

Is Ilze Jansone's *Insomnia* *the Latvian Well of Loneliness?*¹

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Abstract. The novel *Insomnia* by the young Latvian prose writer Ilze Jansone was the first contemporary Latvian novel dedicated to lesbian identity. It is productive to look at the questions raised in this novel in comparison to the well-known lesbian novel by the English author Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness*, which caused considerable controversy at the time of its publication. These books have been written in different times and places, still there are some points that make Jansone's approach similar to Hall's: the presence of religion, the importance of the father figure (God the Father) and other issues of gender. Taking into account various queer theorists' attempts to categorise Hall's protagonist as a martyr, a masculine woman, a Christ-like person and in other ways in this paper we try to look for similarities between Hall's and Jansone's protagonists.

Keywords: lesbians, female masculinity, homosexuality, Latvian novel, God the Father

Historical Context

Male homosexuality in the Baltic states was decriminalized in 1992. The attitude towards female homosexuality changed as well. It was no longer regarded as psychological pathology. However, queer subjectivity in Latvian literature surfaced very gradually, there was no Latvian equivalent to the Estonian Emil Tode's novel *Piiririik* (*Border State*, 1993) with a homosexual protagonist. At the beginning of the 1990s homosexuals appeared in short prose, usually endowed with stereotypical qualities (feminine and hysterical men, sometimes AIDS inflicted, dressed in women's clothing; pairs of butch/femme type

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women), but only in the first years of the 21st century did the first gay protagonists appear in novels. These novels did not represent realistic narrative and the ideology of the *Gay Liberation* movement, their protagonists were not based in the social reality of contemporary Latvia. Authors developed unrealistic plots or offered speculations on an alternative history of Latvia – *Siržu zagļa uznāciens* (*Enter the Stealer of Hearts*) by Zigmunds Skujiņš and *1945 Rīga* by Ainārs Zelčs (both 2001) – or created self-contained, isolated worlds where the protagonists live and seek spiritual closeness to their beloved as in *Rono. Rono...* by Anita Rožkalne (2010).

After Ilze Jansone's (born 1982) second book, her novel *Insomnia* was published in 2010, it was received as a manifesto of lesbian experience with a viewpoint of specific lesbian subjectivity. At the same time the book was accused of not paying enough attention to questions of Latvian queers and their problems (Melgalve 2010). However, both the author and critics accented the universal nature of Jansone's story as recommendable to the general public.

The plot of the novel is very simple and develops slowly, being told from the viewpoint of Padma (an uncommon name for a Latvian woman, meaning 'Lotus'). She is a young woman who gets into a relationship with a woman named Rasa. After a peaceful time of living together, Rasa leaves Padma who is then broken hearted and experiences feelings of emptiness and despair. Between intense monologues, dedicated to God, full of questions, reproach and blasphemy, Padma engages in one night stands with different women, sometimes ruining these women's relationships with their male or female lovers. The novel ends with a promise of a new *femme fatale* – Padma accidentally meets a woman who reminds her of Rasa in some ways. The circle has ended and a new one can begin.

Jansone's book shows similarities to the classic lesbian novel by Radclyffe Hall (1880–1943), *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), which traces the life of a lesbian woman Stephen in her childhood and adolescence, and later on as a grown-up. Her parents were expecting a boy, so she was given a boy's name Stephen. She is a boyish girl who loves her father very much, but her mother remains emotionally cold. Her first love affair with another woman ends with her getting outed, and she is forced to leave England for Paris which has a liberal atmosphere in the artistic circles. There she meets Mary and starts a relationship with her. However, at the end of the novel Stephen sends Mary away as she is aware that she cannot make Mary happy. Religious feelings play an important part in the novel – Stephen prays asking painful questions and longs for understanding and happiness. As Diana Souhami writes, this novel has mixed ideological and aesthetic viewpoints; it “has aspects of pathological case history,

religious parable, propaganda tract and *Mills & Boon* romance”² (Hall 2008: x). Soon after its publication the book was condemned as obscene libel and prohibited in England (ib. viii).

