

Becoming a (Slovenian) Poet at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century: Male Censorship of Vida Jeraj's Poetry

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This article analyses the gendered censorship of male writers towards the poetics and writing of Vida Jeraj (1875–1932), the most prominent Slovenian female lyrical poet of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and a member of the new wave of Slovenian women writers associated with the Trieste-based publication Slovenka. This case study demonstrates the immense difficulty, if not impossibility, for a woman from a small, conservative patriarchal society on the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to become a poet and introduce new poetics and new imagination. This was due not only to patriarchal society in general, but also to the gendered censorship of Jeraj's male colleagues and friends. We aim to analyse the gendered discourse with its misogynistic characteristics evident in the correspondence between the poet and male authors during her early period of writing, which had a profound impact on her poetic strategies. Two male critics in particular had a great influence on her style and shaped her poetic career: her friend Josip Murn-Aleksandrov (1879–1901), the impressionist poet of the Slovenian "moderna" literary movement; and Anton Aškerc (1856–1912), the most important and celebrated Slovenian poet of the older generation and the editor of the Slovenian newspaper Ljubljanski zvon. This male censorship also meant that the young poet was forced to self-censor, as her writer's identity was very fragile. This was one of the reasons why her voice eventually fell silent.

Keywords: feminist literary criticism / Slovenian poetry / Slovenian women writers / Jeraj, Vida / censorship / self-censorship

The twenty-first century has seen censorship become a very real phenomenon; however, in terms of theory, there is no clear consensus on what the term actually signifies.¹ Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler have offered useful theories on this subject. Helene Freshwater proposed an inclusive definition that takes into account the diverse experiences of censorship and its socio-historical specificity. This definition acknowledges that censorship is a process realized through the relationships between censorious agents, rather than a series of actions carried out by a single authority. Furthermore, to reflect the ethical complexity of speaking for the silenced, this definition of censorship is based on the inclusive logic of “both/and,” rather than the censorious modality of “either/or” (Freshwater 217). This theoretical concept can also be applied to the Slovenian context.

Gendered censorship in the Slovenian context

Intellectuals and writers from Slovenian culture, which was a part of the Habsburg monarchy, experienced very tough political censorship throughout the nineteenth century, from the era of Romanticism to the end of the century. During this period in particular, there were numerous political agents who promoted different types of ideological systems in the small, provincial Slovenian land as part of the larger monarchical state. The writers had to contend with three main sources of power: the political ideology of the monarchy, the ideology of the Catholic Church, and later the ideology of the Slovenian nation. Marijan Dovič and Luka Vidmar established that from 1790 to 1848 the monarchical censorship in Slovenian culture was primarily characterized by a centralized and comprehensive pre-publication censorship, which was further intensified by restrictiveness (a system of granting concessions), economic constraints (i.e., taxes and deposits), and severe penalties (Dovič and Vidmar 36, 37). They also highlighted the existence of retroactive censorship after 1848, which lasted until the beginning of the First World War (37–41).

Nevertheless, at the turn of the nineteenth century, gendered censorship was also present in Slovenian culture as an implicit form of

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ensorship; this was connected to the emergence of the second wave of women writers.² Judith Butler has highlighted that implicit and powerful forms of censorship suggest that the power of censorship is not exhausted by explicit state policy or regulation. She emphasized that such implicit forms of censorship may, in fact, be more effective than explicit forms in enforcing a limit on speakability (Butler 130).

The socio-political climate in Slovenian culture during this period reflected a divided, polarized society with considerable tension in gender relations, and the suppression of women in the cultural sphere. Slovenian society and public spaces at that time were clearly divided; the main writers, critics, and editors of major literary and cultural publications were all male.

The entry of women into the public sphere in Slovenian culture occurred in tandem with the growth of the national movement and feminism, which was typical of the contemporaneous processes across Europe (Verginella & Selišnik 1–17). The public activities of young intellectuals took place within the framework of the multi-ethnic and multinational empire of Austria-Hungary, which was destabilized in the nineteenth century by numerous nationalist movements, seeking to consolidate their national identities.

Along the author's journey, there were numerous challenges for the young female poet to advance her career and have her works published in Slovenian newspapers. As Slovenia was part of the conservative monarchy, women's roles were greatly restricted. Within the framework of the patriarchal power and the existing discourse, women did not have many opportunities to voice their opinions. According to Greene and Kahn, "the oppression of women was both a material reality, originating in material conditions, and a psychological phenomenon, a function of the way women and men perceive one another and themselves" (Greene and Kahn 3).

