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She tells a story about the end of the world. Literary images of the war experience in contemporary Croatian female prose

She tells a story about the end of the world. Literary images of the war experience in contemporary Croatian female prose. The main goal of the paper is to describe modern Croatian female literature. More specifically, the paper deals with several novels which were inspired by the traumatic events that occurred in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s: *Kao da me nema* by Slavenka Drakulić, *Pred crvenim zidom* by Irena Vrkljan, *Crnac* by Tatjana Gromača and *Uho, grlo, nož* by Vedrana Rudan. The common denominator in these literary works is that they are all written from a female perspective and they combine fictional elements with autobiographical records and events which can be referred back to the reality of the 1990s war. In order to be able to explore this literature, of great significance are such elements as the body, memory and identity which are intertwined in different combinations. Moreover, the style aspects are of crucial importance, being not only secondary elements but also the subject of female writing which faces the experienced trauma.

Keywords: trauma, post-war narratives, female literature, the body, stylistics.

Ona priča o kraju svijeta. Literarne slike ratnog iskustva u suvremenoj hrvatskoj ženskoj prozi. Ovaj članak pokušava opisati specifičnost suvremenog hrvatskog ženskog pisma, koje je inspirirano događajima ratnih devedesetih godina na području bivše Jugoslavije: *Kao da me nema* Slavenke Drakulić, *Pred crvenim zidom* Irene Vrkljan, *Crnac* Tatjane Gromače i *Uho, grlo, nož* Vedrane Rudan. Posebnost ove književnosti proizlazi iz činjenice da je realizirana iz perspektive žene te da spaja literarnu fikciju s realnim događajima koji se odnose na ratnu stvarnost. Osim toga, ono što povezuje ova djela je pokušaj razbijanja stereotipa, aktivna umjetnička subverzija te uporaba specifičnih literarnih formi. U produbljivanju te književnosti bitni su glavni motivi,

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svojevrnsni tropi, koji pomažu u interpretaciji, a takvima smatram probleme tijela, pamćenja i identiteta, koji se prožimaju u različitim konfiguracijama i proporcijama. Štoviše, jako je bitno pitanje stila koji čini, ne toliko nadgradnju, nego i temu ženskog stvaralaštva koje se suočava s proživljenom traumom.

Ključne riječi: trauma, poslijeratne naracije, žensko pismo, tijelo, stil.

The objective of the paper is an attempt to describe the specific nature of Croatian modern female literature inspired by and referring to war times of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. This type of literature includes fiction that is often combined with autobiographic records and event descriptions to which are added fictional characteristics initiated by war reality. The exceptional nature of these works results from a perspective of a description that has been used — a perspective of a woman who participates in the conflict or, in other words, a woman “doomed to history.” The war in this literature ceases to be only a “male business,” it enters women’s lives and forever leaves its mark on them. I chose four works to be analysed in my paper: *Kao da me nema* by Slavenka Drakulić (born 1949), *Pred crvenim zidom* by Irena Vrkljan (born 1930), *Crnac* by Tatjana Gromača (born 1971) and *Uho, grlo, nož* by Vedrana Rudan (born 1949).² What links all these works is a conscious effort to break stereotypes, the acts of active artistic subversion and the use of heritage and potential of female writing. In order to explore this literature, the main motifs, individual traits useful for the interpretation, which, I think, include the body, memory and identity issues merging together in different combinations and proportions as well as stylistic aspects constituting not only the additional elements but also the subject of the experienced trauma in the female works, are essential. Crystallizing one of the above-mentioned aspects without the reference to the others is often very difficult, impossible or distorting the image of the analysed work. The body, memory, identity and narration exist here in a sort of connection, in constant intertwining. As methodological tools I used feminist and gender research, mainly that referring to the corporal nature and ways of transferring artistic messages by women.

Disappearing body, disappearing women.

Kao da me nema by Slavenka Drakulić

The subject of carnal and physical nature — omnipresent in the works of Slavenka Drakulić, became a hallmark of her writing.³ It is also the case in the novel *Kao da*

² S. Drakulić, *Kao da me nema*, [in:] eadem, *Sabrani romani*, Zagreb 2003; T. Gromača, *Crnac*, Zagreb 2004; V. Rudan, *Uho, grlo, nož*, Zagreb 2002; I. Vrkljan, *Pred crvenim zidom*, [in:] eadem, *Sabrani romani*, Zagreb 2006.

