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The Theme of Rape in Ida Fink's *Aryan Papers* and Tadeusz Śłobodzianek's *Our Class*

DOI: 10.18318/td.2017.en.2.3

Work on this text has been supported by the Polish Minister of Science and Higher Education, through the National Programme for the Development of Humanities (2014), under the Grant 11H12010481, agreement nb 0049/NPRH2/H11/81/2013.

The structure of domination is inscribed into the bodies of women.¹

In recent years the subject of violence against Jews, including Jewish women, in World War II has become an increasingly frequent topic of public debate. I wish to focus on two forms of representing sexual violence: in the first, it emerges as a symbol of Polish–Jewish relations; in the other, it reveals the continuity of patriarchal structures as the organizational model underlying the entirety of social relations. I analyze and interpret gender-based violence (specifically the theme of rape) in two literary texts associated with the Holocaust: the play *Nasza Klasa* (*Our Class*)² by Tadeusz Śłobodzianek, and the short story

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1 Asun Bernárdez, Irene García Rubio and Soraya González Guerrero, *Violencia de género en el cine español* (Madrid: Instituto de Investigaciones feministas de la Universidad Complutense, Editorial Complutense, 2008), 52 (translated here from the author's own translation).

2 Tadeusz Śłobodzianek, *Our Class*, trans. Ryan Craig and Catherine Grosvenor (London: Oberon Books), 2009. The book was awarded the Nike Prize in 2010.

“Aryan Papers”³ by Ida Fink, published in English translation in the collection *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*. In this essay I attempt to assume a “qualitative perspective that calls attention to the manners in which violence is employed, to the ways in which actors and their actions are legitimized, and to the variation in the values associated with their treatment depending on the author’s gender.”⁴ I am also interested in performing a comparative analysis that reveals whether the perspective – and, by extension, the manner of narration – is conditioned by the gender of the speaker and their affiliation with the dominant social group.

1. An Exposé of Sexual Violence?

Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s staging of *Our Class* won him acclaim as an author who had succeeded in exposing the most drastic manifestations of the violence that had been an inherent part of life in Poland during World War II, including sexual violence. The latter had been traditionally overlooked in Holocaust discourse, as discussed repeatedly by the authors of the book *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*.⁵ For centuries, this particular type of violence has been a means of exerting control over the female body, as evidenced by Joanna Bourke’s study of Great Britain, Australia, and the United States,⁶ as well as Georges Vigarello’s research in France.⁷ Three female characters in *Our Class*, Dora, Rachelka and Zocha, are victims of rape.⁸ Słobodzianek has the courage to depict sexual aggression, deconstructing some of its attendant cultural myths in the process, the majority of which have been used as cultural and historical justifications for the act.⁹ Among them is

3 Ida Fink, “Aryan Papers,” in *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories* trans. Madeleine Levin and Francine Prose (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 63–68.

4 Bernárdez et al., *Violencia*, 83.

5 “It was an experience that [...] is not easily reconciled with traditional Holocaust narratives.” Quoted in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Hanover, London: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 129.

6 Joanna Bourke, *Rape. A History from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: Virago Press, 2007). Chapter: “The Home.”

7 Georges Vigarello and Alicia Martorell, *Historia de la violación. Siglo XVI-XX, Ediciones Cátedra Colección Feminismos* (Madrid: Cátedra, 1999); Georges Vigarello, *Histoire du viol* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

8 Two of them are Jewish women: Dora and Rachelka, who later converts to Catholicism.

9 Copious evidence can be found in *Los violadores* and in *Histoire du viol*.

the myth that rape is committed by outsiders. In each instance of sexual violence committed in the play, the perpetrators are the girls' classmates: familiar and supposedly trustworthy individuals.

While the play decries sexual violence against women, depicting it in all its cruelty, it effectively justifies rape to some extent by employing symmetry. *Our Class* consistently juxtaposes the suffering of women with a certain positive aspect of this suffering, casting the women as victims – a role traditionally ascribed to them by patriarchal society. In two instances, this aspect acquires a “higher moral nature.” Zocha claims to have given herself to Zygmunt to save Menachem's life.¹⁰ Her words reinforce a patriarchal stereotype according to which a woman has not been raped if she is not injured or did not fight off her attacker. Rape is thus trivialized.

