

Extended Solidarity: A Feminist Reading of Anna Świrszczyńska's *Czarne Słowa*

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The poet must have a strong sense of connection with people, feel that they are a member of a great human community. They must be the throat of those who cannot speak.¹

Anna Świrszczyńska

Introduction: The Gender Effect

Discourse which takes into account the analysis of class antagonisms has disappeared from the conceptual map of literary criticism and from the conceptual map of feminist literary criticism. In the case of the latter, we are not so much concerned with the presence or absence of the category of social class as with the fact that the tools which have been developed by feminist critics since the 1970s are sometimes abused, insofar as analysis is reduced to thematic concerns only or to the ahistorical category of gender.

Feminist literary criticism is based on the assumption that not only gender but also all human creations, including literature, are socially constructed. The main goal of feminist literary criticism is to identify the mechanisms which make gender oppression an integral part of

¹ Anna Świrszczyńska, "Izba tortur, czyli moja teoria poezji" [Torture chamber, or my theory of poetry], *Kultura* 8 (1973): 3.

reproducing social inequalities in any given socio-economic system. As a practice of reading and interpretation, as emphasized by Krystyna Kłosińska, feminist literary criticism does not have a single “conceptual focus” but functions as “an all-encompassing position.”² This means that feminist criticism is not limited to reading literary texts from a gender perspective; indeed, it effectively functions as a political intervention. It aims to transform old cultural methods of constructing and strengthening social hierarchies, taking into account the question of gender. For this reason, feminist critical terms should transgress the dominant cultural analysis focused on the categories of exclusion and identity. Instead, they should pertain to all forms of social relations, primarily taking into account the material determinants of gender oppression.

This article attempts to reflect on how focusing on one identity category alone produces the so-called gender effect that Cora Kaplan calls “Pandora’s box of feminist criticism.”³ I define the gender effect in a twofold manner: on the one hand, it brings to light the marginalized experience, and, on the other hand, it contextualizes it in a unifying narrative, focused on the category of identity which does not reflect the complexity of social relations. I believe that *Czarne słowa* [Black Words] (1967) – in my opinion, one of the most important collections of poems by Anna Świrszczyńska, which is a testament to not only the significance of her poetic program but also the complex political context of the 1960s – fell victim to the gender effect.⁴

Czarne słowa is undoubtedly one of the most enigmatic and, at the same time, least discussed books of poetry by Świrszczyńska. Critics usually read it through the prism of her 1972 *Jestem baba* [I am a Woman] collection. *Jestem baba* became a synecdoche for Świrszczyńska’s entire oeuvre and the interpretations that followed mainly concerned gender oppression. As a result, the questions of gender were emphasized in *Czarne słowa* or, respectively, critics mainly argued that the poems with the female “I” paved the way for Świrszczyńska’s later collections.

In my readings of *Jestem baba*, I showed how gender, as an inalienable analytical category, is transformed into a static identity construct, most often referring to the undifferentiated universal category of Woman and thus obscuring the category of social class.⁵ While in the first half of the 1990s women scholars of Świrszczyńska used the recovered category of gender to challenge the balance of power in the literary field, especially in the context of the crisis in the field of social reproduction caused by the political transformation and the growing influence

² Cf. Krystyna Kłosińska, “Feministyczna krytyka literacka wobec pisania kobiet i jej pułapki” [Feminist literary critique of women’s writing and its pitfalls], *Fa-Art* 3 (2012): 3–13.

³ Cf. Cora Kaplan, “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism”, in: *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), 148.

⁴ This article does not provide a detailed interpretation of Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Czarne Słowa* [Black Words], as it focuses on the analysis of selected reading strategies in the reception of her work. I discuss the poetess’s book in more detail in the monograph *Wybuch wyobraźni. Poezja Anny Świrszczyńskiej wobec reprodukcji życia społecznego* [Explosive imagination. Reproduction of social life in the poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska] (in print).

