

# *Her Story Is Like a Weed:* Censoring the Vulnerability in Women's Writing

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*The aim of this article is to broaden feminist scholarship on women writers by exploring the relationship between women's writing, intimacy, vulnerability and censorship, and the rediscovering and canonization of women's writing in Latvian literary culture. In the early twentieth century, intimacy and motherhood as a source of vulnerability in women's writing was closely linked to censorship, which revealed enduring patriarchal attitudes. The disclosure of vulnerability associated with a woman's embodied experience was "a weed" which critics wanted to weed out. Focusing on the example of Anna Rūmane-Ķeniņa (1877–1950), whose literary texts create experimental journeys into intimacy, exploring the inner states of female characters, family relationships and particular situations (death and grief that bring her characters into intimate contact with others and change the shape and experience of intimacies), the article examines the censoring attitude of literary criticism towards the openness with which women's experiences are discussed.*

Keywords: feminist literary criticism / Latvian literature / Latvian women writers / nineteenth century / intimacy / motherhood / censorship / Rūmane-Ķeniņa, Anna

Over the past two decades, feminist scholars have recognized intimacy as an essential issue, and recent debates on the topic illustrate the broad scope of the term.<sup>1</sup> In addition to intimate friendships, family, and sexual relations, the focus has also been on non-familial intimacy, for example, with nature, artwork, or reading and writing as intimate activities. The exploration of intimacy is an important area of literature. Likewise, creative processes requiring openness and vulnerability

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<sup>1</sup> The present research has been carried out as part of the projects "Embodied Geographies: History of Latvian Women's Writing" (No 1.1.1.2./VIAA/3/19/430) and "Narrative, Form and Voice: Embeddedness of literature in culture and society" (VPP-LETONIKA-2022/3-0003).

are seen as a place where the author reveals her/his intimate self—thus writing becomes an intimate act. Engaging in intimacy raises questions about the status of the subject, as well as “the creative and self-creative acts of writing and reading” (Cooke, “The Risks” 3). Intimacy studies (Berlant, “Intimacy”; *Cruel Optimism*; Cooke, “Making” 2013) have repeatedly explored and sometimes deliberately blurred the traditional boundary between public and private, which has been disrupted in many women writers’ works when they use their own lives as the material from which to create. As stated by Susan Gubar, “many women experience their bodies as the only available medium for their art, with the result that the distance between the woman artist and her art is often radically diminished” (Gubar 296). The fusion of the personal story, the literary text, and the marginalized position of women writers in the cultural field create a particular vulnerability. Kaye Mitchell, drawing attention to the particular gender vulnerability that arises in feminist traditions of self-centered writing and art, points to a cultural imagination in which women are often seen as emotional, irrational, or otherwise unsuited to public intellectual work. The purposeful exposure of vulnerability, investing herself, her personal experiences, and her feelings in her work can be a radical act of self-expression (Mitchell 196).

However, the disclosure of intimacy is a double-edged sword for women in patriarchal cultures: on the one side, it is connected to empowerment and emancipation, but on the other side, it also reflects increased vulnerability, exposure, or the possibility of backlash. The same pattern forms motherhood, which is not only part of respectable femininity and the foundations of nationhood, but also a vulnerable and delicate experience of the female body and emotions (Rye et al.; O’Reilly). Women’s writings are mainly subjected to this double bind. In the early twentieth century, the aspect of intimacy and motherhood as a source of vulnerability in women’s writing was intrinsically tied up with harsh censorship, both by the self and others to conform to constraints of gender, class, and decency. Often censoring interventions took place after the publication of work through literary criticism that was influenced by and revealed persistent patriarchal assumptions.

This article was inspired by a critical remark in a newspaper after the publication of the first of three sequels to the story *Mātes bēdas* (*Mother’s Sorrow*) (1912) by Anna Rūmane-Ķeniņa (1877–1950) (she was also published under the names Anna Ķeniņa, Anna Rūmane, Aina Rasmer, and the abbreviation A.R.). A critic (writing under the first letters of his name and family name) claims that *Mother’s Sorrow* is a weed in the monthly literary magazine where it was published, *Druva* (the

title of the magazine translates as ‘cereal fields’). He continues: “This story is very clumsy and dilettantish. It is hard to believe that anyone will have the patience to read it to the end without being outraged.” (-be 1) The harsh criticism gives the impression the critic has made his argument based on the first part of a longer story, without exploring or even wanting to delve into the structure and themes of the whole text. It demonstrates a particularly hostile attitude towards the author as well.

