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DOI: 10.35539/LTNC.2023.0052.07

Gender Conventionalism in Estonian Girls' Novellas during the Era of Stagnation: the Silja Series by Silvia Truu

Konvencionālās dzimšu lomas igauņu meiteņu literatūrā stagnācijas laikmetā: Silvijas Trū Siljas sērija

Keywords:
youth literature,
gender roles,
Soviet literature,
Estonian literature

Atslēgvārdi:
jauniešu literatūra,
dzimumu/dzimšu lomas,
padomju literatūra,
igauņu literatūra

Summary The article explores gender roles in four Stagnation era Estonian novellas for girls – the so-called Silja series by Silvia Truu, which focuses on educational work experience gained in a candy factory. The stories are analyzed against the background of public discussions of that time which were characterized by a strong opposition between genders and fueled by buzzwords such as "women's emancipation" and "crisis of masculinity". The aim of this article is to find out whether and how this opposition was reflected in youth fiction, both on the level of its young protagonists and on the level of supporting adult characters. The books are also compared with advice literature for girls of that time. It is concluded that whereas the author of the Silja series takes care to use some of the constant motifs of Soviet youth education and to lay out a seemingly gender-neutral setting, the final result points in another direction: the fundamental difference between genders, even their incompatibility, is given more emphasis. The arising contradictions are reconciled through individual narrative solutions, often characterized by gender conventionalism – a conscious favoring of gender roles perceived as "natural" and "traditional". The tensions familiar from media and adult literature of the same period are most evident in the background descriptions of families and their problem areas (divorce, alcoholism, and single motherhood); the desirable solutions seem to rely heavily on gender conventionalism here as well.

Kopsavilkums Rakstā tiek pētītas dzimšu lomas četros stagnācijas laikmeta igauņu rakstnieces Silvijas Trū (*Silvia Truu*) garstāstos, kas rakstīti meiteņu auditorijai – tā sauktajā Siljas sērijā, kur uzmanības centrā ir darbaudzināšanas pieredze konfekšu fabrikā. Stāsti tiek analizēti kontekstā ar tālaika publiskajām diskusijām par dzimumu atšķirībām, kurās bieži tika izmantoti aktuālie jēdzieni "sieviešu emancipācija" un "vīrišķības krīze". Šī raksta mērķis ir noskaidrot, vai šīs atšķirības tolaik atspoguļojās arī jauniešu literatūrā – gan tās galvenajos varoņos jauniešos, gan pieaugušajos otrā plāna tēlos. Siljas sērijas grāmatas tiek salīdzinātas arī ar tā paša laika meitenēm adresētajām praktisko padomu grāmatām. Var secināt, ka, lai gan Siljas sērijas autore cenšas likt lietā tālaika padomju izglītības pamatmotīvus un radīt šķietami dzimumneitrālu vidi, galarezultāts ir citāds – tiek uzsvērta vīriešu un sieviešu atšķirīgā, pat diametrāli pretējā būtība. Starp stāstu varoņiem radušās nesaskaņas tiek risinātas caur individuāliem naratīviem, bieži vien balstoties konvencionālajās dzimšu lomās, kuras tiek uzskatītas par "dabiskām" un "tradicionālām". Tā paša laikmeta presē un pieaugušo literatūrā aplūkotie konflikti parādās arī jauniešu literatūrā, attēlojot galveno varoņu ģimenes locekļus un to problēmas (laulības šķiršana, alkoholisms, vientuļās mātes). Arī šai gadījumā vēlamie problēmu risinājumi tiek balstīti tradicionālajās dzimšu lomās.

The Soviet gender discourse carried the ideal of gender equality as a rhetorical ballast until the end of the USSR, but by the period of Stagnation it had reverted to rather separate gender roles, emphasizing the difference between women and men. Such duality gave rise to a strange, contradictory notion of femininity where gender role nostalgia and the idea of an independent modern woman collided. The concept of women's emancipation became a buzzword, a starting point for numerous press debates where emancipation was acknowledged as inevitable, but simultaneously ridiculed, setting gender convention as the norm. At the same time, confrontation between genders grew more and more vigorous in the public discourse, often discussed under the nominator of the "crisis of masculinity" (see e.g. Zdravomyslova, Temkina 2013; Dumančić 2021). It has been argued that gender role issues became a metaphor for all kinds of social discontent and were a popular topic of conversation (Zdravomyslova, Temkina 2013: 43).

This raises the question: how does literary fiction of the era handle such controversies? In any earlier work, I have looked at the depiction of gender roles in late Soviet Estonian prose with a female protagonist and identified different approaches to "femininity" (Ross 2018). This article examines what kind of gender roles emerge in youth literature for girls. While Soviet children's literature has sometimes been described as a realm of comparative creative freedom, it also bore the ideologically loaded task of raising proper new members of the society. In her foreword to *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film* (2021), Olga Voronina most vigorously emphasizes the importance of ideologically contextualized interpretations of such material. This holds similarly true for texts aimed at youth – realistic by genre, close to adult literature, but simpler and more clearly didactic-ideological, presumably with a more specific message.

Regarding gender roles, a Stagnation era advisory book for girls informs with the classic but-construction:

> "It is true that we have equality. Our women have proved it. However, a woman's function as a continuer of life gives her a special status and imposes special responsibilities on her, and a woman who is able to do her "feminine" work well will later be able to successfully involve her husband in her chores" (Kurm 1977: 10).

The adjective "feminine" is enclosed in quotation marks, but the surrounding argumentation points otherwise – these chores seem to be feminine without any concessions. This can be explained by *gender conventionalism*, a term coined by sociologist Anna Rotkirch to emphasize that such norms in late Soviet society are

not so much a genuine heritage of the past but an invented tradition. Gender conventionalism is characterized by strong support for opposing gender roles that are perceived as natural and normal, and a reluctance to question them in any way. According to Rotkirch, this is society's reaction to the real change in gender system and the resulting unrest (Rotkirch 2000: 132–133). Would a similarly gender-conventionalist message be heard in girls' novellas?