⁵ Katarzyna Szopa, “Poetka rewolucji. Anna Świrszczyńska i socjalistyczny projekt równości kobiet” [Poetess of the revolution. Anna Świrszczyńska and the socialist project of women’s equality], *Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne* 2 (2018): 59–79; “Roses or Bread? Anti-Communist Narration in Feminist Readings of Anna Świrszczyńska’s Poetry”, *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 1 (2019): 72–92; “Babski przełom. Konstelacja tomu «Jestem baba» Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [Women’s breakthrough. The constellation of Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Jestem Baba* [I am a woman] collection], in: *Konstelacje krytyczne. T. 1: Teorie i praktyki* [Critical constellations. Vol. 1: Theories and Practices], ed. Dorota Kozicka, Monika Świerkosz, Katarzyna Trzeciak (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 179–204.

of the Catholic Church with its conservative reproductive policy, later it became a dominant analytical category which obscured a much more nuanced picture of social relations found in Świrszczyńska's works. In this way, Świrszczyńska joined the ranks of poetesses associated with the apology of motherhood and female sexuality, and the critical focus of her poetry, especially as regards exposing and critiquing the order which reproduces social inequalities, disappeared from the critical and academic horizon. The category of "femininity" became dominant in criticism, obscuring a complex field of social tensions and conflicts.

This tendency, of course, did not only affect the reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry. This model of analysis became dominant in feminist theories as neoliberal ideology gained ground and, in this form, also infiltrated (not necessarily and not only feminist) Polish research. As Nancy Fraser writes:

Rejecting "economism" and politicizing "the personal", feminists broadened the political agenda to challenge status hierarchies premised on cultural constructions of gender difference. The result should have been to expand the struggle for justice to encompass both culture and economics. But the actual result was a one-sided focus on "gender identity" at the expense of bread and butter issues. Worse still, the feminist turn to identity politics dovetailed all too neatly with a rising neoliberalism that wanted nothing more than to repress all memory of social equality. In effect, we absolutised the critique of cultural sexism at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy.⁶

I believe that if we adopt an interpretative optics which focuses solely on the category of gender, we fail to notice Świrszczyńska's well-thought-out ethical program rooted in left-wing and feminist emancipation policies of the 1960s and 1970s. I call this program extended solidarity and I define it as a way of creating a new kind of social bonds which are to transform the public into the common.⁷

Universal Femininity

Many critics found *Czarne słowa* problematic, evidenced by the gaps in the history of its reception: when it was first published, the collection received only three short reviews and after 1989 it was read on the margins of Świrszczyńska's other works.

Critics often read *Czarne słowa* as a prelude to *Jestem baba*, marginalizing its original focus. Świrszczyńska's "black" poems were to pave the way for *Jestem baba*, as they heralded, as Włodzimierz Próchnicki wrote, "a different vision of womanhood; she is not an abstract cultural construct but someone who has worked all her life, given birth, screamed in pain and

⁶ Nancy Fraser, "How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden - and how to reclaim it", *The Guardian* (14 Oct. 2013) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal>).

⁷ Cf. Ewa Majewska, "«Solidarność» i solidarność w perspektywie feministycznej. Od post-mieszcząńskiej sfery publicznej do solidarności globalnej" [*Solidarity» and feminist solidarity: From the post-bourgeois public sphere to global solidarity*], *Etyka* 48 (2014): 44.

pleasure, aged over time.”⁸ The story of African women was read in terms of a stylization strategy. Stanisław Balbus concluded that the “sophisticated primitivism” of *Czarne słowa* “was not so much a manifestation of the author’s interest in exotic cultures as a way of presenting eroticism in a very bold manner. Stylization was meant to ‘tame’ the subject matter, to defy conventions.”⁹ As a result, the African woman described by Świrszczyńska actually represented the Polish woman (Próchnicki wrote: “There is no difference between these women from Polish towns and villages and their African sisters described in *Czarne słowa*”¹⁰). However, as we read on, the latter also disappears, and the complex social situation presented in Świrszczyńska’s poetry gives way to dehistoricized “femininity.”

