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### Cambridge: A Factory of Mediocrity. Maria Komornicka's Reportage "Youth's Paradise" (1896)

Over 120 years ago, an eighteen-year-old Polish woman writer Maria Komornicka came to Cambridge to prepare to study in the all-female Newnham College (Filipiak, 2006: 98; Filipiak, 2001: 163–199).<sup>1</sup> During her six-month stay in England she wrote a series of caustic, critical reportage<sup>2</sup> about discrimination against English women and the asymmetrical relationships between sexes in England, comparing them to those in Polish and other Slavic countries, in which – according to Komornicka – more partnership was allowed. The reportage was first published in 1896 in *Przegląd Pedagogiczny* [Pedagogical Review] and was ironically titled "Raj młodzieży" [Youth's Paradise] (Komornicka, M., 1896). After "half a year of struggle and suffering" (Komornicka, A., 1964: 307) the author returned to her home country deeply disappointed, which her sister Aniela Komornicka attributed to "an aversion to regular work and a strictly regulated lifestyle", as well as "a social and spiritual alienation" in her new surroundings (Komornicka, A., 1964: 307). In reality, however, Komornicka returned to Warsaw mainly to continue her work on *Forpocząty* [The Forefronts] – the first modernist manifesto in Polish literature. She wrote this book with much older, more acknowledged journalists Wacław

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<sup>1</sup> In both publications Filipiak provides more information about Newnham College, founded in 1871, and the social and academic life of its female students. Filipiak points out the differences in the way the college was perceived by Komornicka and by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own*, and by other former students of the college.

<sup>2</sup> The beginnings of this genre in Poland are discussed by Joanna Sztachelska (1997). Sztachelska does not mention "Youth's Paradise" and it is debatable if such an omission is correct. According to her, the first reportage in Poland is Reymont's *Pielgrzymka do Jasnej Góry* [A Pilgrimage to Jasna Góra] from 1896.

Nałkowski (a geographer and a social activist, the father of Zofia Nałkowska, who will later become a well-known writer) and Cezary Jellenta. What was waiting for her in Warsaw was a circle of friends who would fulfil her intellectual ambitions and show her new opportunities, open to her not as a student, but as an adult and a social activist. Her return to Warsaw was also an act of rebellion against her father, who had sent her to Cambridge to distance her from – in his opinion – dangerous left-wing gentlemen who had been too interested in his daughter. Furthermore, in 'Poland' (which did not exist on the maps of Europe, partitioned by Prussia, Russia and Austria-Hungary) women could not study yet. It was only in 1896 when the Jagiellonian University admitted the first three female students to their pharmacy course. Therefore, in those days, the young and ambitious Polish women who had sufficient financial resources studied mostly in Switzerland. However, Augustyn Komornicki chose the Great Britain, not Switzerland, as he believed that it was the English language, not German, that was crucial to learn by "a developed creature of our times" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 177). Therefore, as Maria went to Cambridge not of her own volition but forced by her very authoritarian father, her attitude must have programmed her for a disappointment, which she describes in "Youth's Paradise".

Before we move on to an analysis of the reportage itself, let us first introduce the writer. Maria Komornicka (1876–1949) is an extraordinary figure in the history of Polish literature, displaced from the canon for many decades and only recently (so far only in Poland) rediscovered, mainly by the scholars of gender. Her first texts were written in the spirit of budding modernism and were published when she was in her teens. She was perceived as a prodigy. However, in 1907 she started to identify herself as male, which resulted in her incarceration in lunatic asylums for many years and a corresponding exclusion from literary life. She was still known within a narrow circle of readers, but her profound reportage from England as well as other pieces of prose and poetry have so far not been republished. A large body of her work has never been published at all.

Maria Jakubina Komornicka was born on 25 July 1876 in a wealthy family of landed gentry, a second child of Anna, *de domo* Dunin-Źawowicz, and Augustyn Komornicki. She was born in Grabów on Pilica, near Warsaw, at the time located in the Russian Partition. Maria showed signs of a literary gift early, at the age of seven, as she ran the family chronicle. She was thoroughly home-educated by governesses and spoke fluent French. She also enjoyed considerable freedom and the support of her mother, who was charmed by her exceptional individualism. Yet, at the time of her teenage rebellion, which coincided with her first love and a literary

debut, Maria experienced a fateful event which probably traumatized her for life. At the age of seventeen, Maria ran out of her house one night with the purpose of drowning herself in the Vistula River. On her way there, however, she was stopped by the police patrol and taken to the precinct, where she was subjected to a medical examination reserved for prostitutes. It is possible that Komornicka was verbally and possibly even sexually abused, which at the time was a common practice in such circumstances. Only the next day did Maria come home under the escort of the police. This incident left permanent marks in her psyche as well as her writing (Komornicka, M., 1907: 64–80).

The first short stories written by Komornicka in her teens are focused on the fates of outstanding and rebellious adult women. Two of those, *Z życia nędzarza* [From the Life of a Pauper] and *Staszka* were published by *Gazeta Warszawska* [Warsaw Gazette] already in 1892, and two years later they were released in a volume *Szkice* [Sketches] financed by her father. This literary success was followed by Augustyn Komornicki's decision to send his daughter to a university. After her quick return from Cambridge and subsequent death of her father, Komornicka moved on to lead a rich creative and social life and in 1898 she married Jan Lemański, a poet ten years her senior. This marriage almost led to her death, as her jealous husband shot at her and her male cousin in Cracow's Planty. After a spell of travelling abroad, in 1900 Maria decided to separate from her husband. A blooming creative spell ensued, and at that time Maria wrote fragments of her novel *Halszka*; it is an unfinished piece of fiction about a girl who risks everything to free herself from the pseudo-idyllic world of landed gentry. The first part of this novel was serialized in 1901 in *Głos* [The Voice]. Between 1900 and 1903 Maria spent most of her time in Warsaw, abandoned by her friends and unwelcome in some circles due to her unconventional behaviour and her writing. Flirting, balls and literary meetings became gradually empty and meaningless. She got distanced and reserved, although she still participated in literary life. Between 1903 and 1907 she published several texts in the most prestigious literary journal of Young Poland, *Chimera* [Chimera]. In 1903 she travelled abroad again (this time alone), mainly to Paris. She became engaged in spiritual matters and in a study of her ancestry. In letters to her mother she began to distance herself from the female gender and expressed a desire to be 'something in-between' – a son and a daughter at the same time. She started to claim to be a special descendant of her family. Allegedly, she got all her teeth removed to give her face a new, less feminine expression. In early 1904, after a nervous breakdown, she spent several weeks in a mental health institution near Paris. She returned to Warsaw in 1905, and in 1907 she proclaimed herself to be a man

and undertook the name of Piotr Włast. His family decided that he was mentally unstable and needed treatment. The writer spent the next seven years of his life (1907–1914) in various mental health clinics, where he wrote desperate letters to his mother (Komornicka, M., 2011). What transpires from this correspondence is the fact that in those institutions he was not only subjected to verbal abuse, but also to physical one and to attempts of molestation. Until the II World War, the incapacitated writer lived with his older brother's family in Grabów, where he was condescendingly addressed as 'Grandfather Piotr.' While staying there, he wrote a curious 500-pages-long volume of mystical poetry titled *Na fundamentach pokory* [On the Foundations of Humility], which is full of painful bitterness. *Xięga poezji idyllicznej* [The Book of Idyllic Poetry], filled with compensation fantasies of a disgraced poet, was also written at the time, and it has not yet been fully published. In 1944 Grabów was in the war zone and the Komornicki family was forced to leave their home. After almost a year of wandering, Włast stayed in Zbójna Góra and subsequently was moved to an old people's home run by nuns in Izabelin near Warsaw. Komornicka/Włast gained his desired freedom when he died at the age of 73, on 8 March 1949.

What is Maria like in 1894, when she goes to Cambridge? Let us use a portrait of her sketched by Cezary Jellenta in 1935:

Ale skąd się wziął ten genialny gnom w spódnicy; ta żywa puszcza Pandory: szyderstw, ironii, parodii i karykatur, ta starszłachecka, słowiańska boginka, godna rozwłóchność, mitologicznej fantazji Stryjeńskiej, osoba drobnej statury, gdy gniewna, to trzęsąca się cała febrycznie, gdy zachwycona, to miotająca, zdawało się, iskry ze swych bujnych kasztanowatych włosów i ogromnych brunatnych oczów, paradoksalna mieszanina buty i naiwności życiowej, zgrzytliwości i słodczy niewymownej.

(Jellenta, 1935: 2)

[But where did she come from, this ingenious gnome in a skirt, this live Pandora's box of scoffing, irony, parody and caricature, this noble Slavic goddess, worthy of the messy, mythological fantasy of Stryjeńska; she is small of stature, but when enraged, she shakes all over as if in a fever, and when delighted, she seems to shoot sparks from her large, chestnut hair and enormous brown eyes; she is a paradoxical mixture of pride and naivety, harshness and unspeakable sweetness.]

Exceptionally intelligent and feisty, this energetic young woman who wants autonomy and action goes to England (Komornicka, A., 1964: 307). Cambridge, however, turns out to be a catastrophe in her eyes.

Komornicka rejects this place immediately, although it could have offered so much for her development. From the very beginning she invests much more energy in keeping in touch with her intellectual colleagues in Warsaw than in accustoming herself to the new, mentally alien environment. These are the colleagues (Nałkowski and Jellenta) for whom she writes her reportage. *Przegląd Pedagogiczny*, of which editorial board Waclaw Nałkowski was a member, hosted a debate at the time on the possibility of admitting women to higher education.<sup>3</sup> It was so much more attractive to be an author of published works, with an immediate influence on her society, than a conscientious, modest student, patiently facing humiliations of a society adverse to women educating themselves. Komornicka had not been brought up in a Victorian home, like most of the other female students, but she was raised in a 'noble nest' – rather tolerant of her eccentricities – therefore Cambridge turned out to be not an opportunity to broaden her liberties, but their radical limitation.

