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OLHA KOBYLIANSKA AND ELIZA ORZESZKOWA: TWO WOMEN, ONE IDEA

Olha Kobylanska and Eliza Orzeszkowa lived nearly at the same time, at the end of the 19th century. Both wrote novels about the faith, life and identity of women, especially about the gender roles of men and women, therefore I call their novels *feministic ones*. I consider them to be key works of feminism because they show the situation of women in their time. The aim of this article is to compare the novels *Tsarivna* by Kobylanska and *Marta* by Orzeszkowa to discuss some aspects of the situation of women in the 19th century in Eastern Europe.

Key words: women, work, family, feminism

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. FEMINISM AND FEMINIST LITERATURE

When I call these novels *feministic*, it is important to know that this refers to the current view on the topic. The word *feminism* contains the word *fēmina* (woman) and the suffix –isms which means abstraction or doctrine. Dumas used the word in his 1872 published book “L’homme femme”, to designate the so-called *rights of women* movement (Klein 1920).

This is what feminism was originally about – the equality of men and women. The current feminism discusses additional topics. The German DUDEN suggested the following definition: “Richtung der Frauenbewegung, die ein neues Selbstverständnis der Frau und die Aufhebung der traditionellen Rollenverteilung anstrebt¹“ (DUDEN 2006: 400). Not only are the biological differences between men and women and their roles important, but equally important are other aspects such as age, level of education, ethnicity or sexual orientation. As a consequence the subjects of Gender Studies concentrate on these aspects.

It is necessary to make it clear what *feminist literature* means. Rita Felski defines feminist literature as literature which “[...] engage[s] sympathetically with feminist ideas, whatever their particular form” (Felski 1989: 12). Since the term feminism is not easily described and does not have one definition, the phrase *feminist literature* can also be ambiguous. Feminism

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¹ “Direction of the women’s movement, which aims for a new self-understanding of women and the annulment of the traditional role allocation”.

should more be understood as a “postmodern worldview” (Felski 1989: 13). I consider these two novels as feminist novels (which is a subjective judgment).

1.2. THE FEMALE SITUATION IN POLAND AND UKRAINE IN THE 19TH CENTURY

The whole history of women writers and the so-called *women question* is well known, though a few notes should be made on the situation of women at that time in Poland and Ukraine in particular. Vira Aheyeva calls the period from the end of the 18th deep into the 19th century the “Війна статей²”, because a lot of women took the chance to protest against the patriarchal structures (Aheyeva 2008: 5). Ukrainian and Polish literature seems to have only male heroes in the 19th century before women showed up (Adam Mickiewicz is as well known in his country as Taras Shevchenko in his own). In the early 19th century women stepped out of the shadow of the male writers, showing that they also had the talent to create literature. The print culture was controlled by male publishers, but women had the concern that a reinvention of the place of men and women in society and in private was needed. The image of the new woman appeared and female identity became a major topic of women’s novels.

At first, female-themed novels were considered trivial in the publishing world. In 1856 George Eliot labeled them “silly novels by lady novelists”. Virginia Woolf complained that the only books written by women she could find in a library were novels, not the more appreciated genres like poetry (Woolf 1991: 94). However Woolf also criticized a very common situation: the place where women write. The title of one of her essays shows what women needed back then: a room of one’s own. “If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common living room” (Woolf 1991: 94). Women had to write in a disturbed place and had to look after children at the same time. This led to a very difficult writing situation for women and explains the difficulties they faced as writers.

A woman’s life in the 19th century in both countries meant marital, family and parental authority, but most of all it meant tradition. The place and life of women was determined for them. It had always been that way and always would be. The education of women was very poor, and because of that the uneducated women had no chance and no right to work on their own and depended on either their husbands or, if they were younger, on their fathers.

