

Slovenian LGBTQ Narrative in the New Millennium

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Abstract: Since 2000, literary and political activities of sexual minorities in Slovenia have remained interconnected and interdependent. Despite an increase in hostility towards those who are perceived as different, literary accomplishments have significantly improved, which is obvious from the large production of narratives. Gay and lesbian studies in these works are gradually incorporating queer theory, and narratives by sexual minorities are contributing significantly and in novel ways to Slovenian literature. These are: the predominance of lesbian themes, motives, and main characters; the emergence of a transgender literary character; absence of victimisation; and difference as a reflection of subversiveness on the narrative level. For my analytical-interpretative approach I chose narratives written by authors who have published texts in which they have obviously and clearly introduced the theme of sexual minorities; moreover, the selected authors are “out” and representatives of the LGBTQ+ scene: Brane Mozetič, Nataša Sukič, Suzana Tratnik, Gojmir Polajnar, Urška Sterle, Jedrt Lapuh Maležič, Vesna Lemaič, Teja Oblak, and Nina Dragičević.

Keywords: gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, Slovene LGBTQ narratives

The article¹ asks whether the political activities and literary production by sexual minorities have received a more democratic treatment in the new millennium, and explores the situation in the field of Slovenian narrative art after 2000. I will first briefly present the LGBTQ+ activity on the Slovenian scene, and then analyse and interpret nine narratives by the following authors:² Brane Mozetič, Nataša Sukič, Suzana Tratnik,

1 The author acknowledges the financial support from the Slovenian Research Agency (research core funding No. P6-0265).

2 For reasons of space, I analyse only one work by each author. I selected authors who have published quality literary works in which they have clearly used the theme of sexual minorities; who are “out”, and who have already achieved recognition in Slovenia.

Gojmir Polajnar, Urška Sterle, Jedrt Lapuh Maležič, Vesna Lemaić, Teja Oblak, and Nina Dragičević. In my analyses, I will refer to the findings of gay and lesbian studies, while also considering some of the fundamental premises of queer studies, which are still largely unrecognized in Slovenia.

Like in many other countries, gay and lesbian literature in Slovenia is linked to the development of the gay and lesbian movement. Its origins date back to the mid-1980s, and coincide with the publication of the anthology of translated and original (i.e., Slovenian) homoerotic literature, and the foundation of the specialized ŠKUC³ book series Lambda and Vizibilija (Tratnik, *Samo* 94-96). In the subsequent years, these collections have encouraged the representatives of the LGBTQ scene to write and publish their work. Crucial for the development of gay and lesbian movement and literature was the first Magnus festival of homosexual culture, which took place in Ljubljana in 1984, followed by a few alternative publications that emerged within the gay community. In October 1987 *Mladina* magazine published the supplement “We Love Women” with translated and original texts, which is considered the official beginning of the lesbian movement in Slovenia. Although the movement later developed in a variety of directions, comprising other sexual and gender minorities in the process, the two central spaces of the movement are still the gay club Tiffany and lesbian club Monokel at Metelkova in Ljubljana (Velikonja 69). The reason for that is primarily the fact that the two clubs have been operating without interruption for twenty years.

The term *gay studies/criticism* encompasses a broad field of research (Childers and Hentzi 120), including feminist research into the historical construction of gender as well as anti-homophobic theories of the historical production and reproduction of sexuality. Both lesbian and gay studies are political in the sense that they acknowledge the marginalized and minority discourses, reflect on the formation of the canon, and question the types and effects of repression. Lesbian studies were less developed even during the period of the rise of gay studies. Nevertheless, in a very short time, lesbian studies have managed to create their own (and not merely common) history. It is a history they sometimes have to fight for even in the context of “straight” feminism or the gay movement in order to be regarded as an equal within an already established movement, or as a variant in the context of other movements (Childers and Hentzi 167-168). While traditional gay/lesbian literary scholarship attempts to establish “the truth” about the sexual orientation of an author/literary character/text, queer theory is more interested in establishing why certain views seem self-evident and in identifying the mechanisms behind heteronormativity (Zavrl 105). The queer approach maintains the criticism of a unified identity, accentuating sexual non-normativity instead of sexual identity. The queer movement and queer theory are located precisely where the analysis

3 ŠKUC is one of the most prominent non-profit organizations for cultural production in Slovenia.

of the production of the modern body merges with the arrival of the postmodern bodies to the scene (Andrieu and Boetsch 239-242).

