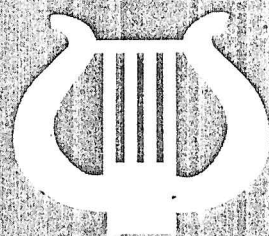


PSA NEWS

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Let's Not

Tame the Shrew

IN SPRING 1980, several months before Solidarity was formed, I met a young Englishman on a visit to Poland. He had just joined the Communist Party of Britain and with the zeal of a neophyte made a tour to the land of communism to meet some genuine comrades. His problem was that wherever he went everybody expressed anti-Communist sentiments and even the members of the then powerful Polish Workers' Party that in reality consisted mainly of the members of the establishment or those who tried to join its ranks, knew very little about Marxist theory and instead of discussing revolutionary issues asked him about the possibility of coming to England to work illegally in order to earn some hard currency. I met him at a party where after many disappointments he was shocked when one of the girls, slightly plump but definitely not overweight, refused to eat a delicious chocolate cake because she was on a slimming diet. The Englishman, Paul, was very upset because he was convinced that in a Communist paradise women should be free from such bourgeois and capitalist bonds.

Setting aside his extremely naive perspective and his mistake of taking for Communism or Socialism the bizarre system that caused so much destruction in Eastern Europe and which until recently wholly prevailed in the Soviet Union, Cuba, and other former or present Soviet satellites, his astonishment at that get-together could be a good invitation for a discussion of why in Poland—a rebellious country very open to any trends from the West—the feminist movement had not found much rapport until very recently, and, what is more, has often been treated with mockery and misrepresented as one of the Western fads.

One could offer various explanations. The deteriorating political and economic situation of the seventies and eighties affected women and men alike, and in the face of the hated system the main objective was to fight it together rather than antagonize the two sexes. Theoretically, according to the law and constitution, Polish women had various privileges that their sisters in some Western countries could only dream about, like almost free day care or the extended maternity leave that allowed women to return to work at the same position after more than three years' absence. Pornography was banned, abortion legal, and advertising in which the female body misused was nonexistent. Therefore these aspects of the feminist movement did not have a suitable ground either. Women have comprised a higher percentage of university students, and some professions, like dentistry or law, have been heavily feminized.

But there was another aspect of existence that could not find its expression in the constitution or law: the hardships of everyday life affected women more than men, since shopping and most household tasks have to a large extent been a duty of women, and this in a country of shortages, lines and scarce services made living much more difficult than in the West. In spite of such a high percentage of women graduating from universities, a relatively small percent of them could be found in executive or upper-level government positions. Moreover, alcoholism, especially acute in the country and among the working class, ironically the leading class of the system, affected women in a particularly painful way. On the surface Polish chivalry was expressed in such behaviors—having roots in the gentry tradition—as kissing a woman's hand, even if it required skill when you met a lady on a crowded bus carrying two bags of groceries, helping her with her coat, or mentioning the woman's name first when addressing a letter to a couple. The Communists added their share to this superficial honoring of women by celebrating International Women's Day, which most women considered a silly and even humiliating event with crowds of men running around with flowers and gifts and some getting drunk in the ladies' honor.

At present, when the common enemy ceased to exist and Poland is making its long-awaited but painful transition to a freemarket economy, chances are that the feminist movement will take a

stronger stand. Several organizations have been established and some research is being done at several universities. One of the issues accelerating this process has been the recent discussion over the possible delegalization of abortion. Pornography has made its way to Poland together with computers and bananas, day care is no longer free, and some of the other benefits taken for granted before might be abolished, especially by fledgling private businesses.

Taking tradition into account, the attitude to women in Poland is quite complex. On the one hand the cult of the Virgin Mary, so prevalent compared with other Catholic countries,

...many women still leave their villages for low-paid factory or clerical jobs in cities to avoid the hardships of country life.

seems to generate respect for women. Another concept contributing to the glorification and idealization of women in literature and art is that of 'Matka Polka' (literally the 'Polish Mother,' but this concept has a wider meaning encompassing patriotism, sacrifice, and courage) going back to the national uprisings against the Russians in the nineteenth century and praising women who in times of hardship were able to take full responsibility for their households while men were in the battlefield. That concept, however noble it may sound, has put enormous pressure on women since they were supposed to be simultaneously courageous and gentle, wise but not boasting of their wisdom in order not to intimidate men, modest and beautiful, passionate and faithful. Besides, the concept itself was often misused by the Communist leaders for propaganda purposes, and due to this acquired an ironic meaning. It goes without saying that this idealization of women was valid only in the case of the nobility or educated classes and did not reach the peasantry, in which women were treated with very little respect and perceived mainly as a working and procreating force.