1.2.1. SITUATION IN UKRAINE

One female writer in Ukraine was Olha Kobylanska, who is often named together with Lesya Ukrainka and Marko Vovchok (Mariya Vilinska) as the three feminist writers of Ukraine, all of whom struggled with the old system. Marko Vovchok was the first woman in Ukraine to write about the situation of women. In these works a main topic can be found: the self-confident woman, who wants to emancipate herself from men. “Це були перші паростки українського фемінізму – жіночого руху за зрівняння прав і становища обох статей³” (Solod 2008: 248).

Marko Vovchok and Lesya Ukrainka were the first women in Ukraine to write about the situation of women at the time. But they didn’t invent feminist literature; Mickiewicz

² “War of the articles”.

³ “These were the first steps in Ukrainian feminism – the female movement for equality in rights”.

as well as Shevchenko already had included female life as a topic in their works. Vovchok, Ukrainka and Kobylianska were simple women who expressed their feelings about being a woman at that time. For this article Kobylianska's *Tsarivna* was chosen, because "[...] мира интеллигентной женщины ещё никто не коснулся так глубоко, как Кобылянска"⁴ (Andrusenko 2004: 127).

Olha Kobylianska was born 1863 in Gura-Humora, in Bukovina territory. She learned by reading world literature. First she wrote novels in German but then switched to Ukrainian, publishing her novels in this language. She was a member of the Foundation for Ruthenian Women and had a strong influence on the feminist movement in Ukraine. She died in 1942.

Tsarivna, published in 1895, is a story about the girl Nataalka. Since the death of her parents, she has been living in the home of her aunt and uncle with their four children. Nataalka wants to break away from her home, and her aunt hates her. All alone, she fights against her family for the right to write and read. In the end Nataalka finds her own personal fortune by marrying a doctor and writing novels.

Tsarivna is often described as a psychological novel, because the inner view of Nataalka plays a larger role than the outside view.

The rights of the women in Ukraine in the 19th century were increasing. Many women found themselves jobs as writers or cultural activists (as did Kobylianska for instance). Marta Bohachevsky-Chomiak, who took a close look at the women's movement in Ukraine between 1884 and 1939, sees no difference between Ukrainian and western female activists. Ukrainian feminists "were engaged in 'pragmatic' or 'community' feminism, and so were indeed 'feminists despite themselves'" (Hibner Koblitz 1990: 205).

Ukrainian feminists avoided ideology and theoretical discussions and in the end, according to Bohachevsky-Chomiak, they had to subordinate the goals of feminism to those of the nation (Hibner Koblitz 1990: 205). Kobylianska wrote in *Деяко про ідею жіночого руху* (*Something about the Idea of the Women's Movement*), that most of the people (men and women) have no idea what emancipation means. They thought, for example, that it means not to marry at all or to behave like a man. According to Kobylianska, in reality "[...]сучасне положення жінки середньої верстви, а головню жінки незамужньої, є сумне[...]"⁵ (Kobylianska 1894). Kobylianska criticizes the education of children. The boy will be educated at school; the girl, however, will be educated in good manners and how to look more like a delicate lady. Whereas the man has to work for a piece of bread, "[...]по неї прийде той пан, і він подасть їй хліба"⁶ (Kobylianska 1894). The unmarried woman has a sad fate – people will laugh at her because she became an old maid. This is why the woman's movement was founded, to support those women. Kobylianska wants a woman to stand for herself and not just be a wife of a man. Instead of saying "Ось ти, і ти жінка того або того чоловіка!", one should better say "Ось ти, і жий!"⁷ (Kobylianska 1894). Kobylianska wanted attitudes towards women to change. Even if a woman has a job and is physically and financial independent from the husband, the ideological attitude should also change. In her

⁴ „The world of the intelligent women nobody had described that deep like Kobylianska did”.

⁵ “[...] the current situation of the middle-class women, but mainly of the unmarried women, is sad [...]”.

⁶ “After her comes a man and he gives her bread”.