Queer theory – despite the criticism directed at its indeterminacy, excessiveness and transgressiveness – is a modern discipline that has provided scholarship and everyday life with many benefits;⁴ for instance, the terminological amelioration of existing discourse, the raising of biopolitical issues, and the establishing of connections between queer theory and narratology. Especially the latter represents an important updating of literary scholarship. Since a number of queer theory pioneers have made significant contributions to narrative theory (e.g., de Lauretis, Miller, Sedgwick) as well as analysed narrative texts, queer theory has aligned with narratology from the very beginning. It is precisely through the development of strategies for narrative analysis (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 478) that queer theory strives to find innovative ways of questioning. Its goal is not to simply identify certain authors or works as *queer*, but also to subject canonical or heterosexual texts to queer reading (to so-called *queering*). Apart from that, an important contribution of queer theory to the theory of narrative is also the questioning of the relationship between narrative structure and sexuality.

The analytical-interpretative method I will employ in my treatment of the texts is an attempt to contribute to the reflection on and the formation of a Slovenian/European literary canon, examining the types and effects of suppression of marginalized or minority discourses in the process. These concerns belong to the domain of gay and lesbian studies. However, in my readings of the texts I will combine this traditional method with the study of characterisation and narrative – that is, the approach contributed by queer theory. Queer analysis of characterisation not only places homosexual characters into a certain context or defines their behaviour; it also reveals how frustrating the expectations regarding sexual identity are for these characters. In my exploration of the narrative structure, I will observe how it deviates from the traditional principles of story coherence and narrative ending. It is logical that less predictable non-normative sexual practices not only depict “different” kinds of sexuality on the thematic level – i.e., the story (e.g., narcissism, fetishism, anal eroticism) – but also introduce various innovations and diversions on the narrative level.

Brane Mozetič (1958) is a poet, writer, editor, translator, promotor of Slovenian literature, and the most established Slovenian gay activist. The main protagonist of his third novel, *Objemi norosti* (Embraces of madness, 2015), is a gay man who is spending a summer month translating in a translators’ colony in an unnamed country. In this novel, madness – a recurrent theme in Mozetič’s work – refers even to the paranoid

4 No particular attention will be paid to the acknowledged advantages cited in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Herman, Jahn and Ryan 477), i.e. the expression of “newfound discontinuities within the sex-gender-sexuality system” (Sedgwick), “resignif[ication of] apparently stable terms of identity” (Butler), and prediction of an incomplete and undeveloped perverse future (Berlant and Warner).

fear of refugees. It is, in fact, through the lens of this particular aspect of madness that the author criticises social anomalies. How does sexuality relate to the novel's narrative structure? Combining the realistic-naturalistic style with the asceticism of a reporter's gaze and uncompromising sincerity, the writer bypassed the Slovenian literary tradition of treating homosexuality as a morally perverted or merely ethereal relationship (Zupan Sosič, *Robovi* 328).

The existential anxiety caused by sexual identity is considerably more pronounced in the lesbian novel *Bazen* (The pool, 2017) by Nataša Sukič (1962). In her fourth novel, the writer, DJ, lesbian activist and politician places her literary character, an unnamed young woman, in a situation of making a decision about her lesbianism. Since she is growing up in a conservative environment and in a dysfunctional family, the revelation of her lesbian identity is extremely difficult. Like in Sukič's other narratives, the main structural principle is the fragment. Although in this novel the fragmentarity on the level of the story is less obvious due to the characteristics of the Bildungsroman, it is considerably more prominent on the narrative and structural line. According to queer theory, such deviations from the traditional narrative line reveal non-classical sexual practice, and tend to loosen the heteronormative (narrative) formulas.

