

GENDER IN A PERFORMATIVE DEPICTION IN TADEUSZ ROZEWICZ'S DRAMA *WHITE MARRIAGE*: ON THE BASIS OF JUDITH BUTLER'S THEORETICAL TEXT

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Introduction

The role of women in Polish culture today is defined by norms usually deriving from three traditions: the 19th Century culture of the nobility, Catholicism, and post-war communist transformations. The culture of the nobility produced not only the ideal of the Mother-Pole but also a new understanding of freedom. What the Polish nobility always understood by personal freedom was Poland's independence and their own participation in government. So the picture of the Polish woman of the 19th century consisted, on the one hand, of the ideal of the Mother-Pole, a symbolic model of an ideal wife and mother of a soldier fighting for independence, which, on the other hand, gave Polish women duties going beyond the sphere of tasks referred to as feminine (household duties) and pressed them into becoming independent. At the same time, the development of industrial structures caused the transfer of women to a lower level on the social ladder. The model resulted in a completely unrealistic idealization and, in effect, in comparison with the ideal the woman, women had to become creatures unable to fulfill the criteria of an ideal. The other source of tradition – Polish Catholicism – combined a traditional model of femininity with fundamental values: heroism and readiness to dedicate herself and sacrifice her needs became the norm.

Despite the lack of feminist organizations under the communist system, an official feminist organization called the Polish Women's League (*Liga Kobiet Polskich*) has been in operation in Poland since 1913. Its representatives made public declarations in which they supported martial law, and thus created a negative picture of woman as a passive creature, who adjusted to the norm and was hostile towards any change. A short period of

activity of the Women's Commission (*Komisja Kobiet*) should also be mentioned. This organization did not share the views of the 'Solidarity' Trade Union on the role of women, and stressed that in Poland the status of a woman is low and women themselves do not realize their rights or the degree to which they are violated.

In the 1960s feminist ideology reached Poland in the form of fashion, music, and press articles. It is at that time that hatred towards the word 'feminism' was born in Poland. Irrespective of this ideal, a modern woman became an ideal in the 1960s: an emancipated, independent creature, successful at home and at work. While in western Europe after 1970 the women's movement flourished, the political situation in Poland made it impossible for formal women's structures and organizations, independent of the communist authorities, to be established. At the same time, in the 1970s, the role of the Catholic Church in Poland grew and therefore so did the place of the model of femininity advocated by it.

All these traditions had one feature in common: an extremely passive view of the world of women and men, united by national issues, which did not allow for the creation of too strong a division between the sexes. Therefore, as Maria Ciechomska argues: "The oppressor could only be the imposed political system and not patriarchal structures" (1996:317). The notion of feminism reached Poland as early as the times of communism but only in the form of a description of western feminism, which, moreover, was very distorted: "Characterizing the situations of Polish women, Anna Titkow uses the expression 'pressure.' Women's adjustment to the requirements of pressure happens because of historical tradition (over the centuries Polish women had little chance to be responsible for

their own fate), because of the early socialization of women and their life experience” (Ciechomska 1996:318).

With all society’s prejudices against feminism, in view of political changes, Poland’s opening towards the west, and the initiatives of women’s groups we can observe traces of feminist ideas appearing in the consciousness of some social groups. As a result, issues like contraception, violence within the family, and the sexual abuse of children are no longer taboo. The example of Poland shows that women’s progress from traditional dependence to freedom does not always happen in a linear manner, and it can be, to a considerable extent, conditioned by the complications of national history.

In *White Marriage*, a drama written by Tadeusz Różewicz in 1973, we can see an attempt at diagnosing Polish culture and the inter-human relations present in it, projected onto the backdrop of sensual life. But eroticism in Różewicz’s play is not an aim in itself; it is subjugated to the problem of the human condition through the deeply contemplated heritage of Polish culture. In his interview with the critic Józef Keler, which took place at the premiere of *White Marriage* in the Royal Theatre in Stockholm on 23 April 1976, Różewicz said: “I’m not able to say why I wrote this play. I could give specious answers. For example: I could say that because of the rising wave of pornography in the world I was trying to stop it with this play, to restore a human face to eroticism and sex, because in pornography it has a not human face” (Keler 1976:65).