⁷ “Hey you, you are the wife of this and that man” – “Hey you, just live!”.

very emotional article, Kobylińska calls upon the women to live and to take their lives into their own hands. In her novel *Tsarivna*, we will later see a lot of these topics and thoughts.

1.2.2. SITUATION IN POLAND

Eliza Orzeszkowa was one of the women writing in Poland. Often she is classified as a positivistic author of the third wave of the Polish Feminism (which took place between 1870 and 1900). Her work *Marta* is called a roman à thèse, a tendentious novel which Edmund Jankowski describes as “Powieść pisanej ‘z krzykiem’, a novel written ‘with a scream’⁸ (Jankowski 1964 : 151).

Eliza Orzeszkowa was born 1841 in Milkowszczyzna (modern day Belarus). At the age of 17 she married Piotr Orzeszko, who would be arrested some years later and sent to Siberia. After the divorce, she was forced to work on her own because she had lost a great portion of her wealth during the divorce. As a result of these experiences, in 1873 she wrote the novel *Marta*, for which she gained acceptance around the world. Orzeszkowa was in the same situation as her heroine Marta, writing in one letter “Zaczęłam myśleć, z pewnym uczuciem szczęścia marzyć o pracy⁹” (Jankowski 1964: 81). Orzeszkowa died in 1910.

Marta Świcka, the heroine of the novel, is a young mother who has lost her husband. She is forced to look for work just to feed her young daughter. Marta, filled with grief about her loss, has difficulties finding herself in this unknown world. Tired to death with a sick daughter, Marta understands that she has no future and commits suicide.

Bianka Pietrow-Ennker named *Marta* as the “woman’s novel of the century” (Pietrow-Ennker 2000: 138).

Eliza Orzeszkowa mentioned that emancipation of women is very difficult to describe, though “Na dźwięk emancypacja kobiet, przed oczami niektórych ludzi przesuwały się niemiłe często śmieszne, niekiedy bardzo smutne obrazy¹⁰” (Orzeszkowa 1873: 2). In her article *Kilka słów o kobietach (Some words about women)* she struggles with the word “emancipation”. What does it mean, when a woman says, that she is emancipated? Orzeszkowa describes a woman, spending all her time in a chair reading novels and philosophical works. Her only explanation is: I am an emancipated woman. No wonder, says Orzeszkowa, that emancipation is connoted negatively by men, as a feministic woman to them is a lazy woman who leaves her family to read novels. “Emancypacja kobiet powstała z pojęcia o istniejącej w ludzkości potrzebie zrzucenia z kobiet jakiegoś jarzma, uwolnienia ich od jakichś krępujących je więzów¹¹” (Orzeszkowa 1873: 5). Which chains do women have and from whom should they emancipate themselves? These are the main questions in Orzeszkowa’s article. The family is like a holy institution for her. A woman can find fulfillment in raising the children here. She is needed and her husband normally helps her. The reason of feminism and emancipation for women is “od słabości fizycznej bardziej narzuconej niż od natury wziętej, od braku sił moralnych na samoistne i logiczne życie, od klątwy wiecznego niemowlęstwa i anielstwa [...]”

⁸ “A novel written with a scream”.

⁹ “I began to think and with a feeling of luck to dream about work”.

¹⁰ “The expression emancipation of women means in some eyes often funny and sometimes very sad pictures”.

¹¹ “The emancipation of women arose under the idea that women should shake their yokes off and to throw their chains away”.

winy emancypować się kobiety”¹² (Orzeszkowa 1873: 8). According to Orzeszkowa, women emancipate themselves because of their natural being. At the time Orzeszkowa lived, she finds the main problem between the sexes in their different aims in life: a man’s aim in life is to work, a woman’s aim is to get married. Orzeszkowa means that the women at that time didn’t know themselves, because “celem jej życia jest zostać matką!”¹³ (Orzeszkowa 1873: 14). The way women are raised and educated is a key: when they marry they think about their whole life as a wife in a very naive way, which is why Orzeszkowa calls them “children”. A woman with no family and no children is of no use to the society. They have to find themselves other aims in life than marriage and giving birth to children, but that, according to Orzeszkowa, is very difficult. Often those women are not respected, more often people laugh at them (we will later see, Marta in that situation). She compares them with a fluttering butterfly (“fruwania motyla”), alone with no home.

