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IMAGES OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY CZECH PROSE

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The question of male-female relationships and of the images of women arises with natural urgency when we contemplate the value system of contemporary Czech society as reflected in certain stereotypes of heroines, especially in the predominantly male literature of the 1960s, 1970s and even 1980s. I have chosen to study mostly dissident Czech contemporary writers who are progressive in their political views, whose books, however, seem to be often severely biased when it comes to depicting the relationship between men and women.

It is striking that the more prominent prose writers in Czech literature of this period are men. This is not a situation characteristic of Czech literature as a whole. Czech literature has been endowed by prominent women literary talents in the second half of nineteenth century and even in the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, I am inclined to believe that the obvious predominance of male writers in the second half of this century is due primarily to the heavily ideologized character of life in our time.

After examining an extensive sample of contemporary Czech prose, I have come to distinguish seven general types of women which I designate in the following way: 1) the idealized woman; 2) the silent woman; 3) the resigned woman; 4) the silly goose; 5) the masculine chess-player; 6) the nasty woman; and 7) the victim turned nasty. For each type I have chosen a representative work or two but have also provided references to other similar works. In addition I discuss the images of men who complement these women. I believe that the question of male complements is an important one, if we are to discover deeper underlying beliefs and values regarding human relationships.

A. Prose by Men

1. The Idealized Woman.[1]

The woman of Bohumil Hrabal's novel Postřižiny (Haircutting, 1976) is an embodiment of beauty as seen through men's eyes and a nostalgic tribute to life before 1918. She is delightfully appreciative of the smallest elements of life. Like a true artist, she is wonderfully sensuous, yet lovingly compassionate. She is an effective worker, she possesses a sense of humor, and she is playful yet mature. It is a true pleasure to discover the existence of such a down to earth, yet poetic soul in a woman of contemporary Czech literature, however, she is clearly portrayed as a "male" feminine ideal, rather than as a real person. She finds total delight in the surrounding world and in herself. She is an extremist, a gargantuan, an adventurer. She is strong yet tender, and aware of her power over her man and men in general. Her husband treats her with kindness and a mixture of wonderful foolishness and devotion. She is always supportive of her man, who is sometimes a little awkward.

In the initial scene of Haircutting, the woman tenderly takes away every worry of her man at the end of the day without being pathetic. The scene is

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[1]We find this type of woman in Arnošt Lustig and Bohumil Hrabal. In Lustig „ it is the heroic Jewish woman standing up against incredible odds. as in the Prayer for Kateřina Horovitzová (Modlitba pro Kateřinu Horovitzovou, 1967). This woman is exceptional and so is her situation. Outside of this case, the type of woman that attracts Lustig's attention is the concentration camp whore, who is seen in a humanizing way as in Lustig's recent novel The Unloved (1985). This type of a woman, however, belongs rather to the category of a resigned woman. The difference between Lustig, Klíma and the other authors consists in the basic fact that they give a woman a place of importance in their works. Klíma's attitude to women is more real and detailed and it has to do with everyday life. His women types are very varied and his women characters cannot be so easily typified.

In the work of Hrabal, a woman does not always play an important role. In many of his works she is virtually absent. But there is a series of books--Haircutting (Postřižiny, 1976), Sad and Beautiful (Krasosmutnění,1979) and Harlequin's Millions (Harlekýnovy milióny, 1981) where a woman plays a central role. Haircutting is about a young couple living in the country, Sad and Beautiful is a series of tales about the same couple, however, here they are referred to as mother and father, and the narrator is not the woman as in Haircutting, but the son. Harlequin's Millions is a fairy tale about the same couple in a retirement home, this time narrated by the woman again.

saturated with pure tenderness. She does not say anything, simply caresses his wrinkles "away from his face, somewhere into the hair or behind the ears" and feels like a dangerous snake at that. This wonderful contrast lightens up the moving situation. The contrast is complemented later when the woman takes her pig to be killed and then works the meat and blood of the dead animal with gusto, sensuousness and humor. The killing is presented in a humane and matter-of-fact way, thus completing the portrait of the idealized heroine. She also turns out to have a healthy appetite. She starts in the morning with a bottle of beer and two pork schnitzels while her husband Francin looks at her with reproachful eyes, telling her that a proper woman does not eat like that (32-3). This, however, does not sway her from repeating the same ceremony the very next morning. The situation is picturesque.