Constructing gender in Tadeusz Różewicz’s drama

In Różewicz’s *White Marriage* gender is shown in the context of Polish culture and its customs at the turn of the century. The plot of the drama takes place at the turn of the 20th century, and the following motifs show references to Polish culture: an old Polish manor house, the life of the nobility, girls from the manor house growing up, and national symbols such as the Polish Mother, the Insurgent’s Wife, and elements of parody or literary allusions, e.g. Young Poland’s lust or the mask of a Young Poland poet.

The characters of two young women are shown in the drama against a background of 19th century mentality and traditions. Różewicz seems to pay attention to contradictions resulting from the 19th century way of perceiving women.

In the drama we have two adolescent girls, for whom their family has already written the continuation of their adult life. Bianka is to ‘get married’ and Paulina is to ‘devote herself to learning’. The 19th century ascribed a designated place in society to a woman; the position of a passive person, dependent first on her family and then on her husband. Both characters, Paulina and Bianka, try to break away from female attributes which, like the institution of marriage, were to guarantee them a life in line with socially accepted norms. In order to find their lost identities and individualities, against commonly accepted social norms, the young women ostentatiously stress their physicality or, in Bianka’s case, enter the realm of male activity. In contrast, we see the characters of older women, the Mother and the Aunt, whose words and behavior prove how illusory the revolt of the young girls is. These female characters’ passivity towards stereotypes causes these stereotypes to become normalized mechanisms governing the world. The juxtaposition of female characters with Polish culture carried out by Różewicz in *White Marriage* shows the way in which these characters initiate an argument with the roles imposed upon them.

Starting with Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement in *The Second Sex* that ‘nobody is born a woman, we become women!’, a distinction has been made between biological gender and cultural gender or sex identity. Cultural gender is partly resultant from the general importance that society places on its functional meaning. This means that gender determines our life not directly, but indirectly, through the rules of social relations. The body – as de Beauvoir claims – constitutes a historical situation, is a way of making, dramatizing, and recreating any historical situation. As purposefully organized matter, it is always an embodiment of capabilities, both conditioned and limited by historical convention. Therefore, being female is, according to de Beauvoir’s differentiation, a meaningless fact, but being a woman implies the necessity of becoming a woman, forcing the body to coincide with the historical idea of a ‘woman’, convincing the body to become a cultural sign. In other words, the body realizes itself in obeying the historically determined range of abilities and in so doing as a recognized and repeated bodily plan. Gender is a plan, whose aim is cultural survival, therefore, the term ‘strategy’ better reflects the situation of compulsion under which the making of gender

occurs constantly and in different ways (Butler 1997). Thus, as a strategy of survival cultural, gender is a presentation with obvious penal consequences. Intermittent cultural genders constitute a part of what 'humanizes' individuals in contemporary culture and those who are not able to create their gender properly receive regular punishment. This is, as Butler argues, because there is no 'essence' which gender expresses or manifests, or the objective ideal to which the gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the idea of gender is formed by a variety of acts which create it. There would be no gender at all without them. Thus, gender is a construction, which constantly hides its origin, a name we give to the language through which we reach the knowledge of our desires.

