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## **TOPOLOGY OF THE FEMININE IN THE NOVEL “THREE WOMEN IN THE MIRROR” BY E.-E. SCHMITT**

### **Introduction**

Appearance of feminist theory in the philosophy of culture at the end of the last century made it possible to *actualize* a separate research subject – subject of gender relationships in society, history and literature. By differentiating sex (biological) and gender (social) that were not previously differentiated in the history of culture, the feminist theory based on the methodology of postmodernism and poststructuralism, denies to reduce the properties of sex to biological parameters, but defines them as social and cultural norms which the society attributes to the subject with respect to its biological sex. Such representations of feminine phenomenon in culture which are hidden from superficial glance as feminine thinking and language, feminine literature and writing, feminine life experience, etc., allowed to raise a question about specific feminine type of discourse where the woman has gained the right, as O. Zabuzhko said, to «raise her own voice», having overcome the traditional gender dichotomy central/marginal in culture.

### **Methodology**

The main *methodological basis* of the article is the theory of feminism which starting from the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s assumes the shape as the problem of representing the feminine subjectivity in philosophy of culture in general and literature in particular beyond conventional patriarchic canons. Supported by concepts elaborated by post-modernist philosophers (M. Foucault, J. Deleuze, R. Barthes, J. Derrida and others), the feminists developed main conceptual basis of the feminist theory which enabled to raise the question about structure of feminine subjectivity, its specifics, issue of particularities of feminine language and the models of its representation. As a consequence, conventional patriarchic discourse has become open for diverse ways

of feminine re-interpretation, thus enabling presentation of feminine subjectivity as self-sufficient and independent that conceives itself via building of its own unique topology.

### **The history of female subjectivity as an alternative way of being**

A similar attempt to represent the feminine as the phase of self-manifestation of specific feminine identity in the contrast with traditional regulatory «patriarchal canon» (Zabuzhko, 2014) can be found by the reader in the novel by contemporary French-speaking Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt «Three women in the mirror».

Comprehension of the institutionalization of the feminine occurs in the novel in the perspective of three historic epochs in the Western European civilization reflected in the characters of three main heroines of the novel: Anna who lives in medieval epoch in the Flemish town Bruges, Hannah, whose feminine experience is formed under conditions of bourgeois Vienna at the beginning of XX century and the time when Freud's psychoanalysis emerged and, finally, Annie – our contemporary, who was destined to live and shape her own personality in American Los-Angeles.

Each of the heroines challenges patriarchic ideology that is «purportedly established by God» (O. Zabuzhko), where her personal life, her gender identity is evaluated as «otherness» which threatens world order. Heroines of the novel feel their «otherness» through the image of «mirror» that symbolizes the standpoint of «The Other» one, transforming female identity into no more than in the objects for rated assessments, stripping her from control over her own existence and opportunities to unlock her own creative potential (Gender and culture, 2008: 94).

Thus, the genesis of Anna's identity, the first heroine, occurs through non-compliance with regulatory bound forces upon her by society to perform the part of «second gender» – to become a wife, mother, therefore embody a female appropriacy that every morally upstanding and decent woman must be identified with. As remarked by the author: «...from the very birth everything was decided for her by others and she always subdued to someone else's will» (Schmitt, 2013: 51).

Impossibility to get clear of restrictions imposed upon Anna by society forces her to escape from «this world» into her own autonomous world where the supernatural emotional and mystical experience of communication with nature she feels her proximity to God: «She was much more thrilled by nature than by her fiancé. ...She felt her legs itching – she wanted to run, to roll on the grass, to hug trunks of the trees, to breathe in air with all her strength...» (Schmitt, 2013: 6). It is this abundance of life-asserting spiritual power that gives Anna a boundless feeling on joy and completeness of existence. Her consciousness tries to go beyond the limits of philistine values and leave to the transcendental where her irrational dialogue with God becomes possible without religious institutions as intermediaries. She feels chosen to be the guide between the «Kingdom of Light» and the «Kingdom of Darkness» which is presented by tangible world. It is for a good reason why the author shows how Anna is enchanted by solar rays which she obviously treats as manifestation of the Holy Spirit on Earth. (Schmitt, 2013: 14).

Such mystical calling, exceptional creative aptitude due to personal spiritual search causes Anna to look for a way to apply her abilities. Creative breakthrough of Anna's consciousness occurred through selfless commitment, through sacrificial love to her fellow persons, through devotion to everything till the end.

