

Alicja Budzyńska

University of Warsaw

alicja.budzynska@uw.edu.pl

ORCID: 0000-0002-5462-4957

How Does Contemporary Polish Literature Tell Minority Stories of Women? On the Example of the Novels *Sońka* by Ignacy Karpowicz and *Krótką wymiana ognia* by Zyta Rudzka*

DOI: 10.12775/LL.3-4.2025.012 | CC BY-ND 4.0

ABSTRACT: The article analyzes the way histories of rural working class women belonging to ethnic minorities are used in two contemporary Polish novels: Ignacy Karpowicz's *Sońka* and Zyta Rudzka's *Krótką wymiana ognia* [A Short Exchange of Fire]. The women characters are created in a similar way – they talk about their lives right before they die, showcasing a minority perspective on the 20th century history of Poland. Through analyzing literary and linguistic strategies utilized by the novels' authors, the article shows how contemporary Polish literature creates minority histories, and, by their means, builds discourse concerning the sources of identity for the middle class.

KEYWORDS: contemporary Polish literature, ethnic minorities, rural working class, middle class

The interest in women's minority stories in Polish literature did not begin with the publication of Joanna Kuciel-Frydryszak's historical reportage *Chłopki: opowieść o naszych babkach* [Peasant Women: A Story of Our Grandmothers] (2023). In fiction, women's perspective on life in the countryside had already appeared in novels inspired by the folk trend created prior to

* The article was written as part of the research subsidized by "National Program for the Development of Humanities" project no: NPRH/DN/SP/0146/2023/12; subsidy amount PLN 429 804,19

1989¹. In them, there are also present subjects undertaken by Kuciel-Frydryszak – patriarchal power and violence inextricably connected with life in the countryside in the first half of the 20th century.

My interest lies in women's minority histories that I find in novels of the second decade of the 21st century. Their focus on minority does not concern only the protagonists' gender identities and rural background, as it is in the case of *Chłopki*². The protagonists of Ignacy Karpowicz's and Zyta Rudzka's novels are also persons whose ethnic identity exceeds Polishness. Significantly, they do not fully recognize their belonging to minorities themselves: it is visible from the reader's perspective. An important factor behind such classification consists in that the stories told by the protagonists are an attempt at retelling war and post-war history with the use of perspectives heretofore underappreciated in Polish historiography and literature. The protagonists themselves do not seem to realize that.

Although even a few years ago re-writing the history of the first half of the 20th century (focusing, above all, on the stories of excluded groups) could have seemed an attractive task due to its novelty, today it is a fairly obvious concept. This is evidenced by the multiplicity of publications in the recent years that present latest history through the lens of groups heretofore excluded. Among these, there are, for instance: Silesians (Zbigniew Rokita's *Kajś*), homosexual people (Joanna Ostrowska's *Oni. Homoseksualiści w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*) or people with mental illnesses (Kalina Błażejowska *Bezdušní. Zapomniana zagłada chorych*).

When observing the popularity of the phenomenon of re-writing history, which is also the essence of the folk turn, it is worth taking a closer look at how it has functioned in the 21st century fiction. It would be difficult to prove in a convincing manner that literature is faster than the changes taking place in the discourses of humanities and social studies. However, it is worth taking a look at novels, at the subjects they touch upon and how they do so, in relation to the issues appearing in non-fiction texts. Even if fiction does not directly inspire research, reportages or essays, it certainly expresses social moods, and in many cases, it can be a detector of emerging processes, changes and turns.

In this way, I will analyze two novels in the present text: Ignacy Karpowicz's *Sońka* (2014) and Zyta Rudzka's *Krótką wymiana ognia [A Short Exchange of Fire]* (2018). They were both published prior to the boom for folk stories, best illustrated by the popularity of *Chłopki* – a book that was the only non-fiction publication to have made it to the list of top ten most read books in Poland in 2024 (Chymkowski, Zasacka 2024: 6). In Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels my area of interest will be the way minority stories of women are cre-

1 One example of such novel can be found in *Najada* by Zyta Oryszyn, first published in 1970.

2 In the introduction to a new edition of Oryszyn's novels there appears the statement that this novel "can be read [...] as a separate voice with regard to the canon [of peasant novel – A. B.] created by men" (Chmielecka, Fierek 2021: 5).

ated, what their narrative meaning is, and, as a result, what their discursive function consists in. Juxtaposing these two texts makes it possible to demonstrate a certain universality in the way minority histories of women are used. Some of the similarities I showcase can definitely also be found in non-fiction literature undertaking the subjects of history of excluded groups.