In "Youth's Paradise" Komornicka describes the collision between English bigots and a (heroic) representative of the 'forefront' of humanity; the conflict of "English geese with a woman of the world" (Filipiak, 2006: 117), of mediocrity and ingenuity. In this way she not only shows solidarity with her colleagues in Warsaw, but she also defends herself from a double exclusion in England – as a foreigner and as a woman. A sulky alien, feeling, as she claims, to be an intruder, she keeps a hypercritical reserve against her new environment, which she observes in a rather insulted, unfavourable way. She says, "as we go to England, we expect the perfect face and the burning soul of Shelley – and what we meet are the cunning eyes, red cheeks, thick lips and broad shoulders of the aptly named John Bull – hypocritical, muscular bigotry with a logical head which is as thick as a coconut (...)" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 175–176). Maria is too proud to try and adjust to her new social surroundings. She adopts an attitude of a proud stranger. A wary exchange of glances with the 'locals' is interpreted by Komornicka as a power struggle full of mutual contempt:

(...) w przelotnym wzroku mieszczan czytam to samo: (...) pyszną, arystokratyczną wzdarcie stałego mieszkańca dla przybysza, i arogancję typowo angielską (...). Wejrzenia te wpływają na mnie ożywczo. (...) prostuję się, hardo podnoszę głowę, szyderczo wytrzymuję ich lekceważenie... i na ich nieme, pyszne pytanie: „myśmy

<sup>3</sup> On how unique Komornicka is within this debate with her eccentric texts, written somewhat 'beside' the controversial standpoints, on how she disturbs the order of dispute, refusing to provide arguments neither for the proponents nor for the opponents of the higher education for women, see Filipiak, 2006: 136.

Anglicy, jesteście u siebie: lecz ty skąd się wzięłaś i kim jesteś?' wzrok mój odpowiada: 'ojczyznę moją świąt, jestem człowiekiem'.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 98)

[(...) in a fleeting glance of the townspeople I read the same thing: (...) a proud, aristocratic contempt for a newcomer, and a typically English arrogance (...). These looks enliven me. (...) I straighten myself up, proudly raise my head and mockingly endure their disdain... and to their proud, silent question, 'we are English, we are home, but who are you and where do you come from?', my eyes reply, 'the world is my home land, I am human.']

A proud foreigner, "dragging", as she says, "her nostalgia all over Cambridge," she perceives herself as a citizen of the world and an individualist, a herald of the future, for whom there is no room in this landscape. Therefore, it is not difficult for her to identify herself with the myth of a neo-Romantic poet-wanderer (Shelley). Like him, she is balancing on the margins of society, a 'dissenter' representing the figure of the Other (Filipiak, 2006: 138).

Her first reportage is already a strong manifestation of her contrariness which strengthens her self-esteem. Komornicka comes to a Sunday sermon and is, or at least so it seems to her, the only person who is not put in her place by the 'university police' and forced into a religious ecstasy, or at least a delight for the national pride of the English in which the Church played its role. She is, in her own words, the only one who refuses to be humiliated, who does not accept an instrumentalisation of faith for the colonial purposes, as a woman and as a representative of an enslaved nation:

Wszyscy trzymają przed oczyma książkę ze śpiewami, porządku i skupienia w modlitwie dozoruje policja uniwersytecka w togach, gromiącym wzrokiem wzywa nieuważnych do ekstazy (...), mnie, nie mającą modlitewnika i nie należącą do śpiewu, piorunuje demonicznym spojrzeniem i kładzie w ręce książkę rozłożoną, wskazując palcem odpowiedni hymn, co naturalnie na mnie innowiercy, wrażenia nie robi. (...) I nikt zapewne nie czuje tego, co mnie uderza obuchem (...) – że ten spokojny, pewny siebie mówca – to nie pionier oświaty – lecz 'kulturkämpfer' angielski, nie gorliwy kapłan-apostoł, lecz członek bractwa wyzwysku, sprzymierzeniec wojennej floty angielskiej. I duszę się w tej atmosferze zbiorowego egoizmu (...) wychodzę sama, odprowadzana zgorszonymi oczyma wiernych.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 101)

[Everyone is holding their hymn books in front of their eyes, and the university police in gowns is enforcing order and solemnity during prayers, calling the inattentive to a religious ecstasy with their berating looks (...). He gives me, who is without a hymn book and not participating in singing, a thunderous, demonic look, putting an open book in my hands and showing the right hymn with his finger, which obviously makes no impression on me, the heretic (...). No one here probably feels what is obvious to me as a blow (...) – that this calm, self-assured speaker is not an educational pioneer, but an English 'kulturkämpfer'; not a zealous priest and an apostle, but a member of a fraternity of exploitation, an ally of the English war fleet. And I suffocate in this atmosphere of group selfishness (...). I leave alone, followed by the shocked looks of the faithful.]