³ Cf. A. Zlatar, *Žena, identitet, tijelo*, [in:] S. Drakulić, *Sabrani...*, p. 13.

me nema, in which the main story of the principal female character — named only with an initial S. — was demonstrated with the use of references to the body. In this case the somatic connotations refer to politicization, which constitutes at the same time a sign of the literary subject, its disappearing and splitting. The range of methods of oppression which the heroine faces includes deprivation of rights to her body, its appropriation in the form of rape, breaking the integrity of the physical identity through a deprivation of rights to use it, rights to shame and intimacy. By bringing up the subject of war rape as a central motif of the plot, the work presents a situation of women within the armed conflict. On the one hand, perceived as more physical beings, on the other, as female members of a group subject to men, they become victims of sexual aggression. The phenomenon of rape within the feminist research was analysed in depth by, among others, Kate Millet, Susan Griffin, Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller. The results of their studies are not a subject of this article, however, it is worth reminding that in a detailed analysis *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller describes a destructive power of rape towards the body as well as psyche as an act of crime against a human being and also one's property.⁴ In the context of transformations and warfare in the former Yugoslavia, which is highlighted by Žarana Papić, a double approach appears towards the physical identity of women who are perceived as: "A) kao *insajderi* su kolonizirane i instrumentalizirane u svojoj »prirodnoj« funkciji kao sveta »esencija« i »strojevi za rađanje« Nacije; B) kao *autsajderi* su označene kao cilj destrukcije, kao posredan instrument poretka nasuprot ostaloj muškoj Naciji i kulturom identitetu."⁵ By contrast, Svetlana Slapšak sees the motivation of sexual abuse in the circumstances in which "a female body seems as a male (patriarchal) phantasm of symbolic territory."⁶ In the novel *Kao da me nema* by Slavenka Drakulić, one can observe how such a phantasm is manifested within marking one's "own" territory through writing on a body — a sort of history (!) of violence which consists of wounds and scars: "Ožiljci ostaju, vidljivi i nevidljivi. Ispisani s unutrašnje strane bedara, na trbuhu, na vratu, na grudima, u maternici,"⁷ but also an oral/visual record of inter alia religious symbols carved on the victims' bodies. In that way, one receives a precisely portrayed way of signing won/conquered territory the metaphor of which becomes a female body that is also

⁴ S. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, New York 1975, p. 201. Cf. also V. Nahoum-Grappe, *Gwałt jako broń wojenna*, trans. K. Bartkiewicz, [in:] *Czarna księga kobiet*, ed. Ch. Ockrent, Warszawa 2007 and B. Bećirbašić, *Tijelo, ženskost, moć. Upisivanje patrijarhalnog diskursa u tijelo*, Zagreb-Sarajevo 2011.

⁵ Ž. Papić, "Europa nakon 1989: Etnički Ratovi, Fašizacija Društvenog Života i Politika Tijela u Srbiji", *Treća. Časopis Centra za ženske studije* III, 2001, no. 1–2, s. 032. Cf. also K.E. Supriya, *Confessionals, Testimonials: Women's Speech in/and Contexts of Violence*, „Hypatia. Women and Violence” 11, 1996, no. 4, p. 99.

⁶ S. Slapšak, *Feminizm i pisanstvo kobiet na polu minowym: paradygmat jugosłowiański i postjugosłowiański w perspektywie synchronicznej i diachronicznej*, [in:] *Literatury słowiańskie po roku 1989 w chaosie ponowoczesnych przemian*, t. 2. *Feminizm*, red. E. Kraskowska, Warszawa 2005, p. 152.

⁷ S. Drakulić, op. cit., p. 564.

a real space of warfare.⁸ The rape itself appears additionally as: „a cross-cultural language of male domination (that is, domination by males; it can also be dominated of males).”⁹ The presentation of a disintegration and reduction of a female subject is demonstrated also by the heroine’s lack of name in this novel. S. is called only by an initial for a couple of reasons: in order to keep the witness anonymous, present this non-existence signalled in the title and also because of the fact that it is representative for a community. In addition, the 3rd person narrative, which distances us somehow from the heroine (especially from her inner world) takes away the story from S. herself. Thus, when one refers once again to the title, it seems indeed as if there was no woman in a woman’s story. At this point, the problem of talking about trauma and a literary choice of tools to describe the content escaping verbalisation inevitably appears.¹⁰ One specific fragment — in which women released from the camp start to talk about their experience at night, in the darkness — is exceptionally meaningful. Their stories break the silence of shame. This silence, also collective, is a historical experience/part of women, it is something for which the oppressor hopes, which forms the system of oppression, therefore storytelling/talking/writing is so important to break free of imposed ways of participation in which it is “as if there were no women.” For example, analysing confessions of Asian female violence victims, Supriya notices that this confession discourse contains a clear message about the balance of power. The reproduction of a patriarchal regime manifests itself in either silence (which is one of the important elements of creating violence/oppression) or in perceiving oneself as guilty/inferior/dishonoured. Women talking about experienced violence feel as if they are betraying their husbands, faith, society and country. Additionally, patriarchal structures are also forged in women’s relations with other women (“between female others”). On the other hand, the confession is a kind of resistance, silence breakup as well as reproducing and copying patriarchal elements by victims (it refers also to a reconstruction of their position in society) lead to exposure of a deal based on violence.¹¹ While women are really excluded from an official discourse, deprived of their right to the body, opinion, identity; literature and the body become places where this voice can be audible, brought back specifically because of oppression but also breaking narration and stereotypes. Another greatly important element of a “talking body” I find in a passage concerning a few-year-old A. This tortured girl cannot speak, but her mutilated body communicates a lot — it is not only a medium of the oppressors’ symbols, but also a record of power discourse, her combination of religion and culture. Yet, the behaviour of A — monotonous

⁸ Cf. S. Brownmiller, op. cit., p. 31.

