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## Access Paths: On Popular Women's Literature and Criticism

**Dariusz Nowacki**

University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0001-8274-8845

**Abstract:** Referring to critical statements that have appeared during the last few years, the author discusses ways of commenting on popular literature penned by female authors. One may distinguish five types of comments, 1) Appropriation (*Aneksja*), employed when a popular novel is included in the socially important literature referring to pressing and alarming problems (e.g. domestic violence). 2) *Playing with convention* (*Gra z konwencją*), based on pinpointing both grotesque and ironic elements and, above all, metaliterary signals in popular novels. 3) *Adherence to tradition* (*Zgodnie z tradycją*), best represented in the secondary literature, either through a poetologic approach (structural analyses) or approaches inspired by feminist criticism. 4) Exhortation to pay close attention (*Dobrze się wsłuchać*), focused on the approaches suggested by other fields, e.g. how popular women's literature is read by sociologists. 5) *Focus on emotions and excess* (*Emocje i zbytek*), based on emotional and therapeutic research on the perception styles of popular literature. In this case, one focuses not on popular women's fiction, but on the way it influences the readers' emotions.

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In his 2003 paper titled *Women and the spirit of identity (Kobiety i duch tożsamości)*,<sup>1</sup> Przemysław Czapliński estimated the number of novels written by women, but he could also freely, that is interchangeably, use the terms “proza kobieca” and “proza kobiet” (in English the terms are equivalent to each other and we use either “women's prose writing” or “women's literature”). Therefore, such statements as “in the years 2000-2002 there were one or two prose works out of ten written by women”<sup>2</sup> were not surprising. Moreover, having taken stock of the literary oeuvre of 2001, Czapliński was able to list sixteen names of female writers who

<sup>1</sup> P. Czapliński, “Kobiety i duch tożsamości,” *Opcje* 2003, No. 3. In a slightly extended and, simultaneously, final version as part of his book titled *Efekt bierności. Literatura w czasie normalnym*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004. Other references to the article will be given in accordance with the latest version published in the book. All the quotations from the Polish sources have been translated by Agnieszka Grząśko, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

published at least one novel that year. Ignoring the broadly understood notion of distinction, he placed Julia Hartwig and Ewa Kuryluk next to Katarzyna Grochola and Hanna Kowalewska.<sup>3</sup> The question arises as to why Czapliński could ignore both genre diversity and the different groups of target readership. This is so simply because ten years ago in Polish literary studies there was a slight, sometimes barely noticeable, difference between “proza kobieca” and “proza kobiet” (“women’s prose writing”). In a world dominated by male writers, the fact that the author was female seemed noteworthy. It is important that such classifications appeared as an illustration of the thesis, which was true back then, that female literary expression had been actively blocked (part of Czapliński’s article referred to here is “The silence of women”).

Women’s expressiveness – as we know today – was soon unblocked by the market, and its result surpassed the wildest expectations of the advocates and enthusiasts of the “women’s issue” (in literature). We are still unable to provide the actual number of all novels written by women in Poland. However, it is undeniable that there are hundreds of such books written per annum, and Katarzyna Michalska, who published six novels in 2013, was single-handedly able to meet one third of the quota from 2001. Undoubtedly, as far as the proportions are concerned, we are dealing here with the exact reversal of the tendency from a decade earlier when Czapliński claimed that the proportion was alarming (“in a fat year it is one to five, in a lean year it is one to ten<sup>4</sup>”). And so, is the completely reversed tendency a good sign? Even if it is, this probably does not make anybody happy. Let us quote Inga Iwasiów:

Undoubtedly, currently we are dealing with a situation in which large numbers of book editions and faithful fan clubs prove that literature by female writers predominates over any other forms of literary communication, and thus it is impossible to discuss either the artistic merit or the social issues at the heart of this kind of literature in a manner that respects feminist theory.

The current success of female writers should be perceived from a sociological point of view. The genuine interest of readers, exceeding that which accompanied female authors debuting after 1989, who have stressed both their independence and the connections with the emancipation discourse, proves that there is a demand for safe narratives for women. Such narratives interpret the contemporary world in an accessible way and do not urge anybody to confront socially favoured lifestyles. The sources of these demands should be the subject of “multicultural research,” hence a literary scholar has little to do here.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Julia Hartwig (1921-2017) was a distinguished Polish poet. Czapliński referred here to her 2001 autobiographical publication, in prose, *Zawsze powroty. Dziennik podróży*. Ewa Kuryluk (b. 1946) is a well-known and respected painter and art historian, who also in 2001 published her novel *Encyklopedioerotyk*. Both publications should be perceived as belonging to a sort of elitist prose. On the other hand, Katarzyna Grochola (b. 1957) and Hanna Kowalewska (b. 1960) are representatives of Polish popular prose.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>5</sup> I. Iwasiów, *Granice. Polityczność prozy i dyskursu kobiet po 1989 roku*, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2013, p. 120.