It is worth starting this analysis with the beginnings of the novels. This would be a paraphrase of the narrative starting point of *Sońka*:

The car belonging to Igor, a theater director, breaks down somewhere in the middle of Podlasie. This happens at a key moment of his professional life – the way his directorial body of work is assessed is about to be decided. His routine, so far connected with Warsaw, is temporarily disturbed in a village nearby a place where his grandparents used to live and he used to spend his holidays. Igor comes across Sońka, an elderly woman who looks after cattle grazing in the meadow (Karpowicz 2014: 7–11).

In turn, *Krótką wymiana ognia* begins the following way:

Roma, an aging poet, arrives at her family house in Silesia. Some time ago her teenage daughter left her, having written a letter in which she said she did not want to have any contact with her parents. Later, Roma discovers her husband's cheating. She comes to visit her elderly mother as the awareness of inevitable passage of time forces her to recapitulate her last years, especially the relationships she had created (Rudzka 2018).

These two narrative beginnings already have much in common. Middle-aged protagonists, at their lives' turning point, meet elderly women for whom they become the audience of the last telling of their life stories. Seemingly independent histories of characters from different generations influence each other, but mostly one-sidedly – it is the stories of the elderly women that have impact on the life of younger characters.

The way Igor and Roma are created as characters is also similar. They are both people who have experienced social advancement and moved from a small town to Warsaw. Although they are both artists seeking inspiration for their creative work in daily life, they have not seen the potential of stories to be told in the roads they have traveled so far. Their big city identity is built in separation from their place of origin or family identity. In the case of Igor, the narrator states outright that the protagonist “carefully hid his childhood, painted it over, was consistently ashamed of it, diligently forgot it, repressed and buried. The childhood he spent with grandparents in the nearby countryside” (Karpowicz 2014: 24).

This detachment from the past on Igor's past is also bluntly emphasized by his changing his name from the one given to him by parents – Ignacy, to the one he chose on his own – Igor. The symbolic meaning of changing one's

first or last name in the case of people advancing in society is discussed by Morgane Cadieu in her *On the both sides of the track*, mentioning the examples of French writers: Eduard Louis and Annie Ernaux, who function as creators under new names and not their family ones (Cadieu 2024: 31).

Therefore, although the protagonists' advancement is clearly visible for us-readers, due to the fact that it remains unnamed and not fully recognized by the characters as such, it resembles the way Andrzej Leder termed post-war social changes – a dreamed-through revolution (Leder 2014). Karpowicz's and Rudzka's protagonists do not belong to the generation that survived the war and built their life on the debris of the Holocaust. They were born in the Polish People's Republic and started their careers in 1980s and 1990s. However, similarly to the people advancing, unnoticed, in the post-war years due to the changes introduced by the new authorities and the wealth left by Jews, they have not in any way named the change that took place over the course of their lives. They are representatives of a new middle class, which, following Marx, could be termed as a class-in-itself – having common interests – but which is not yet a class for itself, that is, one that is aware of its own identity³. Przemysław Czapliński, in turn, defines it as a class devoid of a background it could use.

The fact that the middle class is born through negating their own origins should be seen as a clue that at the beginning of the 1990s there was no class legacy (family wealth, experience, network of connections) that could serve as background for mass middle class. This why it found its beginning in despair (caused by poverty), in dreams (of a better life), in determination (not to repeat the parents' biographies), as well as in the tradition of cunning and illegality of Polish People's Republic (Czapliński 2024: 190).

Sources indicated by Czapliński can be found in both Igor's and Roma's lives. Both have achieved a kind of artistic success in the capital, thanks to their dreams and determination, while simultaneously experiencing failure in their private lives, turning them back towards despair.

Although central places in both novels are taken up by the histories of *ma-mulka* (mommy) and *Sońka*, we become familiar with them in an indirect way – they are located within narration initially focused around Igor and Roma. The way in which both texts are constructed as stories-within-stories becomes significant in the context of analyzing class discourses. After all, in literary texts,

3 In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx writes: "Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases, this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests" (Marx 1955: 79).

the plot is not the sole carrier of meaning. The genre of a given piece may turn out to be equally important⁴. Should the story-within-a-story composition of Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels be treated as a feature of a genre, what would it say about the image of the presented world in these texts?