Following the idea that vulnerability is “not just a condition that limits us but one that can enable us” (Gilson 310), we will reassess intimacies and motherhood in women’s writing through the lens of vulnerability. And drawing on the new censorship theory, which views censorship as a diverse, diffuse, and pervasive phenomenon in which multiple actors, including circumstances, act as effective censors (Freshwater 217; Bunn 27), we will examine literary critique as a form of censorship that affected women’s creative endeavors. There are two main questions for the discussion. First, how, and why did Anna Rūmane-Ķeniņa “disappear” from the literary canon? Second, what role did censorship and criticism play in this disappearance? Using the example of Rūmane-Ķeniņa and tracing both the arguments in literary criticism and the strategies the author uses in conjunction with her most vulnerable characters to subvert the hegemonic restrictions imposed on women and women’s writing, it is possible to draw conclusions about Latvian women’s writing in general in the period in question.

## **The new generation of women writers**

In nineteenth-century women’s writing, it became more pronounced that intersections of the personal story merged with the fictive representations of women, and from the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century, this has also been fully applicable to Latvian women’s writing. This slight delay is due to several factors. While the foundations for Latvian literature were laid in the second half of the eighteenth century, the authors of these texts were Germans. The first generation of native-speaker Latvian intellectuals entered the literary scene around 1830, and during the national awakening of the mid-nineteenth century, Latvians established their literary independence. In the early days of Latvian literature, the intellectual activity of educated men, teachers, and students, was driven by the goal of creating Latvian high culture and “strengthening the self-confidence of the rising Latvian nation”

(Daija and Kalnačs 18). Women writers such as Marija Medinska-Valdemāre, Marija Pēkšēna, and others joined the movement during the 1870s with their literary works centered on national ideas. But unlike men's works, these texts also featured strong female characters who demanded equal educational opportunities for themselves. The entry of women into literature is closely linked to the fact that from the 1870s onwards, both in urban and rural areas it slowly became possible to provide a basic level of education for girls as well. Starting from the 1880s, more advanced gymnasium-level secondary education opportunities were available for wealthy young Latvian women, providing opportunities to become teachers, governesses or accountants. In contrast, until the foundation of the University of Latvia in 1919, higher education—available in France, Switzerland, Germany, or Russia—was, for the most part, a well-regarded opportunity for young men, but did not seem an attractive option in the eyes of the parents of young women, as it entailed several risks: daughters not returning home, staying unmarried, and career taking precedence over so-called women's natural tasks in life. Only a small number of the most determined women, or the daughters of ambitious and wealthy parents, went to university.

The presence of women in the Latvian literary canon began to take shape at the end of the nineteenth century. In the Latvian literary tradition, there were two canonized “great women writers”: Aspazija (1865–1943) and Anna Brigadere (1861–1933), who represented women's writing, meanwhile the names of other women fell into obscurity. As literary scholar Sandra Meškova points out, this was influenced by two factors: first, by the dominant liberal discourse which emphasized the social and political role of women. Second, gender was used as an instrument for shaping national identity, with the masculine symbolizing the national heroic spirit and the feminine as the child bearer of the nation and the preserver of its symbolic values. Although femininity was given an important place in the Latvian cultural tradition, it was actually “a glorification of the feminine as appropriated by the patriarchal discourse” (Meškova 241). At the beginning of the twentieth century, a new generation of women writers appeared on the scene of Latvian literature, choosing women's lives and female subjectivity as their main subject matter. Bringing into greater visibility certain hitherto silenced experiences such as female sexuality, the experiences of marriage and motherhood from a female point of view, they explored those themes more openly than Latvian writers before them. Often, texts written by women sought to change social perceptions, and to reveal and break the dissonance many women were experiencing in

their lives. Themes such as these in women's writing also faced fierce opposition from literary critics. The writer and literary critic Andrejs Upīts published a review *Mūsu jaunās rakstniece* (*Our New Female Writers*, 1913), criticizing the depiction of female sexuality in women writers' works and women's confusion about how to reconcile motherhood with their aspirations for independence and emancipation. He criticized women writers as self-centered, diminishing their writing as shameless and dull (Upīts, "Sieviešu" 360; "Annas" 407).

Women's increased presence in literature was also discussed by the literary critic Antons Birkerts. He observed the rapid changes in women's lives caused by emancipation, noting that recent literature raised issues everyone had to deal with but were of particular concern for women: love, family, children, parents, and so-called higher aspirations (Birkerts, "Sieviete" 1). The two most important topics were pointed out as: women and love and women and children. This division is organically linked to what is defined as the vulnerability of women, namely sexuality and motherhood, because "the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" (Rich 24).

Birkerts also highlighted the literary achievements of women. Giving a reasonably comprehensive overview of women writers who had published up until 1912, he mentioned Rūmane-Ķeniņa's literary oeuvre together with Aspazija and Brigadere, the two canonized women writers: "So it turns out that out of some thirty women who are active in our literature, only a few have brought something more valuable and lasting to it: Aspazija, Anna Brigadere and Aina Rasmer [pseudonym of Rūmane-Ķeniņa]." (Birkerts, "Latviešu" 3) Although in 1912, after the publication of the short story *Mother's Sorrow*, Rūmane-Ķeniņa appeared alongside the canonized authors because of the quality of her writing, her name later disappeared from the history of literature, while Aspazija and Brigadere have remained important authors in the canon to this day. One of the reasons for Rūmane-Ķeniņa's disappearance from the canon is her short literary career and her relatively few literary works, as well as the phenomenon of leaving outside the official canon one particular generation of Latvian women writers. Yet another is the frankness with which Rūmane-Ķeniņa's work discusses women's emotional and physical experiences.