2. COMPARISON OF THE NOVELS *MARTA* AND *TSARIVNA*

Both Kobylianska and Orzeszkowa want a new type of woman. Kobylianska is quoted as saying that “Україна потребує іншого як досі чоловіка, іншу жінку”¹⁴ (Hundorova 2002: 40). Maybe among other things because of the existing inequality between men and women, Orzeszkowa called the 19th century “smutno i straszno!”¹⁵ (Orzeszkowa 1956: 41).

Superficially, these novels have no real parallels: the mother Marta who cares about her daughter and fights to survive, and the girl Natalka who falls hopelessly in love and wants to become a novelist. But with a closer look, shared themes and motifs of the novels become apparent.

Both histories start with the death of a beloved person. Natalka’s grandmother passes away when she is 12 years old and Marta’s husband dies of illness. Marta and Natalka have both lost the person closest to them, the person they could rely on. Now they are on their own, independent but unprotected.

The novels tell the story of two very strong women who try to find their place in the world. Marta is looking for a job and does everything to keep herself and her child alive. Natalka tries to find a place in the new family of her aunt and uncle. Both women have to fight against oppression. Marta sees herself confronted with a male-dominated working field and Natalka tries to find a way out of the classic woman’s fate of marrying and becoming a housewife. She wants to have a life of her own.

Tradition and the normal rules of womanhood are major themes in the novels. Does a woman have to marry or can her life be self-determined? Natalka is nearly forced to marry because her aunt threatens to expel her from the house if she does not. She should

¹² “From the physical weakness, more imposed that taken from nature, from the lack of moral forces of the intrinsic and logical life from the curse of eternal infancy and being an angel [...] should emancipate women”.

¹³ “The aim of her life is to become a mother!”

¹⁴ “Ukraine needs other than the existing men, other women”.

¹⁵ “Sad and terrible!”

marry an old professor which indeed is a minor episode in the biography of Kobylianska. Marta could marry once more to gain financial security, but she does not even consider that.

In both stories, education is a key motif. As mentioned above, the education of women in the 19th century was often quite poor. Marta was sure that the knowledge she had was enough for a woman in her position, a daughter of a nobleman, and for a wife of a clergyman (Orzeszkowa 1957: 36). Both heroines want to change their situation by improving their knowledge of languages or literature. Natalka has to fight for the right to read and to write, fighting for her own education. “Чи жіноче духовне життя менше цікаве як її організм?”¹⁶ (Kobylianska 2009: 3), asks Natalka herself. Marta tries to study French at night just to gain the necessary knowledge to work as a teacher. The woman who arranges employment tells Marta, that “w społeczeństwie naszym, pani, taka tylko kobieta zdobyć sobie [...] która posiada wysokie udoskonalenie w jakiegokolwiek umiejętności lub prawdziwy jaki i energiczny talent”¹⁷ (Orzeszkowa 1957: 48). Orzeszkowa also mentions working as a teacher in her article *Kilka słów o kobietach*. There she disparages that kind of work for women, saying, “Nauczycielstwo zagarnęło u nas najznaczącą część pracujących kobiet, przejęte zostało jako środek uniwersalny na każdą biedę, na każde zubożenie kobiety”¹⁸ (loc. cit.). In the novel *Marta* we see the heroine trying to work as a teacher, but there are only a few subjects she could teach, Music, French or other languages. The salary is very low, although the well paid teachers, like the science teachers, are men.