However, as the author shows, this way provides a chance for female subject to fulfill its potential beyond private field and this threatens the world order where only male subject acts as one that embodies the Law of knowledge about the world.

This situation of dramatic conflict between aspiration of feminine individuality to affirm its own topology of existence beyond being mediated by the great Other – Father, Priest, Tutor – is observed by the reader in the novel on the example of relationships between Anna and her tutor monk Brandor, who, on the one hand, sympathizes with Anna and helps her, and, on the other hand, tries to direct compulsive religious search of Anna to making her aware of the truth and logocentric patriarchic order described in the Bible. However, Anna makes her way to God not through rules and logic, but through empathy, intuition and

extreme sensuality that borders excessiveness, i.e. qualities which the traditional patriarchic culture has long tried to restrict in the structure of feminine individuality.

In the course of discussion with Brandor Anna reproaches fathers of the church that «they must speak about God with love, blinded, charmed, full of gratitude and devotion. We must be envious that they are so close to Him, that they are his representatives... But instead of this they frighten others by the God like a whip» (Schmitt, 2013: 233). Rational female logic of Brandor gives up when facing life-asserting force of female emotionality and incomprehensibility of her perception of the godly manifestations. Unexpected Anna's responses to the monk's questions cause his confusion and powerlessness: «Brandor clenched his teeth. It would seem that Anna's statements reflected either vanity or angelic faith» (Schmitt, 2013: 222). And further on: «Anna kept silence. But this silence did not mean there was no thought behind it – it rather meant a complicated thought, a thought beyond description. Not knowing how to get her out of that silence, Brandor denied continuation of discussion» (Schmitt, 2013: 223).

Thus, Anna is trying to implement a strategy of her own «feminine language», avoiding univocal and stiff logocentric meanings: «What a horrid wretchedness – being able to speak out perfectly... This indicates that there is nothing inside a person that would be attributed to soul going beyond its narrow boundaries» (Schmitt, 2013: 345). As demonstrated by the author, male logic is incapable of acknowledging such antagonism of feminine in relation to the existing hierarchical church-symbolic order, she tries to «forcibly eliminate all what is left non-discursive in it by subjugating it to the rational structures of consciousness» (Zherebkina, 2000: 34), i.e. to the institute of church that was a symbol of power on earth.

As a result, Anna's story ends up tragically. The church court passes its judgment on her – to executing her by burning at the stake. So, the author demonstrates on the example of Anna's character that in the epoch of Renaissance a feminine individuality who tried to represent itself as independent and autonomous, was put by patriarchic society under social

conditions when she could no longer act or speak on her own behalf and perishes being convicted in heresy.

The next discourse of the feminine where transformation of feminine individuality uncovers into mysterious and immense way that cannot be comprehended by conventional male view, takes place in the novel at different epoch and at different place – in bourgeois Vienna. However, just like previous heroine, Hannah is not satisfied by roles imposed on her by the society of that day. She also has an acute problem of choice – either subjugate to conventional moral law or affirm her own existential value in the world by undertaking the burden of responsibility herself.

At the beginning of her family life Hannah thoroughly tries to follow roles that correspond to male regulatory beliefs about the status of feminine in society. But this life, that may seem successful at first glance, leads Hannah to understanding that she is losing her own individuality by transforming into the object used to implement the desires of others: to be beautiful, successful, rich, to give birth to an heir of her husband's family Franz von Waldberg. Whereas she cannot succeed in it, Hannah feels guilty. She confesses to her childhood friend Gretchen: «I feel some original sin inside. I have always felt that I am different...». And then: «If anyone is responsible, or even worse – guilty, it is myself!» (Schmitt, 2013: 95).

From this point of view topology of the structure of feminine individuality represented in the novel in Hannah's character may be interpreted from the position of methodology of up-to-day feminist researchers who, based upon philosophical analysis by M. Foucault, state that the woman as socially marginal object of culture possesses one role – the role of subject that confesses. Wherein, according to Foucault, confession discourse in culture is always the discourse of guilt and the ideal figure to embody the guilt of history is woman (Zherebkina, 2000: 33). As Hannah confesses herself in her autobiography letters, she feels like a woman who has not matched expectations of her husband, his numerous relatives and society: «It seems to me that I have made a mistake. A great mistake. The truth is I am beneath the mark: I do not correspond either to what life offers me or to what it requires of me (Schmitt, 2013: 53).

