

Lesbian Literature in Poland: Authors, Reception and Social Presence

Daniel Kalinowski,

Philology Faculty, Pomeranian University, Słupsk, Poland

Abstract: In Polish literature, lesbian motifs appear in the mid-nineteenth century, and further representations of this theme are occasional. Only after 1989 (the fall of the socialist countries in Europe) did the lesbian themes become clearer. However, the real eruption of Polish lesbian literature took place in the last two decades of the 21st century.

Polish literary studies on the lesbian motif show the creations of lesbian heroines contained in the works (healer, hidden lover, "full-fledged" partner, warrior) and point to the problem of the presence of lesbians in traditional Catholic society. Authors of both literary works and texts of literary criticism fight to reject the stereotype and stigma of lesbian love. Lesbian literature in Poland is becoming one of the forms of manifesting a woman's subjectivity, an expression of the right to freedom of belief and choice of life model.

Keywords: Polish Literature, Lesbian Literature, Stereotype, Stigma, Woman's Subjectivity, Life in Polish Culture

Terminological and Historical Notes

Before proceeding to the description of the issue, it is necessary to determine the meanings of the words used. Thus, lesbian literature in Poland can be defined as texts written by lesbians expressing lesbian experiences or reflecting a lesbian existential perspective (Faderman 49-59; Nadana-Sokołowska 270). The Polish context of lesbian literature is different from the phenomena occurring in multiracial, multiethnic or multilingual societies. In its mainstream, Polish culture contains, to a limited extent, issues that appear in postcolonial discourse. It has absolutely no sensitive issues associated with black women's brand of feminism.

Such a general definition requires a few additions, especially regarding the vague category of the experience of existence. Firstly, lesbian literature considers the perspective of a non-heteronormative woman not only through the social attitude of the actual author of the work but also through the fictional construction of the literary character. Literary creations present a different sensitivity and a different type of existential experience of the heroines. Cultural (clothing) or linguistic (sociolects) codes specific to the lesbian community are also introduced, which emphasise women's subjectivity. Secondly, the lesbian experience presented in literary descriptions concerns not only an individual example of interpersonal relationships but also shows lesbian love as a full-fledged model of interpersonal relationships. What is very important here is the belief that homosexuality is not a deviation from sexual life or a social dysfunction but one of the forms of contemporary human expression. Literature written from this perspective raises awareness of the phenomena of legal inequality (formalisation of same-sex relationships), disproportions in professional life (unfair wage system) and political responsibility (problems of communities or political parties). Thirdly, the lesbian existential perspective can be understood as an element of the socio-political feminist consciousness of contemporary women who treat the literature of sexual minorities as a record of the world they identify with. Literature written from this perspective raises awareness of the phenomena of legal inequality (formalisation of same-sex relationships), disproportions in professional life (unfair wage system) and political responsibility (problems of communities or political parties). Fourthly, the most important factor in qualifying a work as lesbian literature is the actual author, not literary critics or ordinary readers. In this point of view, only women can be considered as authors who "truly" write about the world of lesbians, and the voices of male authors can be a kind of complement to women's narratives. All the aspects of the existential experience mentioned above represented in literature are at least partially related to the demands of radical feminism expressed already in the 1970s by Adrienne Rich (Rich 1980).

The first signals in Polish literature related to the description of women's homosexuality appeared in the works of the 19th-century writer Narcyza Żmichowska (*Poganka*, eng. Pagan woman,

1846; *Biała Róża*, eng. White Rose, 1861). However, they were camouflaged to such an extent in the applied poetics of the romance-symbolic novel that in the era they appeared, they were not identified with the literary image of lesbian love. Also, later prose productions from the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries by Aniela Gruszecka (*Przygody w nieznanym kraju*, eng. Adventure in an Unknown Country, 1935) or even later ones by Anna Kowalska (*Safona*, eng. Sappho, 1959) were treated marginally as a kind of artistic experiment or a gesture of moral provocation. Such a reception cannot be too surprising. The situation of Polish culture in the 19th century, when Poles did not have their own free state and were subject to cultural and administrative pressure from Russia, Prussia or Austria-Hungary, was challenging, and there was no space here for the issue of gender identity. Equally unfavourable years came after Poland regained its independence in 1918 when, despite many avant-garde trends in Polish literature and the appearance of works with gay motifs, lesbian themes were almost absent. The period of the People's Republic of Poland (1948-1989), when Polish culture was under the influence of the socialist model of political and social life, did not change the situation of the absence of lesbian literature. The absence of a lesbian motif in Polish literature of that time can be explained by the apparent liberalism of socialism, which, on the one hand, postulated equal rights for women, encouraged political activity or granted them the right to abortion, but on the other hand, maintained the patriarchal model of society. Concerning literature, the representatives of socialist art criticism forbade writers from referring to homosexuality because, according to them, it showed the moral decline of man.

