

SOCIETY VERSUS ART: REFLECTIONS ON FEMINISM IN POLAND

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In Poland, the response to feminism is connected with two different outlooks on life: Christian or postmodern. While the Christian model seems to stabilize the traditional image of a woman, the postmodern model connects feminist issues with questions of identity and the category of "womanhood". The article considers the way in which the postmodern model is realized in art—the sphere in which sex can be treated as a kind of dynamic structure. The work of Polish women artists often playfully polemicize religious dogmas referring to the paradoxes of Christianity. The article also gives a short outline of the national-catholic paradigm, which still dominates Polish social-consciousness and casts women in shadowy social roles. In Poland, feminism seems to be perceived as an attack on a national ideology which promotes traditional family values and maintains that religious symbols are fundamental to Polish culture and its specificity.

In Poland, the response to feminism is connected to two different outlooks on life: Christian or postmodern—in other words secular and pluralistic. Each of them emphasizes different aspects of feminist problems. While **the Christian model** seems to stabilize the traditional image of a woman and her relationship to society (constructed through the centuries), **the postmodern model** connects feminist issues with questions of identity, unmasking the category of "womanhood" and bringing into relief convictions based upon it. The analysis of philosophical thought shows the process of the formation and strengthening of symbolic oppression against women. The same process has been taking place not only in philosophy but also in science, law, religion or the arts from the time of antiquity to the present day. The study also reveals the fact that, being based on patriarchy, Christian culture cultivates a vision of the world which puts women in an unfavourable position and casts them in shadowy social roles in terms of the male need to dominate. The aesthetic analysis of postmodern Polish art reveals a blurring of the categories of sex, gender and the division of social roles. It also points to the tendency of the "feminizing of modern men", who now construct their new image and look for their new identity in consumer culture (unlike the Christian model which focuses on the spheres of politics, authority, law and customs). Social practice shows that in the battle for supremacy of these two models, the winner is the Christian one, because most women accept it as their own. Therefore, all systematic attempts to make the issues of feminism the central subject of important social and political debates fail to

overcome a major obstacle—the fact that women seem to abandon their basic right to determination and rely instead upon the rule of so-called “male reason” and “male rationality”.

One of the most important features of Polish culture is the existence of a deep dissonance between social practices like customs, politics, ethics, law, and science in the public sphere (generally identified with the official, institutional domain of the state, and with the declarations of its citizens) and those located within the private sphere which is treated as the proper reality. This pattern of thinking in Polish social consciousness still generates the blissful conviction that “real life” takes place outside the official sphere and consists of something different from civic duties (which are—thanks to this conviction—ignored by women). Interpretations of this kind seem to be a legacy of communist times. But much more important is the fact that such an attitude, often proudly called “common sense”, seems to favour the concealment of some culturally arbitrary issues, particularly those connected with gender roles in society. In consequence, it makes their denaturalisation—in other words the indication of their social origin and the cultural mechanisms of reproduction—nearly impossible. Analyzing critical voices, Lucyna Kopciewicz notes: “One may have the impression that critical reflection still represents that “official”—removed from real life—way of thinking and that everyday thought is not held in high regard” (Kopciewicz 2003, 89-90).

The above-mentioned attribute of Polish culture—at least at the level of citizens’ declarations—is enhanced by the family-centrism and infant-centrism that are unusual in other European countries. These values are also supported by the Catholic Church (to which most Poles declare affiliation), for whom family is the preliminary stage of religious life—a domestic church. In Poland, especially in national-catholic ideology, the family has been an idealized institution, albeit everyday practice shows that it is one of the most dangerous domains for women. The Church regards the family as the most important space for the individual and essential aspirations of every person, and as a necessary condition for achieving happiness. However, it is the family itself, which appears to be one of the most strife-ridden spheres of social life. The source lies in the different ways in which the family is perceived: men tend to treat it instrumentally or socially (as a kind of shelter in old age), while for women the family is a value in its own right, a place where the individual needs of all its members can be satisfied. That is why—in contrast to men—women do not identify their own interests with those of the family. Owing to the domination of family values in Poland (the cult of the Virgin Mary, the glorification of passive virtues), attributes such as sacrifice for the family (men call it “supporting the husband”) are intensified in women and as a result, they can lead to a hidden dissonance between the personal development of the woman and the development of the family as a whole.

