankar's unmarried mother is less an individual than a type. This type, however, is not a smiling Madonna; she is a semi-insane, desperate woman, who often tries to kill her newborn baby, always hides him away and then tries to lead a normal life, but never succeeds.

One of Cankar's strongest protests against the fate of unwed mothers and their offspring is the story "Polikarp." This grotesque shows, in somber tones and with cruel probing into a guilty man's conscience, the fate of an illegitimate boy and the punishment of his sly, cowardly father. The unwed mother appears only on the edge of the events. She is a young, nameless woman, who has come to a certain village only to give birth. She has chosen this particular place not only to hide from her acquaintances but especially to confront the new, young village priest with his own baby. After the delivery, she lies motionless in the little hut in which she has found shelter; she stares at the ceiling, does not answer any questions, and she refuses food. The only time she speaks is when she asks the merciful midwife to take the baby to church and have him christened Francis. But the priest refuses to give the baby his own name and

christens him Polikarp. When they bring the baby back to his mother and tell her what his name is, she stops fighting for her life and dies.

Another Cankar story which shows an unmarried mother tortured to the point of insanity is "Smrt in pogreb Jakoba Nesreče." Here too a young girl has given birth in a dismal shelter provided for such misfits by a cunning old woman. As soon as the baby is born, the mother tries to kill him by filling his feeding bottle with brandy. The old woman stops her, however. At night the young mother decides to take the hateful bundle up into the hills where her own mother lives. She hopes the boy might die there; if he lives, nobody will ever know about him. On the way over the swamps, the half-crazy girl decides to drop the bundle into a ditch. But the baby opens his eyes and whimpers. Overwhelmed by hatred and despair, the mother curses her child and wishes that he would pay with his life for her suffering of this night, the night when her torn body is aching all over and her soul is filled with misery to the brim. As soon as she delivers the boy to his grandmother, she disappears. Later she recovers and tries to forget her son. She even gets married and becomes a fine lady. Years later, when the foster mother brings little Jakob for a visit, she gets rid of them, and when Jakob--a grown man by then--once comes to ask if she really cursed him at birth, she screams and faints. Her guilt, however, does not die, and when Jakob dies a vagabond, she goes insane. She comes running to the cemetery, disrupting the burial service, her city finery torn and bedraggled, her eyes burning: "Have mercy on me, my fellow Christians, his brothers ... I cursed him, the sin is all mine ... my curse is lying in his grave ... it is weighing heavily on him."¹⁰ The peasants, however, jeer at her, and the bailiff arrests her. There is no salvation for an unmarried mother. Torn between her natural feelings and the fear of a cruel society, she can commit crimes, she can disown her own flesh and blood, she can curse and cry--but she is doomed.

In the story "Aleš iz Razora" we see an unwed mother through her son's memory. She is a young peasant woman who has come to the city to hide her pregnancy and give birth to her son. She then abandons her baby, but only after making sure that he is taken in by some good people. Then she disappears not to interfere with her son's destiny.

The illegitimate boy in this story fights odds against him so valiantly that he even becomes a priest. He learns about his mother later from a merciful woman who tells him that the girl was seduced by a pious village hypocrite and that she became sick and died young. This story differs greatly from others about the fate of unwed mothers and their offspring. This time the pharisee father is punished by insanity, and the illegitimate child becomes an important member of society. However, even in this optimistic story the unmarried mother dies after having lived a life of poverty, obscurity and sickness.

A very brief glance at the same type of a loving unmarried mother is given in the short story "Jure." Jure's mother did not allow society to rob her of her son; she supported him as long as she could and was happy in spite of hardships. Yet, she had to be sacrificed, too. Incessant work and worry undermines her health, and she dies of tuberculosis, leaving her son to his fate. Jure is then shipped to the village poorhouse, where the rosary-rattling old women keep reminding him of his "illegitimate" place in the world by telling him constantly: "Pray for your sinful mother!"¹¹

Cankar's unwed mothers are more defined than Prešeren's. Yet their features are still nebulous and to some extent distorted by generalizations and the exaggerations of their psychotic state.

A clearly defined, unique depiction of an unwed mother was made thirty years after Cankar's time by the self-educated writer from the Carinthian mountains, Lovro Kuhar, whose best work was produced under the pseudonym Prežihov Voranc. In his story "Samorastniki,"¹² which is considered the peak of his artistic achievement, he paints the portrait of an unwed mother with all the brutality of realistic detail, yet with such passionate involvement in the exposition of an outrageous social injustice that he gives it an aura of supernatural beauty and a universal meaning.

The peasant heroine, Meta, in opposition to the faceless Madonna of Prešeren's "Nezakonska mati" and to Cankar's nameless semi-insane women, is not only a clearly

defined individual, but is also shown in her growth and development. When the seventeen-year-old beauty comes to the farm, Karnice, she is an innocent, naive, obedient girl. She does her penance and she prays. When she falls in love with Ožbej, the owner's son, she does not speculate about any kind of social climbing; therefore she cannot understand the wrath of Ožbej's father, Karničnik. When she realizes that Karničnik wants her to give up Ožbej, she cannot understand that, either. How can she give up the father of her child? But as she is tortured at Karnice, a change occurs within Meta: she realizes not only that her lover is a weakling but also that the family is inflicting a horrible injustice on her. Her naiveté gives way to courage and self-sufficiency. Voranc describes this transformation as follows:

She was overcome by horror and disgust, yet she found enough strength to get up; she approached the bench with a firm step and calmly sat down to face her torture. Her mother's behavior as well as pity for Ožbej gave her courage of which she had not been aware before. Her sobbing ceased, and the tears which kept pouring from her eyes were not bitter tears of heartfelt misery any more; soon they dried up in the new strength growing inside her.¹³

The second step in the development of Meta's character comes during her torture at her trial. This time it is not the compassion for her mother and the pity for her lover which toughen her during the barbarous beating. It is her feeling of a horrible injustice and her disdain for her torturers that make her remove the wet sheet into which they had wrapped her broken body, get up and walk proudly through the town of Doberla ves. Meta then lives as a hard-working, honest woman, brave, independent, her pride growing with her suffering and physical deterioration. This new Meta is shown in a dramatic scene at the village cemetery, where she is attacked by Karničnik's maids and daughter. Meta, pregnant with Ožbej's fifth child and accompanied by his oldest two, refuses to fight with the hysterical women. Voranc describes the scene as follows:

The whore did not bend her head, the harlot stood proudly erect in front of everybody, exuding an invincible charm of beauty,

motherhood and strength ... She was overcome by a feeling of which she had not been aware until that time, a feeling of self-importance, equality, and this feeling permeated her with cold, lofty disdain.¹⁴

Supporting her brood with hard work, toiling in the fields, spinning, knitting, weaving straw mats and carving wooden utensils, Meta reaches the final step in her development. Calm and serene she finally realizes that her suffering has not been an isolated case of bad luck but a product of the social system in which she lives. She knows now that she is no sinner and that society has perpetrated a gross injustice on her. Therefore, she does not hide her life story from her children; instead, she teaches them to defend their honor wherever they might be, instilling in them self-respect and hatred for hypocrisy and injustice.

The short story "Samorastniki" was first published in 1937. In 1940 it was chosen as the title story for a collection of Voranc's starkly realistic stories about the peasants in the Carinthian mountains. Since the war the book has been reprinted in several editions; the story "Samorastniki" was made into a film. It is interesting that in spite of legal reforms concerning unwed mothers and their children in post-war Slovenia, the critics have underplayed the character of Meta and overemphasized the revolutionary ideas of "Samorastniki." Thus, for example, in 1968, Slodnjak defines the story as "a tale about the economic fiasco of a mighty house of a Carinthian farmer, who was destroyed in the second half of the previous century by an economic crisis." Slodnjak also adds that "Kuhar ... employed symbols and allegory in order to put across his message that poor peasants have the right to own their land and enjoy its products."¹⁵ Slodnjak does not mention the central problem of the unwed mother at all. In 1969 L. Legiša classified "Samorastniki" as a story about forbidden love between a poor beauty and a rich farmer, disregarding the fact that Voranc does not describe a single love scene between Meta and Ožbej and that the point of the story is the character of an unwed mother and the fate of her offspring and not the trials and tribulations through which a romantic idyll had to pass.¹⁶ In his study of Voranc's peasants, attached to the 1969 edition of Samorastniki, Marjan Kramberger analyses certain traits in Meta's

