

## *Women, femininity, everyday life in works of culture, based on the example of Kornel Filipowicz's micronovels*

### *Kobieta, żeńskość, codzienność w tekstach kultury na przykładzie mikropowieści Kornela Filipowicza*

Łukasz Kowalski

UNIWERSYTET JANA KOCHANOWSKIEGO W KIELCACH

---

#### **Keywords**

everydayness, boredom, oppression, intense situation, conversion

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

codzienność, nuda, ucisk, sytuacja graniczna, przemiana

#### **Abstract**

The purpose of my article is to present female figures appearing in the selected micro novels written by Kornel Filipowicz. These books contain many different issues, but they are integrated by the motif of everyday life as the space for boredom, a reality that is unbearably fettering, sometimes oppressive towards women, damping their natural psychological needs (dignity, freedom, autonomy). Some heroines remain passive to the pitfalls of fate, others looking for a symbolic consolation. Revealing intimate dramas of the characters, Filipowicz attentive to their emotions, hidden desires, moral reactions and unexpected metamorphoses.

#### **Abstrakt**

Celem mojego artykułu jest omówienie sylwetek kobiet występujących w wybranych mikropowieściach Kornela Filipowicza. Utwory te łączą się ze zróżnicowaną problematyką, ale spaja je motyw codzienności jako przestrzeni nudy, rzeczywistości pętającej, niekiedy opresyjnej dla kobiet, blokującej ich naturalne potrzeby psychologiczne (godności, wolności, autonomii). Niektóre bohaterki pozostają bierne wobec wyroków losu, inne szukają symbolicznego pocieszenia. Ujawniając wewnętrzne dramaty swoich bohaterek, Filipowicz zwraca szczególną uwagę na ich emocje, ukryte pragnienia, moralne reakcje i nieoczekiwane metamorfozy.

### Women, femininity, everyday life in works of culture, based on the example of Kornel Filipowicz's micronovels

Among the literary output of Kornel Filipowicz one can find many works in which the writer talks about women<sup>1</sup>. These works are not always insightful, they do not always reach the deepest recesses of the female soul, they sometimes utilize the prevalent stereotypes, simplicity, trite clichés. Of course, there is no place for a full reconstruction of Filipowicz's literary insights into the realm of femininity here, in this article I will limit myself to the area of a few micro novels<sup>2</sup>. One would like to read these texts using the everyday life study methodology. Filipowicz was one of the writers who assigned extra value to plainness and put it in the center of their attention. Such intellectual and aesthetic tendencies of the artist make the problems discussed by them seem insignificant, trifle, inconspicuous. This is a somewhat deceitful notion, since Filipowicz (in contrast to e.g. the lumineers of "mały realizm" – "minor realism"), was never into recording everyday life just for the sake of it. He was interested first and foremost in the fate of the individual in its existential dimension. Everyday experiences were only a backdrop, a pretext allowing to pose questions pertaining to the psychological motives behind human actions, providing the opportunity for a full insight into the situations where the protagonists have to make choices. In micro novels the novelist extends the purely unitarian, psychological point of view, he situates the person in an environmental context, tracks their various social ties. These works differ in their subject matter, but they are integrated by the motif of everyday life as the boring pandemonium, a reality that is fettering, sometimes oppressive

<sup>1</sup> Here is a list of works that deserve a thorough explication: *Ballada (Krajobraz niewzruszony)*, 1947), *Klementyna (Profile moich przyjaciół)*, 1954), *Trzy kobiety z obozu (Po burzy)*, 1956), *Adela, czyli list znaleziony w szufladzie (Ciemność i światło)*, 1959), *Ja ciebie nie kocham (Biały ptak)*, 1960), *Po trzydziestu latach, Kobieta czeka (Mój przyjaciel i ryby)*, 1963), *Doxa (Co jest w człowieku)*, 1971), *Niedzielną wycieczką, czyli o prostocie serca, Wspomnienia są moim słodkim pokarmem (Światło i dźwięk, czyli o niedoskonałości świata)*, 1975), *Pies wdowy Wurm (Kot w mokrej trawie)*, 1977), *Wycieczka do Sopotu, czyli opowiadanie naiwne, Moja mama z Europy środkowowschodniej (Między snem a snem)*, 1980), *Moja mama kłamie, Sprawy na tamtym świecie, Fizjologia (Koncert f-moll)*, 1982), *Matka, Starsza pani w kapeluszu fioletowym (Rozmowy na schodach)*, 1989), *Zazdrość (Rozstanie i spotkanie)*, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> This group of works from Filipowicz's vast collection includes 5 titles: *Romans prowincjonalny* (1960), *Pamiętnik antybohatera* (1961), *Jeniec i dziewczyna* (1963), *Ogród pana Nietzsche* (1965) and *Mężczyzna jak dziecko* (1967).