It was not until 1989 that works by Izabela Morska (Filipiak) (*Absolutna amnezja*, eng. Absolute amnesia; *Perszing*, eng. Pershing from the volume *Niebieska menażeria*, eng. The Blue Menagerie) and Ewa Schilling (*Lustro*, eng. *Mirror*; *Akacja*, eng. Acacia) appeared in Polish literature, which can be considered the first, so expressive and even programmatic examples of works by women authors writing about lesbian love. It was a time of deep reevaluation in Polish society, which could use the cultural goods of Western Europe without the restrictions of political or moral censorship. The socialist worldview is no longer the binding interpretation of moral behaviour, and

liberal attitudes, including feminism, have become increasingly more robust. Moreover, the Polish Catholic Church quickly lost its position as the only source of moral norms, and religious movements related to the New Age movement began to develop rapidly. In the context of cultural changes and the topic of homosexuality, a significant event in Poland was the year 2003 and the social campaign "Let them see us", which introduced the topic/image of gays and lesbians into the public social discourse. Billboards with photos of homosexual couples appeared on the streets, coming outs of famous figures of culture and art were published in the press, and media events were organised in which gender issues were discussed. In literary life, novels by Michał Witkowski (*Lubiewo*, eng. *Lubiewo*) and Magdalena Okoniewska (*Mój świat jest kobietą. Dziennik lesbijki*, eng. *My world is a woman. Diary of a lesbian*) appeared, which were always manifestations of work on homosexual topics. The literary image of a lesbian slowly ceased to be treated as a social provocation, and in the cultural reality of Poland in the 21st century, it is no longer considered an extravagance. Literature created by lesbians has been the subject of several literary studies, and in the socio-political dimension, the lesbian community has its place in Polish associations of sexual minorities (Adamowicz 81-90; Iwasiów; Cuber). Lesbians co-create the feminist movement in Poland (Kalinowski 173-192), having their leaders and engaging in public and artistic life (e.g. Sylwia Chutnik).

Heroines of Polish Lesbian Prose

Discussing some of the most significant examples of Polish lesbian literature, we can identify several artistic projections of Polish lesbians based on the heroines created in the works. Of course, these are literary constructions that can be described in more detail and more texts. However, it is worth pointing out the most expressive examples to determine their semantic functions (Mikołajczak). Here, however, it is worth pointing out the most expressive literary examples to determine their semantic functions and indicate their role in introducing a type of hero that is new to Polish literature.

The first type of lesbian heroine in a novel or short story is a healer who brings an improvement in the existential situation of another, usually unhappy, woman. The healing feature

sometimes has a mental dimension, and then the recipient of the help changes her style of thinking or comes out of mental depression. Sometimes, the healer changes the whole model of the life of the suffering and healed person, which causes the treated person to divorce her boyfriend-lover, divorce her husband, and change her job and place of residence. The positive figure of the healer appears in both the heterosexual and homosexual narratives of the healed heroine (*Lustro* and *Akacja* by Ewa Schilling). The healer interferes deeply in the life of such a woman who has disturbed relations with men. The lesbian heroine shows another suffocated and lost woman how much she lost her subjective "I" and how she erred, subordinating herself to the heterosexual social norm imposed by men. In still other cases of the novel, the heroine-healer can rescue a lost woman from a physical illness (*Jedno lato, drugie lato*, eng. *One summer, another summer*, by Małgorzata Wudarczyk, *Słońce*, eng. *Sun*, by Monika Mostowik). With her care, presence, joy of mind and style, she restores a lost woman's will to live and allows her to look at the future with optimism (*Alina i Teresa*, eng. *Alina and Teresa*, by Ewa Schilling, *Bumerang*, eng. *Boomerang*; *Kolce*, eng. *Spikes*, and by Monika Mostowik). The examples of lesbians in the novel refer to the ideas of homosexual marriages expressed by sexual minority communities, in which procreation is not the primary goal of the family. This does not mean that homosexual couples should give up having children. The lesbian love relationship is about mutual psychological understanding, mental support, the ability to realise one's personality, satisfaction of sexual desire and/or having children (Halberstam 317). Sometimes, such literary projections appear to be a modern fairy tale because lesbian healers appear suddenly in the lives of suffering women, and their character or physical characteristics are idealised. However, this idealistic-utopian aura of the narrative is intended to show the non-rational power of lesbian love (Jagose; Martindale).