This extensive quotation encompasses all issues to which I would like to refer in this article, although the most important problem is to be discussed at the end.

In fact, never before, counting from the landmark year of 1989, have “women’s issues” been so well represented in literature, and – at the same time – so generally ignored by the experts on contemporary literature. Iwasiów points out the “uselessness” of popular women’s literature, claiming that one can hardly discuss important artistic and social problems while referring to it. Other female experts seem to be more careful,<sup>6</sup> as far as the problem in question is concerned; or they simply have different views on this issue (as we will see in what follows). Iwasiów suggests that the problem “be considered from a sociological perspective,” given that there are two tempting approaches to women’s prose writing.

On the one hand, we may expect a sociocultural story on how, in Iwasiów’s words, “women’s prose writing lost its revolutionary impetus”<sup>7</sup> at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here one needs to say that this story has, to a large extent, been started, but it has definitely not come to an end, as I will demonstrate below. On the other hand, we need to establish and comment on the circumstances under which the “independence and emancipation discourse” was abandoned and about the consequences of this decision. In fact, this constitutes a very interesting task for a literature sociologist: How can we account for the supremacy phenomenon (“the advantage of women’s literature over any other forms of literary communication”), believing that we are dealing here with a phenomenon that, in a way, exists beyond literary culture or – as we may safely say – on its barely discernible margins? This time we would confront a situation in which a widespread phenomenon, whose impact cannot be compared to anything else, is incessantly presented as being peripheral and meaningless. However, this last topic is to be left for another time, as I would like to focus on Iwasiów’s diagnosis of contemporary women’s literature as being of little to no interest for the literary scholar.

Even though there is a separate field of studies known as *popular romance studies* in Anglo-American culture, there is no such subdiscipline in Poland in spite of the fact that works devoted to Polish women’s fiction do appear from time to time. In my analysis, I do not provide a complete review of the field but rather a sample of approaches as they emerge from such works of secondary literature.

My aim is to generalize, as I attempt to answer the question of what can be done with – let us not be afraid of these words – something unwanted;

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Arleta Galant (“Literatura, feminizm, krytyka – inne konstelacje?,” *Wielogłos* 2011, No. 1.) claims that, all in all, feminist criticism analyses a popular novel for women and its aim is to “be close to both its readers and authors” (p. 73); for more information see footnote 9 referring to Bernadetta Darska’s critical works.

<sup>7</sup> I. Iwasiów, *Rewindykacje. Kobieta czytająca dzisiaj*, Kraków: Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas, 2002, p. 29.

this is the source of my idea, namely to briefly discuss five “access paths” to women’s prose writing. Needless to say that the “typology” (quotation marks are essential here) presented or merely outlined in this article is not exhaustive and that all enumerated critical “methods” and “approaches” may overlap with one another or “methodologically” coalesce.

## 1. Appropriation

Given that contemporary women’s novels constitute a vast collection of varied narratives, it is an easy task to choose books that fall outside the genre stereotypes. It is worth referring at this point to Czapliński’s *Kobiety i duch tożsamości* [Women and the spirit of identity], in which the critic claimed that around 2002 literary feminism started to be dependent on the laws of the free market. As a result, according to Kazimiera Szczuka, “novels written by women for women” were characterized as “boring, petit bourgeois and subordinated to the rules of low stability.”<sup>8</sup> As Szczuka continues:

This thesis may have been correct at the time; however, currently it needs an in-depth review. Katarzyna Grochola suddenly presented to her readers *Trzepot skrzydeł* [The flap of wings] (2008), which is certainly not another love story, but rather a thought-provoking and well-written book about domestic violence, a beaten woman.

Grochola’s novel is also affirmed by Bernadetta Darska, who claims that “in *Trzepot skrzydeł* the author departed from the pop convention and gave her readers a well-thought-out and refined novel.”<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Grochola’s writing style does not convince me at all (it is uniform; unfortunately, she is devoted to her idiom) I understand the function of the gesture of interception/absorption; undoubtedly, it is possible and even quite easy.