towards women, stimulating their need to transgress. Due to lack of space I will not discuss this motif in detail, I will just signalize the issues I find the most interesting.

Most female characters depicted in the micro novels lose themselves in the everyday world, which stops being their world, their space. Sometimes the writer mixes events that are a deviation from the norm, a distortion of plainness (war, unwanted pregnancy, cheating, motorbike accident) into this bleak, stagnant reality. For the heroines the writer designs these often become a sort of a test, tearing away their internal possibilities, unexpected psychological and behavioral reactions. Elżbieta Jabłońska, the protagonist of *Romans prowincjonalny*, tries to hide away for at least a brief moment from the demon of tedious monotony (the situations, events, experiences, opinions and conversations). She is given the opportunity to do so when she meets a varsovian poet who came in for an author's meeting. The protagonists have a brief affair, which concludes in a night spent together in a hotel room. When Elżbieta decides to have an affair with Miłobrzeski, she is not motivated by love. Bound by the chores of everyday life, she seeks an excess, an unpredictable element that would interrupt the monotony imprinted into her everyday existence. The woman is also irritated by small town arrangements and social hierarchies, she notices the numerous flaws of her surroundings, its hypocrisy, prudishness, narrow mindedness, the dense atmosphere of gossip. The innate need for freedom and autonomy, natural for every human being, is also a significant factor behind the heroine's decision. Ever since the beginning, Elżbieta sets up a certain psychological game with her mother. Through minor acts of malignancy, biting retorts, modest acts of disobedience she wants to express disapproval of her mother's actions, forcing her to marry the local engineer, a "man with a personality" and a head full of positivist ideals, but the heroine merely likes him. Elżbieta's mother is not a skirt-clad tyrant, she is rather full of concern for her daughter taking after her father, who lost his life during the war because of his recklessness and tendency for heroics. Projecting the memory of her husband, who died a tragic death, onto the image of her own daughter makes the woman usurp the right to control her fate. Filipowicz uses Elżbieta to present the fate of many provincial maidens, who were unable to fit into the moral norms imposed on them and intellectually surpassed their surroundings. They were not given to come into fruition in the emotional sphere as well, since potential candidates for husbands were either workmen or engineers back in those days, so they and the subtle, well-read (at least enough to tell tripe from good writing), music loving maiden were poles apart. Of course, Elżbieta differs from the trite stereotype of a provincial lass, dreaming of an architect from Warsaw at night

(like in Maria Koterbska's sentimental hit from 1957), she has no illusions that an affair with a comer from the "great wide world" world will free her from the dullness of everyday life. And besides, the heroine does not want to flee from the backwater, she is firmly rooted in her world and she has moral obligations towards it (taking care of her paralyzed mother, looking after the household). She needed Miłobrzieski only to maintain the state of "minor war" with her mother, but also taste what is temptingly exotic, electrifying in some way, forbidden. However, Elżbieta does not forget the cause that she is fighting for, she is mostly aware of the motives behind her decisions, and at the same time she maintains an ironic distance between her and the man, resulting partially from provincial pride, since she knows how she might be perceived by a frequenter of literary cafes. Of course, at first Elizabeth falls under the charm of the genteel guest, whose character is a stark contrast with the coarse background (the woman suffers from what psychologists call the "halo effect"), yet she quickly discovers that Miłobrzieski is far from ideal, both as an artist and as a human being. This master of conventionality and slave to platitudes, who made a name for himself in the literary world only thanks to riding the wagon of the current trends, disguises spiritual blandness behind a veil of high culture and pure poetry. Falsehood fills his every thought, gesture, word uttered. When sketching up the course of the conversations that the protagonists have during their walk around the main square, and then during the fair, Filipowicz's aim is to present a head-on collision between the artist's truisms and Elżbieta's brilliant, full of subtle irony remarks. Divagations of the buffoon from the capital are equally treated with irony by the heroine, who deftly exposes his grandiloquence, she is also very careful not to cross those barriers of intimacy that would violate her personal dignity. In Filipowicz's micro novel, it is easy to notice a certain hidden evaluative tendency. The collision between Elżbieta's and Fabian's personalities and mentalities has a direct connection with the urban-rural duality<sup>3</sup>. Filipowicz