Women in Polish history

In the 19th century and between the two World Wars, the situation of women in Polish upper-class families was relatively better than in other European countries. A large number of men took part in various military operations fighting for

independence and were therefore frequently exiled to forced-labour camps (Walczewska 2004, 73-75). As a result, women were obliged to replace absent men and take over the social roles traditionally attributed to them. They were also responsible for supporting national consciousness. The ideal woman was presented as the "protectress of the home fires" and the educator of young generations in the spirit of national-catholic values. This ideal firmly established itself in the social consciousness. Women's emancipation movements that flourished once independence was regained in 1919 were restricted with the outbreak of the Second World War. Afterwards, the communist authorities used them to propagate their own ideology. The needs of the work force—in the spirit of equality—promoted the image of a woman as a leader at work. In accordance with the communist ideology of "emancipation", women were seemingly exempt from domestic duties thanks to the institutionalized process of children's education (creches, kindergartens, school day-rooms), but in reality, their poor economic situation forced them to reconcile the roles of mother, wife and worker. Imaginary women's rights proved to be a burden upon them. In the late 1970s, the traditional family model with the woman at home became popular again even among communist leaders. In this respect, official policy in this period paralleled the activities of the Catholic Church which was the only legal institution opposed to the authorities. The Union of Solidarity which cooperated closely with the Church from the very beginning did nothing to change that state of affairs, treating the emancipation of women as part of communist ideology.

Legislation

In 1979, Poland signed The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Women's Discrimination, which obliged the Polish authorities to ensure equal opportunities for citizens of both sexes in all spheres of social life. It was supposed to increase women's participation in politics and the authorities; to guarantee equal access to education, to ensure equal principles in employment, to eliminate gender stereotypes from school books, to allow for equal access of both sexes to the health service and family planning and contraceptive services, to neutralize women's discrimination in the family, to ensure the right to information and sex education (Bator 1999, 6). So far, the law on sex equality included in the Polish Constitution (which we view with pride) has remained dormant—as have many other regulations—because of a lack of action in enforcing it. The situation has been noted and commented upon by international organizations. Apart from the above-mentioned areas of discrimination, the UN report of 1999 points out that the law is ineffective in protecting women from domestic violence, that pensionable age differs according to sex, that there is inequality in the labour market in relation to position and pay, with alarming examples of women seeking employment being asked to take pregnancy tests (Bator 1999, 8).

One of the characteristic features of Polish social consciousness is a kind of acquiescence in stereotyping some jobs and linking them with pejorative qualities traditionally applied to women. For instance, the fact that more women are employed in occupations previously dominated by men is regarded as the degradation of their

prestige, which results in lower salaries and inequalities in payment. In a survey carried out in 1999, people were asked if they share the traditional opinion that "if there is not enough work, men should have priority over women". In Poland, 52% of those questioned agreed with this opinion. Such a high rate is the result of the traditional notions of women that dominate Polish society. However, other findings of the questionnaire show that women who are professionally engaged are more admired and respected than housewives, and that the percentage of women who agree with this is increasing (Bator 1999, 9). Amazingly, these results are not in conflict with the general conviction about men's priority to employment. In the Polish patriarchal model of society, a woman can work only under the condition that she succeeds in fulfilling her family duties, which means she has to be efficient both at work and at home.