According to Judith Butler, cultural gender, as an act whose incarnated subjects exist as much as they dramatically and actively impersonate and really assume certain cultural meanings, is not an individual act. And despite certain differences and individual ways of acting one's own cultural gender, the fact is that it is done according to certain specified norms. "An act which somebody performs; an act somebody acts is, in this sense, an act which was performed long before this somebody appeared on stage. Therefore, cultural gender is an act which is repeated, which, like a script, lives longer than the actors who appear in it, but which needs these actors to be updated and presented as reality again" (Butler 1997:409-10). Cultural gender as public activity and an act does not constitute a project reflecting an individual choice; on the contrary; it is imposed or ascribed to an individual. The body does not passively give in to the rules of the cultural code, but also the individual 'I' is not ahead of the existence of cultural conventions, which in principle mean bodies. "Talking in terms of a performance, the actors are always already on stage. Like a script can be performed in many ways and like acting requires both the text and its interpretation, the body, marked by gender, plays its role in a culturally limited bodily space and embodies interpretations within already specified limits" (Butler 1997:410). When de Beauvoir claims that a woman is a 'historical situation,' she stresses the fact that the body suffers because of a certain cultural construction, not only because of conventions, which sanction and order how to create the body, this 'act' or performance which it is, but also because of the silent agreement which creates the convention of its cultural

perception. By inference, if gender is a cultural meaning, which the body endowed with its biological gender assumes, and if various acts and their cultural perception determine this meaning, it might seem that within culture one cannot differentiate between biological and cultural gender.

At the turn of the century, the body was perceived as the 'soul's prison' and, yet, at the same time, it was being discovered as a cultural taboo. Physicality, which in Różewicz's works most often amounts to a dimension of physiology, is close to such modernist visions. Bianka's psychology is shaped by shame and a constant sense of sin and waking desires, which are caused by attempts at overcoming conventional femininity. The body-object in Różewicz's dramas seems to be an unquestionable certainty in view of the inconsistency of information about the characters brought to the audience. Therefore, depriving female characters of their physicality results in their failure to find their own identity, and their submission towards the role means the rejection of their own gender, and lack of self-acceptance. The problem of poetic distortions of female images undertaken by Różewicz makes the characters of his drama the victims of their epoch.

Analysing gender in the context of Judith Butler's theoretical considerations, I will try to show the ways the gender identity of stage characters constitutes a performative act and what its meaning is for the theatre. The reality of cultural gender is performative; it is real only within the range in which it is presented. In her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, Butler analyses the way cultural gender is created thanks to certain bodily acts and tries to present the possibilities of a cultural transformation of gender through these acts. According to Butler, cultural gender constitutes a performative act, induced by social sanctions and taboos. However, in the very character of cultural gender there remains a possibility of questioning the status ascribed to it. Assuming, like Butler, that 'this' body is constantly being transformed into a male or female body and that it is differentiated only through the appearance of the assumed gender, the starting point for my considerations on the problem of gender identity in Różewicz's drama will be the analysis of the way in which cultural gender manifests itself.

In *White Marriage* we encounter the conflict of gender and humanity, which has its reflection in social life as identity and role. Cultural gender, referring to the cultural determination of identity, is the reason why the initiation into gender seems to be the same as the initiation into the role. Being determined by gender means the acceptance of the socially imposed role, since finding one's own identity is so uncertain for the characters in Rózewicz's drama. The dowry of the bride is a ready form that Bianka has to decide on before she makes any other choice, before the process of individualization happens in her. The more she becomes a woman, the more alien she feels and thus the initiation into maturity turns out to be initiation into solitude. Bianka's confession shows her submission to the terror of stereotypes:

"BIANKA: ... I don't want to be a girl, I want to be a boy and I would like to have a penis instead of an opening, I would like to be a soldier when I grow up, and now a priest, is this a sin ...

Everybody at home laughs at me, so please tell me why I can't be a priest. Because I'm a girl and only a man can be a priest? Which means everything has been determined, once and for all."

The pressure of two antagonistic orders concerning behavior which Bianka gives in to are: on the one hand, the imperative of service to society (she wants to become a soldier or a priest), and, on the other hand, the social condition of a woman, or the terror of gender. Rózewicz does not identify this gender only with nature; on the contrary, gender is the most marked social category. Cultural gender, Butler writes, cannot be either true or false, either real or apparent. We are forced to live in a world in which gender creates unambiguous meanings, in which it is stabilized, polarized and presented as essence and mystery. As a result, cultural gender must be in line with the assumed model of truth or falsity, which not only resists its own performative liquidity, but also serves the social regulation and control of gender. A 'false' presentation of gender triggers off a variety of punishments, both direct and indirect; its 'correct' presentation ensures the existence of some essence of gender identity.