We have chosen Rūmane-Ķeniņa, one of the most striking and controversial examples of the so-called third generation (Kusiņa 90) in the history of Latvian women's writing and activism, as a case study that allows us to ask questions about the construction of the literary canon

and the role of literary criticism taking on the role of censorship in the construction of the canon. Giving a brief insight into Rūmane-Ķeniņa's biography, which also explains the inspiration and themes of her works, we will analyze the features of intimacy and motherhood in particular texts, focusing on her story *A Mother's Sorrow*. We will conclude with a discussion which will continue to highlight the patriarchal constructions of the time, and the conditions of self-determination and creative freedom for women through the example of Rūmane-Ķeniņa.

## Anna Rūmane-Ķeniņa: writer and public figure

Anna Rūmane-Ķeniņa was born to an affluent family in Jelgava. She received a good education at the Jelgava Girls' Gymnasium, where only a few Latvian girls got to study among the daughters of German nobility and senior Russian officials. Lessons were conducted in German, French, and Russian. After graduating from the gymnasium, Anna married the teacher and poet Atis Ķēniņš (1874–1961), with whom she had six children in the following years, while at the same time devoting herself to intensive pedagogical work. In 1900 Rūmane-Ķeniņa opened a girls' school in Riga, which over the next few years was transformed into a girls' gymnasium, also offering teacher training as a part of professional education, something the press of the time reflected on as an essential contribution (-ks 5).

Rūmane-Ķeniņa also publicly reflected on the upbringing and education of girls, putting forward progressive views (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, "Par meiteņu" 1).<sup>2</sup> Her main argument was that women's education, with its emphasis on the study of languages, literature and music, was lacking practical and vocational skills: "So she is not usefully prepared for life, she must stay in the house as a refuge, and her husband must provide for her." (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, "Par meiteņu" 1) She also referred to the ideas of Swedish feminist Ellen Key and German writer Malwida von Meysenbug, especially her book *Individualitäten* (*Individualities*, 1901). From the latter, Rūmane-Ķeniņa added her voice to the demand that women should have equal rights with men in the family and society.

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<sup>2</sup> Rūmane-Ķeniņa comments on a popular book by German doctor Oskar Kluge *Männliches und weibliches Denken: ein Beitrag zur Frauen und Erziehungsfrage* (*Male and Female Thinking: A Contribution to the Question of Women and Education*, 1902). Kluge sees statistics and filing documents as the only fields of work for a woman. Rūmane-Ķeniņa argues that girls' mental power does not disappear after school exams, and their intellectual gifts should be put to use in all spheres.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Ķeniņš residence became a literature and art salon, characterized by lively creative meetings and discussions (Ikstena 11). This period also coincided with Rūmane-Ķeniņa's literary activity<sup>3</sup> and with her first literary works she became part of the literary current of her time which was strongly influenced by the works of Nietzsche, Maeterlinck, Verlaine, and others. At the same time, her writing also belonged to the female literary tradition, foregrounding the search for female identity at the center of her texts.

In the autumn of 1913, Rūmane-Ķeniņa went to Geneva to study at the Institute Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1913–1916), recognized for its innovative educational methods. Her aspiration was to establish an educational institute aligned with the most up-to-date pedagogical findings. This intention was disrupted by World War I, during which Rūmane-Ķeniņa began her diplomatic activity, starting propaganda work for an independent state of Latvia. Belonging to a generation that through their studies and travels in Western countries naturally converged with the educated middle class in the West, Rūmane-Ķeniņa found common ground with European intellectuals (Ikstena 26; Gueslin 55). One of her most outstanding initiatives was an anonymous article she sent to the *Journal de Geneve* in response to the pacifist manifesto *Au-dessus de la mêlée* (*Above the Battle*) by the writer Romain Rolland. Her article captured the dilemma the Latvian people faced, trapped between Germany and Russia. Her Latvian propaganda articles appeared in Swiss newspapers, followed by public appearances, speeches, and the creation of diverse networks of influence.

From 1917 to 1919, Rūmane-Ķeniņa served as an official representative of Baltic affairs at the Press Department of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; she also represented Latvia at the Bureau of Oppressed Peoples in Paris, and participated in the founding of the magazine *Revue Baltique*, etc. Later she became fully engaged in public activism and journalism. During this phase in her life, she also published articles on women's artistic and spiritual achievements, based on the insight that women and men are equal in their intellectual capacities.