As with all European *fin-de-siècle* writers, Slovenian writers sought to explore new literary styles. They introduced impressionism, symbolism, and decadence into literature. According to Felski, since they were

² In the nineteenth century, only some female writers appeared in Slovenian culture, but they were isolated and had no predecessors. They were also connected to the national appraisal: in their writing, they supported national ideas. The first Slovenian female poet was Fanny Haussman (1818–1853), who published her first poem in October 1848, "Vojakov izhod" ("Soldier's entrance"). In the second half of the nineteenth century, two distinguished poets, also prose writers, tried to pursue careers: Pavlina Pajk (1854–1901) and Luiza Pesjak (1828–1898). The poetic expressions of L. Pesjak were often interwoven with patriotic feelings, but nevertheless in her poetry we also find intimate themes and modern descriptions of nature, landscapes, and changing time periods.

“caught between the still-powerful evolutionary and historical models of the nineteenth century and the emergent crisis of language and subjectivity which would shape the experimental art of the twentieth, the turn of the century provides a rich textual field for tracking the ambiguities of the modern” (Felski 30).

During this period, a big generation clash occurred in Slovenian literary culture, which paved the way for writers to embrace modernity in the culture. It was a time of great transformation; *fin-de-siècle* writers approached writing with a newfound nervousness. In their works, they delved into subjectivity by employing new psychological and philosophical approaches to the question of existence.³ Imaginative writing was predominant in literature, as evidenced by the symbolist and decadent works, which depicted discordant emotions, as well as themes of anguish and anxiety.⁴

The young generation of Slovenian writers, the circle of “moderna,” tended to encounter difficulties in terms of the reception of their initial literary works within the inflexible cultural milieu of the past, wherein realistic standards had been the norm and the readership of the narrow Slovenian society had become accustomed to them.⁵

The emancipation of women in the Slovenian territory led to increased equality in rights and opportunities. At the turn of the twentieth century, Slovenian female writers tried to transition their careers from the private to the public sphere. This was reflected in the establishment of the first women’s journal, *Slovenka (Slovenian Woman)*, in 1897 in Trieste, and the emergence of a group of young women writers, of which Vida Jeraj was a member.⁶ The journal was founded before the organized Slovenian feminist movement in 1901. Among them, Jeraj was considered to be the most talented female poet.⁷

³ Franc Zadavec declared in the texts of Slovenian “moderna” the turn to subjectivism (Zadavec 15).

⁴ Literary historians also deliberately named this period “New Romanticism.”

⁵ The first texts of the Slovenian “moderna” originally received negative public reception. In their critical reflections, the critics of the major newspapers repeatedly used moralistic criteria, ideological norms, and prejudices. They also reviewed literary texts with the criterion of mimesis (see Jensterle Doležal, *Avtor* 151–167).

⁶ Among the poets were: Zorana Trojanšek-Franica Tominškova (1867–1935), Vida Jeraj (1875–1932), Kristina Šuler (1866–1959), Ljudmila Poljanec (1874–1948), Marica Strnad (1872–1953), and Ljudmila Prunk (1878–1947).

⁷ Jeraj, in the view of Slovenian literary historians, was recognised as the most original and talented (Jensterle Doležal, *Ključni* 74–77). Joža Mahnič wrote that Jeraj’s original and free lyrics is, among the female poets of that time, the most prominent (Mahnič 207).

At the end of the nineteenth century, the topic of intimacy was prevalent in Slovenian literature. The beginning of Slovenian modernism (the so-called “moderna”) was marked by the emergence of erotic poetry, with the dialogue of love between the sexes being the primary focus of male poets, and female poets following suit. This “moderna” generation began in 1899 when two anthologies, O. Župančič’s *Čaša opojnosti* (*The Goblet of Inebriation*) and Ivan Cankar’s *Erotika* (*Erotics*), were published.⁸

On 5 January 1901, the prominent Slovenian impressionist poet, Josip Murn-Aleksandrov, wrote to his female colleague and friend, Vida Jeraj: “Being a writer is not so easy, especially for a woman. In ourselves, a certain distrust a priori exists for those inherited by nature.” (Murn 174)⁹ This paper aims to analyze the gendered censorship that was visible in the correspondence between Vida Jeraj (1875–1932), the main Slovenian female poet of intimacy at the turn of the twentieth century, and her male colleagues, who were also writers. This had a great impact on the poetic strategies of the young and promising poet. Gendered censorship in this case was a problem of discourse and language.¹⁰ The study of Jeraj’s ego documents demonstrates how gendered prejudices formed the poetic career of this talented young writer with promising impressionist poetics, who was recognized by Slovenian public organs, such as newspapers and revues, at the beginning of the century (see also Jensterle Doležal, *Ključni* 35–107).

