

Femina Post-sovietica

Polish Women in Literature, Art and Political Debates of the 1990s

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Polish women after 1989: do they have anything in common?

In this article I would like to discuss several women's issues that have been reflected in Polish literature, in political debates, and in social movements and their publicity after the fall of communism. In spite of the title, this will not be a personal reflection. Rather, I will attempt to give a voice to the issues of women who lived their adult lives during communism and post-communism. I am not one of those women. In 1989 I was thirteen years old. I belong to the last generation of people who vaguely remember communism, and who have entered into the new democracy with low political consciousness but with a clear understanding of our history.

I will employ the voice of my mother, who belonged to these "post-communist" women, who lived for many years under communism, and who had to find themselves—as mature but still young women—in the new democracy. To women of that generation I give the title of *femina post – sovietica*, the female equivalent to the term *homo sovieticus* founded by the anti-communist movement.

This association plays a double role in this article. First, it is a metaphorical link between the two times divided by the year 1989—the time of communism, and the post-transitional time. In order to describe the women after the transition it is necessary, I believe, to remember the past.

In this sense, the term 'post –sovietica' will provide some background to our reflection without delving too deeply into historical recollections.

Second, the term 'post-sovietica', as used in theoretical discussions, is put in the title to keep us constantly on guard and questioning the fact that there was such a time as 'post-communism', which could be categorized in clear terms. There is also the question of whether we can describe women after communism in any general categories. I am aware that I can not avoid the generalization here. We make such generalizations when talking about women under communism, and throughout human history. Still another question is interesting: is there anything special about generalizations of women in the 1990s?¹ This is the problem of interest in my paper.

What I would like to demonstrate are several women's issues as presented by women writers and artists during the 1990s, and at the beginning of the 3rd Millennium. The presentation will have political, cultural, and literary links to the communist period; however, the aim of the paper is to present the different faces of women in Poland after 1989, who were supposedly 'free' of totalitarian power.

Women, leave politics in our hands!

¹ By "post-communism" I refer to the period after 1989 in Poland, the official end of the socialist system. The starting point of "post-communism" differs by country in Central and Eastern Europe. The term itself does not indicate anything but the end of communism and the beginning of the so-called democratization of Eastern Europe. The term then is as problematic as the term "post-communist countries". However, I decided to use it though for its symbolic power, the power of the "end" that must have happened for there to be a "post". The world "post" is symbolic as well; it indicates the necessity for change. Whether this necessity was fulfilled or not is the subject of particular reflections.

The paradox of Polish politics, cultural events and literary works concerning women in the 1990s is that on the one hand the communist solution of equality between the sexes was accepted by the new political forces, but on the other hand there was still a strong tendency against everything that reminded one of the communist regime. The last trend was significantly accompanied by Catholic Church propaganda, which proposed that Poland be rebuilt in accordance to the values that had been destroyed during the last 50 years. For instance, this discourse includes the notion that Polish women after the communist regime should return to their 'real vocation' or 'real mission'. What did they mean by women's 'real mission', and what does it mean to be a 'normal' woman in Poland? Moreover, what is the reaction to women who do not want to be 'good' girls any more?

To understand the experiences of Polish women means, to some extent, to understand Polish national myths. The end of Communism brought the need to find a new face for the nation. It was obvious that the Catholic Church and various romantic national myths would participate in this process. It was just a matter of time before women would be shown their place in society. Certainly the proper place for women in the traditional patriarchal society is the so-called 'private sphere' of home and family.

Apparently, Polish women, even those in Parliament, seemed not to be perturbed by the myths with which women have been labelled. For instance, in 1999 there was a legal debate over the equal status of women and men in the Polish Parliament. The following are the words of a Member of Parliament (posłanka) from the right-wing party AWS (Akcja Wyborcza "Solidarność"):

"Mister Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen! Women have always been treated very well in Poland. They have been given due respect and many honours. They can fulfil themselves in many fields of their lives. It is said proudly that 'we women are, as Mothers, to emphasize our significant role in both the family and the nation's life'. The majority of Poles are Christian and Catholic. Our Christian culture and religion give women a special role. God has created woman and man and has given them different roles in their lives. It is not up to us to change and mend what God intended."²

It is difficult to counter a statement such as this that constitutes religious beliefs rather than rational arguments. Moreover, they are not arguments which stand against arguments in favour of the law, such as the unemployment of women, discrimination in the labour market, under-representation in the political world etc. Religious beliefs belong to a completely different kind of discourse. In that discourse, sex is determined by a historical and mythical category. According to this argument, there is no use talking about equality and inequality because women and men are equal as God's creatures. In addition, it was the will of God to differentiate people in their social roles, according to a Natural Order.

Again, Polish women seem to have become accustomed to such reasoning. They have adopted the role of the adored women and the label of "Mother of the Poles", nurturer of the sons of the Polish Nation. Many Polish women strongly feel that they are influential in their roles, and, although they do not participate in public

² Agnieszka Graff, *Świat bez kobiet. Płeć w polskim życiu politycznych* (The world without women. Sex/Gender in Polish political life). Warsaw: WAB, 2001.

life, they still have an impact on what is happening around them.

