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Men's Anxiety: A Reflection on Changing Sexual Norms in Soviet Lithuanian Literature of the 'Thaw' Period

Abstract

The article aims to analyse the social and cultural change of the society reflected in the literature written by Soviet Lithuanian male writers in the 1960s, during the late 'thaw' period, which was chosen to be analysed through the prism of sexual norms. The aim is to show that an analysis of the male gaze can reveal not only the patriarchal power expressed through literature, but also a wider range of men's reactions to life in Soviet society and its changes. The article examines four works by writers of the Soviet period, whose works were translated into 15–20 languages: Justinas Marcinkevičius' novella *The Pine That Laughed*, Mykolas Sluckis' novel *Adam's Apple*, Alfonsas Bieliauskas' novel *The Kaunas Novel*, and Juozas Baltušis' short story '*A Girl Passed By*'.

Through the socio-cultural tensions related to sexual norms and practices, these writers reflect on the changing social reality through the still dominant patriarchal gaze. However, this reflection is ambiguous, dynamic and imbued with doubt and anxiety about the modernisation of society, especially the emerging new roles and status of women. The overt reproach

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and didacticism expressed by men in literature are interpreted as a feeling of moral panic that the patriarchal power is weakening, a process of changes is approaching, and that nothing can stop them.

Keywords

Soviet literature, sexual norms, Alfonsas Bieliauskas, Mykolas Sluckis, Justinas Marcinkevičius, Juozas Baltušis, Soviet Lithuania.

The literature of Soviet-occupied Lithuania in the second half of the twentieth century was dominated by male writers, despite some very prominent female writers. Therefore, when analysing and evaluating the imagery of gender roles and relations in this literature, it has been repeatedly stated from a feminist perspective that prose and poetry tended to maintain a conservatively patriarchal, male perspective. Over several decades of Soviet occupation (1940–1941, 1944–1990), the images formed in Lithuanian literature varied somewhat. The literary scholar Solveiga Daugirdaitė (2019) has shown that until the end of the 1950s, there was an effort to deploy an ideological image of women's pseudo-emancipation. Then, over the course of a couple of decades as literature became more and more modern, the traditional gender relations were consolidated, and with the fall of the Soviet system post-modern versions of the same themes were developed. The literary scholar Jurgita Žana Raškevičiūtė (2018) has noted that even when men's literature depicted women who were emancipated according to Soviet ideology, ideological clichés were repeated. When the literature shifted to a more personal register of speech, the traditionally patriarchal images of the woman-mother were used again. While explaining precisely and thoroughly how images of women were shaped in men's literature, this feminist analysis pays too little attention to men themselves and their self-understanding. Without denying the permanence of their dominance, it is nevertheless possible to consider that an analysis of the male gaze may reveal not only

patriarchal power, but also the more varied reactions of male writers to the life of Soviet society and its changes.

This article proposes to look at a relatively short, but politically and culturally significant period of change in the Soviet period, known as the thaw. Historians disagree on how to assess the political and cultural changes that began in the USSR during Nikita Khrushchev's rule as, especially in the republics occupied after the war, these changes seemed highly relative and ambivalent in terms of 'liberation' (Streikus, 2018). However, the political, legal, economic and social reforms of the time can also be seen as an effort by the government to find new channels of communication and forms of coexistence with the new urbanised society (Jones, 2006), which required new tools to manage. Soviet Lithuania, like other countries occupied by the USSR during the Second World War, had some specific characteristics: repression and mass deportations in the second half of the 1940s profoundly altered the social fabric of society; armed resistance to the Soviets ended in 1953. As a result, society lived under war conditions for almost ten years longer than in Western Europe and suffered long-term social consequences (e.g. loss of young men, sexual violence against women). Even after the resistance had been suppressed, the Soviet authorities were always afraid of its resurgence, which is why in Soviet Lithuania and the Baltic countries in general (the so-called Baltic republics), the regime had a more restrictive policy than in the other Soviet Republics in certain respects. However, during the thaw years, as the Soviet system attempted to move away from overt mass repression as a modus operandi towards self-discipline, more attention was paid to both diagnosing and improving the state of society (Ilič, 2009). Therefore, at that time, with the slow recovery from the consequences of the war, the modernisation of society was intensified. This meant a faster social change, the possibility of a deeper reflection of society than during the Stalinist era, and the exploitation of modernisation for the political and ideological purposes of the system that was proclaiming renewal. While political tensions were resolved behind the closed doors of the Communist Party elite, social and cultural tensions became more visible in the public sphere.

The aim of this article is to analyse the changes in the modernising society reflected in the literature produced by male writers during the late thaw period of the 1960s, sometimes referred to as the 'socialist Sixties' (Jones, 2017), which culminated in the Prague Spring of 1968. It is analysed through only one of the lenses of cultural and social change – that of sexual norms. Sexual norms are understood here as one of the most important components of any society's culture, consisting of the prevailing values, beliefs, symbols and practices that shape everyday sexual life. These determine what is considered 'normal life' in that society, i.e. what is acceptable to the majority of the members of the social group and what is considered deviant. The paternalistic role of the Soviet state, which had been entrenched during the Stalinist era, did not disappear. Still, during the thaw time it was supplemented by a greater emphasis on the needs and responsibilities of an individual (Jones, 2006). Besides, the modernisation of the state's role was acknowledged, so discussions of not only gender relations but also of sexuality gradually came more and more into the open. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a sign of cultural liberalisation, while on the other hand, sexuality was seen as another avenue for the education of an individual, suggesting that disciplinary pressures on it only increased (Klumbys and Vaiseta, 2022). In any case, this is one of the themes that emerged in the context of Khrushchev's renewal, which significantly marked the beginning of a turning point in value change and reflection.

Why literature? Theoretical problems and possibilities

Sexual norms in fiction can be analysed as representations, images and narratives. In other words, for the purpose of this paper, literature will be understood not as a direct reflection of reality, but as an artistic way of reflecting on reality and presenting the results of this reflection in aesthetic forms. In this sense, it is assumed that behind literature certain impulses of reality lead to the discussion of certain phenomena, but this does not mean that the images formed in a fictional work necessarily correspond to the phenomena of reality. This is because they are subjected to a complicated filter made of the

author's subjective world, cultural context and, in the case of Soviet Lithuania, political control. The already complicated relationship between artistic fiction and reality, which has long been the subject of endless academic debate, is further complicated in the case of Soviet literature. Such complication stems from the censorship exercised by the USSR and the method of 'socialist realism', which was imposed on all works of art from the mid-1930s.

The fact that the term socialist realism refers directly to reality does not bring the literature produced according to its principles any closer to reality; but it does suggest that the question of reality was important to the government that shaped the literature produced under this method. Boris Groys defined socialist realism as a method by which the present was to be represented as part of the future communist world in the making, i.e. as part of something that had not yet come into being, but was yet to come into being. Thus, the present was subordinated to the utopian project of the future and had to serve as a sign of the inevitable future world. Artworks were to present only those facts of reality that could be understood as reflecting (according to the Soviet ideology) the laws of history leading to communism (Groys, 2008). What Groys writes about is what the scholar of Soviet literature Katerina Clark would probably call the macrostructure of socialist realism, i.e. the system that structures all works of art. However, she points out that it is also possible to speak of microstructures in socialist realism literary works, i.e. plot twists, minor deviations from the standard and other details embracing more authorial choices. At this microstructural level, socialist realism literature often relied on quasi-journalistic themes, i.e. topical issues of the time (Clark, 1981). Ideological responsiveness to the events and processes of empirical reality was thus an important principle of socialist realism. Vera Dunham (1990), who examined the literature of the Stalinist period, has argued that the topical novel was one of several ways of satisfying the people's need to understand the everyday problems of their time. The Soviet regime used popular literature as an instrument to achieve this goal. In examining how the microstructures of socialist realism literature changed, Dunham demonstrated the regime's 'Big Deal' with the emerging middle class in the post-war USSR (primarily Soviet Russia) and

the accompanying conversion of public values. In other words, she demonstrated a way of analysing the actual values promoted by the regime and, by extension, the changes that were taking place in the society (Dunham 1990). The paper adopts Dunham's proposed mode of analysis, which relates literature to historical transformations of reality. Taking the view that literature is not a direct reflection of reality, but only a constructed image, it can nevertheless be seen as a reaction to real social and cultural changes. Through this, it is possible to understand certain value attitudes disseminated or attempted to be established. After 1956, fiction began to diversify thematically and stylistically (Satkauskytė, 2015), the power and influence of socialist realism waned and its modernisation began (Baliutytė and Mitaitė, 2011). At the same time – albeit cautiously, with critical scepticism, ideological warnings and political threats – 'socialist modernism' emerged, which began experiments in form, and provided an opportunity for subjective speech (Sprindytė, 2015). Modernist literature still retained elements of the socialist realism macrostructure to varying degrees, but it also increasingly moved away from the canonical goal of focusing on a utopian project of the future and increasingly focused on the present. In this way, modernising literature (at least novels and short stories) began to reflect on the processes of reality in its experimental, subjectively expressive forms, even more than traditional socialist realism literature. At times, it took on a hyper-reflexive character, when it tried to attract the readers' attention to particularly 'contemporary' issues. The modernising literature of Soviet Lithuania could not enter into any discussion of the political situation of the occupied country, but it increasingly concentrated on the social sphere and the private sphere, where the changes experienced and reflected upon became the main basis for the narratives produced. This is in line with Katherine Clark's (1981) more general observation that post-1956 literature was not concerned with the Soviet system, but with the problems of modern society. It is no coincidence that the motif of 'changing times' was popular in Soviet Lithuanian prose of the time: 'In these confused times, when values far greater than love are crumbling around us, such old-fashioned sentiments have long since lost their former weight. And charm. This is the Law.' (Bieliauskas, 1986, p. 38).

In the 1960s, before fiction reading was completely eclipsed by television viewing, when, in the words of Evgeny Dobrenko, the 'mass reader' was just beginning to turn into a 'multimillion Soviet television watcher' (Dobrenko, 1997, p. 171), this modernising Soviet literature was still an important source. It offered Soviet citizens narratives and attitudes on which to construct, perceive and rethink their own new identity and the dramatic social and cultural changes they were experiencing. Therefore, we have chosen to analyse four works of prose by writers who were very popular at the time: the novella *The Pine That Laughed* (1961)[1] by Justinas Marcinkevičius (1930–2011), the novel *Adam's Apple* (1966)[2] by Mykolas Sluckis (1928–2013), the novel *The Kaunas Novel* (1966)[3] by Alfonsas Bieliauskas (1923–2018) and the short story *A Girl Passed By* by Juozas Baltušis (1909–1991).