As Judith Halberstam notes, *The Well of Loneliness* is a “story of inversion” (Halberstam 1998: 75) for it leads to the understanding of homosexuality as “inversion” according to the theory of Richard von Kraft-Ebbing and other 19th century authors who defined homosexuals as a third sex or “sexual inverts”: people with same-sex desires, in their opinion, suffered from a gender disorder and were women in men’s bodies or vice versa (Mottier 2008: 38–39).

Hall consciously used this theory as a background for her work and its political aim – to speak in the name of all “inverts”, showing their right to exist. Her novel is told from the viewpoint of the “invert” – we follow Stephen’s development, see her desires and the challenges she experiences in a homophobic society. As Gregory Woods emphasizes, one of the most significant features in *The Well of Loneliness* is that it has no mediating heterosexual voice that could comfort the reader seeking “touchstones of normality” (Woods 1998: 205).

As Hall shows to the reader, the fate of an invert is already predicted by sexologists. There is a scene in the second book of Hall’s novel when Stephen finds a book by Kraft-Ebbing in the house’s library and reads her late father’s notes on the margins of the book, learning that her father classified his daughter’s behavior as that of an invert:

Then suddenly she had got to her feet and was talking aloud – she was talking to her father: ‘You knew! All the time you knew this thing, but because of your pity you wouldn’t tell me. Oh, Father – and there are so many of us – thousands of miserable, unwanted people, who have no right to love, no right to compassion because they’re maimed, hideously maimed and ugly – God’s cruel; He let us get flawed in the making.’ (Hall 2008: 231)

After learning what her desires are all about, Stephen has to play the role of one of the “miserable, unwanted people”.

The novel by Hall has no tradition of reception in Latvia. The only article which mentions her work is an overview of English contemporary literature by professor William Matthews, an Englishman who resided in Latvia between the wars, published in 1936, where he speaks of Virginia Woolf, Radclyff Hall, Sylvia T. Warner and other women authors as developers of the English novel, accenting that “in their works they show sharply realistic tendencies,

² Mills & Boon – British publishing house of romance books; in 1930s specialized in escapist fiction for women.

they are completely open and discuss questions of life from an ironically critical viewpoint, which can be regarded as a reaction to the exaggerated sentimentality of the Victorian age” (Matthews 1936: 68, translated by the authors). The lesbian theme was not even mentioned in this article, as it had disappeared from public discourse in the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis, established in 1934.

Thus lesbian subjectivity is a completely new apparition in 21st century Latvian writing and has to be created from scratch. An interesting and totally forgotten example of an attempt to create such lesbian subjectivity is a novel by actress and writer Tija Banga (1882–1957), *Sieviete (A Woman)*, published in 1930, told from the viewpoint of a cynical man, in which lesbianism was interpreted rather as female solidarity against male sexist attitudes, however, perceived as a mysterious, secret cult.

According to Judith Butler and other feminist and queer theorists, a category such as “woman” has been deconstructed. Jansone uses this situation raising the questions of gender identity of homosexual women and the understanding of sexuality as a changing and performative thing that cannot be trusted.

In *Insomnia*, the relationship between two women takes place in an isolated environment – returning from work or studies they cocoon in their rented apartment and experience every impulse from outside as a disturbance. Totally concentrated on their feelings, they do not see any relationship between the passionate debates about homosexuality and Riga Pride events that shocked Latvian society in the first decade of the 21st century and their own experience – their self-contained life seems to prove the very possibility of lesbian existence.

Towards Female Masculinity

Analyzing the psychology of the protagonist of Hall’s novel, her masculine features are obvious. As various authors have mentioned, the protagonist of Hall’s novel can be classified not only as lesbian but also as a transgender person – her identification with a masculine role is crucial to her personality (Halberstam 1998). Stephen’s psychology has been analysed by Teresa de Lauretis in her book *The Practice of Love* from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis, stressing the fear of castration and its significance in lesbian subjectivity (De Lauretis 1994: xvii–xviii, 203–256).