In order to survive, Rachelka must marry her Polish Catholic classmate Władek, who sheltered her during the war. Though she clearly does not love Władek, she must be with him in order to survive. She is left with no choice: either she seeks refuge, or she dies immediately. In the scene of Rachelka and Władek's wedding night, we witness rape in the full sense of the word. The playwright ruthlessly depicts the violence inherent in the notion that in marriage (that is, from the moment both sides sign the marital contract), the woman's body must always be available to the husband, that it must be at his disposal, even if it is against her will. This notion – the prevailing norm in Western culture not too long ago – is discussed at length by Joanna Burke in the chapter titled “The Home.” Słobodzianek bluntly exposes the sexual violence to which women were traditionally submitted to in the institution of marriage, as was Rachelka (later named Marianna following her conversion to Catholicism), who, as a Jew facing persecution during the war, found herself in a situation of forced subservience.¹¹

And yet in Słobodzianek's portrayal of the relationship between Rachelka and Władek, the violence is never fully exposed. Elsewhere, when Władek once again saves Rachelka's life, she appears to “adore” her “savior.” “He was hurtling towards us on that thing like Errol Flynn charging to save Mary Pickford.”¹² This scene, which follows that of their wedding night, depicts Władek not as a rapist husband, but as a “brave knight” coming to her rescue.

10 “I let him have his way with me. Anything so they wouldn't search for Menachem.” Słobodzianek, *Our Class*, 69.

11 As we later discover, the main character of Ida Fink's “Aryan Papers” finds herself in a similar predicament.

12 Słobodzianek, *Our Class*, 64.

Rachelka's words thus reinforce another patriarchal stereotype,¹³ namely, the notion that women need men to save them, and that they return the favor by offering adoration and sexual availability, which once again thrusts them into a traditionally passive role. Rachelka/Marianna's subsequent life story casts doubt on this idealized, romantic image. And yet the author somehow mitigates and downplays the significance of sexual violence (which, in the case of Rachelka/Marianna, is already part of an exchange, a ransom for her life) by juxtaposing it with the higher goal of salvation, and more importantly – as we later learn – by granting her a particular and limited role within the play.

Dora presents a more intriguing case. She is depicted as a woman who is the object of male desire, a fact emphasized in the theatrical production of the play.¹⁴ Dora is the victim of a gang rape; she defends herself, offering no hint of consent to sexual intercourse. "She was really struggling, but the boys held her tight."¹⁵ And yet her behavior and the words she utters immediately afterward confirm one of the most deeply-rooted patriarchal myths about rape: that when a woman says "no," she actually means "yes." Dora says:

I went bright red. [...] I fought back, tried to kick them off. [...] I screamed, but I could feel myself getting wet [...] I felt a pleasure I'd never known. [...] The worst thing about it was how much everything hurt. I'd been raped by that pack of savages and I'd actually felt pleasure. [...] I couldn't get the image of Rysiek's eyes out of my head. Wild and beautiful.¹⁶

All of this verges dangerously close to the belief that "women secretly want to be raped"¹⁷ and that they "need to be overpowered by men to feel sexual pleasure."¹⁸ We once again encounter a stereotype that, as Bourke observes, has historically served to legitimize sexual violence. According to one oft-repeated claim, women themselves "solicit rape" in order to "effectively [alter]

13 I describe him as a "merciful rapist" in another article. See Aránzazu Calderón Puerta, "Ciało (nie)widzialne: spektakl wykluczenia w *Przy torze kolejowym* Zofii Nałkowskiej," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2010).

14 A young and attractive actress was cast in this role. The effect is compounded by her costume and a style of acting that emphasize her sexual qualities.

15 Słobodzianek, *Our Class*, 39.

16 *Ibid.*, 38–40.

17 Joanna Bourke, *Rape*, 68. The author devotes an entire chapter to the subject.

18 *Ibid.*, 71.

the balance between blame and responsibility.”¹⁹ Dora openly reaffirms the idea that “she got what she wanted” (that is, brutal sexual intercourse!), and goes as far as to suggest a broader interpretation, according to which women fantasize about being raped... It is their dream to be gang-raped! Dora’s words retroactively strip away the significance of sexual violence, inviting the idea that despite her resistance, she essentially experienced no suffering—quite the contrary (the text mentions pleasure no fewer than three times!). One might pose the question: what model of female sexuality is Słobodzianek promoting by equating pain and pleasure? (Masochism would be an appropriate, if restrained, answer.)

It is greatly significant that the sexual violence is justified by the women themselves. All three of the female characters trivialize it, thus reproducing the very patriarchal discourse of which they are the victims. Each of them ultimately acquiesce to sexual violence as the lesser evil, or even as a source of pleasure (as we discovered above), which should certainly be considered an aberration.