character, but only from the point of view of "Meta, the peasant woman." He explains Meta's physical endurance and her ability to suffer as another manifestation of the iron will which all Voranc's peasants share, a will "which so obstinately negates any kind of limitation to this endurance that just because of this we can hardly envisage it."¹⁷ Kramberger's point of observation, however, being strictly materialistic, cannot encompass Meta's personality as a whole. He says, for example, that neither Meta nor Voranc speak the truth when they say that Meta loved Ožbej for himself only; according to Kramberger Meta was primarily fighting for property and loved Ožbej only as the future master of Karnice, whether she was aware of her ambition or not. Kramberger often refers to an uneducated peasant as an uncivilized human being, incapable of emotions surpassing his immediate greed for property and his stubborn fight for and against the cruel earth. Thus, according to the critic, Meta, too, is incapable of any sublime erotic feelings; her relationship with Ožbej is based on her subconscious desire to climb the social and economic ladder. It is interesting that Kramberger, a Marxist and socialist, does not define Meta's position in a capitalist society as a defiant revolutionary stand. On the contrary: he seems to defend Karničnik's position and accuses the author of painting this character black and white.

Be that as it may, Voranc's Meta is the portrait of an unwed mother, clearly defined as an individual in space and time. In its monumental proportions it exposes the problem clearly, and defiantly demands from the reader an honest effort to sort out his attitudes and face his own prejudices.

Prešeren, Cankar and Voranc lived approximately fifty years apart. Their education and lifestyles were entirely different. Their literary output appeared in forms that had nothing in common. Yet all three chose, sometime during their literary careers, to deal with the theme of the unwed mother and the fate of her offspring. The common denominator to which the choice of this theme could be traced lies in their characters. Prešeren, Cankar and Voranc were men who disliked hypocrisy to such an extent that they were ready to expose it in whatever shape or form

it raised its ugly head, regardless of the consequences for their personal comfort and security: Prešeren, a man of classical education, a spirit of Faustian dimension, a genius whose poetry measures up to the peaks of world literature, remained a poverty-stricken bachelor-lawyer until his death at forty-nine; Cankar, a man whose identification with the philosophy and art of the fin-de-siècle made him a citizen of the world, and whose masterpieces had no model and have had no heir in Slovene literature, remained a homeless wanderer, an annoying presence in petty Slovene society until he, too, died in his forties; Voranc, a man without formal education but with tremendous zest for learning, a writer whose peasant characters are, in Župančič's words, "kot da goram se iz bokov izvili so," spent his final year as an embittered loner.

Persecution of unmarried mothers and their helpless children was one of the outstanding injustices that all three writers witnessed in the society of their time. Prešeren was touched by it through personal tragedy; Cankar's keen eye for social evil born of ignorance, noticed it in the small town of Vrhnika as well as in the slums of Vienna; Voranc saw it among the sturdy peasants of the Carinthian mountains whose passion for life mingled with medieval attitudes and fears and made them victims of their own ignorance.

Prešeren was Cankar's first model and master, and Cankar, of course, knew "Nezakonska mati" just as he knew the drama of Prešeren's life. It is possible that Prešeren's poem focused Cankar's attention on the problem of motherhood out of wedlock. However, in Cankar's stories this problem is tightly interwoven with his attacks on religious hypocrites and sinful priests. Thus, while Prešeren's unwed mother plays the central part in his lovely poem, unwed mothers provide, more or less, only the background against which Cankar exposes a social evil. Voranc certainly knew both Prešeren's and Cankar's work. It does not seem likely, though, that he moulded Meta of "Samorastniki" according to literary models. Her portrait is one in the group of Carinthian peasants, a unique face, but belonging to the composite relief consisting of lumberjacks, sinewy well-diggers and laboring tillers of the skimpy soil on mountain slopes. It is neither a saintly, smiling face of a sad young maiden, nor a pale mask of a semi-insane woman. It is a face carved of rock, defiant and peaceful.

Prešeren, Cankar and Voranc are not the only writers who have dealt with the theme of the unwed mother in Slovene literature. Prešeren was the first to smash the tabu, expose the problem and bravely deal with it in a literary form. After him, the theme of the unwed mother has been exposed by many Slovene writers, great and humble, up to the most recent years. However, the above three interpretations of this social issue are the most vivid because of their masters' total involvement and their literary genius.