<sup>3</sup> Some critics – while maintaining the obvious distance – indicated the parallels between Elżbieta and Emma Bovary, a woman dying of boredom, lulled by the unchanging rhythm of everydayness, searching for turn-ons in the world of literature. Of course, associating Filipowicz's micro novel with Flaubert's work is a gross exaggeration. And it is not only about the obvious artistic differences between both works, but the diversity of psychological portrayal of the protagonists. Madame Bovary grew to be a mythical figure, and bovarism (a term used for the first time by Jules de Gautier in 1892) was recognized as a phenomenon that was ubiquitous in the sphere of social life. Elżbieta bears little resemblance to the demonic Emma, contrary to her she is not a morbidly sentimental person, succumbing without any second thoughts to the charm of daydreaming. She is more of a personification of real-life preciseness, sober thinking. In my opinion, certain symptoms of bovarism can be diagnosed in Miłobrzieski: narcissism, a tendency for melancholy, delusion,

writes the dialogs between the protagonists in such a way so as to emphasize the intellectual and moral superiority of the “simple man” from the outback over the “spirited” intellectual from the country’s capital. Why does Elżbieta take a step further and decides to spend a night with the poet then? I think that a strong impulse was at play. When her mother announced to Elżbieta that she accepted engineer Soniewicz’s marriage proposal, so she completely disregarded her personal needs and feelings, she felt even more enslaved and she wanted to manifest her own independence, which led her towards complications<sup>4</sup> (up to that point she had relieved her psychological tension by playing Bach and Chopin on her grand piano).

---

an identity crisis, dual personality and chameleonism (at every step Miłobrzeski assumes a different role: we see him as an exalted romantic and charmer, then a eulogist of provincial charms straight out of Tuwim’s *Rzuciłbym to wszystko*, at other times he is an astronomer uttering esoteric crap about predestination written in the stars). Bovarism’s defining feature, the innate ability to perceive oneself as someone else, manifests itself in the protagonist through an overgrowth of ambition, constant insatiability, failure to see the meagerness of his own poetic output. Miłobrzeski as a poet is no longer able to tell the difference between reality and phantasms, he is unable to make reliable contact with reality, utilize his own observations and experience. His poem, being a record of the provincial affair with Elżbieta, is full of simplifications and vulgar stereotypes describing women. In light of these remarks, *Romans* can be read as an attempt to defend the outback (including its female inhabitants) against writers who are unable to view the world in a manner other than through a filter of stereotypes and draw “objective” conclusions.

<sup>4</sup> The most serious result of Elżbieta’s transgressions beyond the borders of convention is an unwanted pregnancy, which she aborts. Based on the scarce information available it is difficult to tell if this novel episode is a vehicle for Filipowicz to show how fear of ostracism, slandering and stigmatization provokes provincial girls to morally doubtful actions, or to stand up for women’s right to abortion. Due to the act liberalizing access to abortion from 1956, women were able to apply for a procedure for the so-called social reasons (it was to “support” women who had lost stable employment). At first it was only granted to selected women (for example those who fulfilled the duty of maternity) and through strong restrictions. Before 1959 it was the doctors who called the shots on whether a woman could undergo an abortion or not, often using their power against their female patients, denying them their rights (more on the subject: M. Maciejewska, *Aborcja w PRL-u. Ustawa o warunkach dopuszczalności przerywania ciąży z 1956 roku w kontekście feministycznym*, in: *PRL bez uprzedzeń*, eds. J. Marmurek, P. Szumlewicz, Instytut Wydawniczy „Książka i Prasa”, Warsaw 2010). This is the situation presented by Filipowicz in this work. Unable to terminate her pregnancy by legal means (and wanting to avoid a procedure performed using archaic methods by provincial midwives), the woman heads to the city in search of quinine, and her lack of pharmaceutical knowledge results in her almost dying during her journey. On the other hand it should be noted that terminating the pregnancy results in no moral reflection in Elżbieta.

The German female Heddy from *Ogród pana Nietschke* represents a somewhat different characterological model. Filipowicz provides her with a handful of features that are stereotypically associated with patrician culture: respect for ownership and cult of a balanced budget, supremacy of a general interest criterion (also in the sphere of ethics), a sober, devoid of sentiment attitude toward being (she loves her father, but she finds no problem in talking with other members of the household about the acquisition of inheritance after his death). In Heddy's sketched profile there is no place for any signs of recklessness, disobedience, thinking contrary to the rules of existence in the world instilled in her. Every attempt of moving outside the regulated order meets a firm opposition from the heroine and invokes the brutality hidden in her. The firm, strict, far from subtle Heddy is an embodiment of also those moral traits of patricians that Filipowicz considered typical mainly of German philosophy and national character. In Stefan Lichański's opinion, Heddy's character (associated by him with Brunhilda, the famed valkyrie from Nordic mythology) reveals the moral rot left behind by hitlerism<sup>5</sup>. The heroine is a daughter of a former camp commander, and his actions for the "SS order" left visible marks on her psyche. It is an interesting explication, however I would describe Heddy's function in the artistic plan of the work differently. Hitlerism distorted the history of Europe, the ideas of European culture, it undermined the faith in anthropocentric philosophies. After the war experience it became impossible not only to unconditionally trust the mind, the functioning of state institutions, have faith in the irreversibility of elementary ethical principles. The most "innocent", everyday, obvious, routine areas found themselves under suspicion. Wanting to thoroughly think hitlerism over, we cannot limit ourselves to a vivisection of its socio-political background, but we should rather turn towards the "banal" present, common ideals, lifestyle, but also certain cultural tendencies among nations, even more dangerous, having the *imprimatur* of the norm. In this process of distorting German everydayness, turning its hidden sides inside out, Filipowicz exposes the longevity of the puritan model of raising children. Its idioms are: the cult of order and cleanliness, principality, unquestionable obedience to the authority of government, military discipline. From her silly little daughter Erica Heddy expects only obedience, she imposes on her the strict obligation of total submission and foretells the consequences for the slightest lapse (she is unable to talk to her daughter in a normal way, she speaks to her in the simple language of orders and yells). And we figure out that Erica herself will one day become like her mother and will treat her

<sup>5</sup> S. Lichański, *Żaden*, [in:] the same, *Wśród mówiących prozą. Szkice literackie*, Warsaw 1971, pp. 164–165.



children in a similar way. In moral terms, Heddy's character is supposed to be a warning. Germans failed to do their history homework and keep getting involved in traditions responsible for "maleficent" predispositions, which were activated and fine tuned during the period of Hitlerism<sup>6</sup>. It is easy to associate some of Heddy's reactions and behaviors with the cruel doings of her father from before twenty years – torturing prisoners for minor offenses: "Heddy starts to chase the dog, she manages to overtake him, she puts his muzzle in the puddle, she hits him"<sup>7</sup>. This is how the model pedagogy of filling children with brutality, repressing their subtlety and naturalness of being looks like. It is clear that aggressive models appeal to our primal instincts, they stir aggression. Children quickly learn the aggressive behavior from the model and easily imitate it. The mechanism of learning through observation of the behavior of a significant person – which in the case of children is without a doubt the parent – is a foundation for the shaping of emotions, behavior and attitude of the human being. This is of course no explanation for the crimes of Hitlerism, Filipowicz's diagnosis is much more complex in psychological and social terms, but it does clarify their brutal capacity, and first and foremost the German obsession with order, which manifests itself in the stark disproportion between the form of the inflicted punishment and the offenses of the "victims". By introducing many details describing German everydayness into the plot, the writer actually refers to a very old concept, already present in Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), which sought the genesis of fascism in the pathologies of the upbringing system. Heddy is not a complex psychological portrait, she functions rather as a sign and quintessence of cultural specificity, as a synecdoche of Germany.