At a higher level, the male–female relationships in the play (i.e., the couples Menachem and Zocha, Rysiek and Dora, Władek and Rachelka) stand in as symbols of Polish–Jewish relations. The violence perpetrated against Jews by Poles is personified in the rape of Dora and the forced marriage between Władek and Rachelka. The stereotypical “Judeo-Communist” imagery finds its reflection in the relationship of Zocha and Menachem, and in the manner in which he later abandons her.²⁰ The women in one community seemingly feel an “irresistible attraction” to men in the other community, an apparent reflection of their fascination with the Other. This sort of fascination mitigates the play’s actual condemnation of sexual violence. Słobodzianek draws on erotic symbolism in an attempt to depict the ambiguity of Polish–Jewish history and likely the symmetry of grievances between the two communities.²¹ Though he exposes sexual violence, he fails in committing to a full accusation as his use of rape as a symbol diminishes its relevance as a specific and peculiar instance of violence.

Women play supporting roles in the system of symbolic relations. Among the ten characters featured in the drama, only three are women. But

¹⁹ Ibid., 76.

²⁰ *Nasza Klasa* was inspired by events that took place in the village of Jedwabne, Poland. Menachem’s story is based on the life of Szmul Wasersztajn, who in reality had no association with communism.

²¹ Słobodzianek is dismissive of Polish patriotism and the resistance movement. In the rape scene, Zygmunt says to Zocha: “Now listen to me Zocha. We’re not just some band of hooligans, we’re the Polish fucking army.” *Our Class*, 69.

this is more than just a matter of numbers and insufficient representation. The men act, while the women remain passive. They act out the traditional model of “being a woman,” which involves “transferring to one of the men in the family or her surroundings the right to employ force. [...] The bravery of women has more to do with devotion and personal sacrifice than with the ability and right to use force.”²² The women in *Our Class* feel compelled to give up their own bodies, and that is the extent of their passive resistance. They represent the nation only in suffering, as the victims of the actions carried out by others.

This cannot be said of the male characters. They represent the nation wherever it is active. Their lives are not marked by their bodies and sexuality, as women’s lives are, but by action and decision-making. The men in the play assume a range of ethical, political, and religious stances (communism, resistance, Catholicism, Judaism, etc.). The life stories of women, by stark contrast, are inevitably defined by their emotional and erotic relationships with men. Dora, Rachelka and Zocha are largely – though perhaps not exclusively – locked within the body-object paradigm.²³ They are not depicted as autonomous agents. None of them rebel, take up arms, or display any emotional or sexual initiative. “Women do not act: things simply happen to them,” meaning that “history is told from the viewpoint of male characters (in the cognitive and, in many cases, epistemological sense).”²⁴

2. A History Lesson?

The generalizations about gender, its symbolic nature, and the relevance it acquires in the play become particularly apparent when we consider the Polish subtitle of *Our Class*: “Fourteen lessons in history” – this history, we are to assume, is that of Polish–Jewish relations. Słobodzianek’s concept of “history” and “nation” is openly male-centric, to the exclusion of women. Capital-H History is written by men, because it is they who act. Their experiences are the fundamental components of the narrative that later becomes History.

The “symmetrical” and circular structure of *Our Class* affirms this observation. The death of the two sons – the male progeny – of Zygmunt and

22 Bernárdez et al., *Violencia*, 87.

23 Perhaps herein lies the explanation of the puzzle that is the scene of Dora’s rape. One might ask: to what degree is it simply a depiction of male erotic fantasies (the excitement elicited by a woman’s “no”) and to what extent does it transform the viewer (the male viewer, of course) into the voyeur he has become as a result of traditional film (as Teresa de Lauretis observes in her seminal essay).

24 *Ibid.*, 112–113.

Menachem is shown as a personal trauma, albeit one that acquires a symbolic dimension: it is akin to the divine, biblical punishment for the sins committed by the group, represented here by the fathers (Poles and Jews, respectively). The severed continuity of the male lineage is revealed to be an ominous augury, one that becomes all the more apparent when juxtaposed with Abram Baker's stories about being the patriarch of his large family in the United States. Along with the ending of the play, this new symmetry (the loss of Zygmunt and Menachem's male children contrasted with Abram's plentiful progeny) appears to reaffirm the most traditional family model, one in which women serve little purpose other than to reproduce. Thus it is only the male progeny that are ascribed significance: according to the play, it is only men who can represent their communities.