In 1996, the Parliamentary Women's Group proposed a bill guaranteeing the equal status of women and men, which demanded the introduction of a new legal category—"discrimination with regard to sex". The authors of this document emphasized that the present law failed to prevent discrimination. It was made clear that the inequality between women and men was a characteristic attribute of the prevailing patriarchy. The proposals put forward in that document regarded equality as an implication of natural equality and obliged the state institutions to repair the ills wrought by tradition. Their opponents saw them as a threat to the foundations of the social order. Stressing the fact, that people are different by nature, their opponents demanded a **"proper directing of natural women's predispositions"**. They placed all the activities and women's organizations supporting the project in such a context and qualified them as leftist, pro-abortion, anti-family: therefore, "anti-women". Let us mention that this law was not passed.

Ideology

Social pressure forces women to take roles traditionally attributed to them, sometimes even against their will. The victory of Solidarity in 1993 brought a consolidation of the opinion that women should retreat from the public sphere. This situation points to another characteristic feature of Polish society, which—in every area of life—very willingly rewards activities which assign women to the private sphere and make good conditions for men to participate in official public life. Seventy-four per cent of the population in Poland agree emphatically that if a woman wants to be perceived as worthy she should have children. Life-styles which do not conform to the traditional assignment of roles for women and men are treated by society as pathological, both by working women and men who stay at home (Bator 1999, 9-10). Within the discourse of national-catholic debate, the traditional concept of the **Polish Mother** has been modified and updated. However, it is still burdened with the duty of cultivating Christian values (especially in the domestic sphere), now threatened by what is seen as the barbarity of the European Union. The **Polish Mother** has become a symbol of such values as patriotism, mourning and suffering, and it is a part of a collective mythology reinforcing the prevailing ideology. Liberal discourse remains in conflict with official state policy. Supporting the model of a woman-citizen who, on equal terms with men,

participates in social and political life and who is conscious of her rights, and who can use and defend them if necessary, the liberal discourse attracts the activists of the feminist movement.

Socialization

In general, the process of patriarchal socialization, favouring the internalization of the traditional values transmitted by the family and Church is transmitted at each level of the Polish education system. Among these processes, the most effective is so-called collective common sense, which—in sociologists' opinion—is the most important in reconstructing the social order with its differences, inequalities and hierarchy. They are usually taken for granted and treated as "natural" with no need of explanation. Within this perspective, a woman should intuitively interpret her future and exclude herself from the model of future which is offered to those who have attributes different from her own (Kopciewicz 2003, 94). The position of women in Poland today is constructed according to the terms of the opposition: superiority (which means social activity) *versus* inferiority (which means privacy, "home passiveness"). The above-mentioned socialization also comprises such elements as socially approved patterns of using body and its potential. In the opinion of Lucyna Kopciewicz, one of the most persistent results of socialization is the popularity of the discourse on women's issues in such a notional order by means of which the social distances, hierarchy and divisions are reproduced. The effect of this phenomenon is the constant reconstruction of the status quo (in the form of the partition of space, ways of seeing, taxonomy, often present in language in the form of opposite pairs of adjectives from which those characterized pejoratively are connected—almost automatically—with women). It results in the characteristic inability of Polish science and culture to have an open debate about sex and gender (Kopciewicz 2003, 172-173; Bourdieu 1994, 94). Women, like other exiled social groups deprived of an alternative dictionary, cannot describe their own experiences in any other way than by applying the same categories and symbols which have been traditionally used for their oppression. These concepts have substantially contributed to the perception of women as subordinate, passive and dominated.

Art

Polish modern art, especially that created by women, often contests contemporary culture. However, it must be emphasized that feminism as an artistic movement does not exist in Poland. Małgorzata Lisiewicz notes: "What decides the absence of committed women's art in Poland is the strong mechanism of autocensorship, produced as a result of Polish tradition and the highly stereotyped images of women in Polish culture" (Lisiewicz 1997, 118). Some female artists do not define their own art as feminist, because they do not identify with feminist ideology, despite identifying with other women and the ways in which they perceive and feel the world.