Izabela Filipiak rejected that reasoning. In 1997 she published a collection of short stories entitled *“Niebieska menażeria”* (*“The Blue Menagerie”*).³ In one of the short stories the narrator (with strong hints making it possible to identify the character-narrator with the authoress) tells us about Poland at the end of the 1970s and 1980s. The narrator, a woman who comes from New York to visit Poland, recalls the time of the “Solidarity” movement through her personal experience, and through her friendship with Weronika. Weronika was her landlady then, at the beginning of 1980s. When she met Weronika, she was a charismatic mother of young student Seweryn. She was friendly, original, creative, unique and artistic. Sometimes her unconventional behavior is not good for her son, as:

“Seweryn remembered that he had not liked going to school because the other children called his mother a witch. She had long, disbanded hair (...) Children are the most obstinate conservatives.”

“(Seweryn wspomniał kiedyś, że nie lubił chodzić do szkoły, bo inne dzieci nazywały jego matkę czarownicą. Nosila wtedy długie, rozpuszczone włosy (..) Dzieci są najzacieklejszymi konserwatystami.”⁴

Weronika had a ‘hippy’ style. She was painting happy landscapes. She was listening to music. Weronika's house was a proper hippy house: lacking of money, but colorful. Among friends were a poet and a sculptor; a careless joker, clever and intelligent, and an equally wise and intelligent, although not so beautiful, muse.

They were listening to modern American music and talking about freedom. Everyone belonged to church groups, because in communist times to revolt against values was to believe in God!

Weronika was happy, and the narrator and her son were happy too. One day this happy triangle was broken by history. Let's remember that the setting of the story is Gdańsk, a mythical place of the anticommunist movement, a place where the workers' rebellion against the communist regime began. The narrator is making the impact of the war (martial law) on the family clear for the reader:

“I do not want—we read—to blame politics and to imagine that if the war had not begun, the war which broke our idyll in the house (...), our life would have not been broken around some other lofty impossibility. But one is sure that the house ran out of music.”

(*“Nie jestem skłonna za wszystko obwiniać politykę i wyobrażać sobie, że gdyby nie wybuch wojny, która przełamała idyllę w domu pod kasztanami, nasze życie nie obitooby się o jakąś inną wzniosłą niemożliwość. Ale jedno jest pewne, że zabrakło w nim miejsca na muzykę.”*)⁵

Even Bob Marley sounded too optimistic then. Politics invaded the privacy of the home, private feelings and lives. It infected the artistic Weronika, who wanted to fulfill the role of a good mother.

“Suddenly, we stopped being lovers of art and we became decent citizens concerned our duties, those important matters...”

“Nagle przestaliśmy być kochankami sztuk pięknych i czekały nas obowiązki

³ Izabela Filipiak, *Niebieska menażeria* (Blue menagerie). Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1997.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid 147.

*przyzwoitych obywateli, te ważniejsze sprawy..”*⁶

Weronika chose the patriotic obligation, the private life. From the very beginning we can hear a hint of irony in writing about the patriotic devotion of Weronika. The narrator slowly uncovers the dangerous side of this noble activity. Step by step we understand the skeptical tone of the narrator: “What was not important for my Fatherland, but it was important for me” (*“Co nieważne może było dla kraju, lecz było ważne dla mnie,”*).⁷ It was the choice of the narrator. She chose privacy as the right way for her. But still living with Weronika, she continuously participates in her life. Instead of landscapes, Weronika started to paint collages with the motif of Christ in the middle or the sign of freedom: “V”.

They still went to the Church as it was a place of freedom in a “captivated country”⁸: “Here we are, the young Catholics, united with the fighting Africa” (*“A więc jesteśmy młodymi katolikami, unitarnie zjednoczonymi z wojującą Afryką”*).⁹

The narrator writes with bitter irony. This is the irony of someone who after 20 years is aware of the events and sees the devotion of Weronika. Weronika became a superwoman:

“Combining the demands of history, family and art, and demands of her own, in different versions: of a mother and a good fairy, an artist and a knight in black amour, could make her a woman—the omnibus.”

*(“Godzenie wymagań historii, rodziny, sztuki i swoich własnych, w wersjach matki i dobrej wróżki, artystki i rycerza w czarnej zbroi mogłoby stworzyć z niej kobietę – omnibus..”)*¹⁰

She wanted to fulfill all the roles that society placed upon her. She wanted to do it for her son, for her own ambition, and also to change the time of pretended happiness and imagined freedom of her communist country. She wanted to be a part of the history, but history was meant to be written by men.

One day, the narrator wanted to go to a church meeting. Her friend, a young man, stopped her and said that they had decided that the female element was distracting to their mission. The narrator went away. The narrator did not have a problem with that. Weronika, however, could not accept that rejection:

“Sensible mother of her children, friend of her children, devotee to arts (...) Completely faithful towards her God, a humble servant of her motherland, she fell into such a terrible disease, she began to think that men were dangerous. She had such a hallucination”.

*“Roztropna matka swoich dzieci, przyjaciółka swoich dzieci, opiekunka sztuk (...) Bezwzględnie wierna swojemu Bogowi, pokorna służebnica swojej ojczyźnie, zachorowała na taką straszną chorobę, zaczęło jej się wydawać, że mężczyźni są niebezpieczni. Taka miała halucynację.”*¹¹

The narrator could not find the words to describe the drama of Weronika. She uses someone else’s speech. It gives the effect of a naïve belief that in what others say. The irony is not difficult to pick up from what is said. She was rejected when she was no

⁶ Izabela Filipiak, *Niebieska menażeria* (Blue menagerie). Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1997.

⁷ Ibid 147.

⁸ An allusion to Czesław Miłosz and his book from 1951 “Zniewolony umysł”.

⁹ Izabela Filipiak, *Niebieska menażeria* (Blue menagerie). Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1997.

¹⁰ Ibid 150.