A child, if it is to count, must be a man. The woman disappears from the symbolic realm. The best evidence of this – returning to the subject of sexual violence – can be observed in the fact that the loss of a son is a traumatic tragedy and an allusion to a greater “justice,” while rape essentially has no consequences, either for the image of the community (men are the ones who face punishment for their crimes; raped women are merely the objects of men's actions, and their experiences have no symbolic consequences) or in the characters' personal stories, in which the relevance of the act is diminished. The loss of a son provokes trauma; being raped does not.

In *Our Class* women's bodies are places upon which conflicting male communities (Polish and Jewish) inscribe their own texts. Women and the violence inflicted upon them become symbols. The meaning of the relationship between Jews and Poles is made apparent by the treatment of women's bodies and the depiction of erotic relationships with women. The women themselves do not count. Slobodzianek unambiguously decries sexual violence as impermissible, yet he uses it as a symbol of male relations, and in doing so strips it of its significance as a personal tragedy. While ostensibly criticizing the practice, he himself repeats (perhaps unwittingly) the gesture of inscribing meanings on the female body. Perhaps herein lies the explanation for the bizarre scene involving Dora. Not only is she a woman and a Jew – that is, a specific and unique subject – but she is also a symbol of relations among men. She experiences pleasure because that act is, in fact, not about her, but about the mutual fascination between two hostile communities. “The female body is seen as the »symbolic representation of the national body.«”²⁵

25 Ruth Seifert, “Krieg und Vergewaltigung. Ansätze zu einer Analyse,” in *Massenvergewaltigung. Krieg gegen die Frauen*, ed. Alexandra Stiglmayer (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1993), 101. Quoted in Brigitte Halnmayr, “Sexualized Violence against Women during Nazi ‘Racial Persecution,’” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, 31.

Ultimately, despite its promise to attempt a bold revision of history – a successful attempt, if only in part – Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s play exposes elements of the symbolic patriarchal structure while at once treating them as something natural and intrinsically understandable. He uses them, but stops short of interrogating the power structure that organizes the gendered images. Although the “»history« in which female figures appear is more modern and egalitarian” because it makes room for depictions of sexual violence, the “»story« ultimately pushes the women aside and into supporting roles.”²⁶ The patriarchal order is thus recreated and naturalized, because the “image of women remains influenced by more or less subtle forms of symbolic violence”: in this case, ones that operate at the level of nation-groups. I concur with the authors of *Violencia de género en el cine español* when they state that: “what we need is more than just a story that would recognize the existence of female figures; we need »stories« [histories and Histories] that would be told from the female point of view and would also depict conflicts that involve women.”²⁷

3. Surviving the Holocaust

That is precisely what Ida Fink does: tell a story from the female perspective. In *Aryan Papers*, she also deals with the issue of rape, but does so using a significantly different approach. Fink relates the experience of a young Jewish girl who falls victim to the sexual coercion of a Polish blackmailer. Her oppressor demands sexual favors in exchange for allowing her to purchase false papers that would prove her Aryan descent, giving her and her mother their last hope for salvation.

The experience of sexual violence is narrated from the perspective of a terrified victim. We see her nervous anticipation: “in her anxiety she had forgotten her handkerchief”²⁸; when she attempts to mentally escape the situation in which she is trapped, “the clinking of glasses, and shouts from the kitchen hurt her ears; but when she shut her eyes, it sounded almost like the ocean.”²⁹ We witness the woman’s internal struggle: “Perhaps he won’t come, she thought, relieved, then instantly terrified, because if he didn’t come that would be the end of everything.”³⁰

26 Ibid., 114.

27 Ibid., 116.

28 Fink, “Aryan Papers,” 63.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

The suffering further manifests itself in the girl's body, which Ida Fink's story also presents as the place where male domination materializes: "When he entered, her legs began to tremble and she had to press her heels against the floor to steady herself."³¹ Despite her best efforts, the young Jewish girl can not control her nerves: "Her legs were still trembling as if she had just walked miles; she couldn't make them stay still."³² The blackmailer's easy-going yet cynical demeanor stands in stark contrast to that of the female character: "Come on, let's eat. This calls for a celebration,"³³ he says to the girl, who, meanwhile, "was afraid that she would pass out; she felt weak, first hot, then cold. She wanted to get everything over with as quickly as possible."³⁴