In August 1944, during the Second World War, she fled to Berlin, Germany, where she worked for the Russian occupation administration and translated Russian literary classics into German. After

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<sup>3</sup> Her first significant work was devoted to French literature *Druskas iz franču literatūras* (*Scraps of French Literature*, 1898) and was one of the first reviews of nineteenth century French literature in Latvian.

contracting an incurable tumor, which rapidly spread, Rūmane-Ķeniņa returned from Berlin to Riga on a hospital train. She died in Riga on 9 November 1950.

The life stories and literary careers of the so-called third-generation of Latvian women writers who entered Latvian literature in the first decades of the twentieth century, and to which Rūmane-Keniņa belonged, share many similarities. They all came from families that were wealthy and progressive enough to educate their daughters. They married and started family life relatively early; often their marriages were internally disharmonious, and the choice and resolution of themes in their works were primarily determined by their personal experiences (Kusiņa 91). They made their debut in writing as commentators on cultural processes, the alternation between journalism and literature allowed them to develop wide-ranging intellectual interests, and their contributions to journalism were an essential part of their literary oeuvre. Moreover, this generation of women writers seems to have perceived literary activity as only one facet of their personality, which is why many of them produced relatively few literary works.

In the next two sections of this article, we will examine Rūmane-Keniņa's literary oeuvre. The early texts: the cycle *Iz Dienvidiem (From the South)* and pieces of short prose published in periodicals between 1902 and 1904 are characterized by a common mood and the inclusion of the personal and the private. They also show the writer's ability to employ literary techniques that create intimacy and, by evoking emotional reactions, involve readers intimately in the text. Thus, her early texts prepare for a more overt engagement with the private in her later works. Next, turning to the concept of motherhood and linking it to intimacy and vulnerability, we will consider Rūmane-Keniņa's drama *Melnais ērglis (The Black Eagle)*, (1908) and her short story *Mother's Sorrow* (1912), both of which were also fiercely attacked by literary critics.

### **Intimate writing and textual intimacies**

The beginning of Rūmane-Keniņa's literary career was characterized by short fiction texts written during a European journey in 1902, while staying in a resort in Ospedaletto, Italy. In her autobiography she writes: "In 1901, I felt so tired that I decided to go abroad for a few months. The management of the school was left to Mr. Ķeniņš, the two small children in the care of my parents, while I, with a small



bag in my hand and a little money in my pocket, wandered through Vienna, Switzerland, Northern Italy ...” (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Par sevi” 58) While in Ospedaletto she wrote lyrical travel impressions permeated by a strong emotional mood which also included a self-examination of the female subject.

The cycle *From the South* (1903–1904), consisting of 7 sketches, was later published in *Pēterburgas Avīzes*, and critics recognized the author for having “undoubted abilities, intelligent taste, and already a well-practiced hand” (Goba 255). The fertility of southern nature contrasted with the motif of the premature death of young people, a theme her stay in a tuberculosis health resort invited to explore. However, the writer’s personal involvement in the text skewed the narrative to a certain angle, revealing a thinly veiled version of the author herself (Kārkle 111). The seemingly sentimental motifs and imagery of the surroundings that recur, sunsets, walks in the cemetery, the apparent silence of the night when all the senses are heightened, allow access to the fragility and vulnerability of the narrator’s life. The biographical and literary maps of Latvian women writers often overlap, and this is also the case of Rūmane-Ķeniņa (Kārkle and Eglāja-Kristsons 123). Discovering the specific geographical place—Ospedaletto—through personal and sensual perceptions, she demonstrated how the short text “is able to capture the specificity of a particular moment or encounter” (Cooke, “Making” 12), transmitting the intimacy of the moment to readers.

After returning to her daily routine of schoolwork and family responsibilities, Rūmane-Ķeniņa was able to devote herself to writing only during late evening hours. Reflecting on this period, she attributed the concise form of her literary works to her busy schedule. Echoing Virginia Woolf’s observation that the writer’s physical conditions are important and will influence her work: “The book has somehow to be adapted to the body” (Woolf 78), Rūmane-Ķeniņa writes:

When I returned [from the journey], I continued my schoolwork with double energy. There was a lot to do: conducting lessons, running the school, talking to teachers, pupils, and their parents, 10 girls in the boarding house, 2 small children, and the household. Of course, Mr. Ķeniņš also took his share of these worries, but his *Youth Literature*, poetry, etc., were very close to his heart. Now and then, after 11 o’clock, when the house was quiet, I, too, would write a sketch, these were fashionable at the time, but I did not know how or could not get down to any major work. (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Manas”)

Characterized by the physical, intimate proximity to place, which is often “a room of one’s own,” and nature, through which self-exploration

of the female subject occurs, Rūmane-Ķeniņa in her short fiction continued to explore the themes started in her series of lyrical travel notes.

