FEMINISM POLISH STYLE: OUR TRADITION OR A BORROWED ONE?

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There is a widespread opinion, expressed by foreigners and Poles alike, that because of its traditional Catholic religiosity and conservatism, as well as its communist heritage and the legacy of the anti-communist ethos of the Solidarity movement, Polish society is resistant to feminism; that strong patriarchal values still prevail, making it impossible for social, cultural and political changes to be successfully introduced on a wide scale. In this context the response of Czech women polled by Western researchers of feminism in post-communist countries is interesting. According to one of the respondents,

> The development [of feminism—E.K.] was different in every post-communist country. For example, it went quite easily in the Czech Republic, but when you look at Poland there is a tragedy, you know, the Christian state, and feminism there is very important but it doesn't have many chances, because they have abortion laws and stuff like that (Kapusta-Pofahl 2002).

Meanwhile a Polish researcher chimes in only five years ago:

> The feminist movement has a very limited impact on the shaping of public and private spheres in Poland. Even more interesting than this is the fact that it also has a very limited influence on women. Simply, a lot of women does [sic] not support feminist ideas or even express very critical remarks about feminism […] Polish women, now living in a democratic country, did not choose feminist premises. They do not support the feminist endeavor, they do not join the feminist organizations. It is very likely that they also do not support the feminist program and the vision of femininity promoted by feminists. The feminist organizations do not recognize, nor express the needs and the interests of the majority of Polish women. They have a certain vision of women and they try to actualize it. Women do not necessarily support such a vision (Dąbrowska 2004, 11, English of the original has been retained).

In this article I would like to offer a somewhat different witness to experiences and views that are shared to a large extent—I believe—by my generation of Polish feminist scholars, i.e. people born in the 1950 and 1960s, who were brought up and

educated in the Polish People's Republic and lived through the Solidarity era, martial law and the collapse of the communist system. I shall not refer to the problem of the restrictive abortion law and reproductive rights in Poland, although I realize that this is the main and most controversial issue associated in public opinion with the feminist movement in our country. I shall not focus here on the social and political aspects of Polish feminism. Instead, I shall concentrate on the sphere with which I am most familiar: the academy, particularly the humanities. In numerous academic utterances my female colleagues also express the opinion that the situation of feminist discourse leaves a lot to be desired. Of course their arguments are different from those quoted above. They mostly refer to the "secondary," unoriginal character of the discourse, its dependence on Western theories and concepts, and indifference to local specificity. As one of my much younger academic female friends, Agnieszka Gajewska, has put it recently, Polish feminist scholars still prefer to quote Woolf and Beauvoir, Cixous and Irigaray, Showalter and Rich, than to develop projects of their own; projects which would deal directly with our own mental and material reality.[1] A certain lack of satisfaction seems to prevail within these academic circles concerned with the situation and status of feminist studies. Their representatives maintain, figuratively speaking, that the glass is still more than half empty, and worse still, that its content is rather diluted. Being myself one of those incurable optimists who always claim that the glass is already more than half full, I would like to offer a different opinion, an opinion of someone who remembers very well those times when feminist studies were not only nonexistent in Poland but entirely unimaginable.

Born in the early 1950s, I began my studies in Polish philology in 1972, and until the late 1980s remained totally unaware that feminism had anything to do with my

[1] My own view is that this is not the case only with Polish feminist thought. Feminist discourse tends to be universal and global, and its main ideas and texts cross borders quite freely, particularly in the areas where it has to develop from scratch, so to speak. However one cannot but notice that the more advanced this development becomes, the more self-reliant the discourse becomes in its local dimensions. Such a trend is evident also in Polish feminist studies with their predilection for gynocriticism. They focus on the local historical, political, cultural and social determinants of gender constructs, as well as engage in recovering the forgotten or excluded tradition of women's role in cultural/literary communication across the centuries.