Firstly, Igor's and Roma's meetings with women living in the countryside and listening to their stories become pretexts within the narrative to confront two generations and two different class identities while, at the same time, showcasing how much they are interconnected. The result of this confrontation can be foreseen from the very start, and it is foreshadowed by Roma's mother's words:

Daughter's come. Learned daughter.

Mamulka responds, laughing: Well, what can you do, learned, but a fail. She planted herself in the capital. Fail (Rudzka 2018: 16).

Igor's and Roma's folk origins and their social advancement remove the protagonists from the people that stayed in their places of origin. As Czaplinski notes, the totality of differences between the middle and the rural working class weakened the chances for a set of commonalities being born: culture, value system, space for communication (Czaplinski 2024: 194). Having the women's minority stories nested within the narrative concerning advancing protagonists reveals the scope of differences between characters from various generations. Secondly, the mediation we are dealing with in the case of Sońka's and *mamulka's* stories results in them not functioning as independent histories. They can only be accessed through the city-based protagonists. Not only does this lack of directness construct distance, but it also strengthens doubts regarding the authenticity of the older women's stories⁵. The first-person narration in Rudzka's novel, the literary features of the older protagonist's language and elements indicating a script-like essence of the text in Karpowicz's novel suggests that women's stories could have been processed by younger protagonists, or even used instrumentally, as suggested by the fragment from *Sońka*:

Igor Grycowski, his lips shaping an "o", turned to stone, and, like a fairytale prince, realized at once that in front of him is a creature he had waited for all his life, and this does not pertain the cow, handsome and quite tempting as she batted her long eyelashes, this does not even fully pertain to Sonia, or, at least, not the Sonia that Sońka was on a daily basis. This pertains to a new Sonia, undiscovered and forgotten. An exciting Sonia, whose presence Igor Grycowski sensed and noticed, when

4 This is shown by, among others, by Witold Sadowski by formulating the concept of a Genre Image of the World, see Sadowski 2021: 181–193.

5 This pertains to authenticity within the presented world. Much indicates that in both novels, the stories of older characters are modified (linguistically or narratively) by the younger protagonists.

the old woman's blue eye rested on him, although throughout Igor: first, with a slight apprehension and then – it cleared like the sky, faded, brightened up and glimmered (Karpowicz 2014: 17).

Even if we reject the interpretation, according to which the old women's stories would be a kind of projection or the result of the younger protagonists' creation, there is no doubt, as the fragment above shows, that the stories of *mamulka* and Sonia are, above all, the context for Roma's and Ignacy's histories. Thirdly, finally, the aforementioned mediation and doubtful authenticity of histories of old women inscribe themselves into diagnoses regarding the decline of peasant culture. Back in 2003 Wiesław Myśliwski, a writer creating literature inspired by the peasant trend, described the process that he defined as the end of peasant culture (Myśliwski 2003). He defined peasant culture through its metaphysical nature, attachment to a place, being based in word, imagination, but also silence and isolation. Due to the civilizational progress and lack of interest in peasant culture, it came to be supplanted by folk culture, a reduced vision of the countryside created by the intelligentsia. This is perfectly evidenced by the story-within-a-story composition of both novels – the image of the countryside is constructed from shreds of heard stories of the passing generation. The decline of peasant culture that Myśliwski writes about is manifested in the impossibility of writing peasant novels, which are supplanted with a relativizing narration – the image of the countryside is created there by people who no longer belong.

The Image of the Countryside and Its Women Inhabitants

In both novels, the decline of peasant culture also has a very literal dimension. The end of the countryside life is, above all, its depopulation. Sońka lives in a village described as:

here, at the end of nothing, in Królowe Stojło near the metropolitan Służanka, there were only four huts. Sonia lived in the smallest, mice played in two others, as the owners lay down in coffins, and town heirs sometimes came for a weekend, although not often and definitely not every weekend, pity it was not often, it's always some kind of a change, some noise in the silence, some life in the wilderness (Karpowicz 2014: 14).

As inhabitants of villages migrate to cities, the countryside loses its meaning. Roma says about her place of origin that “this used to be Czarnolas, then Schwarzwald, and now – a black hole” (Rudzka 2018: 14). The tempestuous history of the countryside in the area of the so-called Recovered Territories, where Rudzka's novel takes place, ends with the lives of the last local inhabitants.

