

## FROM OBJECTS TO SUBJECTS: BODY IMAGERY IN CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN WOMEN'S PROSE

### *SUMMARY*

The end of the twentieth century brought significant literary changes to contemporary Lithuanian women's prose. After Lithuania's restoration of its independence in 1990, the number of women writers in Lithuania and their texts have grown rapidly. Such a sudden eruption of women's writing also is characteristic of that section of Europe known as the Eastern Bloc – countries marked by the repressive socialist regime. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, as the elitist status of writers fell and publishers began operating under market conditions, circumstances became more favorable for women's writing. The end of censorship, social changes in society, and changes in political, economic and cultural life opened new possibilities for self-expression and creative discourse. Social and political problems, topics that had been forbidden, suppressed, or coded in a subtle Aesopian language, became distinctive literary hallmarks of a society in transition to independence.

With this new tradition, a distinct divide emerged: Lithuanian women writers distanced themselves from the truths proposed by contemporary tropes of literature and instead imitated the real world, relating stories of the everyday and the intimate. The themes at the center of women writers' attention are social problems, women's everyday life, and a search for identity, followed by a close attention to the body and its experiences. This attention to the material body, including the violence and disease it is prey to, are no longer avoided, although only two decades

ago such corporeal descriptions, even the very idea of it, were considered inappropriate, and were shunned in women's literature. Now, the body is revealed as an object of the grotesque, accenting its physical instead of its spiritual reality.

In an effort to evaluate the literary changes in contemporary Lithuanian women's literature, feminist analysis, which reflects the realities of life, is particularly helpful. Although the author of this study does not intend to consider that literature is a direct reflection of social realities, nourishing itself solely on the empirical experiences, Western feminists have nevertheless shown that the portrayal of women in literature reveals certain ideological models and their regulating affect on women. This aspect is particularly important in analyzing contemporary Lithuanian women's prose since, as literary analysis reveal, women's bodies unfold as a site directly affected by historical, cultural, and social influences in a changing society.

After the long years of the official denial of the body and sexuality in Soviet public life, the feminine body found itself at the epicenter of new ideologies. Women who had grown and matured in a Communist society had to reinvent themselves in the framework of the new Western standards. This sudden change of ideologies and their effect on women is a major culprit in the identity crises of the heroines in Zita Čepaitė, Jurga Ivanauskaitė, and Ugnė Barauskaitė's prose. These writers employ various narrative elements such as irony, grotesque, and carnival in their works to portray the inner conflict of protagonists trapped in the web of Soviet and Western cultural norms and ideologies that are repressive towards women's bodies. The gap between the real and cultural images of the female body is expressed in various forms of trauma. Thus the imagery of the suffering body in contemporary women's literature becomes a literary device to represent women's traumatic experience and memory in a postcolonial society; body imagery attests to the silenced and denied authentic experiences of women, offering stylistic and rhetorical possibilities in the light of the new discourse.

The heroines pictured by Čepaitė, Ivanauskaitė, and Barauskaitė, as well as Audronė Urbonaitė and Jolita Skablauskaitė, are unavoidably influenced by Western feminism ideas: they are individualists who question gender categories, reconsider the depiction of the female body in traditional literature, and are not afraid to openly address the social injuries. One of the most persistent themes – woman as an erotic object – is touched upon by all of previously named writers. Even though they employ various narrative strategies to address this topic, their purpose, it seems, is solid: the close attention paid to the material body, its senses, fluids, and natural processes in contemporary Lithuanian women's prose challenge the previous normalizing literary images of women as ideal daughters, wives, and mothers. The grotesque bodily imagery and authentic everyday bodily experiences undermine the dominating discourse, which had erased female subjectivity in literature and had treated woman's body like an object. In the works of women writers, the close attention to the material body deconstructs symbolic literary images and helps insert a denied female body paradigm into the Lithuanian literary context.