own life and the lives of my generation. I dare to give evidence of such personal experience because I believe it is quite typical of the majority of my academic peers who now declare themselves in one way or another to be either feminists or at least feminism-friendly. Feminism simply did not exist in our mentality. First because of its absence in the official public discourse (education, propaganda, media, art, science) of the People's Republic of Poland, and second because, in the growing atmosphere of anti-communist opposition, we had been trained by unofficial, subversive discourses to believe that there were more serious causes to be fought for than the liberation of women. In this context the opinion of Maria Janion (b.1926) is significant, the opinion of someone who in the past was a Marxist, later a devotee of hermeneutics and who is now the honoured tutor of both male and female apprentices of Feminist and Gender Studies:

> All those years I recognized a clear demarcation between things that were important and unimportant; in the face of subjugation, striving for independence is important whereas the struggle for women's rights is not important. Towards the end of the 1980s, I expressed this view at a feminist forum in West Berlin, where I patiently explained to women from the free world that their way of thinking does not fit with Polish experience. *Solidarność*, I stubbornly maintained, has to first win independence and democracy for the entire society, and only later will we tackle together the issue of women (Janion 1999).

It may be worth emphasizing here that our indifference to feminism at that time did not mean that we were indifferent to various other phenomena of Western culture. Quite the contrary, the 1970s witnessed a genuine explosion of counterculture in Poland: various kinds of alternative cultural activity among students (theatre, art, literature, periodicals, cabarets, happenings) formed part of the everyday agenda (financially supported, it must be said, by official, i.e. "socialist" students' organizations); the hippie lifestyle was admired and imitated; we listened to pacifist protest songs by Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, as well as to Janis Joplin and Jimmie Hendrix, Leonard Cohen and the Rolling Stones; young student intellectuals quoted Marcuse, Fromm, and Cohn-Bendit; we kept track of the history of Baader-Meinhof group; and grew marihuana in pots. At least some of us did. Collecting and

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cultivating all those scraps of Western freedom was our form of contesting the shabby reality of real socialism, its restrictive censorship and its notorious "propaganda of success." From the mid-1970s, with the growing influence of the anti-communist opposition and emergence of the independent underground press and publishers, such contestation was becoming more and more widespread among the student and youth community (which did not mean of course that everybody was involved in it). In short, we were more or less familiar with almost every aspect of the Western counterculture revolution, from leftist anarchists to peace-loving hippies *except the women's liberation movement*. Why?

Well, the most plausible explanation I can give at the moment is the two-hundred-year-long tradition of putting struggle for political freedom above all other causes, and founding our patriotic ethos on this ground alone. In the second half of the 19th century Polish women spoke and wrote about emancipation, education and financial independence, but all this was discussed as a necessary element of patriotic discourse. In this discourse men were presented as leaders, fighters and martyrs, and women as their devoted supporters. Thus the women's movement in Poland never became militant, self-sufficient and independent; it was part of a greater cause. Symptomatically, the two interwar decades of genuine independence (1918-1939) were marked in Poland by an outburst of feminist initiatives in literature, art and social life—to mention only Irena Krzywicka and Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński with their project of birth control and "conscious life" or the literary *oeuvre* of Zofia Nałkowska—and one can only speculate how this tendency would have developed, had those Polish New Women been given a chance to continue their projects. But this period came abruptly to an end with the outbreak of World War Two and the decades of communist rule, counterpointed by the growing strength of the anti-communist opposition. Then came the sixteen months of the Solidarity festival of freedom (August 1980-December 1981), followed by the martial law imposed by General Jaruzelski and his regime. Martial law was officially terminated in July

1983, but the next few years passed in its aftermath, and that meant the further persecution of dissidents.

It was in those years that the ethos of the Polish dissident was established for once and for all, and with it the ethos of the dissident's woman. An exemplary figure in this respect was Grażyna Kuroń, wife of the famous anti-communist opposition leader, Jacek Kuroń (1934-2004). When she died of lung disease in 1982, after being released from an internment camp for medical reasons, several Polish poets wrote poems about her. Here is a fragment from one of them, written in late 1982, by the poet, translator and literary critic Stanisław Barańczak:

To Grażyna

To remember about the cigarettes. So that they're always at hand,
ready to be slipped into his pocket, when they take him away once again.

To know by heart all the prison regulations about parcels and visits.
And how to force facial muscles into a smile.

To be able to extinguish a cop's threatening yell with one cold glance,
calmly making tea while they eviscerate the desk drawers.

To write letters from a cell or clinic, saying that everything's O.K.

So many abilities, such perfection. No, I mean it.
If only in order not to waste such gifts,
you should have been rewarded with immortality
or at least with its defective version, life. […][2]

With such an ideal to be admired and mourned, and with communism still to be overcome, it was extremely difficult for average Polish women to openly express dissatisfaction with their own lives *as women*. All around them were numerous male conspirators to be supported, nurtured, hidden, nursed and loved… The story of Solidarity women remained untold until an outsider, Shana Penn, wrote it. In her book *Solidarity's Secret* she pieced together a decade of interviews with the women behind the Polish pro-democracy movement—women whose massive contributions were obscured by the more public successes of their male counterparts (Penn 2005).

[2] Translation by Stanisław Barańczak and Reginald Gibbons (Barańczak 1992, 240-241).

A heated discussion followed the publication of her book, between those who shared the view that the Solidarity movement was another form of patriarchal discrimination against women and those who claimed that patriarchy had nothing to do with the exclusion of women first from the anti-communist avant-garde, and then from full political involvement in shaping the new post-communist Poland (Graff 2001, 14-32). Maria Janion expressed the feelings of the disappointed and angry ones:

> Some years later, this movement [Solidarity—E.K.] did in fact take up the issue of women, and all of us in Poland know, to what effect. It turned out that in a free Poland, a woman is not a human entity but the bedrock of the family, who instead of bothering herself with politics should look after the home. I was brought to my senses only in 1990, when the congress of Solidarity proclaimed a resolution about the right of the human embryo to life protection (Janion 1999).

It seems that we all—potential Polish feminists in the last decades of the 20th century—needed some kind of awakening, or bringing to our senses. For Janion, and many others, it was the abortion law, and the growing influence of the Roman Catholic Church on social politics. For me, as well as for numerous female colleagues, it was the contact with Western feminism. In 1988 I left socialist Poland for three years, to become a teacher of Polish at the universities of Uppsala and Stockholm, and came back to a transformed homeland: the post-communist third Republic of Poland. I was also transformed. During those years I discovered a whole world of women's prose, feminist thought, and everyday life in which the question of women rights was simply taken for granted. What were my most important readings at that time? I feel ashamed to admit it, but it was, among other things, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*. Of course, as a student of literature, I was already well acquainted with her novels, but for me at that time she was only one of many representatives of European avant-garde modernism, psychologism and experimental narration, and I was totally deaf to her feminist message. And then there was the whole discourse of second-wave feminism, in prose, in criticism, in the social sciences. My reading list for those years is too long and too obvious to be quoted here. What really matters is the fact that those books

turned my attention back to my native literature. I came back home in 1991 knowing for certain that the Polish tradition of women's literature and feminist thought was the topic I wished to explore in my own research, academic teaching and writing.