Some Świrszczyńska scholars further developed such interpretative frameworks after 1989. Almost all monographers argued that exotic stylizations in Świrszczyńska’s “black” collection were meant to make the themes that the poetess found important more attractive.¹¹ For Małgorzata Baranowska, African stylizations referred to “an abstract non-specific people;” the poems were meant to be “the key to one’s private reality;” respectively, she considered the black woman to be a “test woman” and the “first version” of a woman later developed in *Jestem baba*.¹² Renata Stawowy read this volume through the prism of the wrongdoings that women suffered “at the hands of men and conservative society.”¹³ She argued that *Czarne słowa* “describes the life of a community organized in accordance with the old rules. The division of social roles is more rigid than in European civilization and the laws are crueler.”¹⁴ Agnieszka Stapkiewicz also found in *Czarne słowa* universal femininity: “[f]ocusing on an African woman allowed the poetess to show the primal nature of childbirth (the female body touching the ground) but also to create a universal image of childbearing.”¹⁵ Critics focused on the subordinate role of women and emphasized their limited agency and passivity. Stawowy argues:

Women in *Czarne słowa* perform the roles traditionally assigned to them: they give birth to children and take care of them, they prepare food. They do not complain; they accept everything life throws at them. They are defenseless against the laws of nature and against men who decide about their lives and deaths. There is no place for constructive rebellion. They can only, like the protagonist of *Kołysanka* [Lullaby], dream of death as a way out of the miseries of life, or at best ask questions that manifest the awakening of the female consciousness.¹⁶

⁸ Włodzimierz Próchnicki, “Wejść w siebie. O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [Reflect on oneself: Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry], *Życie Literackie* 10 (1986): 9.

⁹ Stanisław Balbus, “Kobieta mówi o swoim życiu” [A woman talks about her life], *Twórczość* 8 (1972): 108.

¹⁰ Próchnicki, 9.

¹¹ Cf. Renata Inbrant, *From Her Point of View: Woman’s Anti-World in the Poetry of Anna Świrszczyńska*, (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007), 182–183; Agnieszka Stapkiewicz, *Ciało, kobiecość i śmiech w poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* [The body, femininity and laughter Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2014), 33.

¹² Małgorzata Baranowska, “Pod czarną gwiazdą” [Under a black star], *Twórczość* 6 (1986): 77.

¹³ Renata Stawowy, “Gdzie jestem ja sama”. *O poezji Anny Świrszczyńskiej* [‘Where I actually am.’ Anna Świrszczyńska’s poetry] (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 156.

¹⁴ Stawowy, 156.

¹⁵ Stapkiewicz, 170.

¹⁶ Stawowy, 157.

Almost no one commented on the themes of combat and ritual dances of tribal warriors. Critics focused on oppressive relations between the sexes, motherhood and childbirth, as well as on the vision of women as a force of nature.¹⁷ The questions closely related to the problem of the exploitation of reproductive labor described by the poet were reduced to universal experiences and read as a prelude to *Jestem baba*; the anti-colonial message of *Czarne słowa* was completely ignored.

Interestingly, this critical narrative has not changed in recent years. *Czarne słowa* is still read as an expression of universal femininity. Scholars still argue about the anti-colonial themes present in the book. While Jacek Dehnel emphasized that *Czarne słowa* “should be embedded in the postcolonial discourse,”¹⁸ in one of the latest interpretations Ewa Janion stated that “poetic images [in *Czarne słowa*] focus on pre-colonial indigenous beliefs, and colonialism itself is not visible in the collection.”¹⁹ Similarly, Piotr Mitzner not only ruled out the possibility of reading *Czarne słowa* through the prism of the history of colonialism but also suggested that the book should be critiqued from the perspective of postcolonial studies. Although in his reading Mitzner noticed the co-existence of indigenous and Christian beliefs, characteristic of colonized tribes, he nevertheless saw Świrszczyńska’s black poetry in terms of stylization only, insofar as it was pure “metaphysics, faith and magic.”²⁰

Actually, the challenge posed by *Czarne słowa* stems from the fact that this book, contrary to what one might think, especially after reading *Jestem baba*, challenges the myth of male domination. Even if African women fall victim to men, the latter are not merely oppressors. More often than not they are shown as brave warriors, resisting some seemingly undefined external and destructive forces. This is evidenced by the poem *To jest walka ostatnia* [This is the last fight] which describes the tragic choices faced by the people living in the village: they have to choose between death by suicide or slavery. Yet Janion writes that this poem may be read in terms of “adhering to the fundamental principle of the patriarchal order in which men control the lives of women and children.”²¹

Czarne słowa was so difficult to interpret mainly because it presents a much more complex picture of reality which goes beyond the framework of gender relations. There is no clear polarization here, like the one we find in *Jestem baba*, which would make it possible to read the book only in terms of gender oppression. That is why, unlike previous scholars, I do not read

¹⁷As exemplified by two essays by Wioletta Bojda: *Kubistyczna Świrszczyńska* and *Tajemnice monstualnego ciała* (cf. Wioletta Bojda, “Kubistyczna Świrszczyńska” [Cubist Świrszczyńska], *Opcje* 1-2 [1996]: 18; Wioletta Bojda, “Tajemnice monstualnego ciała” [Secrets of the monstrous body], *Kresy* 3-4 [1996]: 77). Bojda reduced the complex image of social relations in *Czarne słowa* to the nature-culture dichotomy, associating African community with unformed matter.