This case study of Vida Jeraj will show that for Slovenian women it was almost impossible to break through and to persuade the literary audience of that time that their work was worthy and valuable. Jeraj was nomadic and cosmopolitan, with a bilingual identity: Slovenian and German, like all the other members of Slovenian “moderna.”¹¹ As part of the “moderna” group, she wrote in Slovenian. As she was establishing

⁸ The most prominent male authors of the Slovenian “moderna” were: Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), Oton Župančič (1876–1946), Dragotin Kette (1879–1899), and Josip Murn Aleksandrov (1879–1901).

⁹ “Pisatelj biti ni tako lahko, zlasti pa še za ženske ne, do katerih nam je že a priori od narave vcepljeno neko nezaupanje.” All translations from Slovenian into English are by the author.

¹⁰ This correspondence is, for researchers, the most visible form of communication between them. There were also other forms: things they said and did also expressed performative acts and showed patriarchal power, and unwritten norms of behavior in the society. The other expressions of male power in communication also merged the intimate and public spheres of writers.

¹¹ She was partly educated in Vienna (1887–1891), where she lived with her uncle. From 1901 to 1910 she lived in Vienna with her family.

her poetics, she had to justify her place in the Slovenian literary system. This was a shared difficulty amongst the modern generation of writers at the turn of the century, but for the first real Slovenian generation of female writers, it was almost impossible.¹² Furthermore, the topics of intimacy that were featured in the lyrical confessions of female poets were also subject to censorship.

She wrote and published her poems in the shadow of great historical and political changes in Central Europe: the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy, the First World War, and the emergence of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians (later the Kingdom of Yugoslavia), of which Slovenia was a part after the end of the war.

Ambitious and unconventional poet ... Willing to respect the authorities?

Vida Jeraj broke through into the public arena at the end of the 1890s. She published primarily in *Slovenka*, yet she was also able to publish some of her poems in the major literary journal, *Ljubljanski zvon*. We are particularly interested in the initial period of her career, when she resided in Zasip, near Bled (1897–1901), striving to establish her career in the Slovenian public arena as an independent teacher and unconventional writer. When we analyze her correspondence with her contemporaries, we find a surprising fact. It was difficult for Vida Jeraj, as a female poet, to make her mark in the Slovenian literary milieu, not only due to the numerous gendered prejudices in society and its misogynistic critics, but also due to the “soft” gendered censorship of her close male colleagues and friends.

In her formative writing period, two writers had a profound influence on her style and the trajectory of her poetic career: her friend Josip Murn-Aleksandrov (1879–1901) and the renowned poet Anton Aškerc (1856–1912), a leading figure in Slovenian poetry of the time, a mentor to all young Slovenian poets, and the editor of *Ljubljanski zvon*.

¹² Jeraj was a friend and fellow writer of the “moderna” circle, connected to the leading figures (Josip Murn-Aleksandrov and Ivan Cankar), living in Slovenia (Zasip, Bled) and Vienna. At the beginning of her career as a teacher in a small village near worldly, famous Bled, she was a self-supported, independent intellectual, which would have a major impact on her patriarchal position later: being only the wife of a celebrated musician (Karel Jeraj) and a mother of four children in Viennese bourgeois society.

From the time when Jeraj was almost unknown to the public, there exist five letters from May to September 1897 that Anton Aškerc,¹³ an epic poet, wrote to the young, talented female poet. Aškerc had an impressive facility for storytelling and preferred realistic poetics and traditional forms of expression, often incorporating social motifs into his poetry, and favoring epic themes. His realistic poetics merged with post-romanticism. His most renowned anthology, *Balade in Romance (Ballads and Romances)* from 1890, featured themes drawn from history, folklore, and contemporary life, and his poetry conveyed patriotism, religious criticism, and a critical view of society. Furthermore, his poetry demonstrated both great imagination and knowledge of other cultures.