Art is a very good arena for expressing personal experience and one's own way of perceiving. Well-known female Polish artists focus on such problems as the body,

hypocrisy in relationships, the deconstruction of patriarchal culture models—in other words their art encompasses all those problems which Polish women struggle with in everyday life. The works of Polish artists emphasize the fact that culture, customs, and particularly religion enforce paradoxical demands which are impossible for women to fulfil. As a result of neglecting her duties, a woman is treated as a defective being, unworthy of sacraments, who needs to be subordinated to men. Monika Zielińska in her work entitled "The Scar After Mother" visualizes a navel, which is synonymous with the broken bonds between a woman and her mother. The word "scar" is supposed to remind us of the murder which was committed in Polish culture against women; it is to awake qualms of conscience for the marginalization and exclusion of women from culture and official social spheres to the privacy of the home.

As the only woman worth of glory in Catholic dogma the Virgin Mary is one person to whom the young generation of Polish artists have paid a lot of attention. For modern women, the traditional image of Madonna as an example to follow is unacceptable, because it is irrelevant to their lives. Madonna is a passive and powerless woman and is thus visualized. Katarzyna Górna offered a reinterpretation of Madonna as an ideal of femininity. The artist presented Madonna as a modern woman who is aware of her value and power. She is beautiful, young, full of vitality and no longer ashamed of her naked body.

Artists often playfully politicise religious dogmas referring to the Virgin Mary as an example of female morality. Monika Zielińska focuses on the pressure Polish culture exerts on women. If a wo-



Illustration 1: Monika Zielińska: "The Scar After Mother"



Illustration 2: Katarzyna Górna: "Madonna"

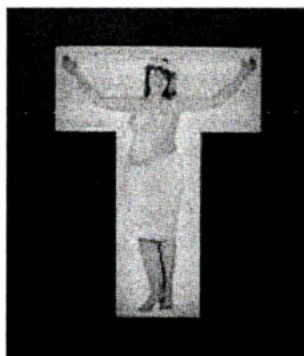


Illustration 3: Monika Zielińska: "When I grow up I'll become a Virgin"

man cannot cope under such pressure, she is doomed to feelings of dissatisfaction, unworthiness, hopelessness and constant frustration. One of the artist's works entitled "When I grow up I'll become a Virgin" brings to light the paradoxes of Christianity. The body of a woman is presented in the position of Jesus Christ on the crucifix. Instead of a crown of thorns, she is wearing her virginal chaplet despite being heavily pregnant. In this way, the artist stigmatizes the Christian glorification of virginity as a means of determining a woman's value and as a source of social exile. Radical art which appeals to religious symbolism is censored in Poland. Usually artists are accused of blasphemy by organizations which maintain that religious symbols are fundamental to Polish culture and decide about its specificity.

There is a distinctive trend in the work of Polish female artists which exposes the social position of the average woman after 1989, when more and more women became unemployed. Politicians are partly responsible for that situation by spreading such an anachronistic model of culture. Women should work professionally and take responsibility for the home and children—they are expected to undertake many duties on a daily basis. This theme is exposed in Elżbieta Jalońska's work entitled "Super-mother", which displays a condensed package of Polish womanhood. Things which would usually be considered individual experiences appear here because of the social structures that discriminate against women and depend on the character of authority.



Illustration 4: Elżbieta Jalońska: "Super-mother"

Alicja Łukasiak, in turn, constructs "Space For Meditation". It is an igloo made of pumice blocks. The pumice connects meditation with a bathroom because it seems to be the most secluded place for Polish women who are appointed to serve their families. Time for woman is time spent in the bathroom!

The work of Polish artists stigmatises the commonly accepted traditional roles of women and provokes controversy, mostly in the sector of society which accepts the male model as the only proper

one. However, confusion generated by this type of art is one way of showing feminist ideology and of fighting for its social acceptance in the future.