Girls' novellas and the Silja series

I use the term 'girls' novellas' to denote stories where the main character is a girl and the expected audience also consists of girls. While the children's literature of the early Soviet time was overwhelmingly masculine in terms of characters and subjects, with e.g. Timur and his team gaining fame (Bukhina 2019: 141–142), things began to change since the Thaw period.[1] The flagships of girls' literature in Estonia are Silvia Rannamaa's *Kadri* (1959) and *Kasuema* (Stepmother, 1963), which were also translated into other languages.[2] Under the guise of moderate criticism, the local reviewers greeted them warmly, as did the readers, and these books can be seen in school reading lists to this day. About a decade later, during "Stagnation proper", critics were already talking of "girls' books" as an acknowledged phenomenon and assessing their qualities as typical to a perceived body of girls' literature (e.g. Krusten 1970). In 1973, the children's writer Heino Väli noted in his review article, not without discontent, that youth literature seemed to be feminizing. Simultaneously, the warm tone of reception had been replaced by a critical one, namely in connection with the "feminization", echoing the gender confrontation in wider public discourse. Criticizing a story by Heljo Mänd, the reviewer writes: "The circle of issues that interest girls is narrow and insignificant if you believe H. Mänd. There is no reason not to believe her" (Krusten 1970: 293).[3]

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1 Such rhythms are, of course, specific to the cultural space. By comparison, it has been pointed out that in Scandinavia during the 1960s and 1970s rather gender-neutral youth novels were written – it was a certain intermediate stage between the highly gender-differentiated works of the beginning of the century and the rediscovered gendered literature of the turn of the centuries (Reitel Høyer 2011: 110). In Soviet Estonia, on the other hand, the opposite is true: it is in these decades that we can talk about the emergence of girls' literature.

2 Both books were published in Russian (the first in 1963, the second in 1972) and in Latvian (*Kadrija. Audžumāte*, 1966, translated by Džuljeta Plakidis). *Kadri* was also translated into Lithuanian in 1969 (*Kadrė*, translated by Rasa Unt), Slovak (1973), Croatian (1979), Czech (1979), and Armenian (1981). As late as 2014, it was published in Finnish.

3 There is a strong parallel with the scene in Estonian adult literature of the same era: there was also talk of the proliferation of "women's books", and complaints were made about their futility and recreational manner. Researchers of English girls' literature, Shirley Foster and Judy Simons, →

In this article, I will look at the so-called Silja series by Estonian writer Silvia Truu (1922–1990). Truu was best known as a children's and youth writer, although she has also published stories for adult audiences and written radio dramas. Until 1965, she worked as a journalist; from then on, she was a professional writer. (Säärits 2005; see also EWOD: Silvia Truu) The Silja series originally consisted of four books. In two of them, the protagonist is a girl named Silja. In the book *Silja, päikesekiir ja maailm* (Silja, the Ray of Sunshine and the World, 1967; hereinafter SRSW), she is a fourth-grade student, and in the book *Kuu aega täiskasvanu* (Grown-up for a Month, 1968; GFM), she has just finished ninth grade. *Tere! Sind ma otsisin!* (*Hello! It Is You I Was Looking for!*, 1971; HIYLF) shows the events taking place during the tenth grade in the life of Silja's girlfriend Merle; *Peidus pool* (Hidden Half, 1977; HH) alternately presents the views of Silja and her boyfriend Indrek in the tenth grade. In 1981, the latter three stories were published in one book in a slightly modified form.[4] Thus, the entire series fits exactly into the so-called era of Stagnation and should well illustrate the moods of the period.

I will examine what kind of gender norms are reflected in the Silja series and what solutions are offered to the contradictions between gender equality and gender conventionalism. The analysis is structured in thematic blocks: career choice, housework distribution, motherhood and family models, masculinity vs. femininity. I take interest in possible manifestations of gender roles on two levels: firstly, I will look at the paths prescribed for the young protagonists; secondly, at the patterns that can be detected in the background setting of the novellas and in the behavior of surrounding adults – a more subtle message for the young reader.

I will also compare the perceived message with that of contemporary youth counseling books. Such counseling books were a subgenre of advice literature that began to proliferate in the Khrushchev Era (Kelly 2001: 317). Some of those books were translated (often via Russian) and circulated over the USSR, such as *Dospívající dívka: lékařské poučení ženské mládeži* (From a Girl to a Woman, 1956; Estonian translations 1962, 1964) by Czech authors Rudolf Peter, Vaclav Šebek, and Josef Hynie. Others were of Estonian origin, such as Heiti Kadastik's *Vestlusi noorukitele*

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who have studied late-19th- and early-20th-century texts, are of the opinion that girls' literature is worth looking at in the context of women's literature of the same time, and that it tends to reflect the same tensions (Foster, Simons 1995: x–xi). Undoubtedly, the same parallelism should be investigated in this material, but unfortunately it does not fit into this discussion. However, in a few striking cases, I will point to some parallels.

4 In 1982, a reprint of the first book, SSW, was published, to which the author had added a story *Sünnipäevad* (Birthdays) about Indrek's childhood. This is outside the scope of this discussion, as it cannot be considered girls' literature.

(Conversations with Adolescents, 1963, 1966, 1970, 1972), Helgi Kurm's *Sinule, tütarlaps* (To You, Girl, 1970, 1977), and Ene Kook's *Tütarlapsest sirgub naine* (A Girl Becomes a Woman, 1978, 1979, 1986). Several reprints are characteristic to late Soviet advice books in general, which Catriona Kelly attributes to this literature being a successor of the Stalinist "*kulturnost'* campaign" (Kelly 2001: 319). The youth counseling books are largely medically focused but also address other topics (especially Kurm and Kadastik), and their normative gender ideology, which has strong gender conventional elements, has been noted retrospectively (Kalkun 2006; Annuk 2015).

Factory work and career choice Thematically, the whole series is dedicated to work – the background is the Soviet idea of "work education", as well as the principle of equality and the view that women have both the right and the obligation to do professional work. In the first book, primary school children busy themselves with collecting scrap metal; further on, the choice of their profession in life becomes more and more important. The fact that choosing a job is considered important for girls as well as boys is confirmed by the counseling book *For You, Girl*, which begins with this very topic. The author advises the young reader to "obtain information about different professions, consider all the pros and cons, and only then make a decision" (Kurm 1970: 7). Examples include professions requiring greater specialization: a doctor, a painter, a teacher, a mathematician, an architect, and a pilot, as well as simpler (and as the author emphasizes, just as dignified) jobs: a milkmaid, a herdswoman, a seamstress, a cook, a kindergarten teacher, a saleswoman. Evidently, the more complex professions are open to both sexes, whereas the simple jobs seem more gendered.