All four authors had a high status in the field of Soviet Lithuanian literature, held various leading positions and were supported by official critics. The relationship between the writer and the authorities became more complicated during the thaw period and literature did not necessarily perform the same function of disseminating the regime's values described by Dunham and encouraged during the Stalinist period. However, it can be argued that the works of these authors played a more or less similar role[4]. Marcinkevičius's novella is still very much a socialist realism one, as it corresponds to the elements described by Clark as characteristic of this canon in the early thaw period: the classical, realistic narrative style; the

1 Translated and published in Bulgarian (*Борът, който се смееше*, 1964, Народна култура), Czech (*Borovice, která se smála*, 1964, Svět sovětů), Estonian (*Mänd, mis naeris*, 1963, Ajalehtede-Ajakirjade Kirjastus), Russian (*Сосна, которая смеялась*, 1963, Молодая гвардия) and other languages.

2 Translated and published in Bulgarian (*Адамова ябълка*, 1971, Народна младеж), Russian (*Адамово яблоко*, 1969, Молодая гвардия), Slovak (*Adamovo jablko*, 1972, Slovenský spisovateľ) and other languages.

3 Translated and published in Bulgarian (*Каунаски роман*, 1975, Отечествен фронт), Polish (*Romans kowieński*, 1969, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy), Russian (*Каунасский роман*, 1982, Вага / Vaga) and other languages.

4 In the Lithuanian public sphere, there is still a claim that the KGB commissioned Justinas Marcinkevičius to write *The Pine That Laughed* to crack down on a specific group of young people who did not like the Soviet regime, but these are not proven claims.

protagonist's temporary departure from the city to the 'morally superior' rural space; the death of the authority figure (mentor) who had been his protector at the end; and the character's break in consciousness, after which he gives up his individualistic worldview in favour of collective action (Clark 1981). Similarly, Baltušis' short story is also a socialist realism one with a clear positive hero, all the characters performing didactic functions and ending with a moral that educates the readers. Meanwhile, the works by Sluckis and Bieliauskas follow the trends of the more modern 'new prose'. They differ in the degree of ideologisation and retain some of the logic of social realism, but both develop the technique of the inner monologue, the narrative is fragmentary and auto-analytical, the focus is on personal experience and social integration is replaced by alienation (Clark, 1981).

The city as a space of anxiety

The thaw period in Soviet Lithuania saw rapid urbanisation. The population of the republic grew by 16 per cent between 1959 and 1970, while the urban population grew by 36 per cent (In: *1989 General Population Census Data*, 1991). The very beginning of the 1970s was a turning point, as for the first time in Lithuania's history, more people were living in cities than in villages, thus formally making Soviet Lithuania an urbanised society. This society, as Moshe Lewin (2005, p. 318) has noted, at least in the 1960s 'was still rather young, inexperienced in the ways of self-regulation, and carrying quite a freight of older traditions'. In terms of norms and values, we could call this a culturally transitory situation. However, the new way of thinking and living that was emerging in the cities was expanding, also reaching the rural areas which, through collectivisation and the establishment of kolkhoz settlements, were brought closer to the standards of urban life by the Soviet authorities. At the same time, other social changes were taking place: to name but a few, the mid-1960s saw a peak in the birth rate and from the middle of the decade, following the liberalisation of the divorce process (1965), the number of divorces tripled in ten years (In: *Soviet Lithuanian Women*, 1985). All these phenomena emerged for several reasons (which will

not be discussed here). However, people of that time must have seen, felt and experienced the strong social and sexual behavioural changes that were taking place in the here and now, and were aware of them in the context of rapid urbanisation.

In all four of the prose works examined in this article, a city is significant as a social context. The city emerges not only as the central space of the stories, but also as an important socio-cultural place with its logic and rules of life, which are different from the countryside and often opposed to it. This otherness is not always reflected upon by the storytellers, but when a glimpse of the urban space is highlighted, it usually captures new, 'modern' and often value-laden elements that are alien to the storyteller. For example, a café was seen as a sign of modern urban culture and associated with a new moral (often 'immoral') order, where the male eye detects the changed and negatively judged behaviour of women: '[...] look, there are women sitting, they are alone, unescorted; a cup of coffee, a cigarette, a foot on the leg' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 134); or: 'And everywhere they went, they were accompanied by girls, who also implacably opposed to the 'bourgeois society'. They wore lipstick and dyed their hair from the age of fourteen, and were smoking cigarette after cigarette behind the tables of the café' (Baltušis, 1965, p. 177–178).

