



## DIALOGUES OF RESISTANCE IN THE POEMS OF ANNA AKHMATOVA AND WISLAWA SYZMBORSHKA

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### Abstract

James C. Scott in 'Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of resistance' (1985) introduced the concept of 'everyday resistance' to cite the reaction of the oppressed against the dominators. This theory further supported the concept of 'public and hidden resistance', from the perspective, 'power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere'. Since 'power is exercised from innumerable points', resistance is 'integrated into social life' on daily basis. Upon reviewing the paradigms of power and resistance from a gender perspective, it is apparent that, while there is a vast academia critically examining themes of women's freedom, power and empowerment, little focus has been given to demystify the core subject 'Woman'. Cultural rigidities of the society still encourage the 'docile body' paradigm, where forms of power over women are exercised in a more subtle and insidious manner. This appropriation into producing 'feminine subject' possibly is the reason for increasing physical and sexual violence against women and a minimal participation of women in the public domain. This paper is an earnest attempt to understand the underpinnings of the narrative of resistance in the poems of Anna Akhmatova and Wislawa Syzmborshka. These two women poets wrote in extremely dangerous political landscapes but dared to awaken a political consciousness among their countrymen. Through this paper I intend to analyse and interpret dialogues of resistance as seen in the poems of these authors, who challenged the socio-political mandate in order to entail dialogues of gender equality.

Key words: power, resistance, political awakening, dialogues

Post World War II, East European Literature was replete with voices of resistance against terror, crime, exploitation, liberation and inequality under the communist regime. Ironically enough, the communist state's repressive control over books and media with the intention to mute the literary responses against communist leaders' reign of terror, spurred writings of resistive nature. A key form of dissent movement across the Soviet bloc was the origin of Samizdat -an activity where individuals secretly reproduced censored literature through underground publications in order to spread and document expressions of discontentment. Thus the search for new forms of resistance defines my theoretical framework: "where there is power there is resistance" (Michel Foucault) and reinforce the concept with: "where there is resistance there is power" (Lila Abu-Lughod)

The Feminist theory establishes that Women for the most part have remained theoretically and philosophically mute. It states that socially, politically and historically women have not directly participated in the production of our body of knowledge. Silencing the perspectives of women over centuries has rendered a condition of alienation from the dominant and linguistic practices of the society. It is in this context that we examine the narrative of women poets who composed poems not only challenging the cultural stereotypes of the society but also helping to make experiences of women and their lives intelligent and valuable.

Wislawa Szymborska and Anna Akhmatova were two such women authors who dared to question the standing political authority in a manner that was quiet, dispersed and disguised. For these women, poetry became an indispensable tool to voice the injustices of their time in a covert manner. Anna Akhmatova's Requiem, is an elegy that bears witness to the oppressive silence of Stalin era. In this 'cycle' poem – it's made

up of sequence of shorter poems- Akhmatova documents the intolerance, repression and torment under Joseph Stalin regime in a rather icy cold manner-

In the awful days of the Yezhovschina I passed seventeen months in the outer waiting line of the prison visitors in Leningrad. Once, somebody 'identified' me there. Then a woman, standing behind me in the line, which, of course, never heard my name, waked up from the torpor, typical for us all there, and asked me, whispering into my ear (all spoke only in a whisper there):

"And can you describe this?" And I answered:

"Yes, I can."

Then the weak similarity of a smile glided over that, what had once been her face.

April 1, 1957; Leningrad

Given the political climate of Russia, Akhmatova had to compose the elegy in great secrecy. Spanned over three decades, Requiem is an elegy that chronicled the Stalinist Terror by blending graceful language with complex Russian forms of poetry. Despite writing under the shadow of fear and torture, Ahkmatova chose to be a clear and strong female persona from whom: "One hundred million voices shout" through her "tortured mouth".