Throughout the Silja series, a candy factory serves as an important setting, whether as a location of an internship for high schoolers or a proper first job taken on due to necessity. Working in a factory carries a strong positive ideological charge in the Soviet context; Katerina Clark (1981: 256) has identified the production novel, often with a story unfolding in a factory, as a central type of early Soviet novel. The candy factory in Truu's novella is a softer, sweeter alternative to e.g. a machine factory; a renewed and perhaps more tangible, but also more feminine version of the earlier motif.[5] Nevertheless, the main ethos of Soviet work ideology is present: young people

5 The factory, the name of which is not mentioned, must be the largest confectionery factory in Estonia, which since 1948 has had the name of the mythological character *Kalev*. This factory is comparable to Latvia's *Laima*, whose name dates back all the way to 1925. Today both brands belong to the same international *Orkla Group*. However, chocolate boxes with ethnic names *Kalur* (A Fisherman) and *Muhutar* (A Girl from Muhu Island) associated with the Khrushchev's Thaw period are passingly mentioned in Truu's text.

Picture 1. Work at the candy factory (GFM). Illustration by Hugo Mitt.

experience the joy of working in a factory, learn to work as a team, participate in socialist competition, and rationalize work organization.

This is emphasized by the illustrations in the first edition of GFM in 1968, depicting the girls working on candy packaging, wearing work coats and headscarves (Picture 1, artist Hugo Mitt). A very similar treatment of the same motif can be found in the 1981 reprint, where the divisional titles have been drawn by Asta Vender. Such images of women workers are also familiar, for example, from the magazine *Nõukogude Naine* (Soviet Woman) where the visual imagery underwent several changes during the Soviet decades, whereas the portrayal of a working woman remained fairly unchanged throughout (see Pall 2011: 80).

Truu's youth narratives provide some nuance to the staple motif, largely in line with the gendered division of labor. The main characters are drawn away from the factory, and their lives are given a different direction. They ponder the issue of career choice on their own and in discussions with others. At the heart of GFM is the ambivalent contrast between dull work and true vocation: it is not clear to what extent simple work can be looked down upon. Silja's parents, both positive characters, disagree on this and the mother is allowed to ask with a note of contempt: "Do you want to become a candy maker, Silja?" (GFM: 18). The romantic geologist and cosmonaut

motifs that exploded during the Thaw period are also briefly played with, but they are discarded immediately, perhaps even with a certain irony and bitterness. Practical choices turn out to be much narrower, internships can only be done in a candy factory, a post office, or a shop.[6] Thereby, gender injustice is also emphasized: boys can choose the attractive car repair workshop, but girls are not allowed to go there due to the "distribution plan and pre-determinations" (GFM: 17).

In the factory, Silja is interested in mechanization; it is implied that she has inherited this interest from her father who is an engineer. Just like the dreams of being a geologist or a cosmonaut, this is in line with the idea of a gender-neutral division of labor. Silja also becomes a rationalizer when she proposes to divide the tasks when packing candy in order to fulfill the norm faster. However, factory work does not turn out to be Silja's vocation, although it does help her find her real path, when the artist of the factory notices her talent. The recommendation for Silja to study art becomes the final solution to the course of events and the happy ending.[7] The artist's profession is presented as gender neutral, similarly to its treatment in the advisory book. Silja's main mentor, the artist of the factory, is a woman. The existence (or absence) of a role model of the same sex has been considered an important aspect in the female *Bildungsroman* as a genre of fiction focusing on the girl's development (Labovitz 1986: 24). However, another influential artist in the girl's life is her neighbor Paul Tamm, a male artist confined to a wheelchair.

In contrast to Silja, Merle's course of development in the first edition of the next book, HIYLF, is strikingly gender-conventional. Due to dire circumstances, the girl decides to quit high school and goes to the factory, no longer for an internship but for a real job. She struggles to find her vocation and the problem is resolved in a single significant chapter with a 180-degree turn. At the beginning of the chapter, in the spirit of the early Soviet glorification of mechanization, the girl admires the machine that wraps liqueur-filled chocolates in silvery foil:

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6 Piret Peiker (2020) has analyzed the motif of Gagarin's space flight in Silvia Rannamaa's 1963 girls' story *Kasuema* (Stepmother), where it is still used completely sincerely and romantically as the culmination of the entire story. This ending has been removed from the text of the 1970 revised edition. A similar distancing from Thaw period motifs is reflected in the fact that the space metaphor is well represented in the Silja series, but it is gradually becoming less serious. In the first book, Silja states that she is not a jet rocket that can be launched on the spot (SSW: 7), but later snaps in response to the question of where she is going: "To Mars!", and it is already clearly a joke (AFM: 10).

7 It is noteworthy that Silja's career decision overshadows the fact that the issue with the romantic relationship with Indrek remains open for the time being. By comparison, in the next two books of the series the final scene provides a solution exactly to personal relationships.

> The disc spun, and Merle was proud: a real machine, not a hand-held candy wrapper, the only tinning machine in this workshop and perhaps the entire factory. The disc spun, and Merle was happy: a fine machine that does nicely and fast the job that would otherwise take so much time [..] (HIYLF: 139).

But the joy subsides, and Merle begins to feel lonely behind the machine: the factory noise burdens her, and she misses the human contact. Having promised to care for the children of the factory's female workers during a common outing, she goes to visit a kindergarten after work in order to prepare herself for this task, and befriends the toddlers playing in the yard. A little girl with a freckled nose and warm hands, as well as a little boy with a flat-top, asking to be picked up, win her heart. Only a few pages after admiring the machine, Merle reaches a conclusion. "No way is my place behind machines", she feels. "At least that's what I know now, and it's already a lot" (HIYLF: 142). By the end of the chapter, it can be assumed that her future will be related to children[8].

What kind of information does the reader gain from the novellas' setting and from the supporting adult characters? As for the protagonists' parents, the picture is almost unequivocally exemplary with regard to women's employment: all mothers work, in challenging and responsible positions no less. The parents of the main character, Silja, embody a perfect Soviet family in almost every way, so it is no surprise that they both work in a professional capacity: the mother is a film director (an aspiring one in the first book), and the father is an engineer. Indrek's mother is a doctor. Merle's mother works in a ministry, presumably in a senior position, as her job necessitates long business trips. A secondary character who is a stay-at-home-mom of five children is mentioned briefly, and this is given a damning indictment: due to her lack of employment, the father struggles to make ends meet and the family lives in constant poverty.

Thus the idea of women's professional employment is supported on both levels, that of the young protagonists and that of the adult background characters. Notably, the youngsters are steered away from factory work and towards white-collar jobs requiring more qualification. In the following sections, I will examine whether the series raises any concerns regarding working women at all.

Household chores

The central role of a Soviet woman in a social contract has been defined through the phrase "working mother" (Temkina, Rotkirch 1997). Anna Temkina and Anna Rotkirch describe the role of a Soviet working mother

8 From the point of view of narrative, such a solution is surprising: in an earlier scene, the attempt to impose babysitting on the factory girls is rejected so forcefully that the main character's later abrupt decision to give it a try does not have a convincing effect.

as a "shadow contract", an agreement between the lines which was not reflected in the slogans but was in force by default. This is another take on the double burden or double shift of the Soviet woman facing duties both at work and at home: although in theory the problem was supposed to be solved by division of labor and, above all, automation, in practice the household chores were left for women to do. This has also been depicted in literary fiction, perhaps most famously in Natalia Baranskaia's *Nedelia kak nedelia* (Just Another Week, 1969).

Given the above, it is worth pointing out that the infamous double burden is not at all addressed in the Silja series and household chores are nary a problem. The only passing reference is the motif in the Merle book about workers who are in danger of being left out of a factory outing because there is no babysitter. While this is initially carefully described to affect both mothers and fathers, it is only women who act to solve the problem (HIYLF: 120).[9] All positive parental figures, too, seem to perform the necessary chores without feeling overwhelmed. Moreover, equipped with remarkable capability and self-discipline, they are also able to manage the household single-handedly when need be, as demonstrated by Indrek's mother and Silja's father. Negative adult characters, on the other hand, are capable neither of breadwinning nor homemaking, such as Merle's drunkard stepfather who steals money from his wife and, in a grueling scene, can be seen yelling at the girl: "Today, you will feed me!" (HIYLF: 72).

This picture can best be explained by the didactic nature of the books. Generally, the goal of Soviet education was a self-sufficient person who can cope with all everyday chores regardless of gender. Especially advice for younger children tended to value the ideal of equality. For example, in the *Pioneeriaabits* (Pioneer's ABC), targeted at children aged 10–15, the audience is taught to clean their rooms, cook, and even do laundry and darn socks. "Potatoes can also be served with a variety of simpler sauces that you, the pioneer, can make yourself," the book urges (PABC 1961: 106). The corresponding chapter is entitled *Help Your Parents* – and not *Help Your Mother.* A similar mood prevails in the first book of the Silja series, targeted at primary school children: starting to take on household chores, e.g. mopping the floor, is a positive sign of independence and growing up. The ability to single-handedly cope with both external and domestic affairs is also central in HH, where the protagonist is Indrek, a high school boy left alone when his mother dies. He makes a point of showing everyone that as a boy he manages to keep his home in order, do his laundry, and cook on his own.

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9 Even there, the entire book does not regard it as a problem because, as described above, this is how Merle finds her vocation of working with children in the first edition.

Picture 2. Jaak changing the lock of Merle's door (HIYLF). Illustration by Asta Vender.

However, the protagonists often turn to traditional division of labor in courting situations. In Indrek's case, despite his decision, girls keep pestering him with offers to help. Silja's support for Indrek is often expressed through making him hot meals; with a note of criticism, Merle asks Silja why she does not help Indrek on cleaning day. In GFM, older factory girls order handsome young men to help them with more difficult chores during an outing. Merle offers Indrek a pack of homemade sandwiches as a reward for help, but instead, Indrek's friend Vootele snatches the sandwiches for himself. Upon seeing that, Niida, a girl in love with Vootele, despairs: "Anyway, I said that if he should beg Merle once more for a sprat sandwich, I will buy Tallinn sprats with my entire first salary and have a courier deliver them to his home" (AFM: 54). In HIYLF there are even three different young men who offer help with installing a lock in Merle's room, making this suspiciously similar to a courting visit. A mutual understanding finally develops between Merle and Jaak, as they also help each other stack briquettes and put up wallpaper. Especially remarkable is Jaak's confession that he has heard that Merle can make very tasty salad and will therefore become a very good housewife (HIYLF: 146).

It turns out that a person can and should generally handle everything, but in the context of courtship, reversion to traditional gender roles is particularly strong. It is precisely this fact that confirms the theory of gender conformism: gender roles are longed for, and in situations with a high symbolic weight, a corresponding division of labor is sought. A comparison of two editions of the advice book *For You, Girl* highlights how, in the area of domestic labour division, ideals shifted towards greater

gender contrast during the Stagnation period. While the earlier edition (Kurm 1970) is limited mostly to medical topics, the latter edition (Kurm 1977) includes a new chapter on housework. The two pages make it clear that a modern woman must also be able to perform the duties of a housewife in order to please her future husband; girls who neglect such responsibilities are despised. In a similar way, Merle's mother praises her daughter and criticizes "other" girls: "I've taught you how to cook, many girls don't even know how to make tea, and semolina porridge is all Greek to them. Sewing a simple dress is no problem for you, but there are girls who can't even make a knot on a thread" (HIYLF: 31). Gender conformism and the *invention* of tradition are confirmed by the title of the chapter in the counseling book: *Should a Contemporary Girl Know How to Knit a Glove?* Yes, she should, the reader is informed, and with a smile on her face.

The so-called double burden of housework is thus not identified as a concern for working mothers, or anybody else, for that matter – neither directly nor between the lines. Instead, performing gender-specific domestic chores can be used to woo members of the opposite sex. Within the Silja series, as seen in the next section, the problem of professional women is located elsewhere: in their relationship with children.