This heroine exudes power and femininity and she clearly feels very happy with herself. She seems to have her own mind, however, she functions exclusively in the frame of a classical marriage relationship and one of the main charms she possesses comes from not taking life too seriously. She looks at her man with a mixture of amusement, love, and compassion as he seems to be much weaker than she is and very shy. He is old-fashioned in his opinions about how a "proper woman" ought to act, opinions which he enforces even in the form of spanking his wife publically when she cuts her beautiful long hair in her rebellious desire to become modernized and wear a bob. The spanking seems to give the wife more pleasure than pain and it rather makes her proud of her man. Francin is totally bewitched by Maryša, and this public display allows the woman to give her husband an opportunity to "be a man." She does this in many different ways and through elaborate rituals. So the relationship consists of a basically strong woman who does not mind living with a weak man, quite to the contrary, she is making him strong by ingenious tactics.

2. The Silent Woman.

While the idealized woman is an exceptional type in contemporary Czech literature, and even in Hrabal it only comes up as a nostalgic remembrance of the "old world," the silent woman appears prominently in the work of dissident writers such as Kundera, Kohout, Vaculík and Škvorecký . The silent woman is the most varied type of all. It not only varies from author to author, but even from book to book.

The most impressive example of the silent woman was created by Kundera in his famous first novel The Joke (Žert, 1967). This silent woman, Lucie, is most interesting because she was clearly created as a silent woman

intentionally and she holds the poetic key to the interpretation of the novel. This silent woman is also intriguing because she is emphasized in the composition of the novel. The novel is narrated by all the prominent characters in turn, while she is the only one who does not narrate her point of view. Another factor that makes her so interesting is that we follow her through an extensive period of her life, through some very crucial and dramatic events. She is gang-raped as a young girl. She falls in love with the main character of the novel, Ludvík, however, she cannot relate to him physically. Later she relates physically to his friend, who manages to communicate with her and give her a feeling of protection until she finally frees herself from the early trauma. But when after many years she meets Ludvík again, we are reminded of the silence between them.

Thus paradoxically, being silent throughout the whole novel, Lucie is the key to an important part of Ludvík's nature, namely his inability to communicate with and love a woman. She creates a strong counterpoint to the "political revenge story turned into a joke," as well as a refreshing balmy effect. She is the only character who does not have her own locked, ideological point of view. Thus she is able to be a total catalyst of the underlying truth. She gives the novel a masterly multifaceted character; she is the only tragic and pure character, precisely because she is unadulterated by an ideological point of view but is a mere expression of life. Notice also that this woman is a victim and her name is Lucie, from lux (light), and symbolically, we could say that life and light are what gets sacrificed in the lives of people who allow a closed rational system of thought to govern them. It may be the communist ideology, or a scheme of revenge, or any other scheme that cuts one off from experiencing genuine feelings.

Women are sacrificed on more than one level in this novel. It is a woman other than Lucie who is supposed to serve as a means of revenge, thus being made into a mere object for the protagonist to satisfy his urge for getting back at his opponent. It is this type of image and attitude in Kundera's work that made him so unpopular among women around the world. Love and respect for a woman and communication with the feminine world of perception and insight are absent in Kundera's world ruled by men. The woman becomes a mere sexual object, or object of revenge, or a silent companion who, if she is wise like Lucie, will not speak at all (her voice would not be heard by the self-centered man anyhow). The man is locked entirely in his system of thought and there is no space for a woman who would be unwilling to give up her sensibility and the genuine expression of her feelings. The only woman who can accompany a man of this sort is the perverted woman who gives up her feminine strength as the victim of

Ludvík's revenge, whose femininity is thwarted by her intense adjustment to the ideological world of man, and who can only become an object of mockery and a victim at the end.