⁹ C. Card, “Rape as a Weapon of War”, *Hypatia. Women and Violence* 11, 1996, no. 4, p. 7.

¹⁰ The question of talking about trauma as a need of female confessing in plural meaning more “mnogostruke priče (kao ženski rod množine u političkom smislu)”, the multitude of speeches creating together an experience of politicization (both concerning one text and some of them), cf. J. Husanović, “Etičko-politička zaviještanja lica i ožiljaka: bosanske priče i traume kao imenice ženskog roda u množini”, *Treća. Časopis Centra za ženske studije* IX, 2007, no. 1, p. 60.

¹¹ See K.E. Supriya, op. cit.

repeating of certain gestures, swaying to a child's counting-out rhythm, permanent washing and brushing her hair — depicts an image of a talking body testifying the experienced violence. As McLane notices “abuse victims are forbidden to speak their experience, often to the point of being unable to articulate or even perceive their abuse [...] abuse is communicated in her physical style and gestures.”¹² As a matter of fact, McLane mentions mainly the problem of self-mutilation as a method to talk about trauma, referring to the language theory of Merleau-Ponty — the problem of the “skin voice” when talking is forbidden or impossible (the silence element for which oppressors hope is greatly important in reference to female writing — women condemned for centuries of silence speak thanks to new forms of expression, also thanks to bodies) enumerates however such behaviours as sleep (it is sufficient to mention the nightmares that haunt S.) and eating disturbances, any forms of addictions and autodestructive behaviours, etc. as essential in the case of “talking body.” McLane also interprets the pain as a corporal and cognitive structure not always possible to be expressed verbally.¹³ In that context the way in which S. reports and judges her situation — expressing it through body and pain — is essential. The problem of speaking (also the linguistic possibility to express trauma) and silence is extremely complex. On the one hand, because of silence and the willingness to return to “normal” life, the victim appears to show oneself as free of experienced violence — “unwounded” — on the other hand, she/he arrives to a stage in which they must talk but find themselves facing a silence barrier difficult to overcome (because of which the need to talk is expressed in a different way, generally referring to psycho-somatic autodestructive behaviours). What is important is that the victim has to learn, also through the body, how to speak again — she or he must realise two facts: the fact of being a victim and the “fact of being silenced.”¹⁴ Thus, the silence bears witness to the disappearing of a female subject, also in a discourse that reduces this subject — breaking the oppression is talking about silence (also about the artistic one), breaking silence, but also searching for forms/ways of expressing the impossible to articulate, also in the art.

Written on the skin. Irena Vrkljan

To explore the issue of style and deliberations on the subject of a characteristic nature of female writing with reference to the principles of gynocriticism/arachnology and *écriture féminine*, I present the piece of Irena Vrkljan *Pred crvenim zidom*. The author consistently organises the whole work by breaking the autonomy of and uniting the artist's body with the text. The place of writing, a unique space becomes a piece of paper-body, whereas the ink-blood aspires to be a life-giving tissue. The whole process of creating is

¹² J. McLane, “The Voice of the Skin: Self-Mutilation and Merleau-Ponty's Theory of Language”, *Hypatia. Women and Violence* 11, 1996, no. 4, p. 109.

¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 108.

¹⁴ According to *ibid.*, p. 110.

established according to the analogy with a basic process of an organism — breathing, where “to write” equals “to breathe.”¹⁵ When extending the chain of interpretations and referring to the mythical figures of hand weavers and spinners,¹⁶ one can assume the synonyms: loom-paper-body-white, thread-ink-blood-red. Moreover, physical characteristics and abilities to have feelings are also attributed to objects connected to the act of writing: a pencil tends to be tired, senseless, stubborn about breaking the verbal impotence, the writing becomes uncertain, the power over it is taken over by spiders. At this point, the essence of Vrkljan’s writing strategy — her novel — appears:

pisani su u prvom licu jednine i oblikuju isti tip književnoga diskurza, koji su kritičari najradije nazivali mekim i otvorenim terminom *autobiografske proze*. Njezine tekstove od tradicionalne romaneskne strukture razlikuje ponajprije nedostatak čvrstoga fabulativnog okvira i neprikriiveni samoidentificirajući glas autorice-priповjedačice, ujedno i glavne junakinje¹⁷.