Throughout their correspondence, Jeraj was a novice, publishing her first love poem in *Slovenka* on 16 January 1897 (Jeraj, “Slutnje” 1). It is a brief, intimate love poem. An autobiographical confession is composed in a straightforward traditional style and a love dialogue is depicted between the first person of the lyrical subject and the love object (you). The subject expresses intense emotions, is haunted by dreams and longs for a great future realization.

Tisoč sladkih slutenj / Dušo mi objame, / Če oko se tvoje / Z ókom mojim
vjame // V blaženosti svoji / Zrem zaupno na-te, / O življenja sreči / Sanjam
dneve zlate. (Vida Jeraj “Slutnje” 2)

A thousand sweet premonitions / candles my soul / when your eyes / meet
mine // Blessed and happy / I look at you / and I dream about the never-
ending happiness in life / and about the golden days. (Transl. by the author)

Even in subsequent intimate poems, the autobiographical lyrical subject with modern sensibility uses lyrical confessions to express modern feelings. Subjectivity was articulated in brief, evocative poems with symbolic implications. The confession of the lyrical subject generally stops in time to look for a sense of purpose.

It was already evident in his letter that Aškerc read her first poetry in *Slovenka*. Jeraj’s lyrical poetry at this time was a great mosaic of modern

¹³ Aškerc was a Catholic priest who at that time lived in a small town near Velenje (1894–1898). He was the main Slovenian poet at the end of the nineteenth century, the most respected in literary circles. From 1895, in *Ljubljanski zvon*, he was responsible for young talents: the main editor Viktor Bežek entrusted him with editing the literary portion of the newspaper. He remained an editor of *Ljubljanski zvon* until 1902. After 1899, he was a co-editor of *Ljubljanski zvon* with Anton Mikuš, and from 1900 until 1902, the main editor.

emotions; it was in some ways rather ethereal and subjective. Aškerc did not approve of this; instead he suggested she change her writing style and focus on “prose or short stories” that were more grounded in reality. He asked her directly: “Are you not interested in social issues?” His primary recommendation was to “stick to the solid ground of reality” (Aškerc 48).¹⁴

She held his advice in high esteem and sent three poems in an epic style to Aškerc in his capacity as an editor of the newspaper *Ljubljanski zvon*: “V stolici” (“In the capital”), “Stava” (“A bet”), and “Rojenice” (“Witches”).¹⁵ In the third letter, he advised her to submit the two last romances with social commentary to *Slovenka* rather than to “his” *Ljubljanski zvon*.

Aškerc was the principal Slovenian professional “poeticus arbiter.” Therefore, in his second letter (8 June 1897) he proposed to her some novel poetic solutions. He emphasized the significance of poetic imagery and metaphors in poetry: “To say as much as possible with images—this is one of those secret solutions that make up a poetic style.” (Aškerc 49)¹⁶ He also advised her to use a more varied and relaxed verse by alternating between masculine and feminine rhymes. He additionally advised her not to incorporate fantastical elements into her poetry and to shift towards realism.

He expressed his fear that he may have been too authoritative in his initial letter to the young poet, thus recommending that she should compose with the principles of her own subjectivity; that is, she should discover her own style and language with sincerity of emotions.

He also sought to demonstrate an appreciation and empathy for gender issues; he wrote about the lamentable position of women in Slovenian society, which, in his view, could be ameliorated through education and civil rights. At the same time, he also expressed patriarchal opinions and prejudices about that problem: “Considering myself, if you will allow me one remark, I was until now very skeptical about the poetical texts and poems of the female writers.” (Aškerc 50)¹⁷

He felt superior to the other sex from the standpoint of male authority; eventually, he proclaimed that he favored beautiful women over a beautiful poem. Consequently, in the third letter (13 October 1897),

¹⁴ “Držite se trdnih tal resničnega življenja!”

¹⁵ She didn’t include them in the anthology in 1908.

¹⁶ “Povedati, koliko se največ dá v podobah – to spada med tiste tajne momente, ki činijo poetični slog.”