Thus the silent woman gives very sad testimony about the position of a woman in a world where a man is in power, as the "stronger" man seems to use his power in exclusively destructive ways. While Hrabal's strong woman helps the man become stronger and more manly, the "strong" man in Kundera destroys his woman and defeminizes her. Showing a woman in this unflattering light, Kundera, as a matter of fact, gives drastic testimony about modern man. Here we have a man who is cruel, inconsiderate, unable to communicate with another system of perception, unable to bend, unable to respect a fellow human being. If we look at it from this point of view, we can see that, as unflattering as the image of the woman and her role might be in Kundera's works, the image of the man is even uglier. If we strip away the author's acceptance of the status quo, we see a cold, egocentric individual.

It is striking that writers like Vaculík, Filip and Škvorecký even though they have women as part of their novels, make them seem silent. Their women are silent in a different sense from Lucie. Lucie speaks through her silence. Vaculík's, Filip's and Škvorecký's women are not silent literally, but their images have nothing important and personal to convey and are silent in that way. The men in these novels sometimes make interesting ideological and political statements, but not interesting personal statements regarding their relationships with women.

3. The Resigned Woman.

The resigned woman is found in widely disparate writers. She is represented most often as a mature woman who is either presently engaged in a marital relationship or was so in the past.[2] All the novels of Kundera contain women married to a womanizing husband. These women are invariably miserable,

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[2]Such women are found especially in Kundera's novels, such as The Farewell Party (Valčík na rozloučenou, 1976), Book of Laughter and Forgetting (Kniha smíchu a zapomnění, 1980) and The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí, 1984). This type is also found in Hrabal's new trilogy Vacant Sights-Vita Nuova-Weddings in the House (Proluky-Vita nuova-Svatby v domě, 1987) narrated from the point of view of the writer's wife, and in Fuks's Mice of Natalie Mooshaber (Myši Natalie Mooshabrové, 1970) written in a surrealist mode.

jealous, seldom resorting to a confrontation with their torturers, and mostly accepting of their fates. They do not stand up for themselves; they know that would be useless, as they are relating to men with closed systems of behavior, thoughts, and feelings, who are unable to assimilate the women's feelings into a harmonious "intersystem." The men who complement these women are insensitive and often cruel self-centered people. They are most often preoccupied by what they perceive as their needs--needs of their fragile egos which they project as insatiable sexuality. They are people living in personal, loveless hells. Sometimes, as in The Unbearable Lightness of Being (Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí, 1984), these people believe that they love each other (the heroes of this novel are certainly deeper than the shallow couples in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting or The Farewell Party.) However, even though Tomas and Teresa are the most loving couple in Kundera's works, they cannot be loving in the true sense of the word. Tomas is depicted as a very attractive man with a "minor flaw." This "minor flaw" is his womanizing by which he drives his insecure wife to nightmares and perpetuates her insecurity. Thus the torture and destruction of the emotional well-being of a "beloved" woman is dismissed by Kundera as a minor flaw and the relationship is referred to as love. Teresa is dependent on Tomas and does not seem to have possession of her own self: she is at the mercy of her man. She, like other Kundera women, is not free to give love, but merely to cling to her torturer. All this happens against a backdrop of the Prague Spring 1968 events and subsequent emigration. These events, being political and affecting a larger population, conveniently provide a "positive" image for the hero. He is depicted as a decent man who loses his job as a prominent surgeon and becomes a window washer. Sex becomes a powerful image of the alienation predominant in the society. It is exclusively a joyless, cynical, detached event which repeats endlessly and exhibits a domineering as well as abusive character on several levels. It is a power game which strips the woman partner of her femininity and implicitly manipulates her into accepting the man's role or a passive role.