The situation in which the text cannot exist separately from the body, pain and the author’s memory is presented. The author does not disperse, disappear in a hiphologic labyrinth of symbols, but she marks the presence of her biography/herself/body in the text. At this moment, I would like to stress Nancy K. Miller’s suggestion of “overreading”¹⁸ which makes reference not only to female space within sexuality but also descriptions of a writing process with the emphasis on her presence (signatures) in the text, as well as efforts to resist imposed political, gendered, historic, etc. discourses.¹⁹ Overreading permits also, thanks to the way the author is perceived in her works, to break the opposition between a subject and a text, a spider and a web²⁰ and also to abandon “the indifference of the aesthetic universal, but to identify the act of this reading as enabling of a n o t h e r poetics, a poetics attached to gendered bodies that may have lived in the history.”²¹ Therefore the text as a body is a sensitive structure innervated and, in this case, exceptionally vulnerable. The ability to write belongs also to the writing table as if all that is touched by a creative hand of the artist who saw the war was doomed to suffering. This table constitutes also a symbol of exile, war and sign of the times. The emphasis of the objects’ unique emotions, their peculiar inner lives (*unutarnji svijet ladica i ormara*²²), which are extremely important in all works of Irena Vrkljan, is inseparably connected with the inner life of the character — the world of objects is demonstrated as a “jedna vrsta *preslika*,

¹⁵ I. Vrkljan, op. cit., p. 441.

¹⁶ See K. Szczuka, *Prządki, tkaczki i pająki. Uwagi o twórczości kobiet*, [w:] *Krytyka feministyczna: siostra teorii i historii literatury*, ed. G. Borkowska, L. Sikorska, Warszawa 2000.

¹⁷ A. Zlatar, *Soba, kuhinja, vlak. Unutarnji svijet ladica i ormara*, [in:] I. Vrkljan, *Sabrana...*, p. 10.

¹⁸ According to N.K. Miller, *Arachnologies: The women, the text and the critic*, [in:] *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. eadem, New York 1986; and eadem, *Arachnologies: kobieta, tekst i krytyka*, trans. K. Kłosińska, K. Kłosiński, [in:] *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Antologia*, ed. A. Burzyńska, Kraków 2006.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. English edition, pp. 270–271, and Polish edition, pp. 512–513.

²¹ Ibid. English edition, p. 271, Polish edition, p. 513.

²² A. Zlatar, *Soba, kuhinja...*, p. 5.

otiska njihovih života u stvarima.”²³ On top of that, in Vrkljan’s novels other people, often famous ones, are frequently recalled, like for example Marina Tsvetaeva in *Marina ili o biografiji*, and Mark Rothko in *Pred crvenim zidom*. Their participation in the narrations serves a deepened autoanalysis of the author in reality, a sort of “recognition of oneself in another person and the recognition of the other inside oneself,”²⁴ which enables to make the author’s/female signature in the text. And the problem of female signature, female emblem is absolutely essential in arachnological discourse.²⁵ It is possible that this emblem constitutes also an attempt to create a kind of common biography in order to reach oneself, even though the author is aware of her unique situation:

Ono što pišem sve više nalikuje na labirint biografije u koji sam zalutala. Svi su putovi u eroziji i zbog krivo pročitanih putokaza postaju provalije. Ali ta nestablina podloga oduzima svemu tvrdoću, nerazumijevanje. Upušta se u nesiguran život. U ljubav²⁶.

The intertextual entanglement of other people’s biographies and writing elements — not only female, according to the idea that not only women can be the female voice²⁷ — in female history/story creates a sort of a common experience of the history and the politicization as well as the combination of artistic and physical experience. Diachronicity and synchronicity of the process in which blood paints signs on the body/flows out of the body and the thread is entered in the loom, the ink fills out a sheet of paper, represent a woman’s way to express/describe herself, a way to go down in history.²⁸ In *Pred crvenim zidom*, the extensive use of metaphors of red is also characteristic — on the one hand the red stresses the vitality of the process of creation, on the other hand, it reminds about the pain to which a human being is doomed, equally as an artist and every physical being, in this case it is additionally politicised. The red dominates the whole world that is presented; it describes the scenery of war ravages, the environment of artistic creation as well as the biography including corporal nature, identity and memory. The war experienced by individuals is mainly a sensory and sensual experience — it has not only its colours (black, red) expressed also by

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 12. Zlatac underlines also the existence in the works of Vrkljan the elements that adjust *su-žensko-pisanje* (*sin-gine-grafia, auto-gyno-grafia*), in which the specific common women’s biography is realised.

²⁵ N.K. Miller, *op. cit.*, English edition p. 273, Polish edition p. 511.

²⁶ I. Vrkljan, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

²⁷ Cf. G. Borkowska, *Metafora drożdży. Co to jest literatura/poezja kobieca?*, [w:] *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie — antologia szkiców*, ed. A. Nasiłowska, Warszawa 2001.