The beginning of Sluckis's novel *Adam's Apple* could be presented as a good example of how the characters' formative images of sexual behaviour are framed by the city and linked to its meanings. At the beginning of the novel, a young woman arrives in the city and meets a man who has been waiting for her. A woman who has come from the countryside is supposed to be scared in the city, from a man's point of view, and this anxiety of being in a culturally different space is identified with her anxiety about what awaits her during the meeting, and thus in her relationship with a man. He therefore leads her 'like a lost sheep' through the city, as if through a danger zone, to a safe space, a dormitory. They are not married, but they make love for the first time and the woman loses her virginity. The woman's fears seem to have been realised – she is tempted by a man in a hostile environment. However, the plot of this novel turns the typical motif upside down. It is not the woman but the man who is plagued by guilt. Trying to justify himself, he says: '[...] I shouldn't

have stayed the night, Geniuk, I am a serious, elderly man, as you said… […] You see, I was brought up that one shouldn't do this before marriage …', and he promises to marry her. And the woman replies: 'All right, Augustinas, if necessary, let's give notice …'. But the man is not satisfied with this answer and seems worried: '[…] if necessary? Isn't she too frivolous about such things?' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 107). In this episode, the couple who have an extramarital relationship commit deviance, but the woman – if only through doubt, as if in agreement – begins to question the established norms. Is sex outside marriage really such a serious sin (breaking the norm) that marriage is necessary to atone for it (return to the norm)? The city thus becomes a point of collision between traditional and modern sexual norms and a place of reflection on their change. It seems that the writer is trying to capture and give meaning to this change, both in this episode and in the novel as a whole, and the choice of genders to represent almost two different cultures does not seem to be accidental.

The depiction of the city as a place of threat and sin correlates with the demonisation of the city characteristic of Western and Russian culture in the early twentieth century (Bradley, 1986; Porter, 1999). It also corresponds with the critical, anti-urban view of the city in the still strongly agrarian Lithuanian literature of the interwar period (Šeina, 2014). While this representation of the city also persisted in Soviet literature, ideologically and culturally the city had also taken on a new meaning as a space for the realisation of revolutionary utopia (Kotkin, 1995). In Soviet Lithuania, it was during the thaw period that a similar image of the utopian new city spread in culture. This came alongside rapid urbanisation with the construction of high-rise districts, the establishment of industry, the development of the service sector and technical sciences, and was presented as a space of novelty, progress and youth. This conflict between the new Soviet city and the old one is not so much a conflict as a contrast with the old one, and is well highlighted by Jonas Mašanauskas' song 'The Old Roofs of Vilnius' (lyrics by Edmundas Juškevičius, music by Mikas Vaitkevičius) (Vilniaus stogai, music.lt). This was released in the same year as Sluckis's novel, 1966. In this song, a singer appears among the 'old roofs of Vilnius', which are overgrown with 'green

moss', and repeats 'I'm young, I'm young, I'm young' – until the city itself takes on this new enthusiasm and finally turns into a 'young Vilnius'. In Sluckis's novel *Adam's Apple*, elements of a similar city can be found – the work depicts an advanced scientific institute with young and ambitious people. However, Sluckis's Vilnius seems to be in a state of transition, as the inhabitants have still brought many rustic habits with them (for example, it is mentioned that one of the inhabitants keeps a pig in his flat of the multi-apartment building because he has no idea how he could spend his whole life without raising animals (Sluckis, 1989, p. 33)).

The writer is not just an impartial observer of this transition to urban culture, as he cautiously hints at his sympathy for, or at least longing for, rural culture and tradition. Similarly, the characters in the episode in question are both seemingly trapped in a state of transition in terms of norms and concepts (the woman comes from the countryside but questions traditional norms, and the man lives in the city but tries to maintain the old concept of sexual behaviour). However, in the context of the whole literary work, it becomes clear that the author supports the man's anxiety rather than the woman's uncertainty.

Generational conflict: defining changes in sexual norms

As mentioned already, during the thaw period, youth and youthfulness had become an important leitmotif of public enthusiasm in official culture. New cultural and social phenomena such as youth fashion, youth cafés, youth magazines and youth festivals were rapidly emerging at the time (Mulevičiūtė, 1992). The Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow in 1957 became a symbol of the beginning of a new era, opening up the autarkic Soviet culture a little, both from outside (to foreign visitors) and from inside (remembered by the Soviet citizens themselves, as a start of a more free sexual behaviour (Roth-Ey, 2004)). Youth was associated with innovation, energy and, in general, modernisation in all spheres of life. This discursive and cultural emergence of youth had both political and ideological motives (youth was supposed to symbolise the post-Stalinist renewal of the system itself) and social reasons (the 1960s saw

the first generation of the post-war demographic boom enter social life, which would soon also appear in the spheres of culture, art and science). Moreover, this younger generation, if not yet born and raised in the city, was increasingly coming of age in the city and entering adult life as never before, taking over and embracing the modern cultural values of the city wholeheartedly and often enthusiastically.

Meanwhile, in post-Stalinist literature, the theme of youth was introduced through the motif of 'generational conflict'. Of course, generational conflict is a constant in social and cultural history rather than a specific feature of a specific period. However, the way this socio-cultural phenomenon is perceived and portrayed by the culture of a given period can vary, and these differences in perception make the analysis of generational conflict meaningful. The Soviet literary generational conflict unfolded in a particular historical context, when the political situation in Lithuania changed radically over a couple of decades. The independent former state experienced three successive occupations (Soviet, Nazi and Soviet again), the horrors of war and the Holocaust, as well as post-war partisan struggles and Stalinist repression, and finally Stalin's death and destalinisation. Three of the four authors examined in this article were perceived as the younger generation entering literature at the time of their publication (Sprindytė, 2015). In general, the generations that could be identified as 'youth' in the literature of the 1960s were most likely those born during the war years (with the last pre-war years) and the post-war years. Some of them – while still schoolchildren – managed to get involved in the anti-Soviet resistance (armed until 1953, then unarmed). In other words, these were generations who still remembered the period of independent Lithuania or who had experienced the horrors of Stalinism (even if they were young). In this sense, the generations of wartime and post-war youth in Soviet Lithuania differed from the youth of Soviet Russia at that time, who largely corresponded to the 'last generation of Stalinism' described by Juliane Fürst (2010). On the other hand, they were also similar in that they mainly challenged the regime not so much politically but culturally. As mentioned before, they engaged wholeheartedly and often enthusiastically with urban culture, experimenting with new cultural practices, symbols and

norms that showed a clear orientation towards an individualistic, consumerist rather than a Soviet-collective ideology (Fürst, 2010).