What is important in *White Marriage* is not the conflict between nature and culture, but alienation from the literature of stereotypes and

gender as parallel forms of violation: initiation into gender and the initiated human being. In *White Marriage*, the idioms of characters and of gender become forms of theatricalization of the world and, at the same time, the alienation of an individual. So the problem in the drama is not the antinomy of a social human being and a biological human being but the opposition between the whole human being and the censored human being – or, in other words, the free human being and a circumscribed human being, or censored on the one hand by biology (which determines gender) and society (which accepts only social roles coherent with biological gender) and on the other hand by gender stereotypes.

One of the main characters, Paulina, finds freedom in her role, while Bianka chooses rebellion in order to attain her humanity. Despite the condition of a woman, she keeps asking about her own identity. The first act of Bianka's transgression is exposing herself. Bianka sheds her female attire and stands naked in front of the mirror. Bianka's act can be interpreted as an attempt at transgression through a symbolic 'suicide', as an attempt at rebirth. A mirror reflection is doubling myself, 'another myself'. Her reflection in the mirror turns out to be the only proof of her identity, while the 'bride's dowry' is her entire 'biography.' The next stages of Bianka's rebellion are at the same time advancing the process of alienation. The manifestation of the role rejection is destroying the 'bride's dowry.' The change of roles in Bianka's case is the process of moving in turn from destruction to aggression (when, in a premeditated way, she uses the role imposed on her on her wedding night and manifests herself to Benjamin, her husband, as a chimera/ghost – terrorizing her victim). The final attempt at liberation is more drastic in its effect. At the end of the drama Bianka denies the imposed tradition, and brushes aside the woman's role by the abolition of her own gender. From this state of aggression she moves to self-destruction, and from gender struggle she reaches reconciliation through the transgression of gender:

"Bianka takes big scissors and cuts her hair, close to the skin, unevenly. She puts the scissors away. She covers her breasts with her hands and says to her reflection in the mirror: <I am> and then after a while she shouts: <I am ready>" (WM. 81-82).

Bianka's act proves a conscious disposal of the attributes of femininity. Bianka, in a way transgressing against gender, is only <free from ...> free from the terror of gender but she also wants to be <free to ...> free in an affirmative sense, also towards others, towards her fellowmen – to find her own identity in this inter-human relation. Not being able to escape from her femininity or to regain her father's acceptance, she is doomed to perform the symbolic act of mutilating her gender identity:

“BIANKA: I am (she takes a step towards Benjamin), I am ... (she lowers her arms) ... your (whispering) brother ...”

Covering Bianka's gender by depriving the character of the attributes of femininity causes a symbol of androgyny, not in the meaning of lack of definitiveness or lack of gender or hemaphroditism, but as a manifestation of humanity despite gender – the human condition of a woman. The act of Bianka's and Paulina's transgression of social norms on the theatrical stage finds its counterpart in transgressing the rules of dramatic probability. Therefore, Bianka's words: 'I am ... your ... brother ...' may also mean: 'be my brother', or 'I (the woman) am also a human being'.

So the statement that Bianka's rebellion against her own gender in the name of the full human condition has all the traits of tragedy, does not seem exaggerated. Indeed, Zbigniew Majchrowski says that “*White Marriage* shows a tragic conflict at the most basic level of existence, ‘the return to the body’ in Różewicz's work results in the discovery of a new antinomy: between the human being and gender” (1993:135). In this drama of the human condition, gender turns out to be a tragic privilege. And the fact that the reality of cultural gender is created thanks to confirmed social presentation means that the images of the essence of biological gender, the real or expected masculinity or femininity, also create a part of the strategy whose aim is to hide the performative aspect of cultural gender.