²⁸ It is also a reference in a sense to women’s resistance tools, in the face of obliging discourse. Whereas, in the scope of interpreting the text it allows “critical arrangement, which permits to read contrarily to undifferentiated texture in order to discover gender specific subjectivity incarnated into writing as well as to recover in the area of presentation of the emblems of its construction” also „interpretation and renewed reading of a certain story, very common in the history of Western literature which unravels twined structures of authorities, gender and identity, inherent to creation of mimetic art.” N.K. Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

daytime, it also smells and sounds in its own way. Its smell refers generally to the ruins of burnt cities but also decomposing human and animal corpses — since the war is a phenomenon that shakes the foundations of the whole microuniverse in which battles take place, it breaks the continuity of individual and common but also natural environment's existence. The sound of war is described by cries, shouts and detonation rumbles — blowing up, burning and bombing buildings fill the whole area with grey dust. Writing/telling one's story bustles with life but also it tears off to blood. The blood — a sign of death and life but also a physically tangible form of soul, becomes the most valuable ink. The escape into the "blessed un-telling"²⁹/oblivion is not possible any more — the red colour of time/story flows into the heart labyrinth and it influences its beat — a women must talk in order to exist, to try to be saved at least, she has to show or sometimes shout out her painful existence in the "male" history:

Ponekad pisanje stvara jedan drugi svijet. Crveni raster biografije. Samo jedna riječ i moguće je odahnuti. Tad čovjek zaboravlja buku s gradilišta u blizini i živi negdje drugdje. Ne utjeha, ne. Tajanstvena tišina. **Otpor**³⁰.

Since the history/war "flew into" the writer's veins, it ceases to be only a matter of which one talks in numbers and dates by moving arrows on a map — thus, the storytelling through body and blood is an important way of transmitting messages, a physical experience and pain. Because this literature is characterised by the same subject — the rules lost, fragile, defenceless and hopeless towards reality.³¹ The act of writing in the Vrkljan's work appears as a unique possibility of protest, subversion, discord with the world where an individual does not matter, in which one needs to play certain conventional imposed (especially on women) roles characterised by submissiveness and silence among orders and others' (meta-)narration.

What did the little girl know? Tatjana Gromača

Published in 2004, Tatjana Gromača's novel *Crnac* exposes the absurdity of the conflict for a cause in a seemingly naive narration of the little girl/young women from the very first sentences:

²⁹ I. Vrkljan, op. cit., p. 450.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 435.

³¹ E. Kazaz, *Pisanie o wojnie*, trans. M. Czerwiński, [in:] *Literatury słowiańskie po roku 1989. Nowe zjawiska, tendencje, perspektywy*, vol. 1 *Transformacja*, ed. H. Janaszek-Ivaničková, Warszawa 2005, p. 183. "Monumental hero who in the name of great historic act has even right to cross the line of ethics — regardless of him using arms of ideological form — dominated South Slavic historic narrations. [...] This monumental conception of history and the paradigm welded with it will begin to erode only at the moment of appearance in the literature of postmodern self-awareness trains. [...] One should also remember that former epic shout of the hero is being replaced by lyrical and tragic confession of historic victim. The image of history creator is being replaced by the image of the hero suffering historic evil, whereas instead of utopian promise made by the hero, there is postmodern dubiety, pessimism and antiutopianism."

Kada je došao rat, otac je ponovo oženio majku, po drugi put, iako se prije toga nisu rastajali. Oženili su se u crkvi. Nisam išla na njihovo vjenčanje. Ali sam zato morala otići u crkvu da me svećenik pokrsti. I moja sestra se morala pokrsti. Svi smo morali otići u crkvu, ali smo morali paziti da drugi ljudi ne misle da se krstimo zato jer moramo.³²

The novel is characterised by “incomplete nature,” fragmentary nature, a state of limbo between poetry and prose that determines the power of this work. Searching for an appropriate way of expression, Gromača locates herself outside a model closed within impassable frames, in this way responding to demands of the need to look for new ways of expression for female writing and language. The additional “requirement” of this search is in this case the war and events related to it that escape any logical explanation.

The melancholy, “fleeting” and fragmentary nature are important elements that determine the memory and this story. Even though this melancholic narration could seem to be a longing escape to childhood (memories of it), it does not bring a rustic image of the lost Arcadia. Thanks to exceptional sensitivity, empathy and simplicity of expression, one observes the signals of standardizing socialisation and coming (or actually, already existing) violence in the passage taking place in the time “before war.”³³ The little girl from Gromača’s novel already knows that the world has been divided. The amnesia training that is performed by the school and any other socialising institutions takes away individuality from human beings and aims to fulfil a culture project of a boy/girl. In case of land and countries’ division after the collapse of Yugoslavia, the amnesia is an extremely strong strategic and propaganda tool thanks to which nationalism can exist — it extends the concept of sex to those of nation, faith, country and language. We observe, especially in the school, situations that form national identity with a top-down emphasis on which nationality is good and which one is bad (hostile) — children who now belong to the enemy’s country (which is meticulously marked next to a child’s surname in the teacher register) must feel ashamed and walk with lowered heads.

Functioning in the oppressing regime assumes that one needs either to surrender to it (oblivion) or being aware of its power one has to live somewhere on the margins, transforming pain and disapproval into a sort of insanity. Resistance to social (and as one will see also national) matrix, the maintenance of child’s sensitivity condemn to exile — being an outsider who is aware of a power division in the world. What existed as a sort of feeling of a young girl who does not fully understand yet but observes already and gets to know the mechanisms of violence transforms into an experience of a girl and a woman enhanced by the nationalist project. In reality, the world of the story, especially after crossing the fictional censorship which is determined by war, seems as a place full of the insane, freaks

³² T. Gromača, op. cit., p. 65.