This historical context makes it possible to understand the themes of generational conflict that have emerged in literature, and why young people were the most frequent object of criticism in this conflict, even if the 1960s became an era of youth advocacy. Reading the literature of the time, the impression may even be gained that there was no real enthusiasm for youth in the 'youth epoch'[5] – that the youth associated with modernisation was not enthusiastic, but pessimistic.

Marcinkevičius's novella *The Pine That Laughed* is intended to explain this paradox ideologically. An old man – a respected professor – appears in the work, representing the authority of the older generation and the patriarchal order. In one episode, he says that everyone is proud to say 'our youth', but they forget that 'youth' is not a homogeneous body, because a healthy, powerful and young body has some cells that have begun to rot. So the problem is not the young people, but only part of them – the part that has started to rot. In his story about young artists in the city, Marcinkevičius describes and explains what is meant by 'rotten cells'. They are egoists, narcissists, indifferent, pessimists, nihilists, full of idealistic (i.e. Western) ideas, and the art they produce is formal and abstract; in other words, modern and too modern. Similarly, in Baltušis' short story *A Girl Passed By*, youth is also divided into two parts: the positive hero, the righteous Petras Alešiūnas, and the 'golden youth', who sit in cafés with 'extinguished eyes', indifferent to everything, self-interested, and who is described as 'it's not youth here, but only the turbid decoctions of life' (Baltušis, 1965, p. 178). This piece of work also depicts a generational conflict: the older generation is represented by Daunoras, the head of a large institution, whose authority is ideologically created by his low social background. He comes from the poor, he has worked as a shepherd, received no education, but has achieved everything through this willpower and determination.

5 For more on the portrayal of 'golden' or 'decadent' youth in Soviet-era Lithuanian literature, see Kmita, 2018.

Marcinkevičius's novella presents two sources of the corruption of these young people – the influence of Western culture (more implicit than explicit) and their urban origins. They grew up in the families of the urban intelligentsia and 'never knew how much a kilo of bread costs' (Marcinkevičius, 1983, p. 99), which means that they did not have to experience the hard work of the countryside. The two young protagonists of the story went to the countryside and met their peers working in the fields. They tried to join them and work together, but they struggled – and this was due to their urban origin. Among the rotten cells of the young people, we find only one positive character – an artist who likes to paint the land (which means he is close to agrarian culture).

However, in the context of our analysis, the most interesting sentence of the professor representing patriarchal authority is the following: 'These people (I call them people with great reservations) are sexual, not social units' (Marcinkevičius, 1983, p. 99). 'Sexual units' is the keyword, the kernel of how the older generations supposedly perceive (and therefore how everyone *should perceive*) the young and why the generational conflict is happening at all. The professor explains that young people are like mere 'bourgeois' (hence *мещанство* (Russian), *petty bourgeoisie*), except that instead of empty objects they tend to love empty ideas. In the wider context of the literature we could say that (changed) sexual behaviour is the main criterion by which 'rotten youth' is defined.

Disregard for traditional sexual norms (public kissing, extramarital sex, sexual freedom), the trappings of youth (e.g. jazz, beards, English slang), and character traits (looseness, carelessness, flatulence) are recurrent signs of immorality in the prose works, which are associated above all with the youth's sexual audacity, aggressiveness and freedom, which threaten the entire social order (they are sexual, not social units): '[...] all the youngsters are now insolent ...' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 17). In Baltušis' short story, one of the most important defining characteristics of the golden youth was also its apparent freedom of sexual behaviour and disastrous carelessness. The positive hero, Petras Alešiūnas, refuses to be friends with a girl when he discovers that she has already left school pregnant and has had at least a few abortions since then. The authority of the older

generation's representative, Daunoras, the girl's father, is shaken precisely because he tolerated and even contributed to such sexual behaviour – he allegedly called a doctor to perform an abortion (Baltušis, 1965, p. 189)). However, this did not reconcile the different generations, but only further divided them. In this respect, the short story by Baltušis stands out from the others in that the blame is attributed not only to the young people themselves, but also to the older generation that did not educate them properly.

In Sluckis' *Adam's Apple*, the character Gauda is also young, does not hide her sexuality, is brazen, has liberal sexual behaviour and speaks in a 'non-Lithuanian' way – a mixture of English and Russian words (however, the English slang predominates). When she becomes pregnant (unmarried, of course), she is described as 'a stubborn girl, finally punished for her disobedience and debauchery' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 51). Interestingly, however, this Gauda in the novel seems to represent a whole generation of young people, rather than a 'rotten cell' that has broken away from the 'healthy youth', as in Marcinkevičius's novella or Baltušis' short story. The science institute in the novel is dominated by people like Gauda – young, brash, familiar, unrestrained by traditional norms and influenced by Western culture – who read contemporary fashionable Western literature (Sartre, Camus) and use English slang. Sluckis essentially portrays them as 'sexual units', because the criterion of sexuality is very important to them, and in this respect, they are negative or clearly negative characters. So it can be argued that Western sexuality still serves as an ideological didacticism, similarly to Marcinkevičius's story. In Sluckis's work, however, young people are no longer just rotten cells, essentially random, disconnected from the rest of society, which only need to be got rid of for society to return to its supposedly natural, traditional order. Here, young people are, if not the dominant force, then at least the vanguard of society, and it seems that shortly, they will pass on these cultural norms to the rest of society.