That is why cultural gender cannot be understood as a role which either expresses or masks the inner ‘I,’ irrespective of whether it is marked by gender or not. As a performative representation, cultural gender is an ‘act’ which creates the social fiction of one's own psychological interior. This model of selfhood is unlike that of Erving Goffman, who describes an ‘I’ that assumes and changes ‘roles’ within the

framework of complex social expectations towards the ‘game’ of contemporary life. So the ‘I’ is not only unavoidably ‘outside’ as a creation of social discourse, but the very image of the interior is the socially regulated and sanctioned form of fabricating the essence of the human being. “The fact that this assurance easily substitutes anxiety, that culture so willingly inflicts punishment or pushes to the margin those who do not act the illusion of the essentialism of cultural gender, should be a sufficient sign that at a certain level there is social knowledge about the fact that the truth or falsity of cultural gender was socially imposed and does not, in any sense, constitute ontological necessity” (Butler 1997:415).

An American theatre phenomenologist, Bert O. States, when writing about the function of dramatic art, enumerates four principal functions of dramatic art: as a means of objectivization of the subjective life of a community; theatrical reality experienced empirically; a perceptive function as watched during the performance; and the theatrical quasi-reality prepared from the substance of one's own body. The theatre for States is the illusion of an unreal world, since the world on stage is never a full, complete, defined world, and it is in danger of constant incomplete-creation. According to States, the theatre should be examined in two ways: semiotically and phenomenologically, or in what way the objects of the real or fictional world are established in the spectator's consciousness. Gender and language are two parallel though different systems of human entanglement.

I will therefore consider the problem of physicality of characters in Różewicz's drama on the basis of the semiotics of their behavior and the ‘psychoanalysis of the confession,’ which, in my opinion, will show the functioning of stereotypes within the range of roles ascribed to gender. ‘Confession’ here does not mean holy confession but the humanely human one, in which a human being stands in front of another human being, and the world of drama is a world without God. The confession of characters is the confession of their hidden fears and drives. Thanks to this, the individual complexes of characters are at the same time the internal manifestation of stereotypes of a broadly understood culture. Since particular characters of the drama become not so much the embodiment of the literary cultural model, e.g. of a 17th century nobleman, like Grandpa (the cult

of a sabre and a horse referring to the knightly model), but rather a projection of group imagination of the nation dominated by this model. Since group imagination loses the model itself, and it only keeps the gestures and props associated with it, in the theatre it finds its expression in both the characters' behavior and their language. Gestures and props in Różewicz's theatrical work turn out to be remnants of old rituals and symbols, which have now acquired the status of stereotypes. The Polish Mother, or 'whole life pregnancy,' as one of the female characters confesses, is the resignation from one's own personality, submission to the rhythm of biology, being the guardian of hearth and home. Benjamin is a pastiche of a romantic poet, who almost does not talk at all, but recites, or speaks through somebody else's poems. In Paulina's behavior the awareness of the theatricalization of life manifests itself – theatricalization through gender and literature; and at the same time the awareness of not being able to fit into both orders: of poetry and of life: "PAULINA: (...) I am not a nymph or Goplana who lives on poetry and seaweed." But it seems that Paulina's rebellion against the ascribed role has an infantile character and is doomed to fail. For, is there a chance of 'freedom' in the theatricalized world? Paulina assumes the role of a director in a theatricalized reality since, as it turns out, she finds a substitute for freedom in the role.

Gender in *White Marriage* is expressed through the position assumed in the arrangement of two powers of male aggression and female submission (Father-Bull and Mother). "It is the attitude to power which makes some a <man> and others a <woman> - irrespective of biological gender" (Barthes 1970:105). Hence Benjamin, who declines participation in the gender game, seems to be a character undefined in terms of gender. In Różewicz's drama, it's not nature or biological gender that defines the characters' identity but how others see them. So the arbitrary division between 'male' and 'female' is no longer valid, but only the gender of aggression and the gender of submission exist.