¹⁸Jacek Dehnel, “Trzecia Świrszczyńska” [Third Świrszczyńska], *Dwutygodnik* 247 (2018), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/8026-trzecia-swirszczyńska.html?print=1>.

¹⁹Ewa Janion, “Mit, obrzęd i duchowość Afryki w «Czarnych słowach» Anny Świrszczyńskiej” [The myth, rite and spirituality of Africa in Anna Świrszczyńska’s *Czarne słowa*], in: *Boginie, bohaterki, syreny, pajęczycy. Polskie pisarki współczesne wobec mitów* [Goddesses, heroines, mermaids, spiders. Polish contemporary writers and myths], ed. Alessandro Amenta, Krystyna Jaworska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL, 2020), 30.

²⁰Cf. Piotr Mitzner, “Maska afrykańska” [African mask], in: Anna Świrszczyńska, *Nienasycenie. Wiersze* [Insatiable: Poems], prefaced and edited by Eliza Kącka (Kraków: Universitas, 2021), 79–83.

²¹Cf. Janion, 41.

Czarne słowa in terms of stylization whose goal is to make universal problems of human existence more attractive. I also do not read African stylizations as stories of universal femininity. The black woman is by no means, as Renata Ingbrant suggested, “a repressed aspect of the self – a source of universal, authentic femininity.”²² On the contrary, Świrszczyńska writes about actual experiences: the slave labor of women grinding cassava; children and the elderly suffering from famine;²³ tribal warriors desperately struggling for freedom; communal beliefs and rituals; and the dramas and joys of individuals. The thesis that the poet used stylization in order to talk about universal problems is difficult to accept. I believe that Świrszczyńska scholars adopted such an interpretative perspective because they focused only on women’s oppression. However, such a generalizing interpretative key, with emphasis put on gender-based violence, obscures a broader and more complex picture of social relations found in *Czarne słowa*.

What has been completely ignored in *Czarne słowa* is the anti-colonial message – a radical critique of imperialist and capitalist policies. Świrszczyńska shows the lives of African women but she does not focus on the question of identity; rather, she emphasizes how the life of a rural community is organized. Therefore, reading Świrszczyńska either from a feminist or a postcolonial perspective would be another form of reductionism.²⁴ *Czarne słowa* is first and foremost a story of colonial violence, which shows how patriarchal and racial violence functions in colonial capitalism. This collection clearly shows the inextricable relationship between gender, race, and class. For this reason, I do not read it as an affirmation of identity but as an expression of the poetess’s solidarity with the disadvantaged, the successive generations of slaves “shackled in chains.” It demands a more comprehensive reading that will take into account different social relations as well as divisions and various forms of oppression which they nourish.

Contrary to what other interpreters of *Czarne słowa* have argued, I believe that the poetess presents the reader with a vision of a community that resists European invasion. This is evidenced by the genesis of this book. An inspiration for “black” poems may be found in Świrszczyńska’s unpublished play *Śmierć w Kongo* [Death in the Congo] (1963), which the poetess described back in 1962 as “perhaps the first contemporary Polish play about colonialism – the most important problem of our times.”²⁵ The play clearly alludes to the murder of Patrice Lumumba, the first prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the hero of the anti-capitalist and anti-colonial revolution who actively fought for the Congo’s independence.

²²Ingbrant, 183.

²³Famine is not brought by nature but by colonial policy. As Przemysław Wielgosz writes, in the pre-colonial period there were old economic systems which had strategies in place in the event of natural disasters; they were destroyed by imperial policies. Extensive storage systems and networks mean to help redistribute grain prevented famine. They fell victim to capitalist and market systems, which led to a humanitarian catastrophe. Cf. Przemysław Wielgosz, *Gra w rasy. Jak kapitalizm dzieli, by rządzić* [A game of races. How capitalism divides to rule] (Kraków: Karakter, 2021), 195.