¹¹ Ibid 158.

longer wanted at political debates in the circle in the little Church (Saint Brigida Church in Gdańsk?).¹²

The narrator continues with this sarcastic tone for a little while. She gives us an official interpretation of her madness. Maybe it was her body, her genetic predisposition? Was she just an individual case? Maybe she was just a victim of a totalitarian system?

The narrator predicts that nobody will take her hatred towards men as a result of patriarchal order. The narrator dares to suggest that, "Because of her madness, because the fact that it was just so, and not different, I will get hit again". (*"Przez to jej szaleństwo, przez to, że było właśnie takie, a nie inne, znów mi się oberwie."*)¹³

There is another myth about Polish women, reflected in the popular Polish proverb: "Man is the head but woman is the neck", meaning: let us allow men to think that they have power but we, women, know better that it is not true. The literary example of Weronika is denying that the saying has anything to do with reality!

Weronika's story is a literary parable. Unfortunately there are many such stories. At the beginning of 1990s, Shana Penn conducted research on women's attitudes towards power in the highest levels of "Solidarność"¹⁴. According to this research the women in all levels of the organisation were hidden.

From the "Solidarity" (*"Solidarność"*) period everybody knows who Lech Wałęsa was, but who remembers Anna Walentynowicz? She was one of the most active trade unionists from that period. It was her dismissal that was the indirect

cause of the strike in the shipyard of Gdańsk.

"Walentynowicz's moment"¹⁵ is completely absent from the myth of 'Solidarność'. The myth of 'Solidarność' is seen as part of the long story of the Polish struggle for independence. The mythical beginning of "Solidarność" is the Wałęsa's ('brave', 'male') jump through the wall of the Gdańsk shipyard. The common amnesia of women's participation in this political movement is significant. The women who took part in the struggle for independence do not fit the mythical construction of a woman¹⁶.

Lesbians? We don't have those.

Let us once again listen to Filipiak's voice. This time it is the voice of the brave Polish lesbian writer who does not deny that she can see the patriarchal structure in our society; a woman does not want to be the neck of a man's head! A year ago she published a collection of poems titled "Madame Intuita" with references to the work of one of the best Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert from his collection entitled "Pan Cogito" ("Mr Cogito").

¹⁵ Marilyn Rueschemeyer also points this out: 'many women played important roles as invisible supporters taking over a variety of practical tasks' in: Marilyn Rueschemeyer, "Difficulties and Opportunities in Transition Period. Concluding Observation," in eds. M. Reuschemeyer, ME Scharpe, Women in Politics in Post communist Eastern Europe. 1993.

¹⁶ There are several examples of women in politics who are hidden behind men. A good example is Danuta Winiarska, who directed the "Solidarność" organization in the Lubelski region. She created the fictional man called Ambramczyk, who allegedly ordered her indirectly. See: Shana Penn, "Tajemnica państwowa (State's secret)." Pełnym Głosem (In Full Voice), (2), 1994.; Agnieszka Graff, Świat bez kobiet. Płeć w polskim życiu politycznych (The world without women. Sex/Gender in Polish political life). Warsaw: WAB, 2001.

¹² Church specially connected to the Solidarity movement.

¹³ Izabela Filipiak, Niebieska menażeria (Blue menagerie). Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 1997.

¹⁴ Shana Penn, "Tajemnica państwowa (State's secret)." Pełnym Głosem (In Full Voice), (2), 1994.

Filipiak's collection is a dialog with Herbert's "good man", who was meant to be an example for Poles during the communist period.

When Filipiak published her poems, reviewers accepted her references to lesbian literature as a sort of "national" poetry with difficulties. One reviewer concluded that if the authoress referred to Virginia Woolf, or even to Gertruda Stein everything would be understandable, but Herbert?

Mr Cogito, a hero from Herbert's poetry, looks for an axiological perspective for the interpretation of a human life. Herbert's hero's life is tragic. The work looks for the answer as to why a human being is unhappy, lonely. How to get the courage or passion to live? Mr. Cogito lives in the unfriendly world:

"alone
in a vault of
all disasters"
("Mr Cogito – return")

(„*sam
w skarbcu
wszystkich nieszczęść*”
"Pan Cogito – powrót";

Here is another fragment:

"the temple of freedom
Has been changed into a flea
market"
("Mr Cogito on Upright
Attitude")

„*świątynię wolności
zamieniono w pchli targ*”
"Pan Cogito o postawie
wyprostowanej"¹⁷

Mr Cogito is surrounded by the mystifications of freedom. He lives in the interior of his existence and that gives him strength to expose the delusion. This delusion was multiplied by the political system that created unfavorable circumstances to talk about freedom. This is why Herbert's poetry became symbolic for the independence movement in Poland!

Herbert also tells us about the crisis of interpersonal relationships.