¹⁷ “Kar se meni tiče – dovolite mi še to opazko – bil sem dozdej sila skeptičen glede poetičnih spisov in pesmij izpod ženskih peres.”

he praised the image of the attractive woman (Jeraj had sent him a photograph, which frequently occurred in communications during this period), and his conclusion was that she was so beautiful that she did not need to write poetry.¹⁸

In the last two letters, he encouraged her to write. At the end of 1897, however, they stopped writing to each other. One potential explanation for this could be Jeraj's declared lyrical poetics; she had established herself as a lyrical poet, and her writing tended towards subjectivity, intimate expressions, and emotional confessions, which was far removed from Aškerc's poetic discourse and poetics.¹⁹ His "censorship" could also be interpreted as a productive force: Jeraj eventually discovered that epic poetry was not her style. Nevertheless, it was only for a brief period that the great poet tried to persuade her to change her lyrical poetics. Aškerc's advice hindered Jeraj's creativity, yet later it also helped her articulate issues related to intimacy.

Jeraj was not the only female poet whom Aškerc tried to shape in terms of poetic style.²⁰ Seven years later, he revealed his misogynistic views about female poets in a letter to another Slovenian female poet, Ljudmila Poljanec.²¹

Women can't write poetry? The power of written words and prejudices ...

Vida Jeraj met Josip Murn-Aleksandrov (1879–1901), who was five years her junior and at that point still unknown to the greater Slovenian public, though his colleagues recognized him as a promising figure of his generation.²² From February 1900 until his death in May 1901, Murn wrote Jeraj nineteen letters (unfortunately, Jeraj's replies to him

¹⁸ "Ta podoba kaže, da Vam ne bilo treba baš pisati poezije. (This photograph shows that you don't really need to write poetry.)" (Aškerc 52)

¹⁹ That silence could have concrete reasons: Aškerc in 1898 had great problems with the Catholic institutions.

²⁰ The younger generation later turned his back on him—that happened after his arbitrary editorial work on the poems by Dragotin Kette (1876–1899), published after his death in 1900.

²¹ See Aškerc's letter to Ljudmila Poljanec, 5 October 1904: "Proti ženski poeziji imam, kakor sem Vam menda že povedal, hude predsodke. (I have terrible prejudices about female poetry, I think I have told you that already.)" (Aškerc 215)

²² At that time, Murn lived in Ljubljana—it was already after his stay in Vienna. He occasionally visited Bled and Vipava because he wanted to cure himself from tuberculosis.

have been lost). They also met in Bled, Ljubljana, and Kamnik (where another female poet, Zorana²³—Jeraj’s cousin—resided). During this period, she was one of his best friends. In his letters, he detailed his life and work, his travels, and he also wrote about their mutual acquaintances, cultural events, and books; however, surprisingly, he did not discuss poetry much. As such, we can presume that he was quite indifferent to her poetry, despite knowing that she was striving to become a poet.²⁴

In his letter from 17 December 1900, Murn was critical of Jeraj’s poetry, claiming that her poems were not personal or emotional enough. He implored her to “go inside of herself,” to discover what she wanted to write and then attempt it. Thinking about her poetry, he expressed his prejudiced views about “unreliable” women: “You women have a big heart; it’s just erratic, and it’s so fickle and so blurry that a man can’t know what’s inside.” (Murn 171)²⁵ For the first time, he also advised her to write only for children.²⁶ He confessed that he would be disappointed with her writing if he would not read her poems for children, which he considered the most beautiful thing that “could be created from a woman’s hurt” (Murn 171).²⁷ He continued by expressing his idealistic concepts of an artist’s integrity, writing about the “clearness” of the poet’s mind and his abilities and skills. According to Murn, the artist must be in a “clearly defined mood” and his art must be highly ethical. Through his words, Vida Jeraj could infer that it was not possible for a female writer to reach the high standards he suggested for the artist’s personality.

We can presume that he did not believe in her poetry, even though she had been one of his closest friends. Women, in his view, were incapable of writing poetry. He gave her the only real advice about poetics in his letter dated 9 January 1901. He again advised her to write poetry specifically for children. He suggested changes for the children’s tale in verse “Orjaki na Ajdni. Gorenjska pravljica” (“The Monsters from Ajdna: The Tale from Gorenjska”)—which she later included as the last poem in her anthology. He believed that the last

²³ Her real name was Franja Trojanšek Tominšek (1867–1935).

²⁴ Perhaps she was also afraid or not confident enough to show him some of her poems.

²⁵ “Ve ženske imate sicer veliko srce, samo nestalno in tako motno je, da človek ne more vedeti, kaj je v njem.”

²⁶ On 6. 12. 1900, Murn wrote to the poet Oton Župančič about the high quality of Jeraj’s poems for children (Murn 145).