This exchange, which takes place in a public place, shows how the *szmalcownik* (professional blackmailer) employs chivalry and protectiveness to cover what is essentially sexual and financial coercion. What is more, he appears unwilling to let the matter be settled once the sexual transaction is done, instead making it apparent that more "trysts" of this sort could be expected: "Send me your address and I'll come to see you; I've taken a liking to you."³⁵

As soon as the girl enters the room in which the "contract" is to be consummated, her anxieties resurface: "If I throw up, she thought, he'll chase me out of here and it will all be for nothing."³⁶ The victim resorts to the psychological mechanism of apologizing for both the oppressor and herself in an attempt to muster courage and cope with the situation:

It probably doesn't take long, she thought. I'm not afraid of anything. Mama will be happy when I bring the papers. I should have done it a week ago. We would already be in Warsaw. I was stupid. He's even nice, he was nice to me at work, and he could have informed.³⁷

This psychological mechanism is often encountered in victims.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid, 64.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid, 66.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

Fink's narrative tactic allows the reader to access the internal experiences of the characters, revealing the degree to which the ostensibly consensual sexual intercourse is essentially rape because of the inequality and power relations between the partners. What we witness in "Aryan Papers" is rape because we cannot assume that a person consents to sexual intercourse when she/he does so in circumstances of coercion, which occurs when the person faces the lack of material resources, the abuse of power, or deception.³⁸

Well, if it is, in fact, a matter of life or death...

Fink's narrative exposes the workings of patriarchal power in combination with violence against the excluded. In this instance, the Jewish woman's body is made available in a twofold manner: as a woman and as a member of a discriminated group. Fink depicts the continuity between sexual violence and that which is described as the "norm" in patriarchal societies: chivalry and paternalistic protectiveness that obscure a hidden system of violence which remains invisible from the inside. This is brutally revealed in the final scene, in the way the main character is treated once intercourse is over. The following is an exchange between the *szmalcownik* and an acquaintance, which occurs in the girl's presence:

"Who's the girl?" he asked, entering the room.

"Oh, just a whore."

"I thought she was a virgin," he said, surprised. "Pale, teary-eyed, shaky..."

"Since when can't virgins be whores?"

"You're quite a philosopher," the other man said, and they both burst out laughing.³⁹

The text ends with the exposure of the victim to the view of others (the presence of a third party, a witness) and her verbal humiliation, only adding to her suffering: "She could barely stand and once again she felt queasy."⁴⁰ We witness the classification of women according to the patriarchal virgin-whore stereotype, the category of lesser or greater "sexual purity" that has been internalized by women themselves and which determines, to a significant extent, their own bodies and sexual behavior. Similar experiences are shared by

38 As authors of the chapter "The Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust" point out in the book *Sexual Violence*.

39 Fink, "Aryan Papers," 67–68.

40 *Ibid.*, 67.

many women Holocaust survivors, who feel “shame and guilt of having [had] to resort to [their] sexuality in order to survive,”⁴¹ although these emotions typically remained unspoken. “As perpetrators of rape know all too well, rape silences women in a way that deliberately alienates them from their families and communities.”⁴²

In sum, “Aryan Papers” tells a H/history from a personal perspective, a viewpoint that is very close to that of a victim of sexual violence. Fink depicts the social and cultural conditions that engender this particular form of violence. She explains how the victim comes to see herself as guilty, thus deepening her own humiliation; how she is cowed into silence and made to experience shame, guilt, and the loss of self-respect. Yet the author does not permit violence against women to be treated as a symbol nor let it be mitigated by references to a “higher order” such as the “nation.” We find ourselves at the antipodes of Dora’s experience of pleasure, yet – in my view – very near to the trauma that affected thousands of women during the Holocaust. The shortcomings of Słobodzianek’s text are revealed in juxtaposition with Ida Fink’s story and the literary strategies she employs. *Nasza Klasa* aspires to open a new space in culture that would welcome stories about Jewish–Polish relations, yet this space turns out to be incomplete. As is often the case, narrative structures of this type fail to consider the female perspective and explain how little difference there is between rape and torture. As Zoë Waxman observes, “rape and sexual abuse – the violation of one’s body at the hands of someone seeking to cause both physical and mental pain – is one of the loneliest and most alienating things that can happen to a person.”⁴³

Translation: Arthur Barys

41 Zoë Waxman, “Rape and Sexual Abuse in Hiding,” in *Sexual Violence*, 130.

42 *Ibid.*, 129.

43 *Ibid.*, 132.