Motherhood and family models

Motherhood was a heavily loaded concept in the Soviet context: it was considered "the highest form of service", which was thus both generously rewarded and strictly policed (Issoupova 2000). Khrushchev Era advice books, too, treat girls as future mothers: "Most women see motherhood as the meaning of their lives and a solid foundation for personal happiness" (Peter et al. 1964: 11). But the Stagnation era saw a new wave of lauding the so-called "heroine mothers" and propaganda of large families due to falling birth rates in the European part of the USSR (Bridger 2007). In the Brezhnev Era, "[g]ender policies took on a patriarchal, slogan-based nature: the Communist Party of the Soviet Union declared its support for women as 'participants in the labour process, mothers, carers and housekeepers'. Demographers began to support the idea of a 'return to the home' for women" (Vinokurova 2007: 74).

For the young protagonists and, presumably, the young readers of the Silja series, parenthood is something that belongs to the future, as they need to finish their education first. However, the seed is carefully planted. While all the main characters (Silja, Merle, and Indrek) are single children, both Silja and Merle would like to have a brother. Merle promises to have more children: "I myself want to have at least four" (HIYLF: 137). Such remarks by characters are clearly linked to the surrounding discussion of

demographic crisis, have an effect of highlighting the declining birth rate, and function as propaganda to introduce the young readers to the idea of raising this rate.

Regarding parenthood and family models presented in the background, as previously said, the mothers of all protagonists work at good jobs. In addition, Silja's father and mother have a good relationship, as emphasized in all books: they are equal partners who get along well, discuss important issues, support each other, and in every way form a safe home for their child. It is in this spirit that the youth counseling books describe a good family life: there is "equality both at work and in the family" (Peter et al. 1964: 13), and marriage must be based on love "which adorns the lives of lovers and spouses and also ensures the maximum development of the mental and physical faculties of children" (ibid., 14). Even a healthy disagreement between parents is modeled, when Silja's mother and father disagree on the girl's future career.

Notably, in the first book of the series the primary-school-aged Silja is living only with her father, as her mother has left for Moscow to study film directing. It is carefully made clear that this is perfectly normal; the father emphasizes to Silja that the two of them can cope with everything. However, a gender conventionalist doubt about such an arrangement lurks between the lines. When Silja's dress gets torn, it is the neighbor lady who has to repair it, as apparently darning is where the father draws the line. One of Silja's great fears is that if she behaves badly, her mother may be recalled from Moscow, seeing that Silja and her father actually cannot cope on their own. Part of her growing up is getting embarrassed and starting to pitch more and more into household chores – an understandable and potentially completely gender-neutral description of becoming an adult, yet in this case strongly supported by an uneasiness over the unorthodox family situation. Once Silja runs into trouble at school, the following explanation is proposed: "She is alone at home with her father, the homeroom teacher is a man, her desk-mate is a boy. So there – she'll end up being a boy" (SRSW: 25). These words are admittedly uttered by a negative character, but the possibility remains open. Even in the case of Silja's model family, certain problems with woman's pursuing professional career are implied.

More problematic family dynamics are illustrated by the parents of other characters, especially in the Merle book. Merle lives with her mother and her mother's new husband, Albert Vaas, an alcoholic and a war veteran.[10] When the mother is at home, Vaas is mostly able to control himself. Unfortunately, during the mother's business trips the situation at home becomes crazy: the stepfather steals money, drinks and marauds, trying to force Merle to drink, breaking into her room, and rummaging through her belongings. After recovering from the drinking spree, Vaas

10 The war motif has been removed from the reprint of the book.

tries to pretend that nothing happened and warns the girl that there is no need to tell her mother what happened and to make her worry for no reason. Merle finds herself in a difficult situation, burdened with guilt: she fears that she will ruin the family if she turns her mother and stepfather against each other by her complaining, so she desperately tries to keep peace at home for a long time.

The stepfather is, of course, explicitly guilty of all this, but Merle's mother's constant working is also criticized implicitly: things get worse during her business trips, and it is her commitment to work that leaves her unaware of what is going on at home. Parallels to this emphasis can be seen in contemporary adult fiction – for example, in *Kaetud lauad* (The Set Tables, 1979) by Aino Pervik, a female factory director interviewed as a paragon of a successful woman expresses regret that she has had too little time for her children[11].

When Merle's patience finally runs out and she tells her mother everything, she is bitterly disappointed when her mother sides with the stepfather instead of her. In fact, the mother's lack of loyalty to her daughter becomes one of the main themes of Merle's book. Anna Rotkirch (2000: 78 et seq.) has generalized that along with gender conventionalism, there was a belief in late Soviet society that a heterosexual relationship is not something important or lasting and that the nuclear family is held together by a mother-child relationship. Merle's mother transgresses against this unwritten rule, and the author holds that against her.

As for Indrek, her mother raises him alone and the boy knows nothing of his father. Before her death, the mother leaves a letter to her son, describing his father as a fickle person, unable to complete any venture he has started. He has left the family, having "found his true happiness" (HH: 31); he does not pay child support and does not visit his son. While Indrek's mother is described as a near-perfect character with a tragic fate, it is worth noting that in her farewell letter, she refers to her own guilt in all this as well. For example, she says: "If there had been a woman of a different nature instead of me, a decisive figure who would have taken Aivar away from the influence of his mother, taken him to the other side of the world, and would have been able to help him overcome his moments of weakness, perhaps things would have gone differently" (HH: 29). She also blames herself for the lack of financial support from the boy's father: "Now I am really distressed because of my foolish and selfish pride and the faux discretion that once we don't have you, we don't need your money either" (HS: 32).

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11 Here we are of course reminded of the intrigue of the famous film *Moskva slezam ne verit* (Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears, dir. Vladimir Menshov, 1979), where a single mother who is also a factory director has to even conceal her position from her lover. In the end, the film does not hold the management position against the woman, but indicates that it poses a problem in her family life.