Although the situation in the country is changing today, many women still leave their villages for low-paid factory or clerical jobs in cities to avoid the hardships of country life. This exodus results in a relatively high percentage of educat-

ed single women, and on the other hand, single farmers desperately looking for a spouse.

Generations of Polish women were brought up on the poems of Maria Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska (1899-1945) who created a style that is still very popular, and that became a synonym of so-called women's poetry. Her poems are aphoristic, lapidary, impressionistic; women are presented as fragile, highly sensitive individuals. Although intelligent and educated, the women appearing in Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's poems cannot exist without the presence of a man. As she states in the poem "Love":

It is a month now since I saw you last.
Sure, it is nothing. I may show more care,
Lips very mute, a face of paler cast:
But it is hard to live, devoid of air.

Man is air for a woman who without him cannot breathe. Her poems have become a symbol of femininity and a number of women poets followed her track.

How astonishing for the Polish reader, both male and female, must have been some poems by Anna Swirszczynska (1909-1984) when they were first published in the early seventies, like the one "I Must Do It":

My dearest love, I must leave you.
I must go away
and be alone again.
I'll have to take my body with me,
disentangle it
from the dreamlike happiness
of its embrace with your body.
(...)
Absolutely no one
demands this of me.
Yet I must do it.

This is a complete reversal of the situation presented in Pawlikowska-Jasnorzewska's poem. And in another poem, "My Fireproof Smile," Swirszczynska is even more radical when she claims that "no man is irreplaceable" and therefore she decides to rely on herself:

I'm as closed as a medieval city
with its drawbridge raised.

You may kill this city,
but no one will get in.

Swirszczynska, a name that sounds like a tongue twister for foreigners, signs her English versions with a penname, Swir. While her full name carries no special connotations, the penname means "craziness," "nuts." And she is crazy in the sense of being a unique and independent artist.

She evokes the voices of various women, young and old, sophisticated and simple, loving

A woman thus gives her air

while a man performs

the cruel act.

and hating, mothers

and daughters. Each

woman is worthy of

the poet's attention.

Although occasionally

there happens to be a

union between man

and woman, like in "Three Bodies," where a pregnant woman and her partner feel the same thing lying in bed and listening to their child moving in her body, most of her poems depict male insensitivity and lack of understanding of a woman's psyche. Relations between the two sexes are often based on love and hatred; they need each other but are unable to break the barrier. Intercourse is frequently presented in animalistic terms, performed in silence. Man and woman "are foreigners, enemies, singing (their) love songs in different languages," but this is not a reason for despair since "your body's no more than an instrument for giving joy to my body." Ambiguity and dichotomy accompany male-female relations since "love's heaven and love's hell." Although some of her female voices express longing for an ideal partner, they do not believe in his existence. Therefore the need to be with someone is replaced by the need to be alone. Solitude will enable woman to develop to her full potential since "it's such an effort to build in myself my beautiful human egoism, reserved for centuries for men." This is among other things a rebellion against the above-mentioned concept of 'Matka Polka,' the altruistic and self-sacrificing female.

Pregnancy and birth are both bliss and curse. One of her longer poems, "The Birth of a Human Being," reminds us of Dante's inferno on a mini scale and consists of four parts, entitled "Just Outside Hell," "Hell," "Just Before the Caesarean," "The Caesarean." This is the male surgeon who "cuts (her) open with his scalpel" and "yanks the child out of the living cave of (her) innards" while she "talks incessantly to the young woman doctor holding the oxygen mask to (her) mouth." A woman thus gives her air while a man performs the cruel act. Later in the poem "Patriarchy" she expresses one of the paradoxes of male-dominated culture:

I gave my child flesh and blood,
the pain of procreation,
and the unwearying care of a brooding hen
which withers a woman's sex and brain.

I gave days and nights by the thousand
which not even a miracle
could restore to me.
In her eyes I put wonder,
in her heart I put feeling,
in her head I put thoughts
which not even I can think through to the
end.

But my child bears
the surname
of a man.

Swirszczynska is very aware of women's bodies and describes them in detail. The very titles of her poems reveal her fascination: "Woman Speaks to the Thigh," "The Pineal Gland," "The Large Intestine." She consciously discusses traditionally 'ugly' physiological aspects of human existence. Her women envy men because they feel that men are free to leave them whenever they want to, while women have to stay either because of their inability to make a radical step or because of the sense of duty to their families.

The most interesting poems are those depicting poor, sometimes deranged women, who are often contrasted with the undeserving lovers, like in the poem "In the Railway Station":

There are mad old women
who carry all their property
in a little bundle on their backs.

Vagrants who curl up
at night in the railway station.
sick people waiting in hospital
for what will be
their last operation.

And I have wasted all this
time on you.