Komornicka distances herself also from the family who hosts her (her landlords), mocking their dependence on status symbols and public opinion. She sympathises only with "exotic creatures," colourful students from the colonies, discriminated against even more than herself – they are the "Negroes (...), Mulattos, Creoles, Hindu, the Japanese, etc." (Komornicka, M., 1896: 100). In their eyes she sees not only nostalgia, but also an 'inner fire' lacking in the citizens of this country. She feels a brotherhood with other aliens, especially because of a common reserve towards the English:

Lecz w Cambridgeu ja jedna, być może, czułam się im dłużną i bratem, ja jedna może usprawiedliwiałam się przed nimi refleksją: 'wspólna nasza niedola, jam dalej od idealnego człowieka, niż wy – od nas, cywilizowanych, od nas, barbarzyńców... Wspólną naszą nędzę w obliczu nieskończoności rozwoju... Wspólną bezsilność wobec nieodgadnionej, strasznej przyrody... przebaczenie mi'.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 81)

[In Cambridge only I, perhaps, felt like their debtor and their brother, perhaps I alone justified myself to them with my musings: our common unhappiness, I am further away from perfection than you are – from us the civilised, from us the barbaric... Our common poverty against the infinity of development... A common helplessness against an inscrutable, horrifying nature... forgive me.]

The English – in love with their law and conventions, hidden behind the façade of reserve – annoy Komornicka. England seems to her as "an iceberg", "a land of hypocrisy", backwardness and collective selfishness. As a representative of an oppressed nation, she is predominantly struck by the English imperialism, the submissiveness of the citizens, and by the educational methods used in colleges. She bluntly exposes what is in her opinion the students' passive acceptance of a repressive and despotic

educational system based on training and capitalist exploitation.<sup>4</sup> In Polish society under partitioning she had learned that 'even' a woman, whose role in preserving Polish identity against the outer pressure was crucial, could resist indoctrination (cf. Filipiak, 2006: 129).

One text in Maria's reportage is fully devoted to nostalgia, which she carefully defines, remembering which social camp (left-wing and emancipatory) she aspires to. She is engulfed in nostalgia, for example, when in the evenings she has to remain "in the prison of the four walls" and feels chocked by "a helpless rage" (as a woman, she cannot freely walk the streets in the evenings). A source of a spiritual support and a solace is nature, which becomes a symbol of liberty for her. English culture and civilization becomes then a symbol of imprisonment. The youth transformed into officers are raised to death, not to life, she claims.

In "Youth's Paradise" Komornicka is an outsider not only because of her nationality and her ethics, but also because of her gender – women are isolated and barely tolerated minority, pushed away onto a margin of university life. The university has a repressive attitude to the all-women college. The writer carefully observes and comments on the behaviour of men and women, as if she was in a laboratory (as she cannot be in a melting pot of social change). Komornicka includes brutality, arrogance, contempt towards women, physical strength, selfishness and authoritarianism among typically masculine features. In her report, the childish male students with "faces of pupils" are animals, or more precisely, "little bulls", creatures whose physical development is in inverse proportion to their spiritual development:

(...) gdy zapełniać się zdają przedemną wolną przestrzeń roślnością ciał (...) ogarnia mnie nerwowy niepokój i antypatya istoty przeduchowionej, fizycznie słabszej, wobec atlety, gniew poczucia swej słabości, swej niższości życiowej, przy samowiedzy odwrotnego stosunku w zakresie ducha, czysto subiektywny gniew, że choć z nieznanym im wyżyn myśli i świadomości patrzą na ich rozwinięte ciała, na arogancję wyrobionych muskułów i brak ducha w ich twarzy, na tę poziomość wyborowych zwierząt – jednak wznosić muszą w górę oczy, by ich płaskość oglądać (...)

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 98–99).

[...] when they seem to fulfil the free space ahead of me with their imposing bodies (...) I am filled with nervous anxiousness and antipathy of a spiritual, physically weaker being towards an athlete, and with a rage coming from a realisation of my weakness, my inferiority, with an inversely proportional spiritual self-awareness. It is a purely subjective rage; even though I look at them from the heights of thought and consciousness unknown to them, at their developed bodies, the arrogance of discerning muscles and lack of spirit in their faces, this horizontality of superb animals – yet I have to raise my eyes to see their shallowness (...).]

Komornicka, who glorifies the spirit (the mind-intellect liven by ideas), feels humiliated by the purely *physical* superiority of young men. She carefully avoids their "brutal mass" and only tolerates them during physical activities, such as "boating on the river." Even then she is offended by the "shallow, animal and thoughtless laughter that hurts the ears." The same men who, when observed during physical work as they "primitively" use the surplus of their energy seem almost beautiful to Maria, evoke disgust then she sees them with books in their hands: "they (...) are like percherons neighing over a microscope lens" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 99).<sup>5</sup>

A crucial element of the feminist critique in Komornicka's reportage is the mutual relationship between genders:

Nigdzie duchowy rozbrat między kobietą a mężczyzną nie jest większy niż w Anglii, nigdzie nie wniesiono między nimi tyle zwyczajowo-towarzyskich przegród, nigdzie ich światy nie są tak dobitnie 'dwoma światami'. I jako rezultat, nigdzie mężczyzna nie jest brutalniejszy i nie ma tyle ukrytej wzgardy dla płci drugiej, a kobieta – więcej czci dla jego 'potęgi', dla jego cech par excellence 'męskich', t.j. siły fizycznej, samolubstwa, żądzy despotycznego panowania, nigdzie też nie jest bardziej zasklepioną w murach domu, w glinie plotek i w mdłych obłokach kłkiwej romansowości.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 253)

[Nowhere is the spiritual gap between man and woman more evident than in England; nowhere has there been so many customary and social obstacles built between them; nowhere are their worlds so distinctly 'two worlds.' And, as a result, nowhere is man more brutal and more covertly disgusted with the other sex, and woman – more in veneration for his 'power', for his par excellence 'male' features, that is, physical strength, selfishness and a desire for an authoritarian rule; nowhere

<sup>4</sup> According to Komornicka, this system does not allow independent thinking. During his education, an Englishman mostly trains his muscles, "his animal self-preservation instinct, cold blood and pragmatic independence", often mistaken for "individualism" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 120).

