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Theme of the thesis: *Polish historical prose by women after the year 2000*

Summary

The thesis focuses on historical prose published by women after the year 2000, a subject matter which has not yet been discussed thoroughly. It presents a detailed picture of the phenomenon, paying attention to the genres favoured by female writers, as well as the themes covered by their works and the ways they perceive the different historical periods - from antiquity to the times of World War II. Historical prose by women (with an exception of a few best known writers, Zofia Kossak, Hanna Malewska and Jadwiga Żylińska) seems to be insufficiently acknowledged, although it is an important and noteworthy area of Polish literature. It mainly belongs to the popular category, with all the consequences of this fact. Moreover, some postulates of feminist criticism are manifested in this type of prose. Sometimes female writers explore themes which are overlooked in mainstream literature, they aim to revive the memory of forgotten female figures from Polish and world history, they ask important questions in their works about women's status in history and about the changing relations between the genders throughout the history. Besides the visible feminisation of history, in new historical prose by women one can notice schematic plots, clichés, and a tendency to insufficiently realise the potential of the complex, and at times only partially researched, biographies of women and the stories told.

The first chapter of the thesis, entitled *Polish historical prose by women before the year 2000. Reconnaissance*, presents an overview and the characteristics of historical works by women, from the early 1800s until the year 2000. It also explores the evolution of and changes in women's prose, by reference to the literature written by male authors, which for a long time was recognised as universal. Particularly in the 1900s, female writers in their works combined - with a varying degree of success - the entertaining features and educational goals, the latter gradually becoming less important as a result of political changes. References are made to well-known female authors who mainly explored historical themes (the aforementioned Kossak, Malewska, and Żylińska); however, the chapter more frequently focuses on the forgotten female writers whose works rarely attract attention of scholars. Their works did not go down in literary history not only because of the artistic weakness or derivativeness often attributed to them, but also because of the social conditions in which these authors lived and worked.

The second chapter, *The Romance of the Novel and the Past. Characteristics of women's historical writings after the year 2000*, reviews the opinions presented by researchers

investigating popular literature, recognising that it can be interpreted in different ways, and emphasising its role linked with the fact that it most quickly responds to the readers' needs, reflects their expectations, and impacts their perceptions of historical figures and the social and gender roles played by women and men in the past. This section also characterises the state of research in women's historical fiction in the West and in Poland, paying attention to literary trends and sources of inspiration for the novels analysed, which primarily include translations from foreign languages and historical television series.

A distinction is made here between two types of literature, i.e., *feminocentric literature* which only to a small degree aims to revise the view of the past, and imply intends to bring back overlooked female figures, and contains only small modifications to genre and cultural models; as well as *feminist literature*, also referred to as *herstoric*, which is critical towards dominant narratives, and exposes male-centric mechanisms of history-making as well as abuse of power over female sexuality and the body. The section also discusses the literary genres most popular among Polish female writers, i.e., romance, family saga, historical crime novel, biographical novel and historical-fantasy novel.

The final subsection of the second chapter is entitled *The Missing Half of History. Non-fiction genres and popular history*. In the area of literature investigated here we can also distinguish feminocentric and feminist/herstoric approaches. The former is more visibly present in Polish literature published after the year 2000, and it continues the old way of writing about history, which is expressed in the choice of recognisable genre conventions and the portrayal of protagonists in their traditional social and gender roles. This tendency is represented for example by the books published in *Znak Horyzont* series, by such authors as Anna Herbich and Magda Łucyan, and in the titles containing the words "girls" or "Polish women". The other group comprises works by authors taking a less straightforward approach to literary genres, choosing such forms as historical report or family history, and playing with the conventional ways of presentation by creating characters with complex psychological features, transcending gender-related limitations. Here we can mention works by Alicja Urbanik-Kopeć, Joanna Ostrowska, Anna Kowalczyk as well as biographical and historical reportages by Magdalena Grzebałkowska and Olga Gitkiewicz. The authors emphasise that it is impossible to present a completely truthful picture of the past and give clear-cut answers regarding the decisions and motivations of the protagonists.

The most extensive third chapter – *The past in historical prose by women after the year 2000: a theme, problem, costume, context or product?* – is related to the picture of the past in the most recent literature and attempts to characterise the major areas of contemporary

historical prose by women. The section focuses mainly on popular literature, and to a lesser extent on prose by mainstream female writers, more frequently acknowledged by critics and scholars. The chapter predominantly discusses literary fiction (or *belles-lettres*) and works which, according to the authors, make reference to family history. These usually are narratives which are not strictly historical but rather inspired by the past. The works discussed in the chapter are divided based on the category of theme, taking into account the specific historical periods of interest for the authors of the books. A reference is made here to the traditional periods adopted in historiography (Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque, and Sarmatism), and to distinctions of culture-related nature (nineteenth-century category). The works in question cover the times between antiquity and the end of World War II. What is important here is the authors' attitude, reflected in the works, towards various stereotypes related to gender, nationality, class, which appear in pop culture.

Works related to historical periods are represented by various types of biographical novels. The novels set in the Mediaeval realities make reference to the convention of adventure stories (sometimes they evoke the type of *Piast dynasty novel*, which evolved after WWII), and at times contain fantastic themes (the series *Odrodzone Królestwo* [Reborn Kingdom] by Elżbieta Cherezińska). The largest group of works related to the 19th and 20th century comprises family sagas taking place in the context of all the important events of those times, as well as novels of manners and romance novels, sometimes these two conventions merging within one book. As regards the works set in other historical epochs, there are notably fewer literary biographies. The writers more frequently create works of fiction or books inspired by family memories, with historical figures appearing in the background. Biographical novels mainly focus on artists (or monarchs in the case of the older historical periods), and at time persons connected with the world of politics.

Authors of popular prose sometimes complicate the picture of the past by including references to social and economic disparities, turbulent political situation, economic realities, and they present a broader social panorama by introducing characters representing various social classes, as well as ethnic and religious minorities. Like nationality-related stereotypes, these distinctions are treated by them instrumentally, primarily as an impediment to the characters' love affairs. Here, the issues which the authors seem to be most concerned about are also pointed out; these most importantly include women's position in the past, evolving as a result of the moral, social, political and cultural changes occurring more rapidly since the second half of the 1800s, and enabling women to pursue careers and education. The discussion

here also seeks an answer to the question formulated in the title concerning the status of the past in women's historical prose.

The final chapter of the thesis, *Looking into the mirror of the past. Historical novels by Eva Stachniak*, discusses the main themes of books by this Canadian novelist of Polish descent, an author of biographical novels written in English and translated into many languages, and focusing on fascinating, multidimensional female characters from the past (e.g., Zofia Potocka, Delfina Potocka, Eliza Branicka, Bronisława Niżyńska). Taking a detached view of the history of Poland and Europe, the writer extracts universal and up-to-date meanings from the past and tells the story in such a way that it is relatable and comprehensible to readers all over the world. The chapter focuses on characterising the female protagonists of her novels in the context of such issues as (e)migration, identity and dilemmas of art and creative work.

The *Conclusion* answers the question formulated in the title of the third chapter and concerning the role of the past in historical prose by women after the year 2000. On the one hand, history is a more or less effective costume disguising contemporary people, and on the other hand it is a context and a problem for the writers who seek answers for questions about the family past and their own identity, and the changing gender relations. Yet, far too often history is used as a "product" which is reflected by mass-produced, commercial novels (trashy romance stories set during the Holocaust and in the realities of World War II). The dissertation ends with *Bibliography* and *Annex* with a nearly complete list of historical writings by female authors, from the 1800s until 2023.

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