Stressing the importance of spatiality, both in the experience of intimacy and in its representation in literature, Jennifer Cooke points out that intimacy in literature is often facilitated by physical spaces (Cooke, “Making” 6). In comparison with the cycle *From the South*, where the narrator is mostly an observer, reflecting on travel impressions which are intimately, but often also indirectly connected to her feelings, her later texts explore the first-person female narrator’s intimate feelings of despair, loneliness, sadness, and loss of hope more openly. One of the recurring feelings in these texts is the female subject’s absence of belief in herself, particularly vividly expressed in the text *Nakstjūtas* (*Night Feelings*, 1903, published in the magazine *Austrums*):

I look into darkness again, I want to see the darkness, in order to understand it, to get used to it, to live in it ... But I see nothing. And the darkness takes hold of me; I sink closer and closer to her black, unfathomable breast; I feel as if I am plunging into darkness’s embrace and completely sinking into her invisibility and unfathomability. I no longer feel myself ... I close the window and throw myself onto the bed, pressing my head into the pillow so that I don’t feel anything. So that I wouldn’t feel that I am so insignificant and shriveled, oblivious that I am so lost and tossed about and swept along by all kinds of winds ... (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Nakstjūtas” 47–48)

Her early literary work, distinguished by the unique emotional and intimate perception of a female narrator, received well-deserved, albeit ambiguous, recognition. Literary critic Alfrēds Goba, overall responding positively to Rūmane-Ķeniņa’s lyrical pieces, nevertheless pointed out that her prose lacked the “social undertones” found in similar texts by men (Goba 225). Her short prose was published in the anthologies *Rīta Skaņas* (*Morning Sounds*) and *Jauna Raža* (*New Harvest*) in 1903 and 1904. The titles of the works already reveal their mood: *Par puķēm* (*On Flowers*); *Mana rudens puķe* (*My Autumn Flower*); *Dienvidus sirds* (*Heart of the South*); *Pavasara ilgās* (*Longing for Spring*); *Kā pavasaris nāca* (*How Spring Came*); *Nāves domās* (*Dwelling on Thoughts of Death*). Public exposure of female anxiety, self-doubt, and states of depression was something that Rūmane-Ķeniņa did not want to identify with at the time of publication. Her surviving letters to Teodors Zeiferts, literary critic and editor of the anthology *Jauna Raža* (*New Harvest*) indicates a strong preference for publishing these works under the pseudonym Aina Rasmer. On 13 July 1902, she wrote: “Only please publish them under the name Aina Rasmer—in places there are things that

I'm not keen on signing my name to the way I feel today." (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, "Vēstule") In March 1904, when Zeiferts prepared for publication the next volume of the anthology *New Harvest*, she sent him a letter with the same request.

Writing under a pseudonym was one of the liberating mechanisms for women authors, and by choosing a female *nom de plume*, as Jenny Coleman puts it, women writers "simultaneously embraced their identities as women while challenging the socially constructed and prescribed nature of what it meant to be a woman" (Coleman 1). Rūmane-Ķeniņa's play *The Black Eagle*, which will be discussed in the next section, was also published under the pseudonym Aina Rasmer. In contrast, her story *Mother's Sorrow*, the most autobiographical of her texts, was published under her real name. Considering Rūmane-Ķeniņa's independent way of thinking, it is possible that by abandoning the pseudonym she wanted to resist the prevailing anonymity of motherhood and its consequences, giving a voice to a mother through herself, personal and autobiographical.

## Motherhood and mothering

As is already evident in her presentation of the theme of intimacy, Rūmane-Ķeniņa puts the complexities of female emotions under the microscope. She also demystifies the mysteries of life, death, love, and motherhood in her fiction. Referring to the critical difference between the institution of motherhood and women's experiences of mothering, Adrienne Rich offers two meanings of motherhood (Rich 13), further elaborated upon by Andrea O'Reilly: "The term 'motherhood' refers to the patriarchal institution, which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, whereas the word 'mothering' refers to women's experiences of mothering and is female-defined and potentially empowering to women." (O'Reilly 2) While motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power. These differences are apparent in the two literary pieces by Rūmane-Ķeniņa, and the critical responses the works received. Both *The Black Eagle* and, more explicitly, *Mother's Sorrow* deal with mothering as an autobiographical experience. Institutionalized settings and patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood, in turn, enter through the opinions and critiques devoted to these works.