"There is no need to say
hallo or good bye we live on
archipelagoes"
(Fortynbras' Threnody)

(*"Ani nam witać się ani
żegnać żyjemy na
archipelagach", "Tren
Fontynbrasa"*)

There are so many people around. We do not know each other, do not understand each other, and do not really meet each other:

"Mr Cogito
(...)
He can not stand
the colloquial phrases any
longer
- comment allez - vous
- wie geht's
- how are you
The questions seem to be
simple
they require a complex
answer
Mr Cogito tears off
the bandages of friendly
indifference"
("Mr Cogito – Return")

¹⁷ The collection of poems "Mr Cogito" (Pan Cogito) was published in 1974. I quote from: Zbigniew Herbert, *89 wierszy* (89 poems). Kraków 1998. The English version is from: Zbigniew Herbert, *Selected poems*, translated by John Carpenter,

Mr Cogito's name is the name of a rationalist. He is Mr Thought. Herbert's man wants to have values that are prompted by his intellect. He is asking universal questions. He worries about life in general! When Izabela Filipiak decided to have a dialog with Mr Cogito, she put this universality into question. Madame Intuita of Filipiak is not talking about a human being and does not pretend to be a symbol of the human problems of life. She speaks as a woman about femininity and about love to another woman. As in the earlier confrontation between the Narrator and Weronika, Madame Intuita, in her confrontation with Mr Cogito, chooses privacy. "The envoy of Mr Cogito" is to go "upright among those who are on their knees" and to "be faithful". Madame Intuita does not understand these generalizations. She does not fit them in with her love to another woman or the heroine in the mental hospital!

Let us read one of Filipiak's poems:

Razor –blade

I had hardly undressed, when he said:
My wife went off with another woman
Then it gave him pain.
For goodbye I said:
Honey, I understand why.

When he met her later in the bar
She was different, sharp as a razor-blade
Nonchalant with a cigarette and hair shaved
at the back
Aggressive bitch who will not let through
anything.
It was her, the other who set her against
him
If not she, they would come to a
understanding.

The other observed them discreetly
From the music play machine.

You know me after all, said Razor-blade.
I should have stayed unhappy
I could miss you then.
I should have been more or less happy, then
Maybe I would forgive you.
But as it is, honey, it is not good
Not good for you.

(Żyleta

*Ledwo się rozebrałam, powiedział:
Moja żona odeszła do innej kobiety
To mu zadało ból.
Na odchodne rzekłam:
Honey, rozumiem dlaczego.*

*Kiedy spotkał ją potem w barze
Była już inna ostra jak żyleta
Nonszalanca papieros i podgolone włosy
Agresywna suka, która niczego nie
przepuści.
To tamta, ta druga tak ją nastawiła –
przeciwko niemu
Gdyby nie ona dogadaliby się.*

*Tamta obserwowała ich dyskretnie
Znad maszyny z piosenkami.*

*Znasz mnie przecież, powiedziała Żyleta.
Powinnam była zostać nieszczęśliwa
Wtedy mogłabym tęsknić za tobą.
Powinnam być średnio szczęśliwa, wtedy
Być może wybaczyłabym tobie.
Ale tak jak jest, honey, to się nie składa
Nie składa się dobrze dla ciebie.)¹⁸*

Herbert was the most important moral authority in communist Poland. Herbert provided the paradigms of good behavior, honorable behavior. Mr Cogito fights with the right issues, he suffers for the Motherland, he is ethical. And Madame Intuita? We can meet her in the mental hospital, she dares to be happy with another woman, she dares to leave a man, and she reveals the luck of language for women! In

¹⁸ Izabela Filipiak, Madame Intuita. Warsaw : Nowy Świat, 2002.

Polish tradition, it is a pretty brave move. One step more and we might liken Herbert's poetical creation to a big phallus in the Polish traditional pattern. In that pattern Filipiak would play the role of a mole digging up a hole to show that she—a woman—is there, behind Mr Cogito!

Filipiak admits that:

"Women speak in whispers
in order that nobody hears them
sometimes it is hard to believe that they
speak at all".

(„Kobiety mówią szeptem
żeby ich nikt nie słyszał
czasem trudno uwierzyć, że w ogóle mówią
cokolwiek, „Mów do Mnie jeszcze”).¹⁹

However, Filipiak speaks quite loudly, and tells us a story about a woman who not only left her man, but also was brave enough to be happy. This is an ironic moment in the poem, where Filipiak sarcastically accuses the patriarchal system of keeping women unhappy, or in an average state of happiness. This is a common belief. Do not give a woman too much, or else you will spoil her!

Filipiak's loud voice on lesbian issues is still one of the few in Polish cultural debate on homosexual, gay, lesbian or queer studies, which, in Poland, are still rare.

Homosexuals are not seen in Poland. They are hidden. Among Poles just 19 percent accept the idea of homosexual marriages, and only 10 percent will agree with the adoption of children by homosexual couples. This is evidence of a national homophobia in Poland. When on the 31st of July (2003) the Vatican introduced its official opinion against homosexual marriages the political world

supported it fully. We have heard opinions such as the following:

"To allow homosexual marriages will mean to give unjustifiable privileges to a certain group of people; e.g. tax privileges. This is in conflict with the legal principle of equality. Privileges for real marriages are justifiable..."

(„Przyznanie związkom homoseksualnym statusu małżeństw oznaczałoby nadanie pewnej grupie ludzi nieuzasadnionych przywilejów, np. podatkowych. To jest sprzeczne z zasadą równości wobec prawa. Przywileje dla prawdziwych małżeństw są uzasadnione...")

This is a quote from a member of the Polish Families League²⁰, a group that is from the extreme right side of the Polish political scene.

The political centre also supported the Church, stating: "I am with Church", "I fully supported the standpoint of Church"²¹, etc. Even the social democrats admitted that: "At this point our standpoint is coincident with that of the Church (...)"²². The International Short Film Festival in Kraków in June (2003) showed a film about the national people registration in Poland. When the official came to the flat, where two girls lived, she asked: "what is the relation between you; cousins, friends, flat-mates?" "We are a couple", they answered. "What do you mean?" The official could not understand. When they explained what it meant, the official was in trouble, because in the national people registration form there was not place for such a possibility. There are no lesbians in Poland.