After their emigration, Teresa is driven by her ruthlessless torturer (whom she is not strong enough to escape) to return to Czechoslovakia, regardless of any political or other consequences. It is only then that Tomas discovers that his attachment to her is strong enough to compel him to follow her there. His behavior is interpreted as heroic, while hers is portrayed as a mere private trauma. Teresa did not have an unusual social position to lose, even though her life changes considerably as well. Tomas, like Sabina, feels to be above "the thing", they do not care particularly for their homeland, or for their respective lovers, they are able to take everything in a cool and detached way and live on the whole a self-serving life. Teresa is the one among the three of

them who has maintained authentic feelings which have a deep meaning to her. However, she is clearly resigned to her torturer, a man for whom women are mere objects of pleasure and Teresa makes a strange sort of exception due to her pitiful dependency. She would rather deal with nightmares and bite her nails till they bled than live without him. Tomas seems to be the sole value of her life. She does make an attempt to leave him once, when he continues his escapades in Switzerland where she feels foreign and totally isolated. But when he follows her to Czechoslovakia, she immediately continues the relationship, although nothing has changed. Tomas only mends his way, when they live in the country at the very end of their life where he simply lacks the necessary opportunity. The situation ends in a blind alley. Tomas has not reached a moral victory, he is simply resigned now, too. The author therefore calls on an accident to help end the lives of both of them. The lack of an internal ending is compensated for by an external one.

Kundera may be very progressive in his attitudes toward social and political problems. However, he sees private relationships almost exclusively as domination of a woman by a man. The concurrent domination and insensitivity of totalitarian goverments toward their citizens' needs, and the lies and disrupted communication because the domineering system is a closed system, are, however, a miror image of the private behavior displayed by the typical men in Kundera's novels. Usually these behaviors are simply interpreted as a consequence of the general demoralization caused by the system. But the relationship between the public and the private life is mutual. The Mice of Natalie Mooshaber (Myši Natalie Moosharové, 1970) by Fuks gives yet another insight into the world of a woman. It is an original insight from quite a different point of view. This is a novel of the absurd with political implications. The behavior of women that emerges here is clearly no more than a subconscious reflection of the author's vision. Natalie Mooshaber is an old woman and a widow. This in itself is an exceptional event in Czech literature. She has two adult criminal children. We do not find out much about her relationship with men, but we are constantly confronted with the issue of her being abused to an extreme degree by her children, who are emotionally cruel to say the least. Her daughter throws a pie her mother baked for her wedding out of the window, then publically chases her mother out of her wedding party. Subsequently, she and her brother play a series of cruel tricks on their mother. Natalie works, interestingly, for an institution called "Care," a social organization taking care of unmanageable children. She also works at a cemetery and her main private hobby is putting poison into mice traps. She lives quite an isolated life, has only one friend, an older woman, who takes care of the house where Natalie lives. Her life is one of

poverty and monotony, enlivened only by her children's tricks. These consist of raising her hopes for something unusually rewarding (a party in a luxurious hotel, a lucrative job, gifts) and then dashing her hopes and leaving her dismayed.

Here we have a resigned woman abused by the system and by her children. This is counterpointed in an interesting way by her work for the "Care." Natalie is a kind woman; however, her resigned attitude toward the children makes her sometimes assume a "bad boy" where there is an abused boy. This motif repeats persistently in the novel and at one point we even suspect her of turning into an involuntary murderess of a child whom she offers a piece of pie that is covered with mice poison instead of sugar. This is played in an absurd fashion, thus giving the situation a multifaceted, polysemic exposure. This constant play with who is the abuser and who the abused culminates at the end of the novel when the reader suddenly finds out that Natalie is no other than the much-talked-about mysterious princess who has been in hiding during the rule of the present dictator. Now that the dictator has been overthrown, she is reinstalled to her power and she rules in a kind way. If we wanted to ideologize, we might interpret this stunning absurd ending as the recovery of the hidden powers of the woman which can only happen after the male dictator is dismissed. In any case, it shows the pervading powerlessness of the woman during the novel in a startlingly new way, namely as a great self-control, generosity and self-denial. Unlike Kundera's or Fuks's engineered women have positive power features. In their personal lives, however, they seem to be reconciled to a rather drab, unimaginative life.