In addition to being a manifesto of the modern woman who craves freedom and creative fulfilment, *The Black Eagle* highlights the problem

of motherhood. It explores new ideas, mainly through the three female characters at the center of the drama. Margrieta embodies the ardent passion and the pleasure of the magic of the moment that is characteristic of modernity. Venta is an intellectual recluse, a blind and intelligent writer, who has long since given up on love and has not started a family. But endless devotion and the cult of motherhood are embodied in the image of a young and fragile Ieva. On the one hand, Ieva is terrified of mothering because her child is weak and unhealthy. On the other hand, her marriage is symbolized in this child. In her view, the conception and birth of a child are the highest forms of intimacy between a man and a woman, which no power can oppose. Ieva's maternal suffering foregrounds the contradictory demands made on women by the equation of true womanhood with maternal feeling. Ieva is a woman and a mother who loves, in a sense, too much. Like other aspects of her emotional life, her maternal feelings are characterized by excess. She is consistently represented and defined as a sacrificing, suffering and grieving mother. Once she begins to entertain jealous doubts about her husband Laimonis and Margrieta, she channels all her feminine emotions into her child, the only socially sanctioned outlet for female desire, apart from heterosexual love within marriage. Rūmane-Ķeniņa gives symbolic meaning to every detail, and Ieva's child, who never takes part in the action but whom everyone talks about because of his importance, which escalates with his death, symbolizes the fragile foundations of love, marriage, and mothering.

Another work in which the author addresses the theme of mothering is her autobiographical story *Mother's Sorrow*, which reflects on the death of Rūmane-Ķeniņa's two-year-old daughter Maija, who died after contracting scarlet fever in the spring of 1905. The story is not an immediate reflection of a tragedy in time. She wrote this deeply emotional testimony, describing in detail the course of Maija's illness and death, the farewell to her dead daughter and the despair of sorrow and mourning more than five years later during her stay in Paris in 1911 (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, "Manas"). Rūmane-Ķeniņa emotionally depicts a mother's experience of losing a child in an intimate and poetic style. The story includes such personal genres as letters to the narrator's husband and deceased daughter. She also strives to achieve intimacy with the reader, e.g., by describing the dramatic feelings in the first hour after the child's death: "I lean over Maija—no, no, she cannot be warmed up again. Her body is stiffening. There is nothing I can do. Omnipotent free will—how absurd, how utterly ridiculous! A human being is but a mite, a speck of

dust!” (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Mātes” 55) She later reflected: “[...] it is a story that, through the reality of the experience, usually makes every woman weep.” (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Manas”) The same assumption was made by the literary critic Goba, who warned that “people of a more emotionally unstable nature will not be able to read it without being moved to tears” (Goba 256).

The story boldly aims to portray the “mother-as-subject” with her own needs, desires, anger and struggles behind the traditional image of the reconciling and self-sacrificing Madonna, the same as Ieva in *The Black Eagle*. Rūmane-Ķeniņa does not shy away from portraying powerlessness, anger, and pain, manifested in self-destructive tendencies and indifferent reactions to the world around the grieving mother:

There is a pond beyond the garden. Let us go Maija, let us go together into the Celestial City. They hold me tight. They lock all the doors. All three are against me and they are stronger than I am. I fall to the floor. I am aware of falling—I want to fall! I scream. I am aware of screaming—I want to scream! They try to lift me up. Get away! Leave me! Let me fall, let me scream, let me smash everything to pieces! (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Mātes” 63)

She acknowledges that sorrow makes life unbearable and “despair is difficult to control in the dark” (65), emphasizing the power of darkness, a motif also found in her early prose. At the graveyard, the mother has a strong emotional and bodily experience which she characterizes as “the good fortune on this occasion to see my child not only in a dream but when I am wide awake, and to feel her so intensely with all my alert nerves” (69). But her husband calls this experience a “visual illusion and a result of my nervous exhaustion” (69). In Rich’s words, motherhood is an experience of “powerless responsibility,” which is most evident in such extreme situations as Rūmane-Ķeniņa’s story presents.

Although the whole story is an intimate act of vulnerability in the imagined letters to her husband and deceased daughter, writing about her own deepest wounds is an especially painful but also productive, even healing, personal exercise:

Don’t call me naive, or confused or arrogant—I am as I am, it is good and honest to be so. You know that I trust my emotions more than my reason, for my emotions have never misled me, while I have often been led astray by my reason. You must know that as I am writing this letter to you, now and again a moist sheen glistens in my eyes. The same sheen that appears each evening when I finish writing a letter to Maija. (Rūmane-Ķeniņa, “Mātes” 73)

Çeniņa explores her relationship to mothering as a position that is structurally vulnerable in body, identity, and institution, as well as exploring how motherhood demands vulnerability.