Man stops being the woman's universe and becomes an obstacle to her learning the true sense of existence. Some of Swirszczynska's poems are like short illustrations of moving articles or letters to the Polish "Dear Abby" one can read in women's magazines. An old woman who rebels by running away from a nursing home; a peasant woman carrying the whole farm and household on her shoulders with never enough sleep since "the alarm clock crows like a rooster in the morning at three a.m."; a young woman punched by her lover in her pregnant belly but happy that he decided to marry her after all; a wife of an alcoholic cleaning up after her husband who has vomited in their bed; a six-year-old girl crying huddled up to her drunk father; an old woman forgotten by her children and loved only by her cow; a violent son abusing his mother; the solitude of a woman taken in the ambulance and listening to her husband's snoring; a woman "humiliated on the gynecologist's table under the gaze of doctors." The titles of these bitter poems are always ironic, like "The Husband's Homecoming," about the expected violence from which nothing and no one can protect the wife, neither the table, nor the child's cot, nor the neighbors on the other side of the wall. "Family Life" is about a child defending her mother against an abusive husband; "Pay Day" with the empty pockets of a man who already spent most of his wages on alcohol.

A particularly strong irony prevails in the poem "God's Gift to Women," an ironic rendering of some old Polish sayings like "If he does not beat her, he does not love her," of "Let him drink alcohol, let him beat her, as long as he wants to stay with her":

She went to the pub to look for him.

He came swaggering out,
Hands in his pockets,
a young buck, God's gift to women,
better-looking than before he was married.

He glanced with a laugh
at her belly,
swollen with its fourth pregnancy.

This poem is especially topical now with the campaign against legal abortion going on with the strong support of the Catholic Church hierarchy. While most advocates of keeping the law as it is do not deny the inhuman aspect of the act of abortion, they emphasize the fact that with the very low level of awareness in some families where sex is often forced on women, the main focus should be on enlightening people and not delegating something that by a number of Polish women is perceived as the last resort.

While most of the poems mentioned above express social criticism, the ones that should be of particular interest for Western feminists are those in which Swirszczynska gives affirmation to the female body, however deformed it might be. Her poem "Her Belly," about a woman who gave birth to five children, for whom her belly was "the sun of their childhood" and who "has the right to have a fat belly" and what is more, this belly is beautiful. The poet reminds us of what Kim Chernin says about Western culture placing women under the pressure to be slim whatever their age and life circumstances. Although this type of pressure is not as great in Poland, it is quite an unconventional statement for the Polish reader as well. The same can be said of a poem about a daughter rebelling against her mother who teaches her that a woman's destiny is suffering or "The Taming of the Shrew," showing how little has changed through the ages:

A renaissance actor
brandishing a whip
chases across the stage a girl
who rebelled
against the fate
of girls.

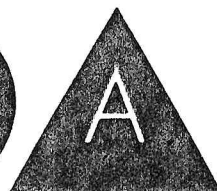
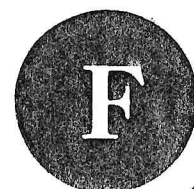
Men of the twentieth century
applaud.

Like in any translation, some cultural allusions or linguistic puns are lost and variations of Polish syntax cannot be rendered in the different structure of English. This is true for example of the title of Swirszczynska's best known collection of poems, which sounds like a manifesto in Polish: "Jestem baba." "Baba" in Polish denotes primarily a mature peasant woman, but has many more meanings, depending on what adjective you put in front of it: "Fajna baba" (a good chap of a woman), "straszna baba" (virago), "baba-chlop" (masculine woman). The English version "I Am an Old Woman" is not ambiguous, and instead of being provocative evokes feelings of compassion. The editors and translators (Margaret Marshment and Grazyna Baran) tried to compensate for this fact by entitling the English edition *Fat Like the Sun*, derived from one of the most provocative poems in the collection. A great number of English versions, however, convey the dynamism and brevity of the originals, while the illustrations by Jola Scicinska—modern versions of traditional paper cutouts inspired by Polish folklore—add even more character to the book.

Swirszczynska's poems may not be shocking for Western readers who are used to much more unconventional voices, but they certainly let them get some insight into the mind of an East European female. Since the time they were first published in Poland, Swirszczynska's poems have inspired a number of young Polish women poets, and if the feminist movement in Poland comes of age, Swirszczynska will undoubtedly be considered its precursor.

Although a number of Polish male readers would probably agree that artists like Swirszczynska are "nuts" and should be tamed, their voices are important, and Polish women of the end of the twentieth century do applaud. ■

Dr. Monica Adamczyk-Garbowska, currently living in Toronto and at work on a book about Isaac Bashevis Singer, has taught American literature in Polish universities and been a Visiting Scholar at the YIVO Institute and Columbia University.



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