<sup>5</sup> In this way Komornicka reverses the gender discourse of the epoch, where it is woman who is assigned to the sphere of the body, biology and nature, while man – to the ones of spirit and culture.

is she more confined to the walls of a house, in the clay of rumours and in a nauseating fog of saccharine romanticism.]

Maria often expresses her indignation with the fact that in Cambridge contacts and friendships between men and women are made impossible. Her ideal is a "common spiritual life" of both genders, with stress put on the spiritual aspect. In her opinion, a possibility of achieving this ideal is much stronger in Slavic countries. She states that 'ladies'<sup>6</sup> play there "indisputably a much bigger role than anywhere else" and are actively supported by male intelligentsia. In England it is unthinkable; besides, the spirit is poor there anyway. Diplomatic survival strategies of female students in Cambridge, such as finding a 'brother,' meeting men among befriended families or striking "an eternal and emotional friendships with one of the other female students" are disqualified and despised by Komornicka. She does not say it openly, but her friends who read the reportage know that in Warsaw *she* openly befriends men – perhaps not being fully aware of how risky that is. Maria here assumes, perhaps unconsciously, that female friendships are a substitute for the impossible relationships with men. All the half-way tactics used by female students are comical in Komornicka's eyes, and she does not want to take part in this comedy.

Komornicka would like to have *intellectual* relationships with the other sex, while English women, it seems to her, are not interested in such a possibility.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, she postulates an important thing – that the relationships between genders were not automatically sexualized. But if (English) men are devoid of spirit, how can a spiritual contact with them, so desired by her, be even possible? It may be explained in a following way: on the one hand, there is mankind itself that Maria criticizes so thoroughly; but on the other, there are exceptional (male) subjects that she values immensely as they support her development (at least temporarily).

Komornicka justifies her 'nostalgia' in the following way:

[Przyczynami odczuwanej przeze mnie nostalgii] są głębokie, niczem zrównać się nie dające różnice między duszą anglo-saską i słowiańską – i wreszcie szalona trudność istnienia dla istoty rozwiniętej naszych czasów, gdy ma nieszczęście być kobietą.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 177)

[[The reason for the nostalgia I feel] is a deep disparity between the Anglo-Saxon and the Slavic souls that cannot be resolved – but also a great difficulty of existence for a developed creature of our times if she is unfortunate to be a woman.]

Komornicka "is unfortunate to be a woman", therefore the blade of her satire cuts mainly against women of whom she has higher expectations and from whom she would like to learn. However, she does not assign women to the fields of biology or zoology, as she does men. She mainly offers a strict appraisal of the functioning and the management of all-female colleges, which in her opinion "do not seem to be strongholds of women's emancipation, but their asylums" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 230).<sup>8</sup> Komornicka is outraged by the fact that these institutions are built as far from the city and from all-male colleges as possible and separated by walls in order to avoid 'depravation' of the female students. She sees the policing of women's virtues by the authorities and selected female students – an expression of a conviction about a moral immaturity of women – as disgraceful; in reality, it was probably another survival strategy. A strictly obeyed schedule of the day and the opportunism and naivety of the guarded fill her with rage.<sup>9</sup> The foreigner challenges a conviction that English women are to be pioneers of women's emancipation. In her opinion, they rather solidify the situation of oppression with their excessively submissive attitude. She presents this opinion by sketching a caricature of a young English woman, the daughter of her landlord:

Córka jego miss Mary, z wyrazem cierpienia i uległości w twarzy, zwiędła także, smutna, sztywna, zasuszona moralnie, o duszy utkanej z kazań, psalmów i paragrafów konwensu – odzywa się chwilami cichym głosem: 'O, yes!' – 'It is nice' (...) i 'is not it?' (...) – trzema powszechnie używanymi beźmyślnymi odruchami angielskiej mowy.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 79)

<sup>6</sup> The inverted commas used here are originally applied by Komornicka herself.

<sup>7</sup> Komornicka describes a situation where she provokes female students by asking them if they know many male students and about their attitude to them. The punchline of this reportage is one incomprehensible reaction: "First they looked at me astounded, then suggestive sparks flashed in their eyes, they nudged each other with a meaningful smile, then said, glancing at me fleetingly with an unpleasant mixture of scandal, excitement and malice: 'We do not know any students. What do they have to do with us!' No comment is necessary" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 253). Filipiak, however, does comment on this situation and provides an insightful analysis of this incident in her essay "Malcontenta w Cambridge" (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Newnham College was at the time governed by Mr and Mrs Sidgwick, who were devoted to the idea of women's emancipation. A very different picture of the college is painted by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*.