²⁰ *Gazeta Wyborcza* (the biggest Polish daily) 2-3 sierpień 2003. s. 5.

²¹ "Platforma Obywatelska", or "Prawo i Sprawiedliwość", see: *Gazeta Wyborcza* 2-3 sierpień 2003.

²² *Gazeta Wyborcza* 2-3 sierpień 2003.

¹⁹ Izabela Filipiak, *Madame Intuita*. Warsaw : Nowy Świat, 2002.

In November 2002 a women's magazine, one that holds strong stereotypes of women, decided to publish an article on a popular Polish writer who is a lesbian²³. A big taboo of the un-lesbian Polish world, it was meant to demystify. That "honourable lesbian in Poland", as she was described in the subtitle of the magazine, talked about Polish women. She stated that "Polish women are happy slaves", and "Polish women are generally busy by making their men feel better, because the men are harmed. Women continuously perform the role of mother, even when they are wives and lovers". Izabela Filipiak admitted that at the beginning of her career, there was a tolerant attitude towards "others", "sexual minorities", etc. After 2000 in 'Millennium Poland', however, the post-communist state authorities began to remind everybody that 'we all are Catholics'. Poland's Catholic mission became a frequent topic in political debates, radio broadcasts, television programs and the press. Filipiak treated this debate, and the official position of the Church and the politicians I mentioned above, as a personal attack.

Still, who would listen to somebody who publicly admitted that she slept with another woman, and that sex with her was wonderful, beautiful, and that women could better understand other woman? Even the person who did the interview seemed to avoid serious political issues, choosing instead to concentrate on questions like "who is the wife, and who a husband in the lesbian relationship", "as a lesbian, did you burn your bra?", "is it difficult to find a partner", etc. Everything was done so that the "normal" reader, the real woman, could

read a bit about the queer phenomenon without having to understand it or hear about how problematic it can be, or—oh, God, no!—that it can be normal, ok, fine, bra and all! If the bra is missing, then it is clear that there is something wrong with that! So do not take it seriously, the journalist of the magazine seems to whisper, when she accuses you, real women, of being passive, doing everything only for your men.

What about literature? Do lesbians need literature? Of course they do, answers once again the "Honorable Polish lesbian" Izabela Filipiak. They need literature to express their feelings and emotions, and also to confirm their identity as lesbian and still feel normal, accepted, included. It is important not to limit discourse on the topic to the question of whether burn or nor to burn one's bra.

Still, we can hardly find lesbian motives in mainstream literature. Even gay men are much more visible in the cultural world as symbols of revolt and rejection of mainstream tendencies. Lesbians, however, are not seen, because "nobody needs to notice them"²⁴.

Women and their dissolute sexuality!

Just as the lesbian issue is new in Polish cultural and political circles, the subject of body and sexuality became a new topic in the literature of the 1990s. The body with its nudity, beauty and ugliness, with its illness, menstruation, erection, birth-giving, was a great disruption in so-called 'cultural' discourse. Anna Burzyńska, the literary theoretician, wrote that:

"The body then has become a kind of virus capable of separating oppositional, internally hierarchized constructions

²³ Isabela Filipiak, "Kiedy kobieta kocha kobietę" (When a woman loves a woman)." *Viva*, 150(22) 2003; *Ha!art* (Polish magazine). Izabela Filipiak interviewed by Anna Kaplińska, pp. 73-78, Spring, 2003.

²⁴ Filipiak in *Ha!art* 2003.

constituting supposedly irrefutable foundations of modern philosophy and modern literary science.”

(“Cieleśność więc okaże się czymś w rodzaju wirusa, zdolnego rozpoić opozycyjalne, wewnętrznie zhierarchizowane konstrukcje tworzące pozornie niepodważalne fundamenty nowoczesnej filozofii i nowoczesnej wiedzy o literaturze.”)²⁵

In the newest Polish literature the motif of menstruation, as a symptom of the body, appears very often, inspired by Western literature and feminist interpretations. This motif has caused many a mocking remark resulting in the terming of some Polish prose in the 1990s as “menstruation literature”.

Menstruation as a ‘key moment’ appears in: “E. E.” by Olga Tokarczuk, “Absolutna Amnezja” (“Total Amnesia”) by Izabela Filipiak, and “Panna Nikt” (“Girl Nobody”) by Tomek Tryzna. In the first novel, the heroine Emma is portrayed as a normal, yet, extraordinary gifted, abnormal young girl. She communicates with the world of spirits, inaccessible by reason. When Emma starts bleeding, it tears her off from the world of magic. The blood symbolises her return to the earthly land and gives the young girl a body, bringing her to the world of pain. In Filipiak's book, similar to the work of Tryzna, maturation, as well as menstruation, also captivates the character's freedom.

Tryzna begins his novel with the character having her first menstruation. The narrator of the novel, a teenage girl, is telling us about her menstruation, about the red little streams all over her legs, and the fact that she was crying for her mum. Tryzna puts his character in all possible

stereotypes. The author lets Marysi, the character, go through all the stereotypical girl's experiences. While the world of Tryzna's novel is dominated by women, the women are unbearably clichéd. Their behavior, their decisions and their sexualities are predictable.

The sexuality of women in the works of Stasiuk, one of the most popular Polish male novelists in 1990s, is completely artificial. Stasiuk builds a male world, and if women or girls wander into it they are very typical: either as the mothers or sexual objects for the male characters. In the novel “Przez rzekę”²⁶ (Through the River), the woman, Zula Egipt appears in just a few scenes. She does not speak, she is “made up” by descriptions. She was important as long as she was used for the male imagination.