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Footnotes

¹Among the Romans, the children born of concubines were entitled to support from their father but had no right of inheritance from him. Germanic law, which lasted throughout the early feudal period, recognized as legitimate only those whose parents were of the same social rank. The children regarded as bastards had no rights of inheritance. Under the Common Law of England the illegitimate child was regarded as "filius nullius" and until the sixteenth century he was supported by the parish in which he was born. An act of 1576, however, made it an offence to beget an illegitimate child and shifted the burden of support onto the mother. Frantic mothers, branded now not only as whores but also as criminals, often abandoned newborn infants. These were then taken to special "Foundling Hospitals." Nowadays, in twentieth-century England, the support of an illegitimate child is primarily the mother's duty. Affiliation proceedings are complicated and even if successful, the father's contribution to the support of the child is limited to a small sum weekly. The United States followed English Common Law, and special institutions for out-of-wedlock children were established. Affiliation proceedings are quasi-criminal in nature.

²As late as the 1960's some groups have tried to legalize compulsive sterilization in the US for females

having more than one illicit pregnancy. Others have argued that illegitimate children should be excluded from financial benefits.

³In the 1920's unwed mothers were generally considered immoral, mentally deficient charity types; in the 1930's they were supposed to come from broken or poor homes; in the 1940's and 1950's they were regarded as emotionally disturbed girls, who could also come from middle-class families.

⁴For an English version of the poem, see Poems by Francè Preseren (eds., W. K. Matthews and A. Slodnjak) (London: John Calder, 1969), 37.

⁵The translation "my friends would blush and pass me by" is not accurate. The original says, "Moji se mene sram'vali so," which means "my close relatives were ashamed of me."

⁶Again the translation ("And he who was my own true love,/Your father by the will above,/He wanders God knows how far from here,/shamed because of us, poor dear") gives a slightly slanted view of the relationship between the girl and her lover. In the original the verses are:

"On, ki je sam bil ljubi moj,
On, ki je pravi oča tvoj,
Šel je po sveti Bog ve kam,
Tebe in mene ga je sram!"

⁷A polemical poem about new styles and topics in Slovene poetry.

⁸Anton Slodnjak, Pregled slovenskega slovstva (Ljubljana: Akademska založba, 1934), 82.

⁹Ivan Prijatelj, Izbrani eseji in razprave (ed., A. Slodnjak) (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 1952), 356.

¹⁰Ivan Cankar, Izbrana dela (ed., Boris Merhar) (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1951-59), Vol. 5, 322.

¹¹Ibid., Vol. 6, 25.

¹²Prežihov Voranc, Samorastniki (ed., Marjan Kramberger) (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1969). The title could be translated "the selfsown."

¹³Ibid., 77.

¹⁴Ibid., 98.

¹⁵Anton Slodnjak, Slovensko slovstvo (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1968), 423.

¹⁶Lino Legiša, Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva (Ljubljana: Slovenska Matica, 1957-71), Vol. VI, 396.

¹⁷Voranc, op. cit., 266.

THE WASTE LAND IN A STATE OF SIEGE:
 COMMENTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY SLOVENE NOVEL*

Milena Davison

So much has been written on the contemporary novel that the very sky threatens to be darkened by the proliferation of criticism, theories and chic descriptive phrases surrounding it. Even nonspecialists must be tired of hearing about the death of the novel and of its attendant reincarnations into the anti-novel, the self-reflexive novel, the self-destructive novel, into surfiction, into literature of exhaustion. Fascinating as many contemporary novels are, I think they are fascinating increasingly and almost exclusively to academics. Few are readable or enjoyable or meaningful. They are essentially enclosed games of various degrees of sophistication: some more like a good old-fashioned game of hide and seek, others more like prohibitively complex chess games with no discernible rules. One tends to agree eagerly with Burroughs' summary of some of his own prose: "I've done writing that I thought was interesting, experimentally, but simply not readable."¹ Or with Czeslaw Milosz's general reservations: "... I have to force myself to read a [contemporary] novel as if warned in advance by the boredom emanating from the devices one knows so well."²

I use these admittedly commonplace observations on the contemporary novel as a thesis against which to comment on the contemporary Slovene novel. On the whole, the Slovene novel seems to me much less self-indulgent than the work of such preeminent figures as Beckett or Barth. While not reactionary or outmoded in structure or style, the Slovene novel nonetheless has provocative and current and human

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