Returning to the title and introduction of this article, we should note that this story had already earned the unflattering description “like a weed” after its first part was published. Further criticism of the story was mixed: on the one hand, Rūmane-Çeniņa’s literary language and style were praised, and the convincing and powerful depiction of the mother’s tragedy was welcomed, noting that *Mother’s Sorrow* “is a document of the female soul, a self-observation” (Birkerts, “Sieviete” 1). On the other hand, the extended depiction of the intimacy of family life and the emotional states of motherhood were not acceptable to male critics. Goba, who praised the portrayal of the child’s death as powerful, also stressed that there were “a lot of unnecessary details in the story that distract, especially at the beginning and the end,” and criticized the author who “unashamedly talks about her own family life” (Goba 256). Upīts, in his mocking review, especially attacked the story’s autobiographical details. Representing a male interest in controlling women, particularly in the realms of family life and motherhood, Upīts at the same time disparaged the theme of mothering as not befitting a literary work, criticizing the story as “extravagantly banal and aesthetically repulsive” (Upīts, “Annas” 407). Later, when comparing Rūmane-Çeniņa’s story with writings of male authors, he concluded that there were too many intimate details, and “a man would be embarrassed to display his children to strangers who, in any case, find their children just as sweet, cute, and gifted. The middle-class woman writer knows no such shyness” (Upīts, “Sieviešu” 360).

Writer Matīss Kaudzīte, the author of the first Latvian novel *Mērnīeku laiki* (*Surveyors’ Times*, 1879) expressed his astonishment at the degree to which the heart of a loving mother can rise and how it is depicted in *Mother’s Sorrow*, but he also deemed it regrettable that the mother in Rūmane-Çeniņa’s story had nowhere to look for hope and reassurance (“R.L.B.” 2). Kaudzīte raised the question of the power of religion, assuming that the most apparent problem preventing the heroine of *Mother’s Sorrow* from recovering from her mourning was the absence of a belief in God. Kaudzīte’s reflections on Rūmane-Çeniņa’s story and his vision of transforming mourning into faith through God and religion as a solution for *Mother’s Sorrow* seem significant in the context of his own novel where a mother’s tragedy was used to create a religious monster, a self-righteous woman.

Rūmane-Ķeniņa's literary works seek not only to represent intimacy through different angles, including the experience of mothering, but also to influence, challenge and change the perceptions of it. By inscribing maternal vulnerability into the story, Rūmane-Ķeniņa follows Judith Butler's argument to refuse a reading of vulnerability that associates vulnerability with passivity, and excludes the possibility of agency for vulnerable people and groups. Vulnerability, Butler asserts, can be instead seen as a necessary basis for solidarity, offering new ways of resisting and opening creative ways of protesting (Butler 1). Rūmane-Ķeniņa's short story *Mother's Sorrows*, her last published and most criticized literary work, is a unique autobiographical narrative of motherhood in Latvian literature. It also symbolizes a turning point in Latvian women's writing, using mothering as a vulnerable central axis, albeit one still restricted under patriarchy. She proved that despite, with reference to Rich, motherhood being an institution was a male-defined site of oppression (Rich 14), women's own mothering experiences might be a source of power and narrative subject.

### **Censorship, canonization, and exclusion**

Literary criticism—typical male sphere at the turn of centuries—was a strong weapon to silence and eliminate women's literary efforts, especially those that viewed femininity and women's experiences differently from the conventionally accepted angles. Rūmane-Ķeniņa's case, analyzed through the criticism of Andrejs Upīts, Antons Birkerts, Alfrēds Goba and others, confirms the statement of Mary Eagleton that the “problem is not the women's inadequacy but a criticism which is patronizing, scathing, or anxiously self-protective” (Eagleton 7). Upīts is the most prolific and misogynistic critic in the history of Latvian literature. His statements such as, “Women's literature can depict the drying of wet nappies, the shelling of peas, and the making of herring dauphinois with the same sincerity as depictions of sexual intercourse,” are typical examples, marking a dismissive attitude towards so-called women's issues. He sarcastically underlines women's down-to-earth outlook on life as “living in cages or shells as snails” (Upīts, “Latviešu” 144).

The general public sentiment regarding the contribution of women writers is a survey conducted by the periodical *Druva* in 1914. It asked readers to name what they liked and disliked about literature, as had been published in the periodical. The novel *Der Amerika-Johann. Ein*

*Bauernroman aus Schweden (John of America)* in Latvian translation<sup>4</sup> won the poll, while Rūmane-Keņiņa's *Mother's Sorrows* came last. While the readers particularly liked works based on real events, relevant to their own lives, they found the subtle nuances of emotions and feeling less appealing (Druvas redakcija 197). Perhaps this last consideration is the reason for the exclusion of Rūmane-Keņiņa from the memory of readers.