It is worth stressing that the most frequently employed form of “appropriation” by literary critics is moving a given object to the realm of so-called middlebrow literature.<sup>10</sup> To give some example, such operations were employed with reference to Grażyna Plebanek’s novel *Dziewczyny z Portofino* [The girls of Portofino], despite the fact that there are clear historical and literary allusions to Pola Gojawiczyńska’s *Dziewczęta z Nowolipek* [The

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<sup>8</sup> K. Szczuka, “Rewolucja jest kobietą,” in: *Polityka literatury. Przewodnik Krytyki Politycznej*, edited by K. Dunin, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2009, p. 63. All quotations come from this page.

<sup>9</sup> B. Darska, “Między prywatnym a publicznym. Macierzyństwo we współczesnej prozie kobiecej,” in: *Dwadzieścia lat literatury polskiej. Idee, ideologie, metodologie*, edited by A. Galant and I. Iwasiów, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2008, p. 285.

<sup>10</sup> This vague, but useful term was employed by Krzysztof Uniłowski (see: “Proza środka, czyli stereotyp literatury nowoczesnej,” in: idem, *Granice nowoczesności. Proza polska i wyczerpanie modernizmu*, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2006, pp. 156-196).

girls of Nowolipki].<sup>11</sup> Other novels by Plebanek were “transferred” in this way from their original context of women’s prose writing into the sphere of so-called middlebrow literature.

## **2. Playing with convention**

This method may be described as a variant of the above-mentioned “appropriation.” Essentially, literary critics extract some minor meta-literary signals and elements of the grotesque and irony from some popular women’s novels. These elements allow critics to devise an affirmative interpretation, or even to prove the thesis of a double addressee of the books. This is how Maciej Duda interpreted Hanna Samson’s works; he concluded that her oeuvre is “a good answer to those looking for feminist pastiche, satire, new language or auto-ironic narrative.”<sup>12</sup> Duda accurately observes that the conventions of popular women’s novels seemed exhausted and thus welcomes any postmodern attempts to transform these literary texts. Moreover, the recipients should be aware that they may find unexpected pleasure in playing with marked cards.

One may ponder over the range of the pastiche literary practice employed in the type of writing at hand and to what extent scholars’ claims about draining or exhausting the convention is shared by the audience. Speaking of the unobvious sources of readers’ satisfaction, I would say that more often we deal with something that should be called a perverse pleasure that we derive from reading. What I mean is the exegeses and irreverent commentaries preying on the literary ineptitude of popular authoresses which tend to list the absurdities and sarcastically discuss pretentious language or implausible details that may be found in a book. One may pose the question, however, to what degree this kind of access path facilitates oversimplified interpretation and thus describes the ethical compass of such an approach.

## **3. Adherence to tradition**

In this section, I will focus on two different research/literary traditions: a poetological approach and an approach steeped in feminist theory that

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<sup>11</sup> See: A. Galant, “Dziewczęta z Nowolipek i ich młodsze siostry,” *Pogranicza* 2008, No. 1-2 (extended version in: “Dziewczęta z Nowolipek i ich młodsze siostry,” in: eadem, *Prowincje literatury. Polska proza kobiet po 1956 roku*, Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego, 2013, pp. 235–248); B. Darska, “Ciało do zapamiętania. Kobięce historie intymne na przykładzie powieści Grażyny Plebanek ‘Dziewczyny z Portofino’ i Brygidy Helbig ‘Pałowa’,” *Media – Kultura – Komunikacja Społeczna* 2010, No. 6.

<sup>12</sup> M. Duda, “(Nie)uczęszczane ścieżki emancypacji. Pisarstwo Hanny Samson,” *Pogranicza* 2012, No. 2, p. 94.

aims to unmask the structures governing the field of women's writing. In my opinion, both of these approaches are passé now. My aim is not to discredit researchers who dealt with popular literature from either critical angle in the past,<sup>13</sup> but rather to show that this type of research is “non-developing,” as far as the functional or – broadly speaking – structural analysis is concerned. Even if we believe that contemporary women's prose writing undergoes a far-reaching process of hybridisation and that it absorbs ideas, concepts and techniques from areas that were not explored a decade ago, I do not think that it would be possible to go beyond the most important findings presented thirty years ago or even earlier.<sup>14</sup> What I want to say is that various conceptual categories or frameworks (e.g. the simplification of structures, pretentiousness, stereotype/schemata – a set of devices employed by Anna Martuszevska) could be applied, although one can hardly claim that a “formalistic access path” is particularly attractive.