<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Komornicka criticises educational system in Cambridge, for example the fact that the female professors employed there are mostly former students of the college.

[His daughter, Miss Mary, with an expression of suffering and submission on her face, withered, sad, stiff, morally dry, with a soul woven from sermons, psalms, paragraphs and conventions – speaks intermittently with a quiet voice, 'Oh yes!' – 'It is nice' (...) – and, 'Is it not?' – three most commonly used mindless reactions in the English speech.]

What Komornicka does here is a deconstruction – which is very insightful for her times – of gender as something essential (Komornicka, M., 1896: 253). She becomes, therefore, a forerunner not only of Simone de Beauvoir, but also of Judith Butler. By showing Miss Mary's soul as "woven with sermons, psalms, paragraphs and conventions", Komornicka shows that femininity is nothing natural, but a result of a cultural practice. Her mocking and caustic criticism against polite female students is mellowed by her simultaneous recognition of the cultural models and other forms of oppression English women are subjected to. Extremely strict and brutal educational methods used in all-women's colleges provoke Maria's vehement protest:

Rektor ma policyjną władzę aresztowania każdej kobiety, która wyjdzie sama na ulicę wieczorem. Należy przyznać, że rzadko on korzysta z tego szaczonego przywileju, (...) sam jednak fakt istnienia podobnego prawa, sam fakt możliwości podobnego gwałtu – jest dostatecznym, by przyprawić o obłęd oburzenia i wściekłości. (...) kobiety angielskie, owe 'wolne' kobiety, schylają zbyt kornie głowę przed samowolą ustawy, by czuć się spoliczkowane, zdeptane w swej godności przez tyranję.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 266)

[The Chancellor has a police authority to arrest every woman who is in the streets in the evenings. It has to be admitted that he rarely uses that honourable privilege (...), but the sole fact that such a law exists, the sole possibility of such a violation – is enough to drive one to mad indignation and rage (...). English women, these 'free' women, humbly bend their necks to the arbitrariness of this law and fail to see that their dignity has been attacked and trampled by tyranny.]

Komornicka's reaction, her "mad indignation and rage" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 102) is personal. In Cambridge, every woman coming home alone from an emancipation debate or, unthinkable, from a theatrical spectacle, could have been treated as a prostitute. This law, or rather unlawfulness, went back to times when there were no female students at the university. What enraged Komornicka the most

was that such unlawfulness would stay hidden under the façade of the law and raise no protest. England terrified Komornicka with its idolatrous attitude to legislature.<sup>10</sup>

Let us revisit the issue of the excessive, in Maria's opinion, diplomacy of the English suffragettes and their readiness to negotiate the dominant order, which Komornicka perceived as cowardice and hypocrisy:

Obłuda ta i tchórzliwość postępu dziwnie głęboko boli, oburza i pognębia cudzoziemca – a jeszcze bardziej cudzoziemkę – która upokarzana bezustannie niższością duchową i społeczną swojej płci, nawykła myśleć o Anglii jako o kraju kobiet rozwiniętych i swobodnych. (...) Autorowie studiów nad Anglią utożsamiają swobodę, której tam niema, z „szacunkiem dla białogłów,” który tam rzeczywiście istnieje. I mieliby poniekąd rację, gdyby ten szacunek był uznaniem ich *godności ludzkiej* (...), nie zaś płytką i śmieszną czcią dla tzw. *godności kobiecej*.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 211)

[This hypocrisy and cowardice of progress is strangely and deeply painful, outrageous and oppressive to a foreigner – and especially a female foreigner – who, constantly humiliated by the spiritual and social inferiority of her sex, is used to thinking of England as a land of developed and free women. (...) The authors of studies on England identify freedom, which is not found here, with 'respect for ladies', which does exist here. And they perhaps could be right if this respect was an acceptance of their *human dignity* (...) and not a shallow and ridiculous respect for so-called *woman's dignity*.]

As in her other texts, Komornicka petitions here to confer *human* dignity upon women, thus surpassing the demands of women's emancipation movements in the nineteenth century. It is to this day one of the most important demands of feminism (cf. Walczewska, 1999). According to Komornicka, the shallow chivalry towards women, especially mothers and morally impeccable wives, is laced with "brutal disdain for those who are not impeccable." Outraged, Komornicka demonstrates the chasm between these two cultural extremes of femininity, the "decent" and the "fallen" one. She uses a caustic, ironic and humorous style in these fragments, surprising the reader with apt, sarcastic comparisons. For instance, she describes chivalry as "a cough lozenge for an irritated throat" and "a gilded paper fixed on shackles."

<sup>10</sup> A certain reserve or criticism of the law is still a distinctive feature of the so-called Polish mentality in comparison to other Western cultures, not only the English one, but also, for example, German.