Despite the differences, sexual behaviour in the works of different authors is a way of defining two different moral (and social) orders. In literature, they are represented as the traditional, good, moral order preserved by the older generation, and the new, evil,

immoral order, created by the young. The younger generation, entering a period of radical social transformation, is identified with the changes or even made the cause of them. However, setting aside the normative dimension, we could argue that this is an attempt to draw the boundaries of sexual norms and social change in general, and to purify their content. It is an attempt to articulate, understand and explain, in culturally and ideologically accepted (or conventional) categories and vocabulary, an unsettling transformation, the core of which is perceived as a new expression of sexuality in a new urban space.

Making sense of socio-cultural tensions: erotic experiences of the period of the transitional state

Times of change do not mean that times have changed, which is why, in 1960s literature, we find traditionally perceived gender roles that function as safe havens for characters, authors and readers. The expressions 'real man' and 'real woman' are written without much reflection, without asking what they mean and why. The man is or should be the social leader, the social power, the authority of the family, the head and the breadwinner. The woman is primarily associated with motherhood as her natural mission and is seen as the weaker half of social relations. In everyday life, she was or should have been her husband's assistant (she washes the dishes, does the laundry, cooks dinner, etc.). The normativity of traditional notions of men and women, of masculinity and femininity, was still strong and helped writers – consciously or unconsciously – to judge characters and their actions. It is clear that the relationship between men and women has often been patriarchal: a woman must be beautiful (for her husband), pure and innocent (for her husband), and caring (for her husband).

However, in literary works it is easy to detect signs of change in new gender roles: for example, alongside the 'traditional' woman we see the 'emancipated' or 'sexually free' woman. Sometimes the traditional woman has to acknowledge that she feels she is an endangered species: 'And women are certainly not going to go to any great lengths to iron men's shirts nowadays' (Sluckis 1989, p. 82). More

importantly, however, most of the characters in the literary works under consideration do not represent a single, purely traditional or purely modern gender role. The characters seem to be stuck between these two roles – we could call them more traditional but with distinct modernity. For example, a man who plays a traditional social role but does not want to have children and urges his wife to live for both of them; or a woman who is shy, virgin, ready to be her man's assistant, but who, after the first extramarital sex, refuses to be married when the man asks her if she wants to marry: 'All right, Augustinas, if necessary [...]'. The characters think about and reflect on social change, but at the same time they are a reflection of that change – they are a reflection of the process, not the final result. Sometimes the characters perceive the new emerging moral order and its values as a challenge to them ('I will immediately restore my superiority against to the insolent wallowing of naked bodies, a man retains his true worth by keeping to himself' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 100)). However, they do not understand that they are becoming part and embodiment of this new order. In other words, a conflict with externally recognisable 'alien' values or norms does not necessarily lead to the recognition and perception of those alien values or norms within; or the characters do not necessarily perceive the coexistence of different values or norms within themselves as a conflict. Among the predominantly normatively stuck or transitory (moving from one norm system to another) characters in the literary works in question, who seem to embody and uphold contradictory, conflicting values and norms, there is one exception. The rotten cells, the youth, who in the works in question represent completely modern gender roles, especially women or girls, but always in a negative sense.

In such a context, it should not be surprising that a woman and her body are still largely objectified by the male gaze in the Soviet prose of the 1960s: 'I was looking at her – slender, fresh, smiling, with a yellowish sweater that tightened her gracefully protruding breasts – those breasts barely rippled [...]' (Bieliauskas, 1986, p. 46). The male characters tend to perceive women as their property or express desire through their wish to make a woman their property: 'Here she is, *my* Geda; mine and nobody else's' (Bieliauskas,

1986, p. 165–166). The man lusts, the woman is the object of lust. The woman in these narratives is only occasionally allowed to lust (she is depicted as lusting). Thus, she can take on the role of the subject of desire, but if she lusts, she feels ashamed of this overwhelming feeling, as if she had crossed a permissible boundary by lusting. The male body is virtually never described in a sexually objectifying way, except when the writer (or the character they create) wants to discredit the other (negative) character, with whom there is usually competition for the woman. But then even the sexually attractive male body is portrayed as an expression of narcissism (e.g. a boxer caressing his biceps), and this rival is dehumanised and objectified through his physicality (he usually lacks most of the positive moral – 'human' – qualities).

Highlighting this patriarchal male objectifying gaze is nothing new. Paradoxically, however, this gaze could be understood and accepted by (male) writers and readers as a sign of literary modernity – as a freer, bolder and more open approach to sexuality. This assumption is suggested by the more general trends in the sexual culture of the period. In the 1960s, for example, in response to the (even overt) demands of male readers, the press began to publish more explicit and increasingly sexualised images of women. Various tricks were often used, such as publishing photographs of women on the beach, in the gym or on a ballet stage (Klumbys and Vaiseta, 2022). One of the writers in question, Bieliauskas, who worked as editor-in-chief of the popular magazine *Švyturys*[6] from 1954 to 1970, was well-versed in such techniques and was aware of the reactions they elicited from readers. This magazine was characterised by these tricks and received both letters of indignation from readers and calls to depict the female body more openly. However, the female body was almost always sexualised. Thus, what practically embodied traditional attitudes and gender relations was understood as modern in literature. Male writers seem to have enjoyed describing women in this way, which allowed them to win the

6 An illustrated monthly magazine of politics, public life, culture and literature, published in Lithuanian from 1949 to 1999 (until 1990 published by the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party).

sympathy of at least some readers. The change in the expression of sexuality that came with the transformation of sexual norms was primarily aimed at a male audience and provided opportunities for the realisation of male needs.

But this is only one side of men's attitudes towards women. At the same time, male characters in literary works could and often did demonstrate (even those with an objectifying gaze) a completely opposite relationship to the female body – the shame, shyness and self-consciousness that would traditionally belong to the role of a woman: 'I am always very constrained in front of them, I blush for no reason at all, and I look much more foolish than I actually am' (Marcinkevičius, 1983, p. 40). Culturally, shyness was perceived as a sign of morality, and by attributing these qualities to the characters the authors aimed to portray them as moral, and therefore positive, heroes. At the same time, however, despite the preoccupation with the objectifying gaze, we could interpret this expressed shyness in the broader context of the new urban culture. This is as an unreflected confession that men find the new roles of women and the new forms of expressing sexuality through a more open representation of the female body stressful and anxious. They are both afraid and scared of the new opportunities it brings, because gender roles are changing along with changing norms, and they are having new experiences that are both seductive and frightening.

The sexualisation of the female body could mean not only the objectification of the woman herself, but also the recognition of the changing role of women in social reality in the eyes of men. She is bolder, more independent, less submissive, acquires a certain (not necessarily conscious) sexual power, and is therefore perceived as a source of risk or danger. In other words, the shyness expressed by men could indicate how gender relations are complicated in the context of changing sexual norms; how men in a state of transition in terms of gender roles and sexual norms experience the very transformation that pushes them out of their usual position. The image of the sexually threatening and socially dangerous woman is related to the archetypal *femme fatale*, the disastrous temptress, which was already characteristic of interwar Lithuanian literature in the twentieth century (Šeina, 2014). However, it seems that in

the prose works under consideration, such a woman appears not as an individual, exceptional figure, but as at least a new social group, which does not yet encompass all women, but a significant part of them.

The socio-cultural tensions arising from the changes in the reality of Soviet Lithuania are well reflected in two other themes found in the prose of the 1960s – extramarital sexual relations and abortion. Neither extramarital sexual relations nor abortion were dramatically new phenomena in Soviet Lithuania in the 1960s. It could be argued that these sexual practices became routinised at a similar time, especially after the legalisation of abortion (1955), when it became almost the main contraceptive tool for women (and showed how little responsibility men took). The social tensions in the prose works under examination are revealed as a conflict between the popularisation of the practice and the still strict moral judgement.

All the texts discussed here deal with extramarital relationships. However, the act of extramarital sex, or even the attempt to perform it, is portrayed as a serious moral transgression, a sin, i.e. a social deviation. This will always lead (or threaten to lead) to tragic consequences if there is no conscious repentance and a return to the traditional moral order. Traditionally, women in extramarital relationships were more at risk of moral judgement, as they were more likely than men to be criticised or condemned. Therefore women are more likely to take the place of the passive protagonist in the works, or the one who tries to avoid extramarital relationships. However, the ongoing transformation of norms and gender roles is also changing men's attitudes. In prose works, by giving in to new forms of relationships, they seem to feel that they are betraying the traditional social and moral order that ensures their supremacy. Perhaps this is why, from the male perspective, there is a tendency to emphasise the special nature of extramarital sex by giving a very dramatic description, while at the same time seeking (often after the fact) the approval of women. 'And I know it's the most important, the most important! – Geda does not shout, does not push me away; she does not say a single word; she just opens her eyes wide, drowning both me and all my anxiety in her gaze, and hugs my neck in a firm, feminine way [...] ' (Bieliauskas, 1986, p. 166).

It would be hard to find a similar description of marital sex. The second part of the quoted sentence is a description of the sex act itself – you can objectify the woman, but you still cannot describe the sex act. Strong desire and its fulfilment are usually associated precisely with extramarital relations, with crossing boundaries. Thus, although the objectification of woman through the eyes of man already discussed allows us to maintain desire as a male prerogative, its fulfilment in the context of changing norms still ultimately means the defeat of the traditional patriarchal order (and of the masculinity that sustains it). It includes the woman's indifferent acceptance ('All right, Augustinas, if necessary') of the man's desire to return to the traditional norms (to marry) merely confirms the inevitability of this defeat, and thus causes pain and doubt. The man of the city is still a conqueror, but in his conquest he creates a new moral order, or rather a moral disorder, in which the clashing norms each time introduce new social tensions and conflicts.