²⁴To read *Czarne słowa* only from a postcolonial perspective would be to duplicate the reading focused on identity categories. For example, Terry Eagleton wrote about reducing the postcolonial perspective to the form of culturalism, pointing in his discussion on the history of colonialism to the effects of shifting the focus from class conflict to cultural conflict. Cf. Terry Eagleton, “Postcolonialism and ‘postcolonialism’”, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 1,1 (1998): 24-26.

²⁵Anna Świrszczyńska, “10 minut z Anną Świrszczyńską” [10 minutes with Anna Świrszczyńska], *Dziennik Polski* 247 (1962): 3.

Materialist Feminist Criticism

I was inspired to write this article by my students—women and men—with whom we discussed Nancy K. Miller's "Arachnologies" during our classes in the theory of interpretation. My students pointed out that Miller's essay may be read in a simplified way, insofar as the emphasis may be placed on "searching for femininity in the text" and the metaphor of weaving. What was not mentioned in the stories of Arachne, Athena and Ariadne described by Miller was, in fact, their class. Athena is a goddess, and Ariadne is a princess. Arachne, however, comes from a poor working-class family. The adoption of this optics changes how we look at the tapestries woven by Arachne and Athena. The working-class woman and the ruling-class woman compete in a weaving contest and as such they effectively compete to show different visions of the world. The focus of Arachne's feminocentric protest, therefore, is not on "women" in general but on women who are raped, women who are poor, and women who are oppressed by gods. As we know, Athena punished Arachne for showing her vision of the world by turning her into a worker, telling her to spin her web but not in order to show her oeuvre.

Equally important, but less commented on, is the difference between Arachne and Ariadne, who in John Hillis Miller's deconstructionist (and, paradoxically, not only male-centered but also bourgeois) interpretation transforms into the undifferentiated Arachne. Miller asks: "[...] does it follow that no significant difference inhabits the two stories?" and further points out that if, politically speaking, we cannot articulate the difference between the two stories, we will not be able to identify and understand material differences between the two women and, furthermore, differences that are fundamental to feminism.²⁶ For Miller, material differences between women concern primarily class differences, which are essential for feminism. Excessive focus on the ahistorical category of gender obscures and naturalizes social inequalities between women.

This mechanism was first described by Marxist literary critics back in the 1970s and the 1980s; for example, the aforementioned Cora Kaplan argued that in 19th-century literature the categories of class and gender intersect.²⁷ In her opinion, feminist critics focus too much on gender, especially as regards social differences between women and men, and thus marginalize other forms of violence and social inequalities. I believe that this is what happens to the peasant woman and the African woman from Świrszczyńska's poems. The dehistoricized category of gender obscures the complexity of social hierarchies and does not allow us to show how and why those women suffered. Effectively, working-class women are brutally silenced in history.

A form of feminist criticism, which, in my opinion, allows us to overcome these constraints, puts the emphasis on social reproduction. It concerns the entire sphere of social relations and the production of life, including paid and unpaid labor as well as institutional and non-

²⁶Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The woman, the text and the critic", in: *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988).

²⁷Kaplan, 167.

institutional hierarchical social relations. This perspective allows us not only to go beyond the discussion of chronology and the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism but also to look at the mechanisms and methods of creating these hierarchies and inequalities. As Susan Ferguson explains, the current dominant capitalist system was not shaped solely by white, well-fed, heterosexual male workers; its development depends largely on those forms of oppression and exploitation that divide and subordinate bodies according to gender, race, ethnicity, etc.²⁸ This approach goes beyond intersectionality, which integrates such variables as gender, class, race, and sexuality, but often reduces them to static identity categories.²⁹ There is more to materialist feminist literary criticism: it attempts to identify and analyze the intersections between gender, class and race in order to better understand the nuances of social divisions. We must therefore understand the complex relationship between materialistic and cultural analysis.³⁰

Let us take a look at two poems by Świrszczyńska dealing with the exploitation of women's labor. The first poem is *Pieśń kobiet o manioku* [Women sing about cassava], which opens *Czarne słowa*:

Od świtu do nocy
kobiety, my tłuczemy maniok na mąkę.