²⁷ “Tudi bi izgubil o tebi že zdavnaj vse veselje, da nisem bral tvojih otročjih pesmi, ki se mi zdijo nekaj najlepšega, kar sploh zamore ustvariti žensko srce!!”

verses were overly constructed in a Germanic style (Murn 175).²⁸ He encouraged her to add three new verses at the end of the poem, so that it would sound more poetic and musical. She respected his poetic authority, so she changed those parts of the poem before publishing it in her anthology in 1908.

However, Murn did not make any reference to either her impressionist poems for adults or her subtle love poetry.²⁹ On the other side, we have letters containing detailed “instructions” about poetry and poetic solutions that Josip Murn-Aleksandrov wrote to an unknown poet, Janko Polak.

Murn’s sudden death in the spring of 1901 was a great shock to Jeraj, a kind of “epistemological wound.” On this occasion, she wrote a cycle of poems “Mrtvemu pesniku Aleksandrovu” (“To the Dead Poet Aleksandrov”) in which she mourns the death of one of the most eminent poets of the generation. She then published the cycle in the renowned *Ljubljanski zvon*.³⁰ The year 1901 also saw Jeraj experience a personal crisis, and she gave up her independent life, opting to marry and relocate from a small village to the bustling metropolis of Vienna.

Reception of Jeraj’s anthology (1908)

Jeraj published just one anthology of poems *Pesmi (Poems, 1908)*³¹ at the main Slovenian publishing house, Schwenker.³² It was not well received in literary society, and the critics applied misogynistic criteria when evaluating her poetical world (Jensterle Doležal, *Ključni* 70–74). They denied the merit of her poetry, her ambition for the poetical language, her concentration on searching for right words in verse and her disciplined effort for formal arrangement. They wrote more about her as a woman than about her poetry. They were ironic, cynical, and

²⁸ It reveals the socio-historical context: Slovenian writers during this period were bilingual, as German culture and language was still influential (Jensterle Doležal, *Avtor* 69).

²⁹ Perhaps she also didn’t persuade him with her poetry, because she published many lyrical poems after his death.

³⁰ That was the decision of Anton Aškerc.

³¹ That was her success in the broader sense. Next to Ljudmila Poljanec, she was the only female poet from *Slovenka* who at the beginning of twentieth century succeeded in publishing a book (Poljanec in 1906, Jeraj in 1908).

³² Her second book, *Izbrane pesmi (Selected Poems)*, was published after her death in 1935 (the editor was Marja Boršnik).

paternalistic in their attitude towards her personality. They ironically referred to the young writer as “a beautiful female gardener” and “a cute fairy on the Slovenian Parnass.” They wrote almost nothing about her poetry, but more about women in general as second-class citizens, who were in their opinion on the same level as children. The words of the critic Pam Morris, who analyzed Robert Lowell’s comments on Sylvia Plath’s poetry fifty years later can be applied here: “Comments continually blur Plath’s person with her poetry, this (con)fused identity is persistently described in gender stereotypes.” (Morris 45) In their view, a woman could not be a true writer because she was not an adult personality. For example, critics of Jeraj’s poetry wrote that “she was just skimming the surface, not going deep.” Her poetry was for them “a dwarf who possesses women in the years when they are neither a woman nor a child anymore” (Jensterle Doležal, *Ključci* 72).³³

The reception was a great source of disappointment for her. She bitterly expressed her frustration to her Viennese friend Steffi Löffler,³⁴ stating: “My husband sent me one review of my poems [*Zvon*] ... Not a single useful sentence! Just phrases and nonsense! But that doesn’t bother me!” (Jeraj, Vida. “Letter to Steffi Löffler, 2 September 1908”)³⁵

That was one of the reasons why she stopped writing poetry for adults and started writing only for children. Her answer to the misogynist critics of her first book was silence. Following the negative reception of her only anthology in 1908, she broadly followed Murn’s advice and began to write children’s poetry. The “soft,” implicit censorship of Murn-Aleksandrov had a great impact on her writing.³⁶ From 1909 onward, she wrote very few works for adults, and her poetry became less personal, with a greater focus on social and war themes.

In 1922, she published her last poem in *Ljubljanski zvon* (“Sappho”), which could be understood as a symbolical gesture with a “message” for Slovenian society. The poem represented a great contrast to her first love

³³ According to Rita Felski in the late nineteenth century, “to demonstrate women’s lower position on the evolutionary chain [...] they [the women] are being invariably compared to [...] children or savages” (Felski 40).

³⁴ Steffi Löffler was at that time the fiancée of Ivan Cankar and Jeraj’s friend and therefore part of the same Viennese circle of Slovenians as Vida Jeraj.

³⁵ “Mein Mann samte mir eine Kritik über meine Gedichte (“Zvon”) ... Nur eine einziger, vermischter Satze! Nichts als Phrasen und Gewischt! Aber das macht mir nichts!” She wrote about the critique of their view by the respected philologist Josip Tominšek (1872–1954) in the prominent *Ljubljanski zvon* (Jensterle Doležal, *Ključci* 71).

³⁶ She published her second book, *Iz Ljubljane čez poljane* (*From Ljubljana through the Fields*), in 1921.

poem in *Slovenka*: “Slutnje” (“Premonitions”), published in 1897, and demonstrated a shift in her themes. One of her first public poems was a celebration of the joy and love wishes—the apotheosis of intimacy—whereas her last published poem, more than twenty-five years later, was a lament of life’s defeats. It expressed the tragic position of the female poet in Slovenian society, who experienced a great disparity between herself as a poet and an inhumane, indifferent, misogynist society.

She also used a completely different form for that confession (the poem “Sappho” is written in free verse, and Jeraj in some way disregarded the traditional forms of strophes and verses she had used before). In this poem, she also incorporated the myth of the first poetess, Sappho, to express her tragical fate without any personal or professional success:

Šla je v množice ljudi, v bakhantski pijanosti je segla v strune zlate lire in vezala
je v girlande besed krasoto ženske duše.
Postala je živ akord njegovega imena.
Za krohot in za aplavz je razprodajala svoje srce.
Pesmi so bile izgovorjene. Ona sama se je žrtvovala neusmiljenim bogovom
sredi praznega svetišča. (Jeraj, “Sappho” 220–221).

She went into crowds of people. In bacchanalian drunkenness, she reached
for the strings of the golden lyre and embroidered them with the beauty of a
woman’s soul in a garland of words.

She became a living manifestation of his name.

She was selling her heart for applause and cheers.

The poems were spoken. She sacrificed herself to merciless gods in the midst
of an empty sanctuary. (Transl. by the author)

The poem conveys the problem of expressing intimacy in her early poetry—the problem of her lyrical poems, which were met with disapproval from society due to its gendered view.

By the end of the twentieth century, Jeraj was completely forgotten in Slovenian literary society. After all of the negative experiences on her path to becoming a writer and a poet within the gendered world of the Slovenian literature, Jeraj bitterly and sardonically concluded in an epigram in 1926 that a Slovenian woman at that time had no chance of entering the literary world (Jeraj, *Izbrano delo* 142–145).³⁷ In 1932, she ultimately took her own life.

³⁷ She wrote this epigram after the occasion in 1926 when the Slovenian Pen Club was founded: “Tu so vrata v Pen-klub, stoj! Ženska, n a š a vrhu tega!?! Moški tu smo med seboj in še to le radi tega, da slavimo svoj obstoj! Ženska, tu je Pen-klub: stoj!”

In 1929, in England, Virginia Woolf wrote about an imaginary sister of Shakespeare—a highly talented poet who, due to the restrictions of her time, was never given the opportunity to pursue her craft and was thus forgotten by history, but her afterlife will come when gendered relations are no longer necessary for human existence: “We go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down.” (Woolf 95)

Conclusion: Silenced voices

Implicit gendered censorship was a destructive form of male dominance in relation to Jeraj’s writerly identity and authorship. Also, in that case the formation of the subject “has everything to do with the regulation of speech” (Butler 133)—and also, we might add, of poetic speech. As Judith Butler has noted, censorship as the “performative with the agents of power also means psychical injury, which affects the bodily ‘doxa’, that lived and corporeally registered set of beliefs that constitute social reality” (159). Censorship is, in her words, crucial for the subject and his position in the society. According to Butler, this social performance is “a crucial part not only for the formation of the subject, but also of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject” (160). Gendered censorship, in the case of Vida Jeraj, caused a reorganization of her subjectivity and a decline in her writing, leading to her eventual silence.

In their correspondence, Jeraj’s colleagues and male friends provided her with advice on poetics, as well as what was deemed appropriate for a female poet to write. Behind all their gendered prejudices, Aškerc and Murn-Aleksandrov believed that a woman could not become a poet. They also tried to persuade Jeraj that she could not write poetry due to her gender. Male censorship of the young female poet signified the beginning of self-censorship, as her authorship was fragile at the outset of her career.