Partially, masculinity has been seen as the very core of a lesbian’s identity. As Judith Roof explains Freud’s theory: “The lesbian is the girl who loves her father so much that she identifies with him, eschewing all other men to be like her father the oedipal son, loving other women in despair of him” (Roof 1996:

100). Protagonists of both Hall and Jansone feel a very strong attachment to their fathers. Jansone frequently depicts Padma's father, called Pilot, as a comforter who gives his daughter good advice when his help is needed, he is caring and understands his daughter's desires and suffering. In an interview Jansone explains: "in Christianity, we take the word "Father" as a divine God the Father, always present and absolute. Therefore the character of the father is idealised." (Skulte 2010, translated by authors)

When Padma's and Rasa's relationship is stable, masculine self-identification is absent. After the relationship falls apart, Padma seeks comfort in promiscuity, one-night stands and teasing relationships with different girls – behaviour that she considers masculine in her reflections. Counting her affairs, she states: "There are lots of trashy chicks, I screw them cynically and then dump them, often I don't even ask them their names because what they're called is meaningless and I don't want intimacy. I want sex." (Jansone 2010: 139, translated by the authors)

There is at least one episode which shows female masculinity as a funny variety of gender-blending. After one of her affairs, this time with Daina, a girl Padma has known before, Daina's husband finds out about Daina's infidelity. A humorous phone conversation ensues where the shocked man tries to formulate his feelings – the gender of the third person in the love triangle does not fit in his understanding of how the situation could be solved: "if you were another man... I could talk to you man to man, hit you in the eye and that's it, but what can I do now? [...] I have no idea how I got myself into such a mess. She loves me not you, you perverted sodomite!" (Jansone 2010:118) Instead of answering his abuse, Padma starts to repeat his phrases, making the man hear his own sentences repeated and inflaming him even more. In this way she is dissolving the border between male and female, aggressor and victim, an officially sanctioned relationship and an illicit affair, making the quarrel impossible.

In another episode, thinking about masturbating while recalling her lost love, she uses the words "jerking off in the fist", in the next sentence correcting herself, arguing that it is impossible to say such things about girls. However, another possible version "to caress herself" also does not fit and gets classified as "bullshit" (Jansone 2010: 127). It is followed by the understanding of the impossibility of acquiring the role of a male: "I'd like to be a tall, mature man with dark hair, to buy a bottle of the best French wine and call at your door. But I'm a Peeping Tom who lives in a rented flat, pays bills on the first day of the month and drinks straight from the bottle without putting on gloves." (Jansone 2010: 127)

So, as can be seen from the novel, masculinity is used to describe models of behaviour that seem to be impossible for a woman: sexual promiscuity, courageous fights for a beloved woman, games of seduction and a cynical attitude to sex partners. At the same time, Padma's father Pilot is a peaceful man, not a manifestation of her Super ego or role model for promiscuity – he makes no demands on her but also cannot serve as an example.

God the Father

In both novels religion has a very strong presence and appears in different contexts. Both protagonists pray to God, fantasise about him in different ways, imagining his character, appearance and other features. As a child, Stephen reflects:

Yet when Nanny washed things they only smelt soapy – but then, of course, God washed the world without soap: being God, perhaps He didn't need any – you needed a lot, especially for hands – did God wash His hands without soap? (Hall 2008: 30–31)

Later, when Stephen has grown up, she still imagines God's presence, trying to create an image of a friendly, understanding God:

Yet Stephen, these days, was not given to prayer, God had grown so unreal, so hard to believe in since she had studied Comparative Religion; engrossed in her studies she had somehow mislaid Him. But now, here she was, very wishful to pray, while not knowing how to explain her dilemma: 'I'm terribly unhappy, dear, improbable God –' would not be a very propitious beginning. And yet at this moment she was wanting a God and a tangible one, very kind and paternal; a God with a white flowing beard and wide forehead, a benevolent parent – Who would lean out of Heaven and turn His face sideways the better to listen from His cloud, upheld by cherubs and angels. What she wanted was a wise old family God, surrounded by endless heavenly relations. (Hall 2008: 77)