The heroines of Kobylianska are often simple women, as we see in Natalka of *Tsarivna*. Aleksandra Tashko was correct when she said that the women in Kobylianska’s work are women who have the chance to live with the responsibility for their own destiny, strength and needs. Furthermore, she says that this includes education and material independence (Tashko 1990: 6–7). Both Natalka and Marta represent this type of woman.

Here both authors show a way out of the unfortunate situations of the heroines in their novels. Were they educated, had they any special skills, they could easily find work and live a self-determined life. To achieve this, the equality of men and women is important. Unfortunately, neither makes it clear exactly how this can be achieved. Tamara Hundorova, who wrote a book about the melancholia in Kobylianska’s work, offers that the only way out of the described situation is the building of a new womanhood (Hundorova calls it the female “me“ – жіноче “я” (Hundorova 2002: 14). The emancipation of women, according to Hundorova, could be achieved with an individual decision and with changes being made in the traditional view of the emotional identity. In *Kilka słów o kobietach* Orzeszkowa makes it clear that the inequality of women is not just the fault of men. Women are beautiful but spoiled by society. Men and women need to work together on this problem. Women live in a kind of “angel world” or “dream world” and should be prepared for reality. Maria Żmigrodzka is right, that at that time the position of women was not clear. Is a woman a flower, a puppet, an angel or just a human being? (Żmigrodzka 1965: 199).

¹⁶ “Is the mental life of a woman less interesting than her body?”

¹⁷ “In our society, a woman can only work for herself if she has great knowledge of something or a really strong talent“.

¹⁸ “Teaching appropriated among us the best known part of the working women, who became the universal center of all poverty, of every impoverished woman“.

Women's work is also a strong motif. Nataalka and Marta both have artistic talent and they are motivated to work. Marta draws at night. This is her passion, and though she would like to do it in everyday life, it is men's work, so she cannot earn money with her drawings. Marta also plays the piano, but her talents are a bit amateurish. Nataalka likes to sing and write novels. In the end, this is the job she earns money with. Orzeszkowa wrote in a letter to Józef Sikorski that she wanted to write about women's work and has to underline first of all the need for women's work and the difficulties women have to face normally. Women should show that "tak dobrze jak i mężczyźni publicznie do ludzi przemawiać mogą [...]"¹⁹ (Orzeszkowa 1954: 12). The reason why Marta cannot find a job also lies in her childhood. Normally young women at the age of four or five are slowly introduced to their future job, for instance they learn knitting or sewing. But since Marta spent her childhood in a higher social class, she has not learned those skills. With work a person gains not just social recognition but also independence. For Orzeszkowa work is a key motif and because of that she dedicated not only one chapter in her article *Kilka słów o kobietach* to work, but her whole novel *Marta* is about the topic of work. Orzeszkowa's main idea is that only a working person is respected. Women who were sitting at home caring for children had no chance to gain social status like men, because the work at home could not be measured in money or salary. The patriarchal structures could not be broken without the movement of women outside of their houses.

Both women have a hard life and struggle with their destiny. Mainly, Marta struggles with her poor education. "Dlaczego ludzie wymagają ode mnie tego, czego nikt mi nie dał? Dlaczego nikt mi nie dał, czego dziś ludzie wymagają ode mnie?"²⁰ (Orzeszkowa 1957: 130). Nataalka cries in the evening and asks her grandma why she was left alone in this world. "Я страшно хочу жити!"²¹ (Kobylianska 2009: 11) she tells herself. That is the reason she does not commit suicide like Marta does. Both Marta and Nataalka are desperate, because they have failed in life. Marta has no chance to find a job and Nataalka's novel, the novel she wrote with "мою кров і нерви"²² (Kobylianska 2009: 11), was rejected.