(English) women themselves are in Maria's eyes virtually priestesses of public opinion: permanently engaged in taming an angry god, "fearfully asking for indulgence," they assert that they only aspire to being better mothers and wives and to more fully prepare for their feminine vocation. "A fair punishment" for this "act of over-humiliation" is, as Komornicka ironically states, a necessity to accept "a chain of burdensome and incessant control of a sceptic god, jealous of his rights" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 251). On the other hand, she notes bitterly, the English suffragette movement has been successful after all: "indeed, [England] does possess more than ten all-female colleges, while we have none" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 212). One of those achievements would be women's suffrage. In the end, however, in Maria's opinion an excessive eagerness to negotiate with patriarchy was keeping women away from achieving their goal: "women (...) who utilize the means assigned to the subordinate groups postpone the moment of becoming independent subjects" (Filipiak 2006: 130).

In the last two pieces of her reportage, Komornicka's criticism of English women's emancipation movement reaches its peak:

Hoże, jasne, grubokostne (...) wniosły do swych człowieczych roszczeń tyle pruderyi, tyle dbałości o dobrą sławę, tyle niewystowienie kobiecego 'wdzięku' – lekkości i wstydlivosti – że emancypacja ich robi wrażenie, jakby się kryła po kątach we wzruszającej pozie (...), zawstydzona swemi żądaniami, niby grzeszną żądzą, przerażona własnem zachwalstwem i chcąc zejść z oczu i udobruchać społeczność czytelników Biblii.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 250)

[Feisty, fair and thick-boned (...), they include so much prudery into their human demands, so much care for good opinion, so much ineffably feminine 'charm' – timidity and shyness – that their emancipatory movement seems to be hiding in the shadows in a pathetic pose (...), abashed by its own demands, as if by a sinful desire, and terrified by its own impudence, wanting to disappear and appease the Bible-reading public.]

The writer derides female students' extreme manifestation of femininity by means of their outfits – even during their emancipation debates. This fact makes their seriousness questionable in her eyes:

(...) występują w 'gala' typowo kobiecem, w jasnych sunkniach wieczorowych, obnażających szyję i ramiona. (...) Siedzą gęsto obok siebie, kształtne, białe – i słuchają to uważnie, z czołem na dłoni, z ręką obnażoną na kolanie, to niedbale, w pozie

bezwiednego roztargnienia, nieraz pełnej uroku. (...) Słuch tylko przypomina, że jest to posiedzenie poważne. Droga luźnych asocjacji przychodzą na myśl ogrody haremów i zabawy opuszczonych niewolnic. (...) Oto zgromadziły się kobiety jutra i radzą nad wydobyciem się z wiekowego poniżenia. Lecz zbyt są blizkie dnia wczorajszego i nie mają pełnej świadomości ani tego poniżenia, ani spustoszeń, jakie w ich duchach zostawiła haniebna 'kultura' wiekowa (...).

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 268–269)

[(...) They appear in a typically feminine 'outfit': bright evening dresses, with bare necks and shoulders. (...) They sit in a thick crowd, shapely and white – and listen carefully, with their hands on their foreheads, with a bare arm on their knees, carelessly, in a pose of an unconscious distraction, often very charmingly. (...) It is only by listening that one may remember that this is a serious meeting. Free associations, however, bring to mind gardens of harems and parties of abandoned slaves. (...) Here are the women of tomorrow and they debate on freeing themselves from centuries of oppression. Still they are too close to yesterday and not fully aware either of the humiliation, or of the havoc wreaked on their spirits by the centuries-old 'culture' (...).]

Perhaps to stop similar "free associations" in the future, Komornicka will put on a pair of trousers one day and never take it off. One thing, however, seems to be praiseworthy: "there is more stuttering and enthusiasm during these discussions than in male clubs" (Komornicka, M., 1896: 267).<sup>11</sup> Women seem to be more capable of passionate engagement, although "here as everywhere else the bravest speakers are the Semites." It is a Jewish female student whose speech arouses Maria's true admiration:

Do głębi wzruszył mnie żar czerwony, z jakim odezwała się niejaka panna Cohn z Londynu. Ciepło biło od jej słów, od głosu, od jej (...) twarzy, w której płonęły czarne, rozumne oczy, od bujnych jej kruczonych włosów i postaci smukłej, silnej, młodzieńczej. Palce kurczowo wpiła w poręcz krzesła, przez ciało jej i słowa biegł dreszcz wzruszenia i przejęcia się słusznością bronionej sprawy. Mówiono mi, że jest jedną z najzdolniejszych studentek i wyróżnia się brakiem instynktów stadowych.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 269)

<sup>11</sup> According to Komornicka, the male students of Cambridge lack inner fire and an ability to engage in a cause with their whole heart. Their political discussions are characterised by conservatism, excessive diplomacy and lack of great ideas. Maria does not recommend her fellow-countrymen to follow this model.



[I was deeply moved by the red fire with which Miss Cohn of London spoke. Warmth was in her words, her voice and her (...) face with burning, black, wise eyes, in her raven black hair and her slim, strong, young figure. She was clutching the back of her chair, and her body and her words were shaken by a shudder of emotion, as she stated her claim affectively. I was told that she was one of the most talented students and that she is characterised by a lack of herd instinct.]