At the conclusion of the book Stephen, alone after sending her lover Mary away, prays once more: "'God,' she gasped, 'we believe; we have told You we believe... We have not denied You, then rise up and defend us. Acknowledge us, oh God, before the whole world. Give us also the right to our existence!'" (Hall 2008: 496)

The Well of Loneliness is a turning point in English lesbian literature, still it is a product of its time – the more the heroine fulfills her desire, the more isolated and unhappy she becomes. Identification with a masculine “inverted” identity simultaneously makes her a sinner in the eyes of a patriarchal society and, in her mind, incurs the anger of God the Father. As Jonathan Dollimore has noted, speaking of this book, “lesbians were able to identify themselves, often for the first time, albeit in the very language of their oppression” (Dollimore 1991: 48). To him, Stephen the invert is “nothing less than a blend of Cain and Christ, simultaneously transgressing God’s law and sacrificing herself to save an ignorant, philistine humanity” (Dollimore 1991: 49).

Some similarities can also be found in Jansone’s novel. However, if Hall’s novel takes place in a society where Christianity is the norm then Jansone’s novel portrays a time when Christianity is a choice, not typically chosen by homosexuals. Nevertheless, Jansone too uses images of martyrs and outcasts, for example, in the moment when Padma and Rasa symbolically get married: “Two identical rings. Ceremony for these two, unloved by the Church.” (Jansone 2010: 93) However, the protagonist of the novel does not really fear God the Father. She is rather a very spoiled child to her “father” and dares to criticise and ridicule him constantly:

And the same thing happens in theology, I know, I’ve studied it. We all love that big-titted God born in a bathroom or on the way to work, or sometimes in church. Big-titted God chock full of noxious chemical additives, on-a-roll God, blonde God, brunette God, bathing-suited God, God with make-up, home and pets, yes, in the end, God as Ken, short-changed God who doesn’t even have a circumcised plastic penis, this sexless creature that we try to stuff into at least one gender. (Jansone 2010: 45)

Such outbursts serve as evidence of her need for an ideal, unattainable image of an absolute God that is always overshadowed by some concrete, physical object of desire. The problem lies in the absence of God, not in his strong presence which would make her think of sin and punishment, just like Hall’s Stephen. This absence makes it possible to break every rule and not be punished. As Judith Roof has pointed out: “in a culture whose reproductive laws have become increasingly unstable, homosexuality becomes a wild card in the social deck, chosen at random, and contained in the degenerate atmosphere of the Father’s temporary decline” (Roof 1996: 101). This atmosphere of decline can also be observed in Padma’s emotional reactions to various challenges of her love life; as she rants in one of her outbursts: “tonight God is a mosaic, made of little

pieces, taken apart and haphazardly glued together again. I hate this God who can't even be dead because it already is – glued together.” (Jansone 2010: 138).

Conclusion

From the lesbian feminist viewpoint, both Hall and Jansone speak the language of their oppressors: fighting against the prejudices of patriarchal societies, they nevertheless use a masculine identification. English literature of the first half of the 20th century and Latvian literature of the 21st century both seek for a positive identity of lesbian sexuality, and following the example of men seems to be the easiest way. The preoccupation with religious themes also serves as a challenging of the woman's role, traditionally associated with passivity and submissiveness.

One aspect in both novels accentuates the need for a language of one's own: both Stephen and Padma find writing an essential component of their lives and relationships, in spite of often unsatisfactory results. As Jansone indicates: “texts give her no peace; they urge, unsettle, make her take risks, challenge borders, dare.” (Jansone 2010: 13).

With her next book *Umurkumurs jeb Ardievas feminismam* (*Hunger-kummer or Farewell to Feminism*, 2013) Jansone crosses borders again, releasing many of her heroines from a lesbian identity and dedicating her stories to her utopian project: finding ways of self-identification that are not based on any ideology. In this project she uses metaphors of human physiology and explores bodies of both male and female characters, thus moving far away from notions of gender and sexuality that have been characteristic of 20th century lesbian prose.

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