4. The Silly Goose Alias The Smart Operator.

Such are the two most typical faces of Josef Škvorecký's women. The two concepts are only seemingly in contradiction. In reality, there is a fluid transition between those two faces of the same phenomenon. The most typical of those is Škvorecký's Blběnka from the The Engineer of Human Souls (Příběh inženýra lidských duší, 1977), Škvorecký's much celebrated novel. Blběnka, whose name is formed from the adjective blbý , "stupid", is more or less a prostitute, an émigrée to Canada who spends her life in dressing as extravagantly as she can, speaking a funny mixture of Czech and English, trying to marry a rich man and certainly succeeding to attract him, going to visit Prague only in order to provoke staring at her. The narrator who is represented as a university professor of English literature is clearly very fond of this creature, he likes her apparently as she does not pretend anything, she is not corny, she amuses him by her supersexy tasteless dresses and her base mind. Like many other heroines of Škvorecký, she is a sex-object, not too intelligent, not too deep. Some of them may try to become

smart, like the student who is the true object of the professor's attentions in the The Engineer but their personalities and their emotional lives are rudimentary and shallow. There is not much difference in my view between the silly woman and the clever operator which are really the two sides of one type of woman, a superficial, mostly sex-directed doll. Occasionally we detect compassion in the author, as in the episode about the woman compatriot who is alone in Canada and who is trying to marry a Canadian boy and is making all the wrong moves at an important party, poking fun at his relatives, etc. There is no indication of this girl's feelings for the boy, but that does not seem to be an important issue. Škvorecký has solidarity with her plight as a lonely émigré. She acts something between a smartaleck and a desperado, which seems to be something that the author is able to sympathize with especially well. The male counterpart of the operator woman, the Czech émigré Canadian university professor of English literature is predictably equally superficial as the women he picks. He is the continuation of the hero Danny Smiřický whom we met as a teenager in Škvorecký's revolutionary novel The Cowards (Zbabělci, 1958) and later in The Miracle (Mirákl, 1972), where he becomes a secondary school teacher. The relationships that were characteristic for him as an annoying teenager are still characteristic for him as an aging professor in Canada. The women change names, receive special external features, like the supersexy dresses and a funny variant of Czechlish, but they continue to be the little figurines, objects for his personal amusement, as they were in his youth. This superficial, annoying and uninteresting part of this writer is interestingly counterbalanced with imaginative literary technique and sensitivity to language (even Škvorecký's first novel The Cowards was revolutionary through his applying of colloquial Czech at a time of stark Stalinist speech patterns). Škvorecký has a keen sense of history and politics and his novel brings important global insights into the history of Europe, especially Central Europe, and shows how it formed the psychology of the people born and grown up there. The cynicism, the special type of humor, untransferable into the virgin lands of America whose people have not been formed in the same drastic and tiresome ways, the sense of historical determination of life, the showing of the history from many different points of view, a mosaic of personalities, or rather little figures who all write to Danny who has become famous in the meantime, all these give a multifaceted picture of the historical events. The marvelous erudition, the first hand experience with the events, the sharp political sense, all this makes the reader often ignore the lack of deeper interpersonal communication or sense of respect for the people of the country that accepted him, the lack of respect for a woman or rather the lack of insight into her world. Indeed, this is the man's world in which the author moves, the

world of dictatorships, wars, disrespect for the fellow citizen, mutilations, showmanship, intellectual and ideological speculation. This world produces a powerful politician and an acute intellectual, but it also produces an immature and an insensitive man.