From dawn to dusk
women, we grind cassava into flour.

Nasze ręce tłuką maniok,
nasze brzuchy tłuką maniok,
nasze głowy tłuką maniok.

Our hands grind cassava,
our bellies grind cassava,
our heads grind cassava.

Nasze cienie tłuką maniok,
nasze duchy po śmierci tłuką maniok.

Our shadows grind cassava
our ghosts grind cassava after we die.

Dlaczego my, kobiety, nawet po śmierci musimy
tłuc maniok na mąkę?

Why do we, women, have to grind cassava into
flour even after we die?

(*Pieśń kobiet o manioku*)^{<?>}

(*Women sing about cassava*)

²⁸Susan Ferguson, *Women and Work: Feminism, Labour and Social Reproduction* (London: Pluto Press, 2020), 115. Similarly, Eagleton asks whether we really need to convince anyone that what happens when 'ethnically marginalized' groups around the world stand up against Western-dependent states is a matter of class struggle. Or should we, Eagleton further asks, naively believe that class conflict only affects Yorkshire miners. Eagleton, 25.

²⁹Social reproduction scholars criticize intersectional feminism because its perspective is often limited to a set of identity categories abstracted from the broader historical and social context and thus fails to explain the sources of these forms of oppression in capitalist socioeconomic system. Social reproduction scholars argue that the unnamed force that lies at the heart of all social interactions is class. More on the critique of intersectionality cf. Martha E. Gimenez, *Marx, Women and Capitalist Social Reproduction: Marxist Feminist Essays* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 82–109.

³⁰For example, the Marxist literary critic Michèle Barrett called for such a reading. Cf. Michèle Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender", in: *Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, ed. Judith Newton, Deborah Rosenfelt (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 65–85.

The other poem is *Chłopka* [Peasant woman] from the collection *Jestem baba*:

Dźwiga na plecach
dom, ogród, pole,
krowy, świnię, cielęta, dzieci.

She is carrying
the house, the garden, the field,
cows, pigs, calves, children on her back.

Jej grzbiet dziwi się,
że nie pęknie.
Jej ręce dziwią się,
że nie odpadną.
Ona się nie dziwi.

Her back is surprised
that it does not break.
Her hands are surprised
that they do not fall off.
She is not surprised.

Podpiera ją jak krwawy kij
umarła harowaczka
jej umarłej matki.
Prababkę
bili batem.

Like a bloody stick, she is supported by
the dead toil
of her dead mother.
Her great-grandmother
was whipped.

Ten bat
błyszczący nad nią w chmurze
zamiast słońca.

This whip
glares above her in a cloud
instead of the sun.

(*Chłopka*)^{<?>}

(*Peasant woman*)

If we read these poems as stylizations which speak of or focus on universal femininity, the essential difference between a black woman and a Polish peasant woman disappears. Consequently, socio-economic factors which give rise to such forms of systemic violence as racism and sexism in the colonial and serfdom systems disappear from our critical horizon.³¹

Because if we assume that the lives of Polish peasant women and African women are identical, two important issues disappear from the horizon of our analyses. The first is the complex trajectory of gender oppression and racism – both types of violence have survived until today and emerged as a result of capitalist accumulation. The second issue that disappears under the pressure of the de-historicized category of gender is not only the mechanism of racialization of colonized peoples or patriarchal violence and the resulting social inequalities but above all the fact that they are part and parcel of class struggles. What is at stake, whether it is a feminist or an anti-colonial conflict, is regaining control over the reproductive process.

³¹The situation of a Polish peasant woman described by Świrszczyńska concerns the times of the Polish People's Republic, and thus the life of a rural community in state socialism. Despite the change in economic relations and the abolition of serfdom, the fear of being whipped persists in the consciousness of Polish peasants. Pierre Bourdieu explains the mechanisms of symbolic violence in *Masculine Domination*. He argues that certain dispositions for submission may be deeply embedded in the body and function long after the disappearance of the social conditions which gave rise to them. Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004), 39.

If we want to avoid simplifications, and not simply focus on the category of femininity, we must expand the very concept of social class. In the feminist optics of social reproduction, it no longer concerns only the paid worker, but all exploited groups involved in social reproduction, whether the work they do is paid for by capital or not.³² Contemporary capitalist societies, as Fraser writes, rely on three different forms of labor: exploited labor, dispossessed labor, and domestic labor. Thus, anti-colonial and feminist struggles should be concerned as class struggles.