Everydayness also puts the choke hold on Krystyna Aksman, the protagonist and narrator of *Mężczyzna jak dziecko* – the only text wherein Filipowicz uses a borrowed female voice. He uses it to paint a picture of a marriage crisis, and in the broader sense: he reveals the background of the problems that the young generation from the "mała stabilizacja" ("minor stabilization") period faced. The narrator of the work is unable to play the role of the loving wife, she drifts further away from the husband who ceased to excite her a long time ago, she seeks consolation in the arms of lovers, seeing no moral problem in it. Acts of infidelity are a remedy for the emotional void, sense of unfulfillment (also in erotic terms), hollowness of existence, but their root causes reach deeper and are connected directly to the manner in which she perceives men (condescending, lacking any kindness). Krystyna likes to infantilize them, she creates no alternatives that would allow them to reveal

<sup>6</sup> J. Kajtoch, *Rozmowa o panu Nietschke*, „Głos Młodzieży Wiejskiej” 1966, no. 3, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> K. Filipowicz, *Ogród pana Nietschke*, [in:] the same, *Motywy*, p. 431.

other sides of their personalities. It is a subversive situation, since the woman itemizes men due to their features and cheats on her husband when he starts to bore her. Of course, Filipowicz's text is not a diatribe aimed at Krystyna, but an attempt to diagnose the factors that formed her psyche. Filipowicz alludes that the discovery of the inner experience of the narrator must be accompanied by understatement, concealment, a suggestion of a secret (for reasons unknown, Krystyna removed ten-odd pages from her diary, describing the beginnings of her relationship with Roman), but by reading her notes one might think that such a happy-go-lucky way of life must have been impacted by the earliest of experiences (the narrator describes them briefly at the beginning of her diary, performing a synthesis of the life of Poles after the war in the process), especially the influence of her mother and aunts, who instilled in her that love life is an amalgam of conventions. Such an "indoctrination" had many complicated causes, i.a. the attempt to dissuade children from sexual contacts, which had become a taboo after the invasion of sexually transmitted diseases. After the wartime hecatomb, women wanted to arrange their lives without men (some of them lost their husbands and had to become self sufficient). During the meetings of the woman clan (which the narrator eagerly eavesdrops on), men became a subject of bad-mouthing, gossip and raunchy stories. Krystyna is not a half-orphan, but her everyday life – as the work suggests – is filled with *à rebours* norms. At home it is the mother who wears the pants, and the father (who has enough of constant squabbles with his family and reminds us of Dulski) is of secondary importance<sup>8</sup>. This has to affect the narrator's world view in one way or another. What happens in the family circle seeps through unnoticed into thoughts and language, it shapes views and values, induces specific attitudes<sup>9</sup>. It is not difficult to notice that the relations of maturing Krystyna with men, quite shallow, frivolous, irreverent, based on conventions and entrusted to the language of the body, stem from observation of the immediate environment. As a matter of fact, the opinions

<sup>8</sup> And yet it is hard to notice any men repressed by women here. Although Krystyna's mother slightly disregards her husband and ruins his private enclave (a man deprived of his own room may bring to mind Virginia Woolf's complaint), it is unclear why the father decided to withdraw from the position of person in charge of symbolic goods. Whether it is the result of his wife's actions, who imposes her own rule over him, or the proof of the character's servility, the heteronomy of his personality, a communicative dysfunction. The sole fact that this character is an allusion to Felicjan Dulski from Zapolska's play makes him at least ambiguous.