The second type of projection of the positive lesbian heroine is the figure of a secret lover who, at the end of her partner's self-development process, is finally revealed to her family, friends and the world. The factor of private secrecy and the formula of social taboo is significant here because the authors of the quoted lesbian prose stigmatise the social habit of concealing behaviours unacceptable by the majority. Thus, they show that lesbian love is an unacceptable phenomenon and

brings public rejection. Non-heteronormative people must, therefore, hide their true and authentic feelings so that they do not destroy the values of the traditional family or prevent them from pursuing a professional career. At such a moment, the authors of Polish lesbian literature refer to the observations formulated by Michel Foucault, who pointed out how models of sexuality were (and still are) strongly related to the exercise of power and the provisions of state, religious and customary law. In addition, there is the issue of language and its constructions that stigmatise lesbian love (Foucault 81). Therefore, the heroines of Polish lesbian works experience cultural oppression and hide their lovers, sometimes all their lives, or at least as long as they do not undergo an internal transformation and readiness to face a hostile world (*W moich rękach*, eng. *In my Hands* by Monika Mostowik from the collection *Akrobatki*, eng. *Acrobats* and *Testament*, eng. *Testament*, by Inga Iwasiów from the collection *Smaki i dotyki*, eng. *Tastes and Touches*). In some works, the hidden lover supports the hesitant heroine of the work to come out and publicly reveal her sexual preferences, but sometimes she too lives with fear, fear and remorse. The need to socially hide homosexuals and their forced “invisibility” is the negative side of lesbian existence. They only get a substitute for happiness during secret meetings and trysts hidden from family or friends. The heroines wait for such moments intensively, routinely fulfilling their professional or family duties. Short moments of lesbian fulfilment, however, are paid for by the need to play a kind of game and assume the mask of a faithful wife or obedient daughter. Polish literature reflects the processes expressed in Western literatures much earlier (Zimmerman 451-475).

The third type of lesbian heroine projected in Polish prose is a fulfilled partner who leads the second heroine to start an openly homosexual life. This fulfilled partner is generally a woman who has decided to come out and openly expose her preferences. She is ready to accept the consequences of her decisions and courageously builds her relationship with another woman. At such a moment, the literature reflects discussions already taking place in the 1960s as part of the sexual revolution and concerned public discourse about sexual life (Wilton 509-510). It was then that the details of

sexual behaviour began to be described without prudishness (e.g. preferences in sexual intercourse techniques, specificity of experiencing female orgasm).

Moreover, this type of brave protagonist can be found in the novels *Moja Les* by Zofia Staniszevska and *Worse Feelings* by Urszula Ledzewicz. In the above-mentioned works, literary descriptions of fulfilled, "official" female homosexual relationships take two primary forms. The first of them shows a specific adaptation of the lesbian relationship to the roles that are encountered in traditional heteronormative relationships. Then one of the women fulfils the role or status of a "husband", while the other partner assumes the role or status of a "wife" (*Moje serce przechodniem jest...*, eng. My heart is a passer-by, by Aneta Fryśny). One of the women then becomes a person who takes care of her financial condition, and the other one takes care of domestic matters. Polish authors, however, do not describe in their works only a joyful and understanding reality. They can outline crises in relationships, the routine of living together, emotional quarrels and partings. Then, such works prove that lesbian prose is not only a therapeutic form for authors or readers. Contained in them: confusion, misunderstanding or uncertainty between lovers shows that the lesbian relationship is dynamic and requires activity and care for both parties in the relationship of partners. A different form of the novel with the creation of a fulfilled partner is a story in which the lesbian is based on the principle of equality and not on repeating the heterosexual model. The works of this group distance themselves from the stereotypes of male dominance and female submissiveness, pointing instead to the process of building a relationship in which harmony prevails. Then, the partners inspire each other to cook, feast, travel out of town, or talk about culture and art. It is in such relationships that sexual and psychological satisfaction is finally achieved, experienced by each of the parties.