Suzana Tratnik (1963) is a writer, translator, publicist, sociologist and lesbian activist; in her 2001 novel *My Name is Damjan* she ascribed existential anxiety to the transgender⁵ Damjan. The titular hero is a transgender person, a woman who feels like a man and who, revealingly, repeats time and again that he has no traumas and that there is nothing wrong with him; that he is completely "normal". It was due to Damjan's identity confusion that the novel was initially inaccurately described as the first Slovenian lesbian novel, while today we can identify it as the first Slovenian transgender novel. The first Slovenian lesbian novel is *Third World* (2007) by the same author. Queer narrative analysis often reveals that less predictable sexual practices not only depict "queer" types of sexuality but also narrative innovations. This is also the case in this novel as the transgender person is extraordinary already on the structural level: Damjan's identity puzzle is also a narrative enigma. A transgender character also appears in the short story collection *Družinske parabole* (Family parables, 2005) by Gojmir Polajnar⁶ (1964), although

5 Transgender is an umbrella term for various phenomena, such as transgender positions, transsexuality, transvestism, intersexuality, etc. Based on their gender identity, a transgender person does not conform to the established division of the biological sexes and social genders, or fluctuates between them, thus transcending the binary divide. The term transvestite refers to drag kings and drag queens, and to male and female cross-dressers. A transsexual is a person who identifies with a gender that does not correspond to the one they were assigned at birth, and they often seek medical help to transition to the desired sex and gender (Bibič et al.).

6 Gojmir Polajnar is a pseudonym used by philosopher, sociologist and writer Boris Pintar, who has been living abroad for a long time. In Slovenia the gay literary scene has been diluted in the recent years, since almost all gay authors live beyond the country's borders. For instance, Milan Šelj lives in London, Uroš Prah in Vienna, Aljaž Koprivnikar between Prague and Lisbon, and Gašper Malej in various places around the globe.

the main protagonists are gay men. The basic structure of the realistic stories in this collection is parabolic and grotesque; the stories juxtapose various events or states with a truth that is generally revealed as a paradox. This truth is similar to the message that most of the novels and short stories addressed in this study convey: the conservative, ordinary patriarchal clerical environment that rejects those who are sexually different is also hostile towards those who are nationally and socially different. The patriarchal matrix not only discards the gay and the transsexual, it also violently attacks the foreign and the poor.

The functioning of the fairy tale structure in writer, translator, performer and activist Urška Sterle's (1979) short story collection *Vечно vojno stanje* (Eternal martial law, 2010) is similarly subversive as that of the parable model in Polajnar's book. The first person narrator moves through the city and analyses and evaluates in Marxist terms the capitalist sludge that various literary characters wade through. The selection of the people from the margin as the main protagonists reflects the author's view of the margin as rebellious, critical and creative. The central perspective is lesbian, and a central figure is that of a female dragon, a monster that the lesbian body received from the heteronormative society. This perspective may also be interpreted as activism and the author's personal eternal martial law, since the lesbian body is a site where the effects of betrayals, everyday fascisms and conformisms are even more blatantly manifested than elsewhere.

The short stories in writer and translator Jedrt Lapuh Maležič's (1979) collection *Bojne barve* (War paint, 2016) are also set at the intersection of the lesbian and straight worlds. Based on their positioning, the literary protagonists, all members of the LG-BTQ community, are roughly divided into two groups: one consists of lesbians, gays, transgender people or transsexuals, and the other of their opponents, usually homophobes who strive to harm or even to destroy them. Little wonder, then, that the lesbians embark on a battle with the world only when they cover themselves with layers of cosmetics – the (titular) war paint. The traditional narrative feels contemporary only due to the structure of the speech. According to queer theory, the criticism of the heteronormative formulas in this collection is therefore reflected on the level of the story, much less on the level of narrative.

This sort of reflection is also the case in activist and writer Vesna Lemaič's (1981) novel *Kokoška in ptiči* (Hen and the birds, 2014): the level of the story is subversive, while the narrative level is significantly less so. The main character in this straightforward and realistic text is a lesbian who narrates the story about the 15o (15 October) movement and the events during the six-month occupation of the area in front of the Ljubljana Stock Exchange in 2011 and 2012; the style is testimonial, corroborated by documentarism. The narrative abounds in factual data, links to websites, media reports, a police record, articles about the responses to the protests, etc. Compared to other LGBTQ narratives, this is the only Slovenian novel in which the main protagonist is

not frustrated about revealing her lesbian identity. It seems that these frustrations are completely obscured by the protest engagement.