As far as the second approach is concerned, Pamela Regis points out that current research on popular women's fiction has reached an impasse. Regis blames the “Four Amazons of the Apocalypse,”<sup>15</sup> as she rather maliciously calls them, for the impasse in question. The term refers to four extremely influential researchers (Ann Barr Snitow, Tania Modelski, Kay Mussell and Janice A. Radway) whose books published between 1979 and 1984<sup>16</sup> presented a grim apocalyptic picture of over-sentimental types of books. Stressing various dimensions of oppression that female readers suffer, there is one aspect that – following Regis – the four researchers agreed on: by “producing” helplessness and submissiveness towards a patriarchal authority novelettes are, generally speaking, a deceitful trap set for female readers. Moreover, Regis claims that the findings from the late seventies and the beginning of the eighties were still relevant well into the twenty-first century – researchers applied the same notions and theoretical concepts to works written thirty years later, without considering that the theories considered as being fundamental in the research on popular novelettes were based on scant literary material.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> A concise and useful review of the research methods concerning popular literature may be found in the following article: A. Fulińska, “Dlaczego literatura popularna jest popularna?” *Teksty Drugie* 2003, No. 4.

<sup>14</sup> See the most important works of Anna Martuszevska which, to some extent, were summed up in “*Ta trzecia.*” *Problemy literatury popularnej*, Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 1999 and the works of Maria Bujnicka from the 1980s.

<sup>15</sup> P. Regis, “What Do Critics Owe the Romance?” [http://jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/JPRS2.1\\_Regis\\_Keynote.pdf](http://jprstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/JPRS2.1_Regis_Keynote.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> There is only an excerpt in the Polish translation from the oldest of these works – A. Barr Snitow, “Romans masowy. Pornografia dla kobiet jest inna,” [“Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different”], translated by J. Kutyla, *Krytyka Polityczna* 2005, No. 9–10.

<sup>17</sup> In her comprehensive study, Snitow quoted only five books from the Harlequin series, which were published between 1977–1978. In turn, Modelski quoted nine titles from 1976 (see P. Regis).

As I have already mentioned, both approaches fail to meet current challenges. If we take into account popular Polish literature written by women, then both the poetological (formal) and feminist (unmasking) analyses will lead us to obvious conclusions. As a result, it will be a mere pseudo-critical reading experience for a researcher whose assumptions regarding the text's function will all be supported.

#### 4. Exhortation to pay close attention

This "access path" proves Iwasiów's assumption that "multi-cultural research" should be applied with reference to women's prose writing, although the word "research" may not seem to be the most precise in this particular context. What I am focusing on here is the question of how to approach the massive literary production, what intellectual angle can we look at it from in the literary critique we practise?

In a few papers devoted to the literature in question, Eliza Szybowicz suggests that we should "hunt" for social problems and the ideas they illustrate provided that they are not presented directly, but they appear during what seems to be empty babble, like in the case of two female characters of Małgorzata Kalicińska's Mazurian trilogy (two volumes are titled *Dom nad rozlewiskiem* [The lake house] and *Powrót nad rozlewisko* [Return to the lake house]). These two extremely talkative characters were described in the following way:

[they] are a perfect medium of mass culture which, as the subconscious of the so-called high culture, "talks nineteen to the dozen, but – in fact – it cannot lie and sooner or later spills the beans." Their rambling monologues and dialogues are devoid of composition and an inexhaustible source of clichés. They often seem to be a recorded session during which culture abandons itself to free associations.<sup>18</sup>

Naturally, one cannot provide any "hunting instructions" (how "to hunt," where to find valuable/important comments in a verbose style) although a prime directive seems to be: watch the margins of the plot carefully, search for the details that complement the characters and read between the lines. Take, for example, another text by Szybowicz, in which she deals with the religiousness of Hanka, the female character from Anna Ficner-Ogonowska's series of novels.<sup>19</sup> Hanka is invariably presented as a Catholic, so the unorthodox sexual ethics invented by the author for her heroine seems to be a kind of blind spot within this creation; the aim is to describe something seemingly invisible as a valuable literary find.

Of all the female literary critics of Polish women's prose writing from the first decade of the current century that I am familiar with, the broad-

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<sup>18</sup> E. Szybowicz, "Portret już nie małżeński z matką w tle. Wersja różowa i czarna," *Krytyka Polityczna* 2008, No. 16-17; the sentence in quotation marks was uttered by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir.