The last literary construction that creates the type of heroine in Polish lesbian prose is a warrior, a dynamic woman fighting for her own happiness and for the rights of other women. Of course, this is not about the militaristic aspect of the term but about the metaphorical meaning, i.e. showing the heroine as a dynamic, rebellious woman fighting for her beloved and for the right to homosexual love in general terms. Such heroines appear in Ewa Schilling's *Codziennosc*, eng. Daily;

Inga Iwasiów's *Smaki i dotyki* or Aleksandra Mader's *Urwany film*, eng—Broken film. The figure of the lesbian warrior appears in many dynamic narrative shots. This type of creations can be associated with the slogans of radical feminism and showing women the harmfulness of the patriarchal social model and ways to combat it. Moreover, it is intended to encourage an active attitude of action and assistance within the environment of women in which "sisterhood" reigns, like in a manifest *The Woman-Identified Woman* (Blasius and Shane 399-400). In Polish literary works, first of all, she often breaks up emotional-erotic emotional systems dominated by a man. The warrior then points out to the other dominated woman that she should not continue to accept the discrimination. A positive solution would be a lesbian relationship, which, in the novel, gives equal rights in love. Secondly, the warrior, even if she does not eliminate the sick love relationship, seduces the woman, arouses fascination, waits for the chosen one's decision, and finally strives for sexual fulfilment. Very often, the literary projection of a warrior woman is associated with descriptions of the physical and mental attractiveness of this type of heroine, who may sometimes appear as a "manly" woman with short hair or a boyish figure. Another time, the warrior is endowed with the biological attributes of women, such as prominent breasts or sensual lips. Of course, writers of lesbian novels constantly put the physical characteristics of female warriors in interpretative brackets (Marks 354-355). The most important features of women fighting for lesbian love are independence of mind and civil courage.

Conclusion

Polish literature created by lesbians is a young tradition dating back to 1989. This does not mean, however, that social phenomena critical in Polish culture did not occur thanks to it. First of all, thanks to such authors as Izabela Filipiak or Ewa Szillig, Polish audiences had to deal with topics that had been almost absent until then. Secondly, literary proposals with lesbian protagonists or narrators caused a creative ferment among Polish studies of feminist criticism (Ewa et al.). They resulted not only in works on homoerotic literature but also stimulated the creation of studies formulated in the discourse of queer studies. Thirdly, lesbian literature understood not only in an artistic or critical sense, seems to be slowly penetrating political circles. It is no coincidence that the LGBTQ

community is constantly represented in the Equality Marches organised by the political opposition as a counterbalance to the right-wing circles of governments in Poland in the years 2015-2023 (Kim).

The lesbian literature discussed in this article, using popular literary genres, i.e. journals, short stories, moral novels or romances, shows female homosexuality not as a strangeness or degeneration but as one of the types of interpersonal relationships. Thus, it disenchant a supposedly aesthetically inappropriate or morally unacceptable topic. The authors of Polish lesbian literature wanted and still want to introduce a wider group of readers into the lesbian experience (Kraskowska 45-67; Packalén 427-435; Lisowska 251-265). Hence, the appearance in public life of coming outs, texts about social oppression and alienation or legal problems of sexual minorities. Finally, it is worth noting that the creation of various types of protagonists in Polish lesbian prose reduces the negative power of social stereotypes and allows us to see the diversity of people and the ways of life they lead.

Works Cited and Consulted

- Fryśna, Aneta *Moje serce przechodniem jest...* Wydawnictwo Książkowe IBiS, 2005.
- Gruszecka, Aniela *Przygoda w nieznanym kraju*. Wydawnictwo „Kobieta Współczesna”, 1933
- Iwasiów, Inga *Smaki i dotyki*. Świat Książki, 2006.
- Kowalska, Anna, *Safona*. PIW, 1959.
- Ledzewicz, Urszula *Gorsze uczucia*. Nowy Świat, 2007.
- Mader, Aleksandra *Urwany film*. Warszawska Firma Wydawnicza, 2013.
- Morska [Filipiak] Izabela *Niebieska menażeria*. Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1997.
- Mostowik, Monika *Akrobatki*. Prószyński i S-ka, 2006.
- Mostowik, Monika *Histeryjki o May: cykl opowiadań 2005-2007*. Prószyński i S-ka, 2008.
- Okoniewska, Magdalena *Mój świat jest kobietą*. Jacek Santorski & Co., 2004.

Schilling, Ewa *Lustro. Wybór opowiadań*, Infopress, 1998.