<sup>9</sup> Which is best summed up by one of the later musings of the narrator: "Ever since my childhood I've heard my mom and aunts say men are like children, all they ever want to do is play, and they're nothing but trouble, there's little use for them, and the pleasure is doubtful" (K. Filipowicz, *Mężczyzna jak dziecko*, in: the same, *Motywy*, Kraków 1973, p. 274).



of her mother and aunts quickly become empirically verified. The narrator has an affair with a man her age, a colleague of her aunt Mila's son. They are bad company, pursuing unfettered freedom and engaging the narrator in the arcana of rotten capitalist free love. Her initiation (while drunk, with no mood and emotional engagement) gives her no pleasure, it becomes a dull, trivial experience, which increases the distance between her and the male world. This "disenchantment" of love by Filipowicz, depicting it as a fool's paradise, is intended to be a warning, saying that teenagers who prematurely let the adult world infiltrate their lives are unable to emotionally engage in long term relationships, they have problems in their sex life and relations with men (it is a shame though that Filipowicz the sexologist – claiming to be a realist and aspiring to fathom various social phenomena – provides a diagnosis that is confusingly similar to the views of the proponents of Marxist analysis of the rotten Western world). It takes a long time for Krystyna to realize that casual sex without any respect for the partner, not integrated with the spiritual sphere, reduced to physiology and empty motions gives no satisfaction. Only the opening of the heroine to the suppressed, hidden feelings turn her relations with Roman into something more refined in the spiritual realm and lead to a full body contact. In a way, Krystyna sets herself free, gives way to her urges, which were hitherto expressed only in her dreams. But this emotional and behavioral transformation comes too late and the heroine loses the chance to live a few fleeting yet happy moments. Roman dies after a car crash and Krystyna is left alone in her everydayness. It should also be noted that at this critical moment Krystyna completely releases the previously suppressed emotions, she wants to relieve her husband's suffering, she promises herself that she will never cheat again. I assume that Filipowicz needed these fragments to "unmask" Krystyna's apparent independence, her illusory individualism, to present it as a facade, behind which there is a genuine need for love, fidelity, dedication, the willingness to make sacrifices. Thus Filipowicz makes use of a certain stereotype, his vision of desired normality includes very traditional ideas of feminine happiness. One could say that Krystyna's portrait from before and after the accident is constructed by Filipowicz following the principle of counterpoint. Behind these two dissonant faces of the narrator there are polar opposite moral assessments. To put this in feminist lingo, the vision of the "full value" woman presented by the author in the hospital sequences corresponds to the norms established by phallogocentric culture. Not a modern, liberal, slightly perverse woman devaluing the value of maternity, but rather a woman who is loving, blindly attached to her husband, caught up in the reign of shame and guilt – she implements the desired model. Krystyna's departure from the norms consti-

tuting “true” womanhood, resulting from her life experiences, has to end in her being stuck in shallowness, condemned to inner confusion and devoid of any right to happiness. Filipowicz intended the ending, surrounded by an aura of fatalism, to be a sort of warning aimed at women who are unable to find true values in life that would guarantee happiness. In this somewhat old-fashioned story from belated adulthood, perfectly fitting the patriarchal way of thinking and perceiving the world, Filipowicz does not reach beyond the horizon of consciousness of a single character, which makes his analysis of marriage aberrations significantly shallow.

Every day life in Filipowicz’s micro novels is a space for boredom, a specific enslavement, for being caught up in different dependencies, influences that impose specific existential scenarios onto women, provoking them to revolt quietly (Elżbieta), forcing them to obey and form their “personality” (the relations between Heddy and Erica), penetrate the subconsciousness with readymade patterns for relations with the world and are emotionally crippling (Krystyna). The Kraków-based author shows that observing women implanted in the tissue of everyday life, consisting of both trivial and traumatic events, can lead to many interesting psychological and sociological observations. The women in Filipowicz’s work are personifications of exemplary fates, typical for their environments, retaining touches of individuality at the same time. In their creations one can find more universal content, they always function as a metaphor for human fate, existential generalization.