³³ On that score, I can notice some points that this novel and the widely commented *Absolutna amnezja* by Izabela Filipiak, recognized by many as one of the most important Polish novels of the 1990s, have in common.

and melancholics stepping out of the lines of the nationalist project — thus, the craziness is also a disapproval for the amnesia and the “new truth.” Recalling the young girl serves an extremely important function in the story — it constitutes a key to the transitory character:

An expedition in search for a young girl is difficult. Yet, the journey seems indispensable if we want to make young girls exist again, to make them go out of the non-existence [...] The search for them may sometimes mean reopening the old wounds but it also can lead to rendering our child joy free or to disagree with the stereotypical treatment of a woman. [...] Because the little girl was first of all a child. Sometimes she was a princess, other times a mother but also a soldier, a nurse or a football player, sometimes she was a boy. Thus, her identity is fluid, changeable, always in a constant process of creation [emphasis — P.K].³⁴

Memories of the little girl are also a way of reaching to pre-logic sensitivity, which is based on conventionalization and schematization according to social and cultural requirements.³⁵ Crossing the boundaries is demonstrated in the novel in many fields. In the sphere of intimate and physical experience (for instance through sexual initiation with a female friend), and also the observation of the vague line between the “normality” of the world and the madness. The character of the heroine herself is transitory, she is a child of parents whose nationality suddenly started to be that of the enemies. Finally, the style of the story is trans-border — it oscillates between poetry and prose. The plot focuses on 138 passages resembling the schema of a poem in a volume of verse, it is interwoven with lyrical descriptions, morals and impressions. The suspension of the narration, oblique statements and the use of ambiguous silence, as if in view of the end of a certain world the language becomes hopeless (like a young child?) and words useless or limiting, seems also evocative.

Both the style and the way of recording the plot are directly named in the text — in the Polish version it is a fragmentary record inseparably connected with a fragmentary (photographic?) activity of memory and a fragmentary character of memories. Fragments, blinks, flashes, glimmers linked to objects around which (and from which) threads of memory and narration are led. It is because people, emotions, important moments in the heroine’s life refer to objects. Therefore, feelings and emotions are the key elements for a typical way of remembering (way of keeping the memories) in this novel. The whole text is marked by a melancholic and sad tone. It is not only sadness or girl nostalgia provoked by the madness of war and transformations of the heroine’s environment. Permanent despair and unhealed melancholy of the one who feels more and sees more are shown in Gromača’s text. In a work dedicated to the analysis of melancholy in reference to Freud and Butler’s assumptions, Joanna Mizielińska puts forward arguments for the

³⁴ I. Kowalczyk, E. Zierkiewicz, *Wstęp*, [in:] *W poszukiwaniu małej dziewczynki*, ed. I. Kowalczyk and E. Zierkiewicz, Poznań 2003, pp. 11–12.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 13.

existence of this type of sadness as a consequence of a loss of a beloved person (also an object inside oneself) and the incapacity to go through the process of mourning in view of social prohibition and taboo, as well as the inability to realise or express and put into words the experienced loss of somebody or something and what went away along with it. The individual suffers from loss at the earliest stages of one's identity formation which determines hetero-normative frames of masculinity and femininity for a boy and a girl while at the same time forcing to get rid of the love to an Other and Other inside oneself the loss of whom/which — even though we are not always aware of it — we are mortified by.³⁶

In the melancholy of the female character of this novel, the melancholy of a young girl, a girl, a woman, I would look for traces of real (emotional and physical) as well as symbolic violence that an individual experiences since the earliest years, executing a project of normative identity through forcing behaviours and preferences in accordance with gender requirements the regularity of which the author is aware of and which are presented without any additional comment in order to emphasise their ordinary and also absurd nature.

History, hysteria, spasm

Bringing up the concept of “our history,” a concept of *herstory-history* and the issues of female voice and condition in the oppressing regime, I will try to present *Uho, grlo, nož* by Vedrana Rudan. As Rudan confesses in one of the interviews in Polish magazines, she used vulgar “male” language in her novel, because Tonka's monologue aims at men, a group that possesses and divides the power.³⁷ At the same time, the outrage, a voice of protest especially among users of this language generated by this phenomenon indicates the absurd and double-faced nature of the system which establishes it, a system based mainly on violence. Of course, in order to overemphasise the “essence” of it, the author often resorts to exaggerations, multiplications with the use of specific poetics of shout, fury and hysteria. Yet, the most shocking is not the fact of existence of such language — war, battle, chauvinism and power language, but its appropriation and exposure by women („To su prejake rječi. Kurac, pička, jebanje,

³⁶ J. Mizielińska, *Melancholia małej dziewczynki*, [in:] *W poszukiwaniu...*, op. cit., pp. 113–133. “Melancholy of a little girl may be understood in the context of the whole process of »girling the girl« connected with the practice of social life. An important element of such »girling the girl« is, more primordial than identification, rejecting of potential love objects — the effect of heterosexualization of the desire. It is something we cannot forget if we want to be recognizable in the social space and not only the set of behaviours, dressing code, or the way we walk inherent to our bodies from the time of our birth, which we later repeat/quote during entire lives. It is also [...] the set of people who we can love and those who we are not allowed to love. Those of us who do it, do it against culture based on this primal ejection. This offense against norms is accompanied by social ostracism and pain,” p. 124.