5. The Nasty Woman.

We find the nasty woman or the manipulative woman especially in Kundera's and Kohout's novels. In Kohout's The Hangwoman, for example, the mother of the heroine is totally manipulative. She lacks respect for her man, is willing to betray him, is always frustrated, attempts to control every situation and has virtually no conscience. Such women are married to weak men (usually a professor in Kohout), who have a poor sense of reality and of self and are out of touch with their wives. Such a woman has the ability to manipulate the man and to feel self-righteous about any foul play that can cross her mind. The man is not able to stand up for himself or please her and she despises him.

In Kundera, the best example of the manipulative woman is the mother of the hero in Life is Elsewhere (Život je jinde, 1974). Kundera depicted her with an unrelenting eye. She first manipulates her lover into marrying her when she becomes pregnant. She then hates him for his cynical attitude toward her and tries to further manipulate him into loving her, even though [illegible] unfulfilled passion on her son, stifling his ability to grow into a healthy, independent, and happy human being. As a result, he is unable to discern reality and empathize in a normal manner with other people. Kundera identifies these qualities with lyrical temperament. (This issue needs to be addressed separately elsewhere). The son has become excellent material for a hard-line Communist without conscience. Because his ego was trampled so miserably by his mother, he is willing to do virtually anything to heal his wound, including sending his girlfriend and her brother to prison out of petty jealousy.

Both Kohout and Kundera have portrayed women whose children have been made shy and without conscience by their mothers. In Life is Elsewhere the situation is again extreme. However, what strikes a female reader is the lack in Kundera of an attitude toward the father. The father here is virtually absent and allows himself to be manipulated; he lacks ideals, whether it would be to form a loving relationship with the woman he made pregnant or to refuse to be a part of it. He acts like a formless mass, who allows himself first to be manipulated, then avenges himself by deliberately cruel behavior to the mother of his child and by total neglect of the child. Kundera has once

again masterfully exposed sick human relationships and the weakness of the woman and "her" morbid product, the son. However, the author is lenient toward the part played by the father.

Thus the manipulative woman and the resigned woman both carry important hidden messages about the system--the manipulative woman "produces the system," the resigned woman puts up with it and thus perpetuates it. The idealized woman and the manipulative woman , on the opposite sides of the spectrum, live with a weak man. In the first case, however, the man is as genuine and loving as is the woman, whereas in the last case the man is cruel or "absent". Silence and resignation seem to be the ways women deal with destructive men in power, not so different from the ways the Czech population deals with its destructive men in power. The absence of a "good strong man", who would interact as an open system with a "good strong woman," is striking and typical of prose of this period.

6. The Masculine Chess-Player.

This is the only type of independent woman in male literature that we can find and it is extremely rare. We find this kind of female character in Kundera's most recent novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being in the figure of Sabina. Sabina is an unusual woman. A master of sex, she is emptied of love. She does not desire to be connected in a bond with a man and she uses men as sex objects herself. She is a painter and an independent thinker. She is the female counterpart of Tomas. It is indicative that the symbol Tomas has for her is her grandfather's hat. The hat surely is meant as a nostalgic object, but the fact that Sabina and Tomas use it as a sexual gadget, to intesify their sexual pleasure in each other is suggestive of the fact that a special kind of defeminization of Sabina takes place in order for Sabina to fit into Tomas's world, defeminization that they both agree on. Indeed, she displays many features traditionally thought of as male characteristics. She is cool, detached, easily manages to divorce sex and love, she is an original thinker with an independent lifestyle, she is unwilling to adjust and become attached to a partner, she uses sex as a pragmatic device for self-indulgence and companionship, lacks deep emotions or spiritual longing, she is cynical and even cruel. This is especially exhibited when she tortures Teresa in the scene of naked picture-taking. Sabina knows what Teresa is living through, she knows Teresa's hell which she helps to create, yet she enjoys the moment of embarassing Teresa, of intensifying her painful role in the triangle. Thus the portrait of the independent woman that Kundera gives us is a sad portrait. It is a portrait of a woman stripped of her female sensitivity, masculinized, lonely, escaping her own heart from one country to another,

from one man to another. She ends up all alone in a foreign country where she has hardly any connection to anyone. Her deepest feelings go to Tomas and Teresa as shows the scene where she receives the news of their death.

The novel is moving insofar as people's fates are portrayed as determined by the events of 1968, but it is disappointing in terms of the poverty of all the three heroes' emotional lives, and it is offensive in its pseudophilosophical generalized conclusions about "people's" motivations and in finding endless pseudo-excuses for the way in which sex is used, for all of which the events of 1968 cannot take an exclusive responsibility. I am inclined to call Sabina a masculine chess-player, as she moves her figures from one place to another, according to the circumstances, without ever being deeply affected by them. She has a profound feeling of homelessness which she is determined to perpetuate. She is the prototype of a modern man, her femaleness is only physical.

The writers presented in this paper do not seem to know a strong yet a sensitive woman, who is able to take a stand against a man who has nothing spiritually rewarding to offer to her, who is able to live without him rather than perpetuate humiliating and meaningless relationships. They do not seem to know a woman who still preserves her feminine sensibility, self-worth and her sense of basic values and does not lose courage and faith. In the rare cases when a single woman is portrayed, she is either masculinized, or depicted as desperately lonely, unable to involve herself in healthy human relationships with people in her immediate environment or in a meaningful activity, but can only think of a sexually abusive relationships as a way out of her feeling of loneliness and meaninglessness.

B. Prose by Women

6. The Victim Turned Nasty.

When studying the literature written by women and the heroines produced by them I found that I could not approach it on the same basis as that written by men. Good female prose, on the whole, is sporadic at the moment, a situation not typical of Czech literature in the past. At approximately the same time in the past century, Czech prose was practically dominated by women. Today there are only a few women writers. Iva Kotrlá is a writer from Brno whose stories Visit from ETC (Návštěva z ETC, 1987) are interesting, but her poetic vein is not quite held under control and her excellent realistic insights get weakened at the end of many stories by an unconvincing political twist which has a forced effect. The heroines here are not very pronounced, rather sketchy, as in Iva Procházková and Zuzana Brabcová's prose Far from the Tree (Daleko od stromu, 1987).

The novel that contains a great deal of material related to the topic of women in men-women relationships is Lenka Procházková's novel Eye Drops (Oční kapky, 1987). In the overall artistic value it is not on par with the work of the male writers treated in this paper. Its scope is rather limited and the message is somewhat lacking in depth. The language is not very interesting and like Kundera's last novel, the plot becomes somewhat unconvincing in the main turn of events.

Eye Drops relates the story of a single woman having a passionate relationship with a single man who becomes the father of her child. The man is not willing to marry her or to admit his fatherhood officially or even to live with her. She, however, does not consider all these facts , as well as his vulgar and insensitive behavior toward her as important enough to get him by gallop out of her life. Instead, she unrealistically consumes her life in a strange sort of love for him. She hardly thinks or talks of anything else than him and his irregular presence and serves him in the very primitive conditions of her summer house/hut, imagining that she is having a sort of family life with him after all and that it is just a matter of time and reeducation. We never find out why she is in love with this strange specimen of a man, we know very little about his nature. We only know that he is irresponsible, very detached from her, extremely insensitive. The heroine, however, insists on ignoring these features which she hopes to turn around ultimately.

Indeed, the novel suggests at a certain point that he is now spending more regular time with her and her little daughter and becoming, even if unofficially, more a part of the family. The author makes the reader believe that the tiresome situation will perhaps even have a happy end. The boyfriend, who "almost" lives with the heroine for three years, suggests that a marriage will take place in the not too distant future. One day he even asks if he can move his things into her place, as a friend of his is going to stay in his apartment. What a surprise for the heroine and the reader equally when the man disappears the day after and she gradually discovers that he has emigrated to West Germany without telling her. This turn of events is incredible even though nothing good can be reasonably expected from this man. That he would, however, invest as much time and energy as he did into this relationship only to leave it without a word for the sake of merely material advantages as the narrator makes us believe is hard to believe.