What do *Pieśń kobiet o manioku* and *Chłopka* tell us in this context? Is there really no difference between the African woman and the Polish peasant woman? While at first glance they seem to be encumbered with the same murderous, endless tasks, laboring from dawn to dusk, what prevents us from seeing their social positions as identical is precisely the perspective of social reproduction. *Chłopka* tells about the devaluation of the reproductive work that rural women performed not only under the conditions of the serfdom economy but also under the conditions of state socialism. The latter, despite the fact that the communist party proclaimed gender equality, reproduced historical forms of violence and preserved (especially in rural areas³³) patriarchal social relations in order to increase control over the reproductive process.³⁴ The devaluation of women's work made it possible to shift the costs of successive crises onto women as well as to efficiently control social anger in the communist economy of shortage. The myth of the Polish landed gentry, which was reproduced in the People's Republic of Poland, also played an important role in obscuring class inequalities and shaping the vision of a classless society. Polish peasantry disappeared in this myth and, along with it, the untold story of harm and violence, the media of which were the gendered and racialized bodies of peasant women.

Respectively, in *Pieśni kobiet o manioku*, we see women's slave labor which, metaphorically, continues even after their death. If we listen closely, we can hear that the women complain (in their song) about one of the basic features of capitalist modernity, namely its tendency to kill living labor – to turn workers into “zombies” in order to seize their labor-power and subordinate them to the interests of capital. The bodies of African slaves are carriers of undifferentiated power, reduced to pure physicality. Such a vision is not consistent with the division of labor typical of ancient agrarian-communist forms of land ownership, where economy was governed by strict and fixed rules. In primitive communist societies, there was

³²Cf. Tithi Bhattacharya, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class”, in: *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, ed. Tithi Bhattacharya (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 89.

³³On the situation of women in the Polish countryside in the post-war period, see: Małgorzata Fidelis, “Równouprawnienie czy konserwatywna nowoczesność? Kobiety pracujące” [Equal rights or conservative modernity? Working women], in: *Kobiety w Polsce 1945–1989. Nowoczesność, równouprawnienie, komunizm* [Women in Poland 1945–1989. Modernity, equality, communism], ed. Katarzyna Stańczak-Wiślicz et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), 138–140.

³⁴Therefore, gender relations described by Świrszczyńska should not be seen only in terms of, as Kacper Pobłocki suggests, the patriarchy which developed under serfdom. Cf. K. Pobłocki, *Chamstwo* [Rabble] (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2021), 332. Although he rightly notices in *Jestem baba* new forms of serfdom-related violence, Pobłocki seems to completely ignore the fact that the monogamous family in the form that survived until today and which was shown in *Jestem baba* was shaped by capitalist modes of production, and later also functioned in proletarian families. Świrszczyńska's criticism is directed mainly at the bourgeois model of family life, which was based on relegating women to the private sphere and on the complete devaluation of reproductive work.

a strict division and organization of labor. Rosa Luxemburg argued that “[...] what appears to us today as a religious system was in age-old times a system of organized social production with a far-reaching division of labor.”³⁵ European civilization destroyed such communities. Luxemburg emphasizes that all colonized peoples fought to protect their communities against European capitalism:

The intrusion of European civilization was a disaster in every sense for primitive social relations. The European conquerors are the first who are not merely after subjugation and economic exploitation, but seize the very means of production, by ripping the land from under the feet of the native population. In this way, European capitalism deprives the primitive social order of its foundation. What emerges is something that is worse than all oppression and exploitation, total anarchy and that specifically European phenomenon of the uncertainty of social existence. The subjugated peoples, separated from their means of production, are regarded by European capitalism as mere laborers; if they are useful for this end, they are made into slaves, and if they are not, they are exterminated.³⁶

Therefore, I believe that *Czarne słowa* does not show pre-colonial communities. Neither does Świrszczyńska describe ahistorical or mythical primitive peoples, but instead tells of the catastrophe described by Luxemburg. The clash between the ancient forms of primitive communism and European civilization was in fact a clash between systems which were based, respectively, on a strict division of labor and anarchy.³⁷ In Europe, capitalist anarchy involved transforming communities into free private producers exchanging goods. In the case of colonized peoples, however, communally owned land was not transformed into private property but “ripped from under their feet.” Traditional social relations were also transformed, and indigenous peoples were turned into wage slaves – into women who grind cassava.³⁸