Różewicz's drama is not only entangled in literary contexts of Polish romanticism and modernism. The parody of a Polish manor house does not exhaust the problems of the piece. The playwright is looking for language beyond the canon of literature, since even if we find allusions to romanticism, they are not allusions to that of the great poets or of emigration, but to

local romanticism. The Young Poland motifs are not like those from Wyspiński's tradition, but are an attempt at a dialogue in expressing the problems of a contemporary human being, gender and freedom, because the problem of gender in Różewicz's work is related to the problem of a terrorizing society. The imperative to be the same as everybody else becomes a far greater danger for individual drives and individual existence. Difference is treated in the drama as a stigma, and every departure from the 'norm' as a taboo. "The terror of society is practically expressed through the terror of gender. It is society that has alienated human gender beyond nature through connecting it with the system of social roles and behaviour models (...). Androgyny is commonly believed to be a blasphemy cast upon a 'normal' human being" (Majchrowski 1993:112-3). In view of which, if we agree with Butler's concept that 'male' and 'female' are only cultural constructs, the tragic character of human nature and human condition in Różewicz's work is visible in the figure of being different, which is always stigmatized by society.

Phenomenological descriptions of the theatre allow for the analysis and differentiation of characters from among other theatre beings. We talk about theatre when the actor, endowed with a certain real character traits, creates the scheme of the role on the basis of instructions and presents the character on the basis of this scheme. And the spectator, watching a play in the theatre, creates an assumed character (presented on stage). The character then exists on various levels of concreteness, as a scheme of the role, as the character presented every evening, and finally as a character assumed by a particular spectator. Contrary to the theatrical character, presented here and now and unique, the assumed character is the character which I, as a spectator, interpret, and in which the theatre performance attains its greatest concreteness. An assumed character is the subject of the spectator's psychological acts, which remains the unique property of an individual spectator, who during the theatre performance or in the act of reading guesses the specific, quasi-real substantiality of the character. The assumed character differs from the real character in the degree of concreteness. The assumed stage character constitutes the spectator's focus of attention, so if the assumed character is eliminated from the theatre, this means that the spectator stops reacting to the actor's playing.

Often, while perceiving the play in the theatre, the spectator diverts his or her attention from the assumed character, but when s/he stops reacting to it, this is no longer theatre. According to States, the aesthetic distance in the theatre gives spectators security. States enumerates three ways in which the theatre speaks to the audience: modus of self-creation or the presentation of the actor; modus of cooperation, or the audience; and the modus of representation, which he considers to be essentially dramatic. The difference between the expression and the presentation is essential, because if the features and acts of the cultural gender, different ways in which the body shows or creates its cultural meaning, are performative, then the identity ahead of them does not exist. True or false, real or distorted acts of cultural gender do not exist either, and the postulate of real gender identity turns out to be the regulating fiction.

Conclusion

White Marriage was considered a play questioning habits and beliefs related to the cultural division of roles imposed by the patriarchal culture of the time. However, Różewicz's plays in which female characters appear reveal his fears of feminism. All his female characters are the embodiment of a gendered stereotype: a fat woman in *Files*, the Virgin Hero in *Spaghetti and the Sword*, a demonic housewife in *On All Fours*, silly girls, faithful wives, and fiancées. Young and attractive women exist in Różewicz's dramas mainly as sexual objects: fiancées from war time, the Secretary and the Journalist in *Files*.

Characters like Benjamin and Bianka play a key role in the feminist reading of the play. The character of Benjamin is built of literary quotations, so his identity, deprived of a permanent character and internal coherence, turns out to be problematic. Bianka emerges as a literary construction to an even larger extent. One could even venture the statement – just as Halina Filipowicz suggests in her book (2000) – that Różewicz's play seems close to the feminist aesthetics through its resistance to the unifying power and the strict discipline of the logical mind, which is usually ascribed to male domination or power. Nevertheless, such a conclusion would be based on the assumption that each gender has its own essential features, which would only strengthen the stereotypes of the cultural differences between genders, while the performative aspect of gender allows for the

interpretation of gender in categories of variety, and also as a kind of 'game' with the convention.

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