Schilling, Ewa *Akacja*. Wspólnota Kulturowa Borussia, 2001.

Schilling, Ewa *Codziennosc*. Korporacja Ha!art, 2010.

Schilling, Ewa *Nad fioletem*. Wydawnictwo e-bookowe, 2012.

Staniszewska, Zofia *Moja les*. Prószyński Media, 2010.

Witkowski, Michał *Lubiewo*. Ha! art, 2004.

Wudarczyk, Małgorzata *Jedno lato, drugie lato*. Rosner i Wspólnicy, 2003

Żmichowska Narcyza, *Poganka*. 1846.

Żmichowska, Narcyza, *Biała Róża*. 1861

1989 Roku”. *Lektury płci. Polskie (kon)teksty*, edited by Mieczysław Dąbrowski. Dom
Wydawniczy Elipsa, 2008, pp. 81-90.

Blasius, Mark and Shane Phelan, eds. *We are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and
Lesbian Politics*. Routledge, 1997.

Cuber, Marta. “Les-silent-story. O polskiej prozie lesbijskiej.” [https://kobiety-
kobietom.com/muzyka/art.php?art=203](https://kobiety-kobietom.com/muzyka/art.php?art=203).

Faderman, Lillian. “What is Lesbian Literature? Forming a Historical Canon.” *Professions of
desire. Lesbian and gay studies in literature*, ed. George E. Haggerty, Bonnie Zimmerman.
Modern Language Association of America, 1995, pp. 49-59.

Foucault, Michel *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alain Sheridan, Vintage
Books, 1995, vol. I.

Halberstam, Judith. “Forgetting Family: Queer Alternatives to Oedipal Relations”, *A Companion to
LGBTQ Studies*, eds. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry, Blackwell, 2007.

Iwasiów, Inga. „Niepokorne podmioty. Proza lesbijska (o
lesbijkach).” <http://artpapier.com/index.php?page=artykul&wydanie=54&artykul=1195>.

Jagose, Annamarie *Lesbian utopics*. Routledge, 1994.

- Kalinowski, Daniel. "Women Rule: Manuela Gretkowska, Olga Tokarczuk, and Self-Liberation of Polish Women." *Wheels of Change: Feminist Transgressions in Polish Culture and Society*, ed. Jolanta Wróbel-Best, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021, pp. 173-192.
- Kim, Renata. „Nienawiść w Białymstoku. Wstrząsająca relacja z Marszu Równości.” <https://www.newsweek.pl/opinie/marsz-rownosci-w-bialymstoku-relacja/xg3f8rq>.
- Kraskowska, Ewa. „Sens przygody w nieznanym kraju”. *Teksty Drugie*, 1995, No. 3-4, pp. 45-67.
- Lisowska, Katarzyna. „Literatura gejowska i lesbijska jako przejaw krytycyzmu wobec kanonu literackiego i tradycji literackiej.” *Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich*. 2011, No. 2, pp. 251–265.
- Marks, Elaine. "Lesbian Intertextuality." *Homosexualities and French Literature*, ed. George Stambolian, Elaine Marks. Cornell UP, 1977, pp. 354–355.
- Martindale, Kathleen Un/Popular Culture: Lesbian Writing After the Sex Wars. State University of New York P, 1997.
- Mikołajczak Marta, Wątki lesbijskie w polskiej prozie współczesnej 2003-2018 [PhD works written under Daniel Kalinowski's supervision and defence in 2020 at the Pomeranian University in Slupsk, Poland].
- Nadana-Sokołowska, Katarzyna. „Literatura lesbijska.” *Encyklopedia gender. Płeć w kulturze*, ed. Monika Rudaś-Grodzka [et al.]. Czarna Owca, 2014, pp. 270.
- Packalén, Małgorzata A. „<Mój świat jest kobietą...> Kilka uwag o nowym gatunku polskiej prozy współczesnej.” *Polonistyka bez granic*, red. Ryszard Nycz, Władysław Miodunka, Tomasz Kunz, vol. 1, Universitas 2010, pp. 427-435.
- Rich, Adrienne Cecile. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Signs*. 1980, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 631-660).

Wilton, Tamsin. "All Foucault and No Knickers: Assessing the Claims of a Queer-Political Erotics". *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory*, Eds. Noreen Giffney and Michael O'Rourke. Routledge, 2009.

Zimmerman, Bonnie. "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism." *Feminist Studies*. 1981, No 3, pp. 451-475.