Women-artists give voice to that which is unspoken and silent, and with the help of the visual sphere, they try to break down the dominant stereotypes of womanhood, in terms of sex and gender identity as well. The radical resignation from personal experience for the benefit of the analysis of cultural stereotypes means a change in the image of women in Polish art. The active and creative subject has been replaced by a female object of analysis, consequently the object of male desire and the object of social and cultural discrimination (Lisiewicz 1997, 117). Representatives of those seeking to change the state of art include the artists: Alicja Żebrowska and Katarzyna Kozyna, who present the functioning of the body and sex in cultural space. The female body is perceived and visualized in terms of aesthetic values. Żebrowska in her work



Illustration 5: Alicja Żerowska: "Onone"



Illustration 6: Katarzyna Kozyra: "Bath II"

entitled "Onone" overcomes the dualistic division of the sexes by referring to forms of sexuality that go beyond this strict dichotomy; he is looking for transgressive bodies. People can choose the sex which they would like to realize in culture. The artist keeps to the postmodern concept of transgression.

The theme of this transgression is also raised by Katarzyna Kozyra in her video installation entitled "Bath II". It consists of a film made of using a hidden camera in the men's baths in Budapest. The artist spends some time in the baths disguised as a man and she also shows us an additional video presenting the process of characterizing her body. In this way, she succeeds in breaking the cultural taboo connected with the division of the sexes.

Conclusion

According to Jolanta Brach-Czajna and Magdalena Środa the cultural heritage of the Polish gentry, the tradition of the Catholic Church and the period of communism caused the consolidation of strong collectivist patterns of behaviour in the social-cultural sphere, thus, standardized patterns of group behaviour are favoured over individualized ones. At present, Polish cultural reality seems to be dominated by a "herd mentality" closely linked to the



Illustration 7: Katarzyna Kozyra in "Bath II" (from video)

repression of individual choice, including sex and gender questions to which homophobia is the answer (Brach-Czajna 1995, 350).

In Polish culture, the postmodern model is represented in the arts—in the sphere where sex can be treated as a kind of dynamic structure. However, from the perspective of Christianity, sexual identity is constructed in the context of heterosexuality and therefore the possibility of changing sex is seen by dominant public opinion to be deviant and thus requiring treatment.

Directing women's aspirations towards the domestic sphere is still the most important part of socialization in women's education. In Polish culture, being mother, wife and housewife is so "natural" that we often fail to notice the system of cultural reinforcements hidden behind it: church, school, state politics. What is more, any attempt at critical reflection seems to be inappropriate. Thus, the experience of femininity is not accompanied by deeper reflection, and the repertoire of woman's patterns of behaviour is dominated by the prism of motherhood, which needs no supplementary justification. Therefore—acting with the necessary interpretative caution—Polish culture might be qualified as a culture characterized by principles of strong gender polarization; a culture in which the value of sex/gender is not fully recognized or realized. However, we are now witnessing—due to western feminism—a reinterpretation of the notion of motherhood (as a sacrificing mother, or as a transgression, or defined negatively as a fight for contraceptive devices and abortion). We should also note that motherhood itself has classified the value of femininity with regards to whether a woman gives birth to a boy or a girl.

In Polish culture, feminism is perceived as an attack on national ideology, which—as scholars emphasize—strongly favours relationships between men, qualified as homosocial, which is characterized by a fear and hatred of homosexuality. That is its essence, since nationalism isolates and represses all public discourses characterized by sexuality. The traditional image of a woman as a mother excludes all non-reproductive sexuality discourses. The dynamism of modern nationalism is still based on the **ideal of masculinity** cultivated by a motherhood which promotes male bonds. But feminism sees through this and denounces the paradoxes, among which the most important seems to be the fact that it is the main source of danger for the values it was supposed to protect (Mosse 1985, 144; Anderson 1997, 194-198; Ostrowska 2004, 215-218).

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