³⁷ P. Wilk, “Koniec Europy mężczyzn”, *Rzeczpospolita* 2005, no. 263.

kurčina. Još iz usta žene. Još iz usta žene u godinama”³⁸). What sounds “simply” as a typical “male” statement in a man’s mouth, sounds “unnatural” when uttered by a woman. Since it sounds so, it stresses that it is possible that the language, style we use is also imposed with the causative/creative power of which one fulfils a cultural task based on violence. What is more, Tonka is created as an “awful woman”: smuggler, unfaithful wife, materialist, bad mother (“the murderer of the unborn”!), she does not spare herself — adjusted to the cultural requirements — when furiously cursing. Tonka blames herself, reduces her value, goes towards autodestruction, but her voice expresses in fact what forms the culture exaggerated by the (post-)war post-Yugoslavian reality. It copies the state (Pogačnik notices here „hiperboliziran kritički mimetizam”³⁹) legitimized by a social and cultural “norm”:

Ljuta na politiku, zgađena kolektivizmom, anarhistica i “antiprotivna” Tonka protestira protiv fizičkog i mentalnog nasilja i svih perfidno-perverzivnih igara bez kojih, kažu, ne funkcionira sustav, a njezin se integritet pokušava utrpiti u kolektivne (nacionalne, povijesne, birokratske, generacijske, spolne, “cosmo” i dr.), odreda sumnjive ladice. Protiv toga ona sikće pred dosadnim TV prijamnikom, svjesna da je prevarena, u ratu i u miru, bez razlike.⁴⁰

Tonka’s shouting within four walls in view of a memory of moving picture in the television with the voice off appearing as a gloomy example of centuries-old constraint of female silence which is a historic, artistic and cultural experience is very meaningful. Female history and memory is enveloped in silence: we move lips, talk, shout, make grimaces but we stay inaudible — because somebody turned off the voice, somebody decides about our voice and silence.⁴¹

With the use of exactly this sort of language that recalls over and over again the metaphors of a cage or a mousetrap, Rudan demonstrates the manipulations and patterns to which we are subject. The central character of the novel, Tonka, presenting herself as a “tongue without the head,”⁴² tries to shout out everything bringing back from the memory, mainly according to the association rule, events that bear witness to everyday violence and enslavement. The enslavement (inciting hatred, promoting stereotypes) that was reinforced by politicians, media, culture, discourse style “je-baćine i ratnih priča.”⁴³ The war is once again depicted as a game of big boys which suddenly needs to be ended:

Osjećamo se dobro, pušteni sa lanca. Konačno l j u d i. Samo. I jedino je to zajeb. Rat ima svoj rok trajanja. Jednoga dana majstori odluče. Treba pokupiti kantice, izvući lopatice iz pjeska. To je uvijek frka. Jer nas je krenulo. Sad kad je naljepše... Kako gotovo? Kakva “pravila igre”? Netko nam govori da je pjesak letio previsoko. Ili predaleko. Sve kanticе nisu na broju. Odjednom je nenormalno jebati

³⁸ V. Rudan, *Uho, grlo, nož*, Zagreb 2002, p. 41.

³⁹ J. Pogačnik, op. cit., p. 272.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cf. M. Kostash, “Literatura to pamięć czasownika »pisać«”, trans. by C.A. Torbicka, *Literatura na Świecie* 1988, no. 4, s. 9.

⁴² V. Rudan, op. cit., p. 38.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 52.

njihove curice. Eto. To ne volim. To je licemjerno. [...] Ljudi su se u ratu osjećali ugodno. Ogromna većina ljudi. Svi n o r m a l n i ljudi osjećali se u ratu dobro. [...] Možeš urlati, pjevati domoljubne pjesme, mahati ljepom zastavom, neka se vijori, možeš klati, možeš krasti, možeš pobiti pola grada u ime pravde i istine.⁴⁴