It was a significant challenge for a female writer from a small, narrow-minded, patriarchal, and deeply Catholic nation on the periphery

(Here is the entrance to the Pen—club, stop! A woman, even more: our woman?! Here just we men can stay and we are here to celebrate our existence! O woman, here is the Pen Club—stop!)”

of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in Central Europe at that time to become a poet and to break through with new poetics. There are many similar stories of female writers in Central Europe at that time, most of which—as in the case of Jeraj—ended tragically.³⁸ For a woman to become a poet in small Slavic culture of that “monarchical” time was a great sacrifice and a struggle akin to Don Quixote’s battle against the windmills. Examining her life, we can appreciate Jeraj’s courage, her determination and creative power, her quest for words, and her experimentation with language: writing poetry in an environment that was not conducive to her efforts. The obstacle was not only the poor reception of her work; in the process of writing, she was subordinated by male authorities and ultimately silenced.³⁹ The female poet found herself neglected by her close colleagues, who did not encourage her work enough because of her gender.

Vida Jeraj was a highly promising poet and a cosmopolitan—a nomadic person who traversed between different cultures. Unfortunately, her status as a woman worked against her and she was nearly excluded from literary history and Slovenian literature, of which she had so desperately wanted to be a part. Nevertheless, her legacy is not forgotten: after one hundred years, her poetry is finally becoming part of the Slovenian canon.

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³⁸ If we look at Slavic literatures in the period of the “moderna,” the exclusion of women from the poetry was common for a long time also in other “Habsburgian” nations. Here it is possible to mention the Czech decadent and impressionist writer of prose and poetry, Luisa Ziková (1874–1896), who after her tragic death from tuberculosis was not well received nor mentioned in the history of Czech literature like her male colleagues were (see Topor). In the history of the Croatian “moderna” from 1978, not a single female poet is mentioned (Šicel 268–305).

³⁹ According to Judith Butler: “Silence is the performative effect of a certain kind of speech, where that speech is an address that has as its object the deauthorization of the speech of the one to whom the speech act is addressed. [...] Power is exerted by a subject on a subject; its exertion culminates in a deprivation of speech.” (Butler 137)

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Postati (slovenska) pesnica na koncu 19. stoletja: moška cenzura poezije Vide Jeraj

Ključne besede: feministična literarna veda / slovenska poezija / slovenske pisateljice / Jeraj, Vida / cenzura / avtocenzura

Razprava se osredotoča na vpliv »moške« cenzure na poetiko in pisanje Vide Jeraj (1875–1932), glavne lirične pesnice med slovenskimi pesnicami, povezanimi s tržaško revijo *Slovenka* (1897–1902). Primer Vide Jeraj razkriva, kako težko je bilo postati pesnica v omejeni, strogo razdeljeni patriarhalni slovenski kulturi kot delu konservativnega monarhičnega prostora tega obdobja. Niso je omejevala samo jasno dana patriarhalna pravila družbe, ki so korigirala njen prodor v javni prostor. Ravno tako je kasneje ni zaustavila samo mizogina negativna recepcija njene prve in edine zbirke pesmi leta 1908, nanjo je pritiskala tudi »moška« cenzura kolegov in prijateljev pesnikov. Zanimalo nas bo njeno prvo obdobje ustvarjanja, ko je še iskala svojo poetiko in se uspešno uveljavljala v slovenskem javnem prostoru. Omejili se bomo na analizo korespondence z njenim dobrim prijateljem Josipom Murnom-Aleksandrovom (1879–1901), tedaj mladim obetajočim impresionističnim pesnikom, ter z Antonom Aškercem (1856–1912), urednikom *Ljubljanskega zvona* in v tem obdobju glavnim arbitrom za pesniška vprašanja pri generaciji moderne. Prikrita cenzura moških kolegov je za mlado avtorico pomenila tudi avtocenzuro, saj sta se njena pesniška identiteta in samozavest šele oblikovali. Diskurz moči pesniških kolegov, ki je poudarjal politiko spola, je bil usoden za nadaljnjo pesniško kariero nadarjene pesnice. Tovrstna spolska cenzura, skupaj s kasnejšimi pritiski, je povzročila umik pesniškega glasu v tišino.

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