Therefore, Hannah experiences state of dramatic disruption: on the one hand, she tries to correspond to regulatory ideas about woman in patriarchic society of those days, and, on the other hand, she feels acute desire to deny these regulations and ideas that force her, as V. Ageeva said, to be satisfied with strictly regulated, monotonous existence (Ageeva, 2003). A glamorous house where von Waldberg couple had settled, became alien suffocating space for Hannah. In the next letter to her cousin she wrote: «...Having stepped onto Vienna soil I understood that I was trapped. I live in an aquarium..., I bet against the glass, I have to tolerate the company of fishes closed together with me» (Schmitt, 2013: 53).

Hannah strives to go beyond the boundaries of her home and social life that limits her creative potential and forces to wear a mask and play the roles imposed by society. She tries to legitimate her own alternative way of life by building independent and unique individuality of her own out of its correlations with male ideas about woman.

An impetus to comprehend the necessity to change her life was spiritual disturbance Hannah felt when G. Mahler symphony was played at the evening gathering in Philharmonic society: «To get free of myself, to leave the society where I suffer, and enter the world where I am thrilled, to run away from time I endure to the time I enjoy» (Schmitt, 2013: 237).

This was the moment of Hannah's spiritual awakening when she realized that only higher, spiritual life existed when the woman could create her own self-sufficient world and could be «the objective for myself, exactly in the sense as the man can be the objective for himself ...» (Kobylianska, 1963: 51).

Finally Hannah, having broken away from her husband, achieves individual freedom and self-fulfillment, she ceases to be only «function», i.e. «woman-for-others», and becomes individuality, «woman-for-herself», «who is not only allowed self-conscious and self-controlled life, but who possesses it by default» (Zabuzhko, 2014: 53). Being attracted by psychoanalysis, she finds her calling and becomes psychoanalytic.

In other words, the author inverts generally accepted stereotypes of patriarchic world where opposition feminine/masculine in culture was perceived as passive/active. Such standing allows recognizing the

structure of female individuality as active structure which constitutes its own topology of existence in the world through fulfillment of will and desire of woman beyond mediation by the great «Other».

The next heroine of the novel – Annie lives in the contemporary epoch which can be characterized as the epoch when patriarchic civilization is in crisis, when a new theoretical reflection emerges in Western European civilization – postmodernism – and the problems of tolerance to the «other», respect to its freedom and acknowledging the rights of individuality to self-assertion have become actual. Based on the example of life of the third heroine the author demonstrates new models of relationships between sexes in the world nowadays. Women gain the right to more emancipated life: the role in public life of society is becoming more and more noticeable, they courageously break routine regulations of moral with its double standards separate for men and women, including in the field of sexual relationships. Woman of the «new type» appears – active, self-reliant, courageous and successful.

At a first glance Annie is exactly a woman of «new type». She is a popular Hollywood star, she lives in luxurious villa with a swimming pool, and she uses all the blessings of civilization to the greatest extent. But, just like previous heroines, Annie feels deep dissatisfaction with externally successful life. She tries to escape from reality that traumatizes her soul using drugs and alcohol.

One distinct feature of the epoch Annie lives in is the emergence of the so-called mass culture when people are enthusiastic about everything seen on the outside, when advantage is given to form over meaning, public tastes are simplified. Let us only look at the titles of the so-called blockbusters Annie is forced to appear in: «Dad, I took your car!», «The girls in the red glasses». But she aspires to play real roles. Annie is aware of her unhappiness because she is forced to act under coercion of the agency that has demand for such kind of «art». She admits to her agent Joanne: «Everyone perceives me as a funny doll, an uninhibited girl who leads extravagant life, but this is only a mask. A make-up» (Schmitt, 2013: 74).