The judgmental attitude of literary criticism is only one of the reasons why Latvian women writers who started to publish in the first decades of the twentieth century produced few works, wrote for a relatively short period and later “disappeared” from the literary scene and history of literature. Other forms of censorship also played a role, such as economic censorship and the restrictions of social taboos and customs which hindered women's self-expression and were better disguised than the more overt operations of cultural control that were largely associated with censorship. As one of the causes for the low number of finished literary works, Rūmane-Keņiņa mentions her volatile nature and lack of ambition in the literary field. She also expresses regret for not being able to complete literary works in progress, nor to gather her published literary works in a book: “I have worked a lot, yet here I stand empty-handed and do not have a single book.” (Rūmane-Keņiņa, “Par sevi” 58) While it is generally assumed that censorship interventions take place after the act of expression, Helen Freshwater, referring to the complexity of censorship, notes that censorship is not just a series of actions carried out by a single or isolated institution, but “a process, realized through the relationships between censorious agents” (Freshwater 217). Such a definition includes socially constructed prohibitions that prevent the dissemination of specific ideas. In the case of women's writing discussed above, certain topics were harshly criticized and publicly ridiculed.

Alongside the harsh and often scornful attitude of critics towards women's writing and the non-acceptance of feminine difference, the presence or absence of private space and the lack of time they could devote to writing also influenced the productivity of women writers. In Rūmane-Keņiņa's case, part of her published literary texts was created abroad, away from home and with daily duties and other tasks at a distance.<sup>5</sup> Antons Birkerts has discussed the “interruptions” in women's

<sup>4</sup> See Moeschlin. Translated into Latvian by Teodors Lejas-Krūmiņš.

<sup>5</sup> In Ospedaletti, Italy—the cycle *Iz Dienvidiem*—and in Paris, France—*Vēstules iz Parizes (Letters from Paris, 1912)*; *Mātes bēdas; Vēstule Jaunam gadam nākot (A Letter for the Coming New Year, 1914)*.



literary careers, arguing that women were more vulnerable to a variety of obstacles, the main reason for the low representation of women writers in Latvian literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He points to women's daily responsibilities and insufficient support in practical life that prevent women from writing, remarking that: "Only exceptionally gifted women writers can rise above this grey everyday life, and then not easily, but with a lot of bitterness, many storms, and setbacks." (Birkerts, "Latviešu" 3)

Rūmane-Ķeniņa's prose, most notably her short story *Mother's Sorrow*, reveals the vulnerability of a writer who invests herself, her personal experience and her feelings into her literary work. Her work constitutes experimental journeys in intimate writing, claiming the value and power of vulnerability. It is possible to argue that *Mother's Sorrow* also changes ideas about the interrelationships among love, mourning and motherhood. In the eyes of the critics, however, Rūmane-Ķeniņa "pollutes" the text with too many personal details and feelings. Current cultural and social discourse not only abounds in questions about vulnerability but also impels a writer to discover and work with their own vulnerability. However, more than a century ago, when Rūmane-Ķeniņa was published, such self-expression, especially in women's writing, was misunderstood and ridiculed. The disclosure of vulnerability associated with a woman's embodied experience in a literary text was "a weed" which male critics wanted to weed out. Their efforts had some success, as Rūmane-Ķeniņa's name was erased from the history of literature. Besides, her entire archive of documents, including correspondence with European intellectuals and literary works in progress, was burned by the gardener of the summer house where it had been stored when she fled the country in 1944 (Ķeniņš 49). Rereading her work from today's viewpoint and contemplating it in relation to the biographical aspects, often from the very aspects that critics previously disparaged, it is possible to see the value of her work, placing Rūmane-Ķeniņa's contribution within the female literary tradition. Unlike critics of the early twentieth century, our advantage is seeing it from a different, affirming perspective in order to broaden negotiations of socially stigmatized female agency and vulnerability.

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## *Njena zgodba je kot plevel: cenzuriranje ranljivosti v ženskem pisanju*

Ključne besede: feministična literarna veda / latvijska književnost / latvijske pisateljice / 19. stoletje / intimnost / materinstvo / cenzura / Rūmane-Ķeniņa, Anna

Namen razprave je razširiti feministično preučevanje pisateljic z raziskovanjem razmerja med ženskim pisanjem, intimnostjo, ranljivostjo in cenzuro ter ponovnim odkrivanjem in kanonizacijo ženskega pisanja v latvijski literarni kulturi. Na začetku 20. stoletja sta bila intimnost in materinstvo kot vir ranljivosti v ženskem pisanju tesno povezana s cenzuro, ki je razkrivala, kako globoko so zakoreninjeni patriarhalni odnosi. Razkrivanje ranljivosti, kakor jo je doživljala ženska, je bilo »plevel«, ki so ga kritiki želeli izkoreniniti. Članek se osredinja na primer latvijske pisateljice Anne Rūmane-Ķeniņa (1877–1950). Njena literarna besedila ustvarjajo eksperimentalna potovanja v intimnost, raziskujejo notranja stanja ženskih likov, družinske odnose in posebne situacije (smrt in žalovanje), preko katerih njeni liki vstopajo v intimen stik z drugimi ter spremenijo obliko in doživljanje intimnosti. Članek preučuje tudi cenzurni odnos literarne kritike do odprtosti, s katero se razpravlja o ženskih izkušnjah.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

UDK 821.174.09:305-055.2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v46.i1.03>