In the course of her Nobel lecture Wislawa Szymborshka used a phrase "I don't know". Though a little phrase, she said it has mighty wings and expands to include spaces within us and the outer expanses. She further states that if Isaac Newton hadn't said, "I don't know" when the apples dropped down, he would have remained an ordinary soul idyllically eating the apples from his orchards. "Poets, if they're genuine, must also keep repeating "I don't know." Her appeal was to come out of the comfortable and putative terrains and go in quest of norm defying journeys

In *The Soliloquy of Cassandra*, Szymborshka speaks through Cassandra, the prophetess of Troy. In Greek mythology, Cassandra is a gifted clairvoyant who can predict future but is powerless. Thus Cassandra personifies as a figure that has deep knowledge but incapable to change the tragic condition of human kind.

Here I am, Cassandra.

And this is my city under ashes.

And these are my prophet's staff and ribbons.

And this is my head full of doubts.

In this strophe, Szymborshka assumes the role of a prophet, whose warning against the atrocities of the communist government had been largely ignored by her people out of fear and death. She feels for her people for she declares:

I loved them.

But I loved them haughtily.

From heights beyond life.

The prophetic words of the poet seeking her countrymen to stand against the mass violation of human rights in her country are not heeded because her voice was harsh and truthful unlike the words of deceit of the communist government of Poland. The poet recollects:

how people, seeing me, would break off in midword.

Laughter died.

Lovers' hands unclasped.

Children ran to their mothers.

They lived within life.

Pierced by that great wind.

Condemned.

Trapped from birth in departing bodies.

Poems like *Cassandra*, *Lot's Wife* and *Requiem* quite remarkable and relevant for several reasons. In the first place, it's sensational to see how Szymborska and Akhmatova drew inspiration from mythical and Biblical characters and effectively subverted these themes to suit the modern discourse.

Like *'Lots's Wife*, these women poets suffered pain, humiliation and rejection: because she chose to turn. The result of disobedience for Lot's wife was she was turned into a pillar of salt:

A single glance: a sudden dart of pain  
stitching her eyes before she made a sound . . .  
Her body flaked into transparent salt,  
and her swift legs rooted to the ground.

In *'Lots's Wife'*, Akhmatova deals with an emotional and relevant problem hitherto hugely neglected by the Bible as well as the literary canon. Women have been invisible throughout the social, historical and political theories. 'Her' issues, concerns, skills, aptitude were not worth mentioning. Just like the name of the Lot's Wife never gets documented in the Bible, woman representation has completely been ignored in the social, economic and political construct of the society. Akhmatova picks up where the Bible writer leaves off, and fills the fissures by subtly colouring the feelings and emotions of Lots Wife as she hastily leaves the city; the native Sodom she is emotionally attached due to:

square where once you sang, the spinning-shed,  
at the empty windows set in the tall house  
where sons and daughters blessed your marriage-bed."

Wisława Szymborska's *Lots Wife* blows the same chord as Akhmatova. In Szymborska's version Lot's wife begins and ends with her side of the story. Strapped between two opposing poles of reasoning, we are allowed to hear a compelling narrative of "looking back." In "Lot's Wife," we hear this nameless woman's voice. We are taken a journey into the internal musings of a lady that had been embedded in stony silence. Lot's wife's gets a chance to explain why she looked back, despite the warning "don't look back".

Carelessly, while tying my sandal strap.  
Checking for pursuers . . . setting my bundle down . . .  
not knowing where to set my foot.

Another striking reason that charmed the works of these two poets is: a casual, detached and taciturn diction to express rage, grief, agony and personal struggles of individual as well as the masses under communist dictatorship in Russia and Poland. Their poems echoed the helplessness of the citizens.

It is also noteworthy to specify that the works of Szymborska and Akhmatova are anthems of resistance by people who had and will have to endure shame, indignity and suffering under authoritarian governments. Like many other women poets of their time, Wisława Szymborska and Anna Akhmatova gambled to abandon the religious, political and philosophical beliefs in order to 'look back' - a political act that not only defied the strong patriarchal narrative but also challenged to debunk all forms of gender appropriation.

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