Lesbian protagonists experience a significantly larger amount of identity confusion in activist and writer Teja Oblak's (1983) short story collection *Kadetke, tovornjakarice in tete* (Twinkets, dieseldykes and queens, 2012). In these stories, the identity confusion is implicit also on the narrative level, specifically in the comic distance. The book diverges from classical realist poetics through its consistent humour and erotization of the story line. For Oblak, eroticism is the essential ingredient of lesbian identity, which is signalled by the motto at the beginning of the book, by the quotation by Audre Lorde. The consistent humorous vitalism charts a new dimension in Slovenian lesbian literature, as it evades victimisation. In this collection, victim positions – which are the *sine qua non* of literature written by sexual minorities in Slovenia – are completely ignored.

Due to their obvious linearity, the narratives by Lapuh Maležič, Lemač and Oblak function rather traditionally. *Kdo ima druge skrbi* (Who has other worries, 2014), a novel by poet, writer, composer, producer and activist Nina Dragičević (1984), is notably different. Observed from the perspective of queer theory combined with narrative theory, the inquiries into the relationships between the narrative structure and sexuality are decidedly innovative. The organization of this modernist narrative is utterly untraditional both linguistically and structurally. The narrative line is not only interrupted by un/connected references, but also by lyricisation⁷ and scenarisation, i.e., by the addition of lyrical and dramatic elements, which are structurally the most obvious on the level of form. Dragičević's novel is also a convenient cue for some final remarks, as it contains three of the four important changes the Slovenian LGBTQ narrative has undergone since 2000: the predominance of lesbian themes, motives and characters; absence of victimisation; and difference as a reflection of subversiveness on the narrative level. Due to the agrammaticality, associative logic and modernist verbosity of Dragičević's novel, the remaining novelty – the presence of a transgender literary character – cannot be established. The text does, however, thematise the fluidity of gender and other identity manifestations.

The predominance of lesbian themes and motives, as well as lesbian characters, is tightly connected to the Slovenian lesbian community, which is currently stronger and more active than the gay community. It is also more notable in terms of literary accolades. Victimisation is avoided in a variety of ways but most often by enhancing humour (cf. Lapuh Maležič, Lemač, Oblak, Sterle and Tratnik) or irony (Polajnar, Sterle,

⁷ Lyricisation is an instance of digression that transforms the narrative by the insertion of lyrical elements, which brings the narrative in the vicinity of lyrical poetry and lyricism. In contrast, scenarisation transforms the narrative through the insertion of dramatic elements in the manner of a screenplay – concretely, through the insertion of (internal) monologues and dialogues, through the creation of scenes in the narrative, as well as through adaptation to the structure of speech (Zupan Sosič, *Teorija* 336–337, and 371).

Dragičević), and by placing literary characters outside the hospital (the most frequent setting in the previous century). On the narrative level, victimisation is avoided by employing essayisation to reflect on the sexual difference, and consequently abolish the passivity of the victim of heteronormativity. The subversiveness on the narrative level, combined with characterisation analysis, is actually the perspective that queer theory considers the most important. Narrative innovations of this kind can be found in *My name is Damjan*, *Bazen*, *Družinske parabole*, *Večno vojno stanje* and *Kdo ima druge skrbi*. Literary characters are generally frustrated by the expectations regarding their sexual identity, and their identity crises are connected to the criticism of society. A transgender character is present in one novel (Tratnik's *My Name is Damjan*)⁸ and in three collections of short stories (Lapuh Maležič, Oblak and Polajnar). Due to its extra-literary character, I have not yet mentioned the fifth novelty that is just as exciting: since 2000, 29⁹ prose narrative books have been written by the representatives of sexual minorities who explicitly thematise LGBTQ issues.

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8 Transgender issues also appear in Nataša Sukič's novel *Molji živijo v prahu*.

9 The sum of all narrative books by the analysed nine authors is 29 (not counting works for children and young adults): Mozetič 2, Sukič 6, Tratnik 9, Polajnar and Pintar 2, Sterle 3, Lapuh Maležič 2, Lemaič 3, Oblak 1, Dragičević 1. Due to its blatant triviality, I did not analyse Mojca Vakselj's novel *MiaXara*.

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