The heroine is a typical contemporary Czech woman, willing to put up with hardships and abuse from her man. On the other hand, she is not a pushover.

She does tell him off when he becomes truly obnoxious, however, she does not ever try to give the situation a deeper look and draw meaningful consequences. Instead, in response to his vulgarity, she becomes vulgar herself. The vulgar and ironic language that permeates the novel is quite realistic and typical of the contemporary Czech society. It is an expression of the general cynical and disgusted attitude which many people adopt towards the social and economic situation as well as toward the men-women relationships.

The heroine follows the philosophy that one does not, after all, expect the same things in a human relationship from a man as one expects from oneself, until she must face the painful truth that she has been used, abused, humiliated, made fool of, abandoned and so was her daughter whom she has allowed to see the light of this world fatherless from the very beginning, believing at first that father was probably superfluous, later that she would get her natural father to become her real father afterall.

It is regrettable that while the author portrays this sleazy type as an émigré, she takes a few shots at Western society. The author is not officially published in Czechoslovakia and thus belongs to the rangs of the counterculture.

In the novel, the heroine finds out with the help of her girlfriend the Frankfurt address of her lover and decides to slip out of the country secretely, only in order to poison him. It is in this part that the novel gains dynamics and turns almost into a detective plot. As she is using her girlfriend's passport, however, the heroine is acting irresponsibly herself, risking trouble for her friend. She is also acting irresponsibly toward her child, whom she would be forced to abandon if the act was discovered. These things, however, do not seem to enter her mind. In the last moment she decides not to perform the murder, but to leave it to fate to determine who will end up drinking from the glass containing the poisonous eye drops. She is now even risking her life. Fate decides in her favor, she does not die. Feeling relieved, she even has time to warn her partner about the poison in the other glass and when he does not believe her, she laughs at him. This dramatic act seems to have freed her of the psychological burden that she has been carrying with her for a year. She feels so exhilarated that she condemns the whole of Frankfurt as a "village" and an "asshole" and happily returns to Prague the same day. The conclusion gives thus an ignorantly haughty impression and acquires a character of local patriotism. The healing process that the heroine needs to undergo is dramatized to achieve an effect. It is only a chance that saves the heroine from either more suffering or death.

The heroine is originally a nice woman that is gradually acquiring nasty characteristics as she has allowed the man in her life to reduce her to her sexual self and as she struggles for her psychological survival. It is striking, that the heroine, a well educated woman (she is a university graduate), is unable to use her intellect and education to her advantage as she allows herself to be sucked into an emotionally destructive situation. Her spiritual life seems non existent, but that is something typical of the contemporary Czech hero or heroine in general. The political struggle is the only thing that replaces this vacuum.

There is a big difference between the nasty woman and the victim turned nasty. The nastiness in this heroine is positive, it is her defense in the face of misfortune and it serves to build her character, saving her life and honor. The nastiness of the nasty woman which comes up in the male literature is dishonest, superficial and manipulative. Thus we have a new type of a woman, a woman who is not silent, nor resigned. She is not idealized either. The book is an honest and personal statement.

The novel does not treat its main theme with depth or subtlety, but it does give a realistic insight into the implications of a sexually abusive situation for a woman. Even though this woman becomes agressive, she stays feminine. She is not portrayed as very appealing, but her final resolve to stand up for herself, even if late and for an impossible price, is to be greeted as a new element in Czech prose.

Unlike the male writers' depictions of a sexual relationship, Procházková's novel gives more detail of its process, as well as some insights into intimate feelings concerning birth, relationship to mother, child, lover, etc., which are largely lacking in male literature. The male literature tends toward a global depiction of the situation and especially of women's psychology. The man in both is given an extremely unflattering portrayal, which is reflected in the portrayal of the woman and vice versa. In general, the mens' men are more idealized, or at least the perspective on them is not so drastic, while in the women's writing the opposite is true. However, the fact that the ideologization of life and literature correlates directly with the basically antifeminine character of most of this literature, is undeniable.

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