The truth is that possessing a feeling hard and vulnerable soul, Annie was a truly gifted actress. It was on the shooting stage that she felt real

and happy: «She won over both her shooting partners and technical staff. They had shivers up and down their spines <...> she was an outstanding actress» (Schmitt, 2013: 108). Annie feels bad for discord in her life both in her relationships with men and in her creative works. Finally, after meeting a soul mate in the person of Ethan who is a humble hospital aide, Annie overcomes the crisis of her own identity and restores meaning in her life. Experiencing true enlightenment of her soul she became conscious that to love is to give yourself away to the beloved person, to commit yourself to the beloved job. And it was this state that gave her inspiration, feeling of completeness and joy in life. A much more significant reality opened up for Annie that the reality she had lived in before. By rejecting all the insignificant and petty and having overcome, as V. Solovyov said, «selfish restraint» of her «Ego», Annie succeeded to feel intuitively how she should play the finally real role in her life – role of Anna from Bruges, the first heroine of the novel, a scene of her tormented and at the same time courageous and enlightened death. This death that takes only the body away and the consciousness of personality transfers into other dimensions in order to, as O. Zabuzhko writes in her philosophic study, «vanquish death by death», «ascertain preponderance of the transcendent, eternal-being, absolute over mundane, evanescent, temporal» (Zabuzhko, 2014: 278).

Describing histories of life of his heroines, the author uses Oriental-mystical motive of reincarnation of female soul in its spiritual ascension in the course of looking for meaning of life and death. It seems as if each the heroines of the novel reincorporates into one another. They have not only similar names, but the kind of soul that allows them feel mystical link in-between regardless that they did not know each other and lived in different epochs.

Thus, Hannah when she gets to know the history of Anna from her manuscript «The Mirror of Unseen», which accidentally falls into her hands during her visit to the town of Bruges, felt that their souls are bound by the inconceivable mystical enlightenment, by that eternal strive to the Light which these souls discovered inside them in the mundane life. Only

except that «Anna called that marvelous infinitude God, and Hannah called it the Unconscious» (Schmitt, 2013: 409).

As for Annie, she took her path to penetrate the mystery of human life and death through love, astute female intuition and creative aptitude.

### **Conclusions**

Therefore, in the novel «Three Women in the Mirror» the author makes actual an important existential worldview problem – a problem of the meaning of life and human living this life, which he considers from the perspective of interaction between masculine and feminine origins in different societies. By touching the main subject of gender and feminist studies – inequality of relationships in patriarchic world – and focusing his novel on creative feminine identity which he represents through various levels of life experience, the author shifts away from radicalism of feminist approach to this problem. He expands the problem of sexes into anthropological idea of their harmonic complementarity in personal life. Such understanding between sexes that may seem above reach and impossible at first glance, occurs, in the author's opinion, through love-compassion which dignifies not only soul, but also relationships between man and woman.

The author takes feminine individuality beyond the boundaries of daily reality, where creative breakthrough of her consciousness takes place into the field of metaphysical transcendent being. And it is feminine individuality which is not burdened by cold, rational logics of patriarchic world which the author endows with capability to experience the state of ecstatic fascination with being, even at the moment of death, through its struggle and against masculine rationality of world order (Aheieva & Oksamytna, 2001: 38).

Actually, the main heroines of the novel can be considered as generalized character of «Eternal Feminine» that exists as ideal origin in the inner world of person and that, as V. Solovyev put it, is a part of the one God which «acts as eternal Possibility that opens endless horizons to Divine Reality» (Hamitov, 2004: 42).

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### Анотація

**Д.Л. Песоцька, Ж.Л. Кущенко. Топологія жіночого в романі «Жінка у дзеркалі» Е.-Е. Шмітт**

В статті висвітлюється проблема феномену жіночого в літературі як фаза самовиявлення специфічного жіночого життєвого досвіду поза традиційною гендерною дихотомією центральне/маргінальне в культурі. Процес формування жіночої ідентичності в романі відбувається крізь призму трьох історичних епох в західноєвропейській цивілізації, яким відповідають образи трьох головних героїнь роману: Анни, яка живе в епоху середньовіччя, Ханни, чий жіночий досвід формується в умовах буржуазного Відня