The awareness of existing constant manipulations is shown in the novel: starting from a presentation of “us” and “them” distorted by media and stereotyped through the need to declare and prove one’s ethnic identity (which becomes a real “obsession” of Tonka), paradoxical requirements and principles of behaviour imposed on women, ending with the emphasis on the importance and objective of the war as “promotion of democracy.”⁴⁵ Not only the war/history appears at this point as a pathogenic factor condemning Tonka to insomnia, swallowing bigger and bigger amounts of sedatives and conveying suicidal thoughts. The memory, which is a record of the trauma — recurring nightmares, obsessions — in medicine described as a posttraumatic syndrome or a trench syndrome, in reality is a trauma of everyday life because the war and peace are one thing. Thus the illness, in this case paranoia, depression and hysteria are a kind of female memory, experience and resistance. The “spasmodic” syntax is characterised by repetitions, associations, ellipses and emotional short sentences which are often reinforced by exclamation or question marks. We observe a combination of a nervous language full of vulgarisms and familiar expressions and a shaking body and hysteric laugh. Hysteria may be a key to the female writing (a key to expose contents that were blocked until now). The notion of hysteria was often a subject brought up at the turn of the 20th century also in literature — the above-mentioned development in medicine, but also emancipation movements and misogynistic backlash contributed certainly to it⁴⁶. Schamma Schahadat makes a remark in her work concerning the issue of cultural gender and neurosis in literature,⁴⁷ a couple of models linking art to illness among which the most important ones are: a pseudo-medical article aiming at describing elements of the illness that mark specific generations and a historic moment; a literary text in which “medicine and poetry are connected together so that on one hand, the illness reproduces images from the medicine (mad, hysteric), on the other one, symptoms of the illness are translated into the literary;”⁴⁸ finally artistic behaviours copying symptoms of the illness as a creation of one’s personality. Thus, hysteria acquires artistic and aesthetic values in the field known as “the art of nerves.” From a feminist perspective, hysteria is first and foremost a defence and (artistic) message. Notwithstanding, it is worth noting the modern attempts to unite psychoanalysis with

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁶ Cf. E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy. Gender and Culture at the fin-de-siecle*, London 1991.

⁴⁷ S. Schahadat, *Szalone kobiety, nerwowi mężczyźni: histeria i gender na przełomie wieków*, [in:] *Nowa świadomość płci w modernizmie. Studia spod znaku gender w kulturze polskiej i rosyjskiej u schyłku stulecia*, ed. G. Ritz, C. Binswanger, C. Scheide, Kraków 2000.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 247.

feminism and suggested changes of meanings — in place of the idea of jealousy of a penis that a castrated women/inferior man suffers from in reality the female desire of power and freedom should be emphasised.⁴⁹

The screams of Tonka are emphasised also by the sense of hopelessness and resistance towards the conventional way of speaking imposed on women — taking such a perspective, the whisper and silence constitute the fulfilment of women's experience and stress the discrepancy between its dramatic nature and the order to remain silent as well as the inability to express oneself. Rudan mentions also another question important for the condition of femininity in culture and politics — the question of (self-)sacrifice. As its symbol, she chooses a biblical heroine — Judith, which for sure means something in view of the importance of this personage in the Croatian culture and tradition when it comes to enslavement and fights for an independent country (present in the Croatian consciousness inter alia thanks to the poem of Marek Marulicia). However, this motif is transposed from a question of freedom and ethics to the issue of power legitimized by violence and humiliation — a power reinforced even more by a sacrifice of/from women. The hysteric story serves to self-purification to some extent. Through shouts, it is also a desperate attempt to reach the reader in society based on a cultural monologue. At the end of the novel, when a documentary is about to be broadcast, the heroine turns the sound on so that the journalist regains her voice.

As Pogačnik remarks, this novel is a “catalogue of Croatian political, social and private nightmares,”⁵⁰ by contrast the title is explained by the critic as: “glo pripada pripovjedačici, uho slušateljima/čitateljima, a nož — to je tema, oštra kao najnoštrenija oštrica.”⁵¹ But does this title not have at least a few more connotations? The movement of a knife from an ear to a throat — the act of killing, “broadening” a smile — an order to play a social role, cutting off a tongue — silence and screaming, memories of female experience.

Conclusion

The examined works constitute an example of literary possibilities towards experienced trauma and the search for stylistic solutions to the described trauma. They raise the problem of expressing the inexpressible and presenting the end of a given world. They often present the alternative vision of war and ways of experiencing it. They describe its physical nature — the aspects of an enslaved body and also the body as a tool of artistic protest. They attract attention to the power, limits and mysteries of memory mechanisms — a memory that appears many times as memories

⁴⁹ See A. Nasiłowska, *Feminizm i psychoanaliza — ucieczka od opozycji*, [in:] *Ciało i tekst. Feminizm w literaturoznawstwie — antologia szkiców*, ed. A. Nasiłowska, Warszawa 2001, p. 207.

⁵⁰ J. Pogačnik, op. cit., p. 270.

⁵¹ Ibid.

of violence (socialization, standardization, politicization). Nevertheless, these stories mainly bear witness to the female experience concerning political transformations: silence, suppressed sensitivity, transitory nature, discrimination, reification, madness and otherness. They also bring up a question of “a homeless generation,” a generation without homes, homeland, language and the problems of identity, the lack of recognition of points of reference around someone (world transformation) and inside oneself. The voice of “the homeless” — a voice other than a hegemonic voice of power discourse — doomed on being silenced or absent, becomes audible now.⁵² Yet, it would not be the same as it is now, had it not been for women writing. It is enriched by power and potential of female expression, observation experiences that are capable of breaking old meaning structures and destroying the oppressing regime intertwined with these structures. These women indicate the permanent experience of culture based on violence, stereotypes and exclusion. Women raise their voices, they cease to be silent. The image regains the sound.

⁵² Cf. E. Kazaz, *op. cit.*, pp. 183–184.