The storylines of Indrek and Merle reflect a prominent topic in media and adult literature of the era: the crisis of masculinity and the breaking up of families due to men's alcoholism and irresponsibility. In this so-called everyday literature, male characters typically down a shot of vodka from time to time, while women resent it and despise drinking men (see e.g. Ross 2018: 229). Zdravomyslova and Temkina (2013: 55) have specifically interpreted drinking by the late Soviet man as a form of protest against family life and the dominant female figure who has received too much power from the state. In adult fiction, it develops into a tug of war between the male and female characters. In contrast, in girls' literature drunken men mostly appear in the role of a father or stepfather, and here the picture is shown more sincerely and tragically.[12] In the farewell letter of Indrek's mother, some familiar tropes of a woman's implied responsibility are represented, although the surrounding narrator's text does not fully support her there, and the reader probably will not blame Indrek's mother.

To sum up the treatment of family life, the young protagonists (together with the young readers) are being prepared for a life of parenthood and big families, in line with the era's newly resurgent propaganda regarding the "heroine mothers". At the same time, the protagonists' families display a more realistic picture: single children, single parents, divorces, step-parents, alcoholism. Similarly to the media and adult literature of the same time, the books here seem to favor gender-conventionalist solutions: if men (such as Indrek's father and Merle's stepfather) were stronger and more responsible, and if women (such as Merle's mother) held the home front, everything would be better. The ideal family of Silja's parents, with its perfect atmosphere and unproblematic gender equality, largely stands apart from the rest, but even there, the little girl fears that if she misbehaves in any way, it will be attributed to her mother's absence.

Masculinity vs. femininity The concepts of male and female genders are, in any case, constructed through opposition to each other, but gender opposition was particularly acute in the public gender debate in the late Soviet period. As Vladimir Shlapentokh wrote in 1984, "the conflicts between women and men are now among the most salient aspects of everyday life of the Soviet people" (Shlapentokh 1984: 171). During the inconvenient period of shifting gender roles, the question of which sex was to blame for the inconvenience was constantly in the air; this confrontation was

12 An alcoholic [step]father's motif can also be found in other girls' stories, such as *Õhupall* (Balloon, 1969) by Aino Pervik or *Neitsi Maarja neli päeva* (Four Days of the Virgin Mary, 1980) by Leelo Tungal.

also played out in the contemporary adult literature. However, children's or young-adult stories of an optimistic nature cannot be susceptible to public condemnation of one or the other sex.

In the first book of the series, the main character Silja, a fourth-grader, is sketched out as a tomboyish figure: she is seen ""riding" a birch-tree" like a shepherd, tearing her dress and going to school wearing the neighbor boy's jeans, perceived as only "boys' pants" (SRSW: 13) at the time. While she is reprimanded by teachers and parents, Silja's "boyish" behavior does not become unappealing to the reader. This is common in Soviet children's literature: according to Marina Balina, the model of a boyish girl dates from the 1930s and the 1920s, when the creation of the new Soviet person sought to dismantle the former gender system. Boys and girls either appeared as completely interchangeable characters, or positive girl characters were marked by their boyish appearance and behavior (Balina 2014: 361–362). Irina Savkina (2019: 227–228) describes a similar dynamic in a Thaw era book by Russian-Ukrainian author Vladimir Kiselev, *Devochka i ptitselet* (Girl and the Bird Plane, 1966), noting that it was characteristic of Soviet children's literature to romanticize masculine values and friendship between boys. It has been pointed out that many important Soviet girl books tell the story of a strange, non-girly protagonist who does not fit in (Bukhina 2019: 144). Really, in such cases, there is more talk about where and how this non-girly girl fits – she fits in with the boys in order to perform exciting boyish ventures. In the books both by Truu and Kiselev, the protagonist girl is accepted into a secret circle of boys; in contrast, her relationship with other girls is rather malicious and competitive.

In the process of a girl growing into a woman, the matters become more complicated. Pondering her looks, Silja starts out with the belief that girls admiring themselves in front of a mirror are stupid: "A person has more important stuff to do in the world than just curl and frizzle their hair." But then she comes to a conclusion that she will also have to do it someday: "You must have something left for the time you grow up. That's what Mother said, and Mother is always right." And right after this monologue, Silja actually starts curling her hair and dresses up in her mother's clothes (SPM 1967: 45 et seq.). The early 1960s have been described as a period when "good taste" was trumped by "looking fashionable" in Soviet public discourse, and curly hair was considered the epitome of fashionable look (Gradskova 2007: 28). Silja's developmental logic is here again very similar to Kiselev's *Girl and the Bird Plane*, where Olga refuses to be a girl when she is younger but later discovers the beauty and femininity of her body (cf. Savkina 2019: 228).

Whereas tomboyish younger girls are simultaneously reprimanded and lauded for their boyish behavior, older girls discovering their femininity instantly become subjected to moral surveillance. This is exemplified by the traditional contrast between

virtuous girls and wicked boys in later stories in the series: girls need to be warned of the inappropriate behavior that boys may coax them into. A very similar picture appears in the youth counseling books: Helgi Kurm (1970) approaches this topic in several chapters entitled *What if It Is Love?*; *A Girl's Self-Esteem and Self-Respect*; *But Just One Glass!*; etc.[13] Both GFM and HIYLF feature a character nicknamed Rinaldo, a ballroom dancer working in the factory, sporting a stripe of a mustache and having an alcohol problem. He is about to drop out of school and his speech is ridden with colloquialisms such as "pardon" and "I can't stomach". Rinaldo is a descendant of the rockers (*stilyagi*) from a decade before, a representative of an allegedly harmful and dangerous youth culture – a warning figure who acts as a measure of the virtue of the girl protagonists.

Silja, again the model character, interrupts Rinaldo already when the latter starts telling a spicy joke (GFM: 91), exactly as the guidance book states: "If you happen to be in a company where obscene jokes are told, you should show your disapproval of them" (Kurm 1970: 42).[14] The behavior of Merle is left more open for interpretation. Due to her vulnerable position at home, she initially befriends Rinaldo and ends up in a vaguely unsafe situation with him. Despite fleeing virtuously, the girl later gets stalked by the drunken boy on the street.[15] When she asks her male friend Jaak for help, he responds with victim-blaming:

> "Holy simplicity! [..] You girls are real idiots. You put yourselves into a situation where others can think god knows what. And later, you are offended and wonder how people can think that way, that you didn't think it the slightest, and nothing really happened, right? I've seen a couple of movies about it. Of course, the blame fell entirely on those who think badly of the girl, but not on the girl who can't tell the difference between what's right and what's not" (HIYLF: 111).