Being a specialist in modern literature, I turned first to the period most obviously rich in the material I was looking for—the interwar years. But I found myself more and more intrigued by earlier periods that I had previously tended to ignore—even the distant Middle Ages. The usual method for a Polish academic literary historian is to concentrate on a selected period. Because of such narrow specialization it often happens that a scholar who wrote his or her MA thesis on, let's say, some Enlightenment author, ends up as a professor renowned for his or her achievements in those same Enlightenment studies. Feminist criticism has helped me to avoid such a trap. Not only has it directed my interest towards quite diverse aspects of my native literature and culture, but it has also opened my eyes to the much more complex diversity of local and global processes involving women's issues. I recently became involved in a project entitled "Slavic Literatures After 1989. New Phenomena, Tendencies and Perspectives" (Kraskowska 2005). A significant proportion of the research undertaken within the framework of this project was devoted to feminist discourse, as well as to other minority discourses. I realized then how much there is to be learned from our closest neighbours, how many problems, and how many experiences we share with our feminist allies in other parts of Central and Eastern Europe.

The fall of communism in truth did not remove the political, economic and cultural barriers between the European East and West but it was in this moment that the vitality, expansiveness and attractiveness of feminist discourse took all before it. Once again it manifested its power to transform societies and in a short time became an important element of political debate in post-communist countries. It opened the borders for a free influx of ideas. A great inspiration for indigenous thought and feminist culture in East and Central European countries was provided by theories, doctrines, postulates and forms of affirmative action imported from the West.

The reception of second-wave Western feminism was not uniform. The earliest reception, already establishing itself towards the end of the 1970s, was to be found in Yugoslavia, which as a result of the consistent anti-Soviet policy of Josif Broz Tito, was distinguished by its greater openness towards the West. The end of the 1970s and the 1980s was also a period when scholars in Soviet and Russian studies in the West applied feminist and gender studies in their approach to Soviet society, Russian culture and history. Gorbachev's liberalism was conductive to establishing controlled research and intellectual contacts with the West, while the activity of émigré Russian dissidents was also important in verifying the image of Soviet reality that was emerging in this way. It was no surprise therefore that Russian literature itself and its associated criticism and research reacted relatively quickly to these stimuli. For the development of contemporary Russian women's prose, a significant moment was when the New Amazons formation entered the literary scene in 1988; this was a group of women writers who took on the collective effort of breaking through to the awareness of readers with their new female sensibility, themes and poetics, publishing in regular intervals anthologies of their work (Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Svetlana Vasilenko, Marina Palei, Valeria Narbikova, Irina Polianskaia, Liudmila Ulitskaia, Olga Slavnikova, Nina Sadur, Ekaterina Sadur). Their fresh approach to prose models still remains a point of reference for the younger generation of female writers, for those who approve of them as well as for those who polemicize with them. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of free speech, Russian women have become a force in the world of letters, they are among the most popular fiction authors today.

The development of events over the past two decades, the Yeltsin and Kuchma eras, the Lukashenka and Putin regimes, have no doubt made the situation of feminism in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus more complicated. Not only is this a result of politics but also of particular social processes that are subject to the functioning of local forms of patriarchy. On the one hand there is an evident degeneration of masculinity in the private sphere (alcoholism, unemployment, the growing role of

women as the sole breadwinners, the increase in single mothers as a matter of choice) and on the other, an increasingly potent cult of male values in public life (strongly centralized governments, the rebirth of imperial inclinations in Russia, the degradation of women manifested in the commercialization of the female body, the sexist rhetoric of the mass media and the growth of crime of a sexual nature). All these tendencies cannot remain without influence on the nature of gender discourse in literature and associated spheres.

Today it is obvious that the neighbouring European post-communist societies could gain much by listening to one another more attentively. Much benefit could be derived particularly from marginalized areas, such as feminist discourse, which despite their intellectual and artistic potential still remain at the edges of political and cultural life. Our experience is at the same time one that is shared and one that remains singular. Our voices may sing in unison or they may produce a discordant roar—but by speaking together we will surely be better heard, both at home and beyond.

I hope that by means of this part personal, part collective narrative I have managed to answer the question posed by my title: is feminism our own tradition or a borrowed one? Yes, we do have our own tradition, but as a result of various political factors it was put to sleep for half a century. We are indebted to Western feminism for awakening it just in time and for providing us with new tools which may help us to examine both our past and present life and culture.

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