початку ХХ ст. і Енні, якій випало жити і творити власну особистість в сучасному Лос-Анджелісі. Кожна з героїнь кидає виклик патріархатній ієрархічній системі цінностей, начебто встановленій Богом, де її особистісний світ, її гендерна тожсамість розцінюється як «інакшість», яка становить загрозу світовому порядку. Свою «інакшість» героїні роману відчують через образ «дзеркала», який символізує погляд «Іншого», що перетворює жіночу ідентичність не більше, як в об'єкт для нормативних оцінок, позбавляючи її контролю над власним буттям і можливостей реалізувати власний творчий потенціал. Автор виводить жіночу суб'єктивність за межі реальності буденного життя, де відбувається творчий прорив її свідомості до сфери метафізичного трансцендентного буття. І саме жіночу суб'єктивність, яка не обтяжена холодною, раціональною логікою патріархального світу, автор наділяє здатністю переживати стан екстатичного захоплення буттям, навіть в момент смерті, через її боротьбу і спротив чоловічій тоталітарності раціонального світового порядку. На відміну від позиції радикального фемінізму автор бачить вирішення проблеми суперечності між жіночою та чоловічою статтями через ідею їх гармонійної взаємодоповнюваності в особистісному житті.

**Ключові слова:** жіноча ідентичність, жіночий життєвий досвід, топологія існування, патріархатний порядок.

#### Аннотація

#### Д.Л. Песоцкая, Ж.Л. Кущенко. Топология женского в романе «Женщина в зеркале» Э.-Э. Шмитт

В статье освещается проблема феномена женского в литературе как фазы самовыражения специфического женского жизненного опыта вне традиционной гендерной дихотомии центральное / маргинальное в культуре. Процесс формирования женской идентичности в романе происходит сквозь призму трех исторических эпох в западноевропейской цивилизации, которым соответствуют образы трех главных героинь романа: Анны, которая живет в эпоху средневековья, Ханны, чей женский опыт формируется в условиях буржуазной Вены начала ХХ в. и Энни, которой выпало жить и творить собственную личность в современном Лос-Анджелесе. Каждая из героинь бросает вызов патриархатной иерархической системе ценностей, якобы установленной Богом, где ее личностный мир, ее гендерная идентичность расценивается как «инаковость», которая представляет угрозу мировому порядку. Свою «инаковость» героини романа чувствуют через

образ «зеркала», который символизирует взгляд «Другого», что превращает женскую идентичность не более, чем в объект для нормативных оценок, лишая ее контроля над собственным бытием и возможностей реализовать свой творческий потенциал. Автор выводит женскую субъективность за пределы реальности повседневной жизни, где происходит творческий прорыв его сознания в сферу метафизического трансцендентного бытия. И именно женскую субъективность, не обремененную холодной, рациональной логикой патриархатного мира, автор наделяет способностью переживать состояние экстатического восторга бытием, даже в момент смерти, через ее борьбу и сопротивление мужской тоталитарности рационального мирового порядка. В отличие от позиции радикального феминизма автор видит решение проблемы противоречия между женским и мужским полами через идею их гармоничной взаимодополняемости в личной жизни.

**Ключевые слова:** женская идентичность, женский жизненный опыт, топология существования, патриархатный порядок.

### Abstract

**D.L. Pesotska, Z.L. Kushchenko.**

### **Topology of the feminine in the novel “Three women in the mirror”**

**by E.-E. Schmitt**

The article covers problem of the feminine in literature as the phase of self-exposure of specific feminine life experience beyond the traditional gender dichotomy central/marginal in culture. The process of forming the feminine identity in the novel occurs in the perspective of three historic epochs in the Western European civilization reflected in the characters of three main heroines of the novel: Anna who lives in medieval epoch, Hannah, whose feminine experience is formed under conditions of bourgeois Vienna at the beginning of XX century and Annie who was destined to live and shape her own personality in the present-day Los Angeles. Each of the heroines challenges patriarchic hierarchic system of values supposedly established by God where her personal world, her gender identity is assessed as “otherness” that threatens the world order. Heroines of the novel feel their “otherness” through the image of «mirror» that symbolizes the standpoint of “the Other One”, transforming female identity into no more than in the objects for rated assessments, stripping her from control over her own existence and opportunities to unlock her own creative potential. The author takes feminine individuality beyond the boundaries of daily reality, where creative breakthrough of her consciousness takes place into the field of

metaphysical transcendent being. And it is feminine individuality which is not burdened by cold, rational logics of patriarchic world which the author endows with capability to experience the state of ecstatic fascination with being, even at the moment of death, through its struggle and against masculine rationality of world order. Unlike posture of the radical feminism the author sees a solution to the problem of contradiction between the female and male sexes through the idea of their harmonic mutual complementarity in personal life.

**Keywords:** feminine identity, feminine life experience, topology of existence, patriarchal order.

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