The topic of abortion can be found in two of the texts analysed – Baltušis' short story and Sluckis's novel. In the short story *A Girl Passed By*, the treatment of abortion is unequivocal: it is portrayed as a tragic consequence of a failure to respect social norms. The allegedly frivolous way in which they are performed is criticised (the daughter reproaches her father: 'Who brought me a new nylon dress as a present, so that I would really cheer up, not be sad after my first abortion?' (Baltušis, 1965, p. 189)) and uncompromisingly declares that this leads to destruction (the girl is rejected by her boyfriend who finds out about her abortion and commits suicide). In *Adam's Apple*, the tension between practice and moral judgement is less straightforward. From the novel, it can be seen that abortion has become a common, even normal practice, especially for young women ('Now girls laugh at abortion!' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 142)), but having an abortion causes moral anxiety and frustration for the characters (both female and male). This is probably the author's position on how this morally inappropriate act, which is permitted by the Soviet state, should be viewed – it is a phenomenon that can cause psychological problems, not social ones. Therefore, the character, a woman who is encouraged to have an abortion by her husband, is not condemned by the author. Rather, the act is portrayed

as a negative consequence of the changing times, contrary to the maternal instinct and therefore to the natural mission of women, but inevitable. It is only through the old ugly woman who gave birth to ten children that the author gives voice to tradition: 'You killed, you killed' (Sluckis, 1989, p. 219). In this way, the author seems to be indicating that he knows how it should be seen from a traditional point of view, but he is not sure whether he fully agrees with it. The didacticism and imperativeness of the old tradition sounds angry, 'ugly', and therefore too far removed from contemporary reality. However, it still preserves and cherishes what is considered to be essential and most important of all – the nature of woman as a mother, the maternal instinct. Despite this much less unambiguous assessment, the possibility of abortion from a male perspective can be interpreted as another way of maintaining the traditional role – taking care of the risk of pregnancy is not a 'man's business'. It is also shown that such behaviour violates the essential elements of the traditional structure and leads to a new moral (dis)order.

Thus, in the context of both extramarital affairs and abortion, socio-cultural tensions can be identified, not only because of the prevalence of these practices and the discrepancy in their moral judgement. It is also because male writers' works virtually always deal with them through the prism of gender conflict: male and female characters have different attitudes towards extramarital affairs and abortion, points of conflict between desires, wishes, expectations and attitudes. This brings anger and frustration, incompatible gender roles and different perceptions of the time of life and its traditions and norms. In a rapidly changing social reality, it seems as if the characters are no longer aware of their change.

Conclusions

Under conditions of ideological control and censorship, it is difficult to assess to what extent the images of sexual behaviour and their evaluation in literature were shaped by the author's position, and to what extent by the wider cultural context and the political will of the regime. Rimantas Kmita (2018) has shown that the mentioned works by Baltušis and Marcinkevičius were also a reaction of the authors

themselves to their surroundings and that the position expressed may have been at least partly in line with their attitudes. Perhaps a similar assumption can be made about Sluckis and Bieliauskas. After all, most writers of the time perceived their role as that of a moral authority, which often meant a guardian of values.

However, one trend is very clear in all four works: the linking of ideological deviance and moral sin or, more accurately, the turning of certain sexual behaviour into a sin through its association with ideological deviance. For example, in Bieliauskas's *The Kaunas Novel*, the object of the male protagonist' crushing desire is a girl named Geda. This love story ended tragically, because the girl's uncle was a minister in interwar, and therefore independent (in Soviet terms, 'bourgeois') Lithuania during the twentieth century which, in the context of Soviet ideology, also meant serving the bourgeois fascists. Since the uncle was a class enemy, an object of lust, an object of sin also had to be treated accordingly. Perhaps we can see this link between moral sin and ideological deviance not as a coincidence of the four authors' positions, but as a trend of a modernising, but still ideologised literature. We should then conclude that the Soviet regime, through the mediation of writers, was trying to react to the apparent changes in the social, or more specifically sexual, life of a society undergoing rapid urbanisation. In such a society, whose members themselves were both changing and being changed, slowly adopting and fostering new forms of behaviour, direct criticism of the new sexual norms was unlikely to have the desired effect of halting the changes. Appealing to traditional moral values – even though it was done in public – could not be effective either, because the change in sexual norms meant that the moral values themselves were no longer stable. So the attempt was made to appeal to what was, at least formally, considered stable, immutable and unquestionable – the Soviet ideology. It was intended that the new (modern) sexual norms would be understood by the public (still) as a sin, by linking them to the ideological sin.

On the other hand, the four works examined can be seen as a culturally expressed anxiety. This is not only in the interests of the Soviet regime, but also in the anxiety of male writers who sought to preserve not so much the Soviet as the patriarchal order of

society. The changing social reality is reflected in the still dominant patriarchal gaze, but this gaze is no longer as strong as the male writers themselves and the male protagonists, the main positive heroes they create, would like. Their reflection is an ambiguous, dynamic and pervasive questioning of their power, a reaction to the changes in society, its modernisation and in particular to the emerging new roles and positions of women. In this sense, it could be argued that in the late thaw period, the so-called socialist Sixties, literature produced by men in Soviet Lithuania adopted a defensive stance. The traditional order appeared not only insecure but also, in the world of the imagery they created, was clearly collapsing. This reflection shows considerations and searches that had just begun at that time and have not yet ended: what should be the role, identity and self-perception of a man in the changing culture of gender relations and the social reality in general? The overt reproach and didacticism expressed by men in literature are often based on the frustration that patriarchal authority has softened and weakened; it reveals a sense of moral panic at the prospect of a process that cannot be stopped.

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