Świrszczyńska differentiates between the position of women and the nature of their oppressions not by means of identity categories such as gender or, in the case of *Czarne słowa*, race, but through analyzing labor relations. In this way, the poetess draws our attention to at least three areas of struggle: anti-colonial, anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist. The images of the hard-working peasant woman and African women-turned-zombies demonstrate that we need to redefine not only relations between sexes but also social relations as such, as they rely on the exploitation of human labor. The analysis of the conditions in which reproductive labor takes place allows us to better understand the place of the gendered and racialized subjects in social hierarchies. In this context, the two poems, *Chłopka* and *Pieśń kobiet o manioku*, by no means present the same situation or the universal history of women’s oppression but point to the differentiated position of women in two separate systems of production: one is colo-

³⁵Rosa Luxemburg, “Introduction to political economy”, in: *The Complete Works*, ed. Peter Hudis (London: Verso, 2013), 134.

³⁶Luxemburg, 195.

³⁷Luxemburg writes that when free competition rules economic relations, there is no plan and no organization of any kind. Hence, capital, which governs the working class, does not take the form of despotism but anarchy. Cf. Luxemburg, 116.

³⁸Cf. Luxemburg, 219.

nial, and the other is state socialist. In both, patriarchal relations are perpetuated to exercise greater control over social reproduction.

Świrszczyńska, and this is, in my opinion, what makes her poetry unique, embraces society as a whole, with its gender, racial, and heterosexist divisions which create inequalities for the exploited class. Therefore, both the African woman and the Polish peasant woman shall complain about and resist further exploitation of their bodies and labor. It seems that Świrszczyńska perceives the resistance of the subjugated and, in the 1960s, of the feminist, anti-colonial and workers' movements in particular as part and parcel of class struggle. As Tithi Bhattacharya writes, "[e]very social and political movement 'tending' in the direction of gains for the working class as a whole, or of challenge to the power of capital as a whole, must be considered an aspect of class struggle."³⁹ It seems that the poetess understood the need to support the colonized peoples in their struggle to break the chains of exploitation, and the need to ally with those who were not allowed to create history. In this sense, and only in this sense, the lives of the Polish peasant woman and the African woman are similar.

Conclusion

Świrszczyńska is a poetess who combines the dream of women's emancipation with the vision of social justice. This vision goes beyond identity politics and moves towards expanded solidarity, which requires us to renegotiate the rules which define our community. The emancipation project emerging from Świrszczyńska's works combines economy, culture, and social and discursive practice. Therefore, the dream of a better world found in her poetry is closely related to the history of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-patriarchal class struggles.

In my opinion, the need for extended solidarity, so important in Świrszczyńska's works, behind which lies the unspeakable but very real dream of a better world, a world devoid of violence, exploitation, suffering and unfair divisions, reveals not only the poetess's ethical principles but above all her class consciousness. Świrszczyńska's interest in anti-colonial struggles in the era of decolonization is neither strange nor surprising. It stems from the role played by the Eastern bloc in the process of decolonization and the poetess's extraordinary sensitivity to suffering, which has its roots in social inequalities perpetuated over time. African slaves, beggars, peasant women, the sick, the old, the abandoned, and inmates in psychiatric hospitals – Świrszczyńska first and foremost expresses her solidarity with them. They are also her allies in the fight for a better world.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

³⁹Bhattacharya, 85–86.

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KEYWORDS

Anna Świrszczyńska

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ABSTRACT:

This article discusses selected reading strategies of Anna Świrszczyńska's poetry, and *Czarne Słowa* [Black words] (1967) in particular, a collection which, in my reading, presents the intersections between gender, race and class. The ahistorical category of gender, which is dominant in the reading of Świrszczyńska's poetry, is what obscures the complex image of social relations that emerges from her works. Employing feminist theories of social reproduction, I argue that the situation of women presented in *Czarne Słowa* not only differs from the one shown in *Jestem baba* [I am a woman] but also reveals Świrszczyńska's ethical project, to which I refer as extended solidarity.

women's poetry

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

Marxist feminism

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