“Zula belonged to those beings whose appearance sets the imagination in motion. We could place everything, what only our intoxication and combination of minds was able to produce, in the place she occupied in time and space. We used to take her to different places, and we forgot about her existence. Conversations about her absorbed us, and the arrangement of puzzles. She herself was the key to this code.”

(“Zula należała do istot, których pojawienie uruchamia wyobraźnię. W miejsce, które zajmowała w czasie i przestrzeni mogliśmy wpakować wszystko, co nasze ześwirowane od alkoholu i kombinacji umysły były w stanie wyprodukować. Zabieraliśmy ją w różne miejsca i zapominaliśmy o jej istnieniu. Pochłaniała nas rozmowa o niej, układanie łamigłówek, a ona sama była jedynie kluczem tego szyfru.”)²⁷

The sexuality and sensuality of women became an important issue in women's

²⁵ Anna Burzyńska, “Ciało w bibliotece” (“Body in Library”). In *Teksty Drugie* (The Second Texts), 78(6) 2002, 19-28.

²⁶ Andrzej Stasiuk, *Przez rzekę* (Through the River). Gorlice 1996.

²⁷ Ibid 94.

prose. Manuela Gretkowska²⁸ was a provoking writer with brave language and even braver descriptions. Nudity, as featured in her novels, was criticized as having just one role—to provoke. Gretkowska's characters are so sexually liberated that nothing can be a taboo for them, and they seem to be bored by erotic experiences. In the short story titled "Latin Lover"²⁹ we know each female character through her sexual activity, conversations about sex, etc. In "Latin lover" Gretkowska plays with the stereotype of the Swedish nation as the most liberal. Women dominate sexually and politically. As one character explains the order in Stockholm:

"Jose, you have come to the white-haired angels' paradise. It is an extremely rich country, the experimental test-tube of the future. Women will rule the world. It has begun just here. They want to put prostitutes' customers into prison. Soon, being a man will be a crime here."

*("Jose, trafiłeś do raju białowłosych aniołów. Przebogaty kraj, eksperymentalna próbówka przyszłości. Światem będą rządzić kobiety, tu się to właśnie zaczyna. Chcą wsadzać do więzienia klientów prostytutek. Niedługo bycie mężczyzną będzie tutaj przestępstwem.")*³⁰

The white-haired angels are very well educated, intelligent and rich, and they use sexual activity as an exercise for fitness and health:

"Jose knew that they were recommended to one another just like a good hairdresser or dressmaker."

*("Jose wiedział, że polecały go sobie jak dobrą fryzjerkę, czy krawcową.")*³¹

Women in Gretkowska's novel have power in the political realm, not just in the traditional private sphere. The narrator does not miss the old order. However, sometimes we encounter a moment of melancholy, which is of course the melancholy of one of those lost poor men, like Jose, who still longs for honor and tequila! ("honor, makabra, tequila" – said the boy)³².

Nudity, and all kinds of sexual activity, became a popular topic in Polish prose and poetry in the 1990s. It was as if after the fall of communism, with either realism or antirealism as the main topic of well-being in Poland, the new literature attempted to expose the private life with all its taboos. When we read about female nudity in 1990s literature, we might think that the female body was used for commercial purposes, either by authors or authoresses. One point, however, needs to be emphasized; that most young Polish writers at the time decided to depart from traditional women's roles. Indeed, when the archetypical woman appears, she is so ironically presented that it cannot be taken seriously. Natasha Goerke's³³ characters is advertising herself to her Mr Right:

"I am the perfect incarnation of the archetypical femininity: humble and indulgent; to my death I am ready to inspire you, and you do not have fear that I will compete with you on the field of spirit; my

²⁸ Gretkowska wrote a lot of popular novels. In the 1990s, among them the best known were: "My zdies' emigranty" (1991); "Kabaret metafizyczny" (1994); "Tarot paryski" (1993); "Światowidz" (1998); "Namietnik" (1998), "Polka" (2001).

²⁹ Manuela Gretkowska, *Namietnik* (Passion Diary). Warszawa: WAB, 1998.

³⁰ Ibid 53-54.

³¹ Ibid 57.

³² Ibid 47.

³³ Natasza Goerke, *Fractale* (Fractals). Poznań: Obserwator, 1994.

strength is not in fighting, but in the birth of the world in your male soul.”

(“Jestem doskonałym ucieleśnieniem archetypicznej kobiecości: pokorna, wyrozumiała; do śmierci gotowam pana inspirować i wcale nie musi się pan obawiać konkurencji na polu ducha, ma siłą bowiem nie w walce, a w rodzeniu świata w pańskiej męskiej duszy.”)³⁴

To those theoretical virtues, she also adds some practical convenient skills:

“Well, maybe I am not the pretty vamp from your youthful dreams (..) But what a splendid apple-cake I bake. And cheesecakes, and doughnuts, and plum jams, I can do everything: I can bake, I can cook, I can clean...”

(“Nie jestem może urodziwym wampem z pana młodzieńczych snów (..) Ale jakież za to wspaniałe wypiekam szarlotki. I serniki, i pączki, i powidła, wszystko potrafię: wypiec, wygotować, wyszorować...”)³⁵

Naughty girls in the art world.

The naughty Polish authoress and the artist are sometimes punished by their wild imaginations. One story about a young Polish artist reminds me of the narrative about the holy inquisition. This time she is not a writer (they are quite safe. After all, who reads literature nowadays?!). Dorota Nieznalska, in December 2001 decided to present her exhibition on the sadistic requirements of being a real man in our time. At least, this was the message! The exhibition consisted some films of men in the gym and a cross with a photo of male genitals on it in the middle of the exhibition.

³⁴ Natasza Goerke, *Fractale* (Fractals). Poznań: Obserwator, 1994, 111.

³⁵ Ibid 112.

The exhibition, called “Passion” [referring to a “passion” as the sufferings and death of the Christian martyr, Latin “pati”, to suffer] was meant to smuggle the message of the painful training of being masculine. This artistic combination of a religious symbol and the depiction of a culture of consumption produced contending interpretations.

Despite protest in artistic circles, the exhibition was closed (even, the gallery, where “passion” was exhibited was punished by being made to close). The artist was accused of insulting the religious feelings of the nation. Nieznalska was sentenced to six months of social work or two years of prison.

A Polish critic, professor Jolanta Brach-Czaina discussed this case, referring to the Greek goddess of order and justice: “Themis is blind, but I would not think that to that extent!”³⁶

Good Polish mothers! They are real women.

*"O Polish mother, if the radiant eyes
of genius kindle in thy darling's face
O Polish mother, ill must be his part"
(Adam Mickiewicz, To a Polish Mother)*

The maternal myth consists of two aspects, one idealising and another tragic. The former concentrates on the role of the mother who devotes herself to bringing up the virtuous sons of the nation. The tragic aspect assumes the mother's willingness to dedicate her children to the nation³⁷.

³⁶ I quote after: Izabela Kowalczyk, “Polowanie na czarownice (Witch-hunting).” *Zadra*, (2) 2003, 37-40.

³⁷ See: Magda Monczka-Ciechowska, *Mit kobiety w kulturze* (Cultural myths of woman). In *Głos mają Kobiety, Teksty feministyczne* (Woman have voice). The Feminist text, ed. Sławomira Walczewska, Kraków 1992.

The maternal myth was a tradition, cultivated during communism. However, after the transition, a maternal “national identity” became very a useful political tool. Instead of woman-centred politics, we had family-centred politics. The crisis of the family is considered one of the most serious of women’s issues. This, in popular opinion, is considered the most serious woman issue. The rest of so-called women’s issues are categorized as general human issues. Being a mother was the most important feature of women, and that kind of thinking dominated politics. Antiabortion law and pro-family politics became the only women’s issues in Parliament. The equal-policy debate was usually treaded as an unserious issue.

Polish women writers again decided to show other points of view. Filipiak wrote in one of her essays:

“A Polish woman lives in her own country like in a museum. In 19th century Polish woman was brought up as a patriot, as a patriots' mother. Then it was the 20th century: even more war and patriotic occupations, and then there was Communism. For the Polish woman, patriotism has her dignity. If she had the right to make an abortion, she had, but whether she used this right or not was her business. When they took away her right, she did not even blink an eye. Two hundred years of training and they succeeded in bringing up a woman who lives in her own country as if it is not her country...”

(“Polka żyje we własnym kraju jak w skansenie. W XIX wieku Polka wychowywana była na patriotkę, matkę patriotów. Potem był wiek XX, jeszcze więcej zajęć wojenno- patriotycznych, potem komuna, a patriotka przecież swoją godność ma. Jeśli dostała wolność do skrobanki, to dostała, ale czy niego korzystała, to jej sprawa, a jak jej to prawo zabrali, to nawet nie mrugnęła okiem.

Dwieście lat treningu i udało się wychować kobietę, która we własnym kraju żyje tak, jakby to nie był jej kraj, tylko cudzy...”)³⁸

The Polish woman as the obedient patriot and mother does not want to be as submissive as the character of Polish novels in the 1990s.

Anna Nasiłowska³⁹, in her novel about the experience of being a mother, shows us how difficult is to find one’s maternal instinct, which is thought to be natural⁴⁰!

In the first-person narration the character is showing us step by step the traumatic experience of childbirth, staying in the hospital, and the first days at home with a child. When the narrator of the novel looks at her daughter, she is surprised:

“She has got a large nose!—I say (...)
(...)”

- What is wrong with you! Do you really love her? Maybe you want to abandon her?

- Ah, the Polish nation, it has its own opinion, and the eternal ideal of a sweet blonde, the best one being a fat one. Even if it is not true, they will see it in their little doll: pretty, nicely fat.”

*(“Ona ma duży nos! – mówię (...)
(...)”*

- *Coś z tobą nie w porządku! Czy aby ja kochasz? Może ją chcesz porzucić?*

- *Ach, ten lud polski, ma swoje poglądy oraz wieczny ideał pyrkatej blondynki, najlepiej przy kości. Nawet jak nieprawda – zobaczą swoją lakę: ładniutką, tłuściutką.”*)⁴¹

³⁸ Izabela Filipiak, *Kultura obrażonych* (The Culture of the Offended). Warsaw: WAB, 2003.

³⁹ Anna Nasiłowska, *Księga początku* (The Book of Beginning). Warsaw 2002.

⁴⁰ See: Elizabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood. An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*. London: Souvenir Press, 1981.

⁴¹ Anna Nasiłowska, *Księga początku* (The Book of Beginning). Warsaw 2002, s. 16.

Nasiłowska demythologizes the ideal motherhood. She tells us about the experience of accepting a new child with humor:

“The hospital's women can't forgive me that I did not sing with them: oh, sweet little one, chu - chu – chu -chu - chu.

And my husband looks at me a bit suspiciously.

- So, how many women do you have inside you? These who I do not know? This old one? And she, is she new? How can I become familiar with all them? Are they all mine?”

(„Tylko szpitalne kobiety nie mogą mi darować, że z nimi nie śpiewałam: o, słodkie maleństwo, aa- cia- ciu, cia-ciu.

I mój mąż patrzy na mnie trochę podejrzliwie.

- Więc ile kobiet siedzi jeszcze w tobie? I te, których nie znam? Te dawne? I ona, ta nowa? Jak mam się w tym połapać? I czy wszystkie moje?)⁴²

When the narrator does not follow the stereotype, and the mode of behavior of a good mother, the others are disorientated. She must be put into some mold, though. Maybe she is just a bad mother, the type who dares to abandon her child.

Still, the narrator just needs some time to adjust to the new situation. She does not want to pretend to be absolutely happy, and can cope with the situation with ease. She needs to cope with a child and with her new self. The body and sexuality of a young mother are also presented by Nasiłowska. She suffers as she has to devote herself to the beauty of her body! It is not easy. Moreover, popular culture pelts her with visions of the ideal beauty of the female body, and she needs to look at a female breast as a determinant of female sexuality!

"Film on television. Woman under shower. She washes her breast. A man looks at her. Desirably. I turn back and I go out. Breast hurts me. Tiredness, surprise. Disgust. Nonsense ”.

(„Film w telewizji. Kobieta pod prysznicem. Myje piersi. Mężczyzna patrzy. Pożądliwie. Odwracam się I wychodzę. Boli mnie pierś. Zmęczenie, zdziwienie. Niesmak. Bzdura.”)⁴³

It is not easy to be mother, says the young Polish authoress, demythologizing the myth that for a Polish Mother there is no nicer thing than delivering and bringing up children!

The nationalization of Polish women's bellies!

Poland entered into the 3rd Millennium of our Christian civilization with the antiabortion law, introduced quite easily by right-wing political circles at the beginning of post communist Poland. Abortion and its sinfulness became the supplementary subject for political forces, in an attempt to turn attention away from economic problems. The prohibition of abortion does not mean that women do not have abortions. They are obviously illegal, paid for and performed in blameworthy conditions. Abortion is no longer a topic of public debate. A woman who has had an abortion is stigmatized as a sinner, her child's murderess, worth disregarding. The silence on the "unwanted" topic was broken for a while at the end of June 2003. On Friday the 20th of June a ship called "Langenort" arrived at the Polish seacoast. "Langenort" belonged to the Dutch organization *Women on Waves*, supporting the right to abortion for women

⁴² Anna Nasiłowska, *Księga początku* (The Book of Beginning). Warsaw 2002, 18.

⁴³ Ibid 16.

everywhere in the world. Doctors in this organisation take women who want to have an abortion on board, and then they sail to the extra-territorial waters, where Dutch law becomes effective (on the Dutch ship). Dutch law permits abortions in the first term of pregnancy. Poland was the first country where the Dutch doctors conducted the project of the organization *Women on Waves*.

The press picture of the whole event was laconic, avoiding valuing. Narratives were made through a dichotomy: There—the women on boat, the sinful followers of abortion; and Here (on the coast)—the opponents of abortion, including representatives of the Polish Family League as well as the All-Polish Youths (Młodzież Wszechpolska), throwing red paint and eggs at the boat, and shouting "murderers", "Gestapo", "to hell!". From television and radio broadcasts we could hear brief information about the event, though there was no serious discussion on the subject of abortion. The event did not seem to be problematic, with unemotional reports on television and silence after that. It was as if nothing had really happened. The drama of antiabortion law had not been touched by the narration.

Doctor Rebecca Gomperts, the initiator of the organisation, did not admit officially that the passengers received an abortive pill. She did not even confirm that there were such pills on the ship. She confirmed, though, that she was pro-choice, and stated:

"I hear so often from my patients: 'In general I am against abortion, but in my situation it is different...'. It is always different. Every situation is different. Only a woman can judge her situation, and that, regardless of her situation, authorizes her to have an abortion."

Who is the Polish woman at the beginning of the 21st century, after the 1990s, these years of constituting—this time not socialist—democracy?

It is difficult to find one definition. There are Mothers, lesbians; there are feminists, there are those on the boat, and those who are crying out "sinners!". There are wonderful, brave women, who are not afraid of the truth, and there are the others. There are some general women's issues that have contributed to the history of Poland in the 1990s, but I would not dare to make one general conclusion regarding who exactly is the Polish *femina post-sovietica*. Instead, I wrote about some examples from the Polish political, social, and artistic spheres. I hope that Polish women will learn from these examples. As my mum commented on the *Women on Waves* incident:

"Why are they screaming at them, what do they all want from these women, why don't they leave them to do what they think is right? Everyone has his/her own conscience!"

To conclude I will quote Izabela Filipiak once again. She wrote about the last 13th years in Poland as a "culture of the offended"! What is this culture of the offended? Here, she says:

"Some murders are regarded as blameworthy, others as praiseworthy. We are pro-life, so we protect the life of the unborn, and at the same time we are pleased that within NATO our soldiers go to different parts of the world to kill those who are already born and even brought up. And all that because they were ordered to do it by anonymous commanders!"⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Izabela Filipiak, *Kultura obrażonych* (The Culture of the Offended). Warsaw: Wab, 2003. 204.

We can find anonymous commanders everywhere, trying to control our lives. Thanks to art, literature, sculpture and events, we can see it, and live our lives, as my mum says, judging by our own conscience!

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