<sup>19</sup> E. Szybowicz, "Tyle szczęścia, że aż mdli," *Książki. Magazyn do Czytania* 2014, No. 1.

est “access path” was proposed by Agnieszka Mrozik, in her monograph *Akuszerki transformacji* [The midwives of transformation] and more specifically in a chapter titled *Bridget Jones znad Wisły* [Bridget Jones from somewhere on the Vistula]. The researcher convincingly develops the thesis that “we have been dealing with the construction, or rather the reconstruction of women’s identity in Polish women’s prose writing not since the beginning, but rather the end of, the nineties, where the (re) construction in question took place in popular literature.”<sup>20</sup> Rebel writers (such as Manuela Gretkowska and Izabela Filipiak) from the mid-nineties, put forward as examples by Czapliński and Iwasiów, did not betray the feminist revolution, but rather they found themselves in a communicative emptiness. Mrozik claims that the incendiary artistic women’s prose writing of that time failed to meet the readers’ expectations. It turned out to be inefficient, far too eccentric, and it undoubtedly failed to meet the “real” needs of Polish women.

Filling an empty space began with a quest for the Polish *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (it was in 2001 that Grochola’s bestseller *Nigdy w życiu!* [Never in my life!] was published; soon afterwards a number of “Bridget-like” novels appeared on the Polish market). Mrozik observes that “‘the representative nature’ is the key factor in the success of ‘the diaries.’”<sup>21</sup> I would rephrase “the representative nature” as a well-constructed mimetic pact. In other words, popular women’s literature from the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may be regarded as a large mirror reflecting contemporary Polish women. Mrozik assures us that this mirror shows their aspirations, dreams, anxieties, sorrows and their moments of happiness. Most importantly, the literature in question has helped many female readers to live, it is like a friend and it allows women to learn from the novels’ characters; it gives them ideas for life and beneficial scenarios of self-fulfilment.

To put it emphatically, popular women’s literature is like a priceless treasure, an inexhaustible source of knowledge on contemporary culture, social changes, the evolution of the mores, psychological problems and who knows what else. Coming back to Iwasiów’s opinion, the literary scholar will not draw anything from this wealth, but no one invites him to this feast.

## 5. Focus on emotions and excess

At first glance, this “path” will be similar to the above-mentioned “access path.” If so, then we need to stress that it is a radical variant. I would like to turn to Przemysław Czapliński again. In *Po co pop* [Who needs pop], he

<sup>20</sup> A. Mrozik, *Akuszerki transformacji. Kobiety, literatura i władza w Polsce po 1989 roku*, Warszawa: Pro Cultura Litteraria, Instytut Badań Literackich Wydawnictwo, 2012, pp. 234–244.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 261.



paraphrases one of the American researchers, Tania Modleski: “critics of women’s fiction overestimate the importance of the pop novel content and they do not appreciate the act of reading. The main advantages are not of a cognitive nature, but of an emotional and psychological nature.”<sup>22</sup> He also shows what stands behind conscious operations seemingly falling within the paradox: “women’s fiction teaches how to ignore ideology and create one’s own emotional utopia of immense strength.”

What we are dealing with here is complex psychology of reception, based on odd hypostases. One can hardly say how to immerse oneself in this emotional space and how to study it. All in all, it is about capturing the emancipation or liberation effects as a side effect of strongly conventionalized reading practice. Either way, it seems to be urgent to employ non-standard and non-literary-oriented approaches.

In one of Bernadetta Darska’s texts I found a tempting idea which, to some extent, mirrors Czapliński’s remarks:

A woman reading something that is generally perceived as not worth reading turns her into a protesting person. Her proclamation could come down to a few basic, but – simultaneously – emancipatory assumptions. It is, above all, a declaration of taking independent decisions concerning her free time – no one will tell the woman how she should rest and what should give her pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

Darska mentions that such notions as excess, disinterestedness or vagueness/impracticality (of the reading act) ought to be mentioned in an analysis as well. Moreover, it would be appropriate to ask a provocative question on females’ and males’ right to “waste their time” and overcome their daily routine or even “escape from reality.” All these issues are worth discussing; however, for literary scholars wanting to undertake such a task this would mean arming themselves with various devices and critical languages, so – quoting Iwasiów – they would have to conduct “multicultural research.”

Translated by Agnieszka Grząśko

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<sup>22</sup> P. Czapliński, “Po co pop,” *Książki. Magazyn do Czytania* 2014, No. 2. Another excerpt from the same source.

<sup>23</sup> B. Darska, “Ucieczka od (do) rzeczywistości,” *Pogranicza* 2012, No. 2, p. 64.

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