The remark is obviously conveyed with a touch of irony by the narrator, and Merle gets a chance for a counter-attack ("But when you came to my home late at night, you didn't lecture me about morals, even though I was all alone then as well"), after which Jaak is left at a loss for words. Similarly, spying on the virtues of girls is shown to be the domain of old hags in various scenes (GFM: 110–111, also HH). Again, it is

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13 Admittedly, boys are also briefly warned about the so-called "loose women, or rather morally ruined women" (Kadastik 1963: 44).

14 Jokes are also mentioned in the boys' guidance book, but the difference is that the boys are told not to tell such jokes (see Kadastik 1963: 25), whereas girls are forbidden to even listen to them. In general, boys are taught gentlemanly behavior; for example, in the Silja series, a "short lecture on polite behavior of boys towards girls" is played on a tape recorder (HS: 9).

15 The central girl characters do not touch alcohol themselves; apartment parties where some girls allegedly also tasted some wine are mentioned in HH only in passing.

Merle's mother who comes under criticism when she, worried about rumors, accuses her daughter of living with a boy in her absence, without realizing that the girl was running away from her mother's husband (HIYLF: 34–35). Characters who tend to express the heightened moral expectations for girls' behavior too didactically and accusingly are shown as unpleasant or at least wrong in the respective situations.

Marina Balina has explained the "double optics" regarding femininity in Soviet culture, drawing on Judith Butler's notions of gender insubordination and gender regulation. She describes how femininity came under criticism in the early Soviet cultural situation, and a violation of pre-revolutionary femininity norms became a new norm, embodied by boyish, brave, and active girls. At the same time, it did not mean absolute freedom; gender regulation still worked, and the new femininity was also strongly regulated. She notes that these regulations especially concerned girls' bodies and "such conceptions of decency and indecency as directly pertain to gender difference," which explains the moral surveillance. Balina's own case in point is the (female) character of Vitka in Iurii Nagibin's 1955 short story *Eho* (The Echo), "an attempt to combine boyishness and femininity" (Balina, unpublished manuscript).

Notably, such criticism of pre-revolutionary femininity norms is expressed visually in the GFM illustration of Silja being scolded for her boyishness in the teachers' room (artist Asta Vender). The most unpleasant scolder is a female drawing teacher, whereas the girl is protected by a pleasant and business-like male homeroom teacher. The illustration shows a caricature of a disagreeable bunch of female teachers with pursed lips and judgmental looks, donning fancy hairdos and pretty dresses, as opposed to the straightforward, good-humored, positive male figure looking attentively at the little girl clad in boys' clothes. This visual also relates to the tendency of petty bourgeoisie being often represented by women characters, as was noticed in a discussion of adult literature of that time (Krusten 1966: 10).

The direct gender confrontation characteristic of the Stagnation era is represented by an interesting pattern in the Silja series. Throughout the series, it is echoed in phrases comparing boys and girls or commenting on gender relations. In most cases, they are just single remarks or an internal monologue that is not supported by the narrator's text, e.g. Silja pondering: "After all, it is terribly unfair that equality has not yet been established on the dance floor" (AFM: 6), or Merle snapping: "Well, you guys are really [..] you are all the same" (HIYLF: 112). The jocular tone of voice must make the young reader believe that such declarations are not to be taken seriously: after all, children can squabble like this, while adults can reach a reasonable agreement in their relationships. However, as the series progresses, it turns out that this reasonable agreement often seems to be based on gender conventionalism. In the last book, HH, the difference between boys and girls is finally

introduced as the main theme through similar children's squabble, someone yelling in the street: "You are a real mystery! [..] Like all boys", and the other answering: "And you are a [..] sphinx, like all girls" (HS: 7). This time, it is not brushed off lightly, and it remains the central intrigue of the book.

As previously mentioned, in HH the orphaned Indrek has decided to cope with everything by himself and not to burden others with his worries. Therefore he hides from his girlfriend Silja everything that happens in his life: initially even the death of his mother, then the fact that he has begun working alongside school. At the same time, he plans to marry Silja and even designs the exact schedule in his head. Puzzled Silja is squirming with confusion: has the entire relationship been the fruit of her fantasy, or is she overreacting? Among other things, she seeks clarity from the so-called biorhythm tables – maybe it is just about her and Indrek's different rhythms?[16] The problem situation thus outlined reflects the common trope of men as silent and women as speakers.[17] In such an explicit form, it may seem unexpected in a Soviet youth novel, but it corresponds very well to the discursive space of the Stagnation period where emphasizing and accentuating the "psycho-physiological" differences between men and women began again (Buckley 1989: 175).

As a full-fledged gender war cannot be declared in a youth novel, it is not made unambiguously clear which of the two positive main characters is "more right". Indrek's silence is treated as an exaggeration by the author, but it is Silja who seeks contact with Indrek in the final scene – as a signal that such gentle indulgence is the woman's responsibility. Trying to pass judgement, reviewers also find that Indrek's behavior is wrong and consider Silja's efforts to understand him outright heroic (Tanner 1978; Krusten 1981), but at the same time, some of them emphasize the so-called natural and inevitable "psychic differences between a girl and a boy, their different demands for communication" (Krusten 1981: 454). As can be seen from the quote in the introduction to this article, the advisory literature of the era considers it one of the tasks of a woman to raise her husband.

Thus, the Silja series exemplifies several contradictions inherent already in the earlier Soviet gender system: modeling of the girl ideal (the main character) through boyish qualities and heightened expectations for her virtue, and at the same time ridiculing those expectations. The discursive confrontation of the sexes, characteristic

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16 The theory of biorhythms claims scientificity but is not verifiable, which brings it closer to esotericism. The Silja series reflects the contemporary overall interest in such borderline phenomena: for example, Indrek is thinking about telepathy, and his mother discusses the possibility of rebirth in her farewell letter.

17 On the fact that this is more of a prejudice, see Cameron 2008.

especially of the Stagnation period, is reflected by the contrast between Silja and Indrek in the last book. Indrek himself is, of course, the opposite of the fun-loving, irresponsible man engaged in the pursuit of pleasure that we are familiar with from journalism or adult literature of that time. However, the entire situation does suggest that the worldviews of the sexes can be so fundamentally different that it causes difficulties in understanding each other, no matter how hard one tries.

Conclusions: equalist setting, conventionalist solution

Silvia Truu's series of girls' stories is centered around some of the constant motifs of Soviet youth education, although they are treated somewhat more sceptically, compared to the previous decades. For example, factory work is on the foreground, but eventually none of the main characters or their parents end up as workers. Something similar happens with gender equality. Both on the level of protagonists and the level of background characters, women are expected to work outside the home and to be able to choose from a wide palette of careers, so the slogan is held high. In practice, this arrangement is seen to cause some problems but, true to their genre, the books have to offer a generally optimistic outlook. This is achieved mostly by leaning towards gender conventionalist solutions.

In the depiction of the young protagonists, some of the contradictions inherent already in the earlier Soviet gender system are evident. Typically for Soviet children's literature, the central character, Silja, grows from a tomboyish girl into a feminine young lady seemingly without any problems, and her deportment corresponds exactly to the ideal girl described in the late Soviet guidance books: from the decisive contempt for spicy jokes all the way to helping a young man with preparing hot meals. The teen girls are just as active and capable as their male peers, but somehow in greater need of moral surveillance. Interestingly, the different requirements for femininity are visually exemplified by the illustrations to the books: the pictures of girls in headscarves working in the factory seem almost like they could date from decades earlier, but the pictures of courting scenes very much emphasize masculine and feminine silhouettes, embodying a clearly late Soviet aesthetic (see Picture 1 and Picture 2).

Analyzing the book *The Girl and the Bird Plane* by Vladimir Kiselev, Irina Savkina (2019: 230–231) concludes that the text points to a gender role conflict typical of that era, although it does not offer a solution. As for the books by Silvia Truu, I argue that the conflict is rather sought to be actively smoothed out. The plot lines of the Silja series are generally addressed in accordance with traditional gender roles. It is

characteristic that alternatives are offered, but the final solutions favor a gendered division of labor. Contradictions are pointed out, but these are reconciled through narrative solutions. Girls try factory work, but this does not prove to be their vocation; women must not be forced to work with children, but they are often naturally inclined to chose this path; a girl may behave boyishly but still grow up feminine; household chores do not have to be divided by genders, but it is romantic to do so; worrying about the virtues of girls is petty bourgeois, but good girls behave properly anyway. The theme setting is gender-equal, but the solution is conventional.

Looking at the supporting characters, especially the protagonists' parents, a bleaker picture emerges. Silja's parents exemplify a positive role model that young adult literature is obliged to give: a perfect family where there is mutual understanding and housework is distributed equally as if by rules. The rest of the families, on the other hand, feature more problematic situations such as divorce, alcoholism, and single motherhood. The implied solutions are strongly gender-conventional here as well. Indrek's father's flawed character points to a lack of masculinity: his dependence on his mother and his inability to do "men's work", such as repairing a footstool or bed. It comes across as tragic that Merle has to clean after her stepfather and cook for him, but it seems that a favorable solution would be if her mother were at home and did it herself.

All this is depicted very much in line with the then-typical media discussions on women's emancipation and the crisis of masculinity. The weak men are not let completely off the hook, but a surprising amount of responsibility falls upon the women, as per contemporary media coverage. Merle's mother – and to an extent, perhaps even Indrek's mother – act as warning about the danger of women being too independent. Their independence becomes damaging to their children. This fits well with the idea that the problem of a working woman's double burden had lost its appeal by the Stagnation era and had been replaced with the call for women to return to the home (Bridger 2007: 74). Moreover, youth literature was apparently a perfect means to make the latter point, showing the situation from the neglected youngsters' perspective.

On the level of the young protagonists, the direct gender confrontation inherent to the public discourse of the Stagnation era could only be addressed in a subdued manner. When characters complain about the other sex, the author rather alleviates this by giving the complaint a funny shade. Nevertheless, the last book reaches a direct juxtaposition and contrast of Silja's and Indrek's perspectives, again in a manner characteristic to the era. The characters, although both positive, turn out to be lacking a common dimension, and the dividing line runs between the sexes.

Finally, a point must be made regarding Merle. The author has made some changes in the 1981 compiled edition, and in the third book several of them concern precisely

the scenes and storylines analyzed in this article. Instead of turning to work with children, here Merle gets an early interest in how the factory's new assorted-chocolate line works and, unlike the first edition, that interest does not go away. The girl decides to enroll in evening high school classes, after which new career options are bound to open for her. The scene in the kindergarten has been omitted; no decision is made to deal with children in the future.[18] Merle's declaration that she wants to have at least four children has also been omitted. The salad scene, too, has been turned the other way round: there is no talk of salad, and Merle watches as Jaak looks for food in the cupboard and sets it on the table. Once again, in the new edition the author has tuned Merle's development beyond the housewife's ideal.

These changes lead the book, at least in some places, away from gender conventionalism and towards more gender-neutral solutions. While the above analysis used the context of the era as the main key to the text, there is no reason to believe that between the first print and the reprint (the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s) social gender conventionalism in the Soviet Union had diminished. On the contrary – Anna Rotkirch, who coined the term, considers it to be characteristic even of the post-Soviet era. Possible explanations vary. Perhaps the author's own beliefs changed, or perhaps editorial corrections are to blame. However, although social context does not explain the *direction* of the change, such rewriting confirms the tensions surrounding this issue in general: it was apparently a loaded decision whether to emphasize the female protagonist's interest in new knowledge or her attraction to young children, and it was worth rewriting. Rather than signal the exhaustion of gender conventionalism in the early 1980s, this emphasizes that these issues were subjects of an ongoing debate. As mentioned in the introduction, the Silja series by Silvia Truu is just one case of the larger corpus of girls' literature that emerged in the Soviet Estonian young adult literature of the 1960s and 1970s. This fact alone confirms the activation of the gender issue, and this corpus should be further explored from a modern perspective.

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18 A brief additional scene with Merle and Jaak has been inserted in the later edition where it turns out that a woman's hand rocks a baby stroller better than a man's hand does, but this does not determine the girl's future.

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