The main topic of both novels is the life of women, but in particular a life which deviates from the norm. Normally, women would simply marry, live with their husbands and have children. Marta's life was interrupted because her husband, the breadwinner of the family, passed away. "Marta to 'każda', jedna z anonimowej masy[...]"²³ (Zmigrodzka 1965: 398). Nataalka is a burden on her new family because they need to get her married. Nataalka's aunt says that only somebody with goodwill will marry her because she is ugly. The independence of women is a strong topic in both novels. Like Nataalka's brother says, "Мужчина – то все, а жінка – то нічо"²⁴ (Kobylianska 2009: 14). Nobody in Nataalka's family contradicts her brother. This can be called the normal attitude to women in the 19th century. Maybe because of that Orzeszkowa recalls her mission in one letter to educate men (Orzeszkowa 1954: 13).

¹⁹ "They can as well as men speak in public".

²⁰ "Why do people want something from me which nobody gave me? Why did nobody give me what people want from me?"

²¹ "I desperately want to live!"

²² "All my blood and nerves".

²³ "Marta is every woman – one of the anonymous masses".

²⁴ "A man is everything, a woman – nothing".

There is nothing strange in the fact that both heroines have the feeling of being unnecessary, to have no future just because they are women. Both are smart, both want to change their situation, and to fulfill their own dreams, but they collide with a society which is not yet ready for such strong women. Both of them fight for respect.

A closer look at the male and female character in both novels seems to be very informative. In fact the male characters seem to be the traditional ones (for example, the jeweler in *Marta* who tells her that this work is men's work, or the brother of Natalka). Natalka's boyfriend Oryadin calls Natalka "modern", and Marta sees that the time has not come for her to work.

As well, there is one more connection between Orzeszkowa and Kobylianska: both women were very melancholic personalities, thus many studies about the melancholy in their works have already been carried out²⁵.

3. SUMMARY

Though there are autobiographical marks of their respective authors in both novels, they have the same key themes and motifs: women in the 19th century and their education. These authors lived in different countries but had to face the same situation, a male dominated world. This opposition of men and women in the world even exists in modern literature.

In her article Kobylianska makes it clear that a woman has to speak for herself, that an unmarried woman also needs to be respected. In *Tsarivna* "Вона стає володаркою (царівною) своєї долі"²⁶ (Marchenko and Marchenko 2011: 390), and this is the main intention of Kobylianska. Orzeszkowa was personally in Marta's situation, jobless and therefore not respected by the society. In her article she underlines that education is a key topic in changing this situation.

The aim of Orzeszkowa and Kobylianska can be summarized as "Свободний человек и разумный – вот мой идеал"²⁷ (Andrusenko 2004: 127) or as it is described by Rita Felsky, they map out "an alternative vision of female identity" (Felski 1989: 151).

Both novels seem to be historical now, but they show a good picture of the women's situation in the nineteenth century and are therefore quite rightly classic novels of the work of both authors, and in the canon of Polish and Ukrainian literatures.

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²⁵ E.g. Mazur, Aneta: *Pod znakiem Saturna*, Opole, 2010 and Hundorova, Tamara: *Femina melancholica*, Київ, 2002.

²⁶ "She becomes a leader (princess) of her destiny".

²⁷ "A free and intelligent person – this is my aim".

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OLHA KOBYLIANSKA I ELIZA ORZESZKOWA: DWIE KOBIETY, JEDNA IDEA

Polska autorka Eliza Orzeszkowa i ukraińska autorka Olha Kobylianska żyły w końcu XIX wieku. W artykule poddano analizie porównawczej dwie powieści poświęcone problematyce kobiecej; Kobylińskiej pt. *Królowna* (*Царівна*) i Orzeszkowej pt. *Marta*. W swojej powieści Orzeszkowa zajmuje się głównie problematyką pracy kobiet, a Kobylianska problemem ich kształcenia i wychowania. Obie autorki rozważały kwestię kobiecej podmiotowości. Omawiane książki cieszyły się niegdyś dużą popularnością i weszły do kanonu literatury feministycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiety, praca, małżeństwo, feminizm