"The Semite", Miss Cohn, is the only person who evokes Komornicka's respect and fascination. The reportage, however, does not mention whether Komornicka ever tried to contact her. Yet, this sullen beauty delivers as passionate monologues as Komornicka's fictional characters. There were, therefore, various women in Cambridge and Maria perhaps could have befriended them if it was not for her bias and for a cultural difference (she: passionate and uncompromising, them: pragmatic and conciliatory – at least in her eyes). The reportage ends with a superb, satirical depiction of balls that concluded emancipatory debates:

Pod koniec – profesorki, zmęczone, siadają na miejscu opuszczonym przez 'prezesa', wśród kwiatów, i patrzą ze wzruszeniem (...) – jak pięknie i grzecznie wzrasta i hasa pod ich bokiem nowe pokolenie emancypantek...

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 270)

[At the end – female professors, tired, sit down in the place abandoned by the 'president', among flowers, and look affectionately (...) – how beautifully and politely a new generation of suffragettes grows and frolics politely in front of their eyes...]

Maria herself measures emancipation and progress with a maximalist, revolutionary measure. She intends to radically fight all manifestations of injustice and social inequality, but simultaneously she predicts her own failure:

I biada tym, którzy pozostać muszą wierni swym szlachetnym instynktom, którzy zgodzić się nie potrafią na upadek moralny w korzystnych kompromisach z ogólną, bezczelną podłością, bo oni w życiu upaść muszą, powaleni kopytami zwycięskiej zgrai.

(Komornicka, M., 1896: 251)

[Woe to those who must stay faithful to their noble instincts, who cannot accept a moral failure in a profitable compromise with general, brazen iniquity, because they must fail in life, trampled by the hoofs of the victorious horde.]

In conclusion, the reportage by Komornicka, who had been sent to Cambridge against her will, is a satirical narration about resentment and disappointment, and at the same time it is a trace of a wasted chance to strengthen the foundations of her own autonomy by graduating from a university. "A rising star of Polish avant-garde, transplanted from the eccentric soil of Polish modernism" (Filipiak, 2006: 130) lets herself to be known as a foreigner who cannot and will not adapt to a new environment. She heroically faces a triple exclusion: as a woman, as a foreigner ("a Slavic soul") and as a cosmopolitan with a reformatory zeal ("a world-hungry atom").

She is therefore, in her own conviction, a fighting feminist resistant to indoctrination, a feisty Slavic woman, a progressive citizen of the world and a forerunner of an evolution of the humankind. In her reportage, which was a kind of a preparation for *The Forefronts*, she draws a picture of herself as a strong creative personality; a person who hates submission, opportunism, selfishness, shallow pragmatism, hypocrisy, and petty dependence on conventions more than oppression. In a full confrontation with what is alien, her own vision of herself becomes more prominent; it is a vision drawn by an eighteen-year-old, and perhaps co-created and fuelled by her mentors in Warsaw. This vision, which is a counter-proposal for the world described in these texts, is based on a distinct set of values. At its top Maria locates self-reliance, independence, spiritual energy, courage, engagement, idealism, intransigence and individualism. Vigorously, aptly and with a great stylistic artistry – with irony and parody – Komornicka deals with England as a colonial empire based on a game of appearances; a provincial "country of bigots", an embodiment of opportunism, with which she will soon fight in *The Forefronts*. She contests a country of ostensible reverence of women as a "reverse side of contempt", Cambridge as a "factory of mediocrity", Newnham college as an "asylum" and not a "stronghold" of emancipation, and of their women's suffrage as a grotesque fancy dress party and a depressing flirt with patriarchy. She presents an exhaustive analysis and deconstruction of gender dualism. She stigmatizes women for their passive acceptance of humiliating educational methods and their internalization of the rules of culture. She radically denies spirituality to the privileged men, pushing them to a territory of urges, biology and zoology – contesting a gender discourse of her times and somewhat avenging the discrimination of women in culture. She stresses her disappointment with belonging to a sex that was enslaved and excluded from public life, from spheres of influence and autonomy. Fairly inconsistently with her own assumption about the carnality of men, Komornicka demands a possibility for both sexes to create a deeper spiritual relationship – showing an example of Slavic countries that England could learn from. She carefully avoids presenting

men as possible subjects of erotic desire, attempting to desexualize the male-female relationships. Komornicka's more positive emotions are directed towards English nature, which, like English women alienated and repressed, becomes her comfort and her escape.

"Youth's Paradise" has still not been reprinted, although a new edition of this text is in preparation. Since 1960s scholars of literary history have been gradually rediscovering Maria Komornicka, although she is still absent from mainstream consciousness and the main canons of literature. In 1960s Stanisław Pigoń published testimonies about Maria Komornicka, and subsequently her writing was examined by Maria Podraza-Kwiatkowska and Maria Janion. A great role in bringing Komornicka back to her rightful place in culture has been played by Izabela Filipiak, Edward Boniecki, Krystyna Kralkowska-Gątkowska, Katarzyna Ewa Zdanowicz and many others. An amazing involvement in restoration of Maria Komornicka to memory was also shown by Grażyna Wnuk, former Head of the Schools Complex in Grabów and Iwona Stefaniak, Director of Kazimierz Puławski Museum in Warka, as well as the Komornicki family. Thanks to all these and other people the writer is restored to the history of Polish literature, and her writings and her biography are certainly soon to become a subject of study and interest not only in Poland, but also in the world.

Translated by Barbara Braid

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