Old age and approaching deaths of women coming from the countryside are a synecdoche of the countryside's decline. The stories told by women

characters are the last testimony of collective history. As a result, they gain a supra-individual dimension, are supposed to represent the history of groups heretofore unspoken about: in Karpowicz's novel, the *tutejsi* (locals) Podlasie inhabitants⁶, in Rudzka's book – Silesians.

Czapliński notes that in Polish novels of the second decade of the 21st century the countryside is frequently depicted as a deserted place, one abandoned by the young. The texts are dominated by a melancholy mood. According to Czapliński, the cultural reason for the countryside dying out can be sought in the conventional way it had heretofore been described (Czapliński 2024: 346). “Literature – in this, the formula of active melancholy expresses itself – killed the past so that the future would be possible” (Czapliński 2024: 346). Therefore, the death of heretofore known forms of life in the countryside is the condition for the birth of new ones.

What are, thus, these passing life forms connecting the stories of Sońka and Roma's mother? Or, actually: how are the women inhabitants of countryside seen by the characters who had moved to the city? And finally, what do both novels say about the way literature of the second decade of the 21st century characterizes the rural working class? These three questions are asked from three levels of reading register⁷: the level of plot, the level of narration and the level of discourse within which the novel is ascribed or which it creates. Through characterizing the protagonists, taking a look at how Igor and Roma see them, I will move on to reply to the eponymous question: How do minority stories of women build the identity of the middle class?

The Folk Elements

Characterizing Sońka and *mamulka* begins with descriptions of both women's houses. These are places they seem inextricably connected with – on the one hand, it would be unthinkable if they lived anywhere else, on the other, their presence seems to shakily hold up the construction of the houses.

When Igor approaches Sońka's croft, he sees that “the small gate barely held on the rusted hinges, lopsided and moss-covered; as if in the farmyard of a Baba Yaga's sister, a turpist sister who removed all that is pretty and new out of her sight” (Karpowicz 2014: 18). In a similar way, nature enters the house of Roma's mother. The protagonist feels the presence of the dried-out river in “the damp house, in walls covered with slime like *suillus* mushrooms, in fairy ring mushrooms growing out of old pots behind the poker in the corner of winter kitchen” (Rudzka 2018: 14).

Women's houses are farmsteads-ethnographic museums, cluttered with old brooms, pots with burned bottoms, holy pictures put behind a glass pane. Traces of old work connected with keeping animals (Sońka's last cow, Roma's

6 The Podlasie inhabitants sometimes use this term to describe their borderland identity.

7 I distinguish various levels of reading register, modeling them slightly on the scheme of set of roles in literary communication as suggested by Aleksandra Okopień-Sławińska (1998).

mother's stool for milking cows) are still visible in these households. It seems that both houses escaped the processes of modernization – in Sońka's house, there is no plumbing, next to *mamulka's* house there is still a well.

These details referenced in the narration are supposed to be signposts of the characters' personalities. Both women are characterized by simplicity, directness, pragmatism. They have a skeptical attitude to changes offered by modernity – be it traveling by car or the possibility of gaining education. The archaic nature of their home spaces harmonizes with the main matter of both Sońka's and *mamulka's* lives – the past.

Both in *Sońka* and in *Krótką wymianą ognia* it is clear, from the very outset, that we are dealing with poor, uneducated characters, strongly connected with their place of birth, which they barely left over their lifetimes. On this basis, we can discuss their belonging to rural working class⁸. In a way similar to sociological studies, in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels, the social and economic status of the rural working class representatives is also showcased through the description of the characters' taste and aspiration. When looking at her mother, Roma registers details of her appearance: “and she laughs with her only tooth. She is wearing a child's tracksuit with a Mickey Mouse applique. The American rodent is shredding at the ears, but still it applauds, and its sleeves release embroidered wishes for a Happy New Year!” (Rudzka 2018: 16). Juxtaposing the absurdity and shoddiness of her mother's clothes with her age and condition awakens tenderness in Roma; similar emotions are probably supposed to arise in us, the readers. Interestingly, in Karpowicz's novel a very similar way of portraying the character and creating emotions around her appears. In *Sońka*, tenderness is caused by the character's aspirations connected with realizing moderate consumption needs:

She bought the chocolate box three years ago, shaped like a red heart, with a beautiful, red inscription: E. Wedel. Earlier, she had looked at that box for about half a year, it was so wonