

**The Woman Question and Patterns of Decadence in Sophia Vardi's Short Story "First Winds" (1914) and Alma Ostra's Novella "Aino" (1923)**

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This article explores how two early 20th-century Estonian women writers—Marta Lepp (pseud. Sophia Vardi) and Alma Ostra—responded to and reshaped prevailing ideas about femininity, creativity, sexuality and social change, respectively in the short story "Esimesed tuuled" ("First Winds", 1914) and the novella "Aino" (started in 1914, published in 1923). These texts are examined in relation to the eminent local writer Friedebert Tuglas's 1908 short story "Midia", a characteristic example of male-authored Estonian Decadence. Besides employing distinctly Decadent tropes and techniques, these three texts share another common feature: a self-conscious, highly analytical New Woman protagonist. Through close reading, the article shows how Vardi's and Ostra's prose works engaged with the literary tradition represented by Tuglas while also developing a distinctly feminist aesthetic tied to early modern Estonian debates about gender and the New Woman.

The article situates these works within *fin-de-siècle* literary Decadence and the Young Estonia (Noor-Eesti, 1905–1915) movement, which encouraged literary experimentation, including the introduction of modern themes. However, despite some rhetorical support for women's emancipation among male intellectuals, women's roles in literature remained constrained by patriarchal and biological determinism. Tuglas's "Midia", for instance, features a revolutionary female protagonist whose attempt to transcend her "female nature" through male-coded ideals ultimately ends in an essentialist solution. Drawing heavily on Otto Weininger's philosophy, this story presents the feminine "core" as biologically and intellectually inferior to the masculine "essence". Midia's experiences are mostly filtered through a misogynistic lens, and her symbolic association with chaos, weakness and degeneracy reveals the limitations of male-authored visions of female empowerment.

In contrast, "Esimesed tuuled" and "Aino" can be interpreted as feminist interventions into this discourse. Both texts explore the ambitions of New Women who seek education, independence and erotic fulfilment. While the protagonists of Vardi's and Ostra's stories struggle against societal expectations and internalised inferiority, their journeys are rather treated with empathy and complexity. These women figures are not condemned for their aspirations but are instead portrayed as figures navigating a shifting cultural landscape that both excites and alienates them.

The narrative strategies in these stories are important to their feminist reorientation. Tuglas's narrator is often ironic and distanced, reinforcing the protagonist's alienation. The narrators of "Aino" and "Esimesed tuuled" are closely aligned with the inner lives of their heroines, offering a more versatile insight into their emotional and intellectual development. This narrative empathy facilitates a more serious treatment of women's experiences and creates space for self-realisation, emotional intensity and even political critique. For example, the protagonists reflect on their disillusionment with male-dominated revolutionary ideals and envision a future shaped by values often associated with femininity, such as tenderness, intuition and emotional intelligence.

Erotic desire also plays a key role in all three texts, but with significant differences. In “Midia”, female desire is shaped by submission to male power, symbolized by a pistol that represents masculine control. In “Esimesed tuuled” and “Aino”, by contrast, erotic experiences are tied to positivised nature, sensory impressions and imagination. Vardi’s protagonist Linda is inspired by the erotic energy of spring and the exotic allure of Crimea, where she identifies erotically with a Karaim woman—an indirect expression of same-sex desire, placed in a safe, “othered” cultural context. Ostra’s Aino experiences erotic dreams rooted in Estonian folklore, where mythical creatures and natural landscapes become mediums of pleasure and transformation. These depictions challenge heteronormative and male-centric views of female sexuality, embracing ambiguity, multiplicity and fantasy.

Racial and national identity also intersect with these gendered concerns. While Tuglas and Ostra both show a degree of pessimism toward the “Estonian type”, often linking it with weakness or degeneration, Vardi’s story affirms racial-national vitality through the figure of Linda, portrayed as a fair-haired, blue-eyed ideal. However, this affirmation carries its own complications, as it can slide into racial purity discourse. Still, both Ostra and Vardi share a broader critique of male-dominated intellectualism and express hope in the potential of a distinctly feminine cultural ethos.

The study ultimately argues that Vardi’s and Ostra’s texts mark a shift in Estonian literary culture. By (partly) rejecting biologically deterministic and patriarchal portrayals of women, they offered new, more empowering models of womanhood that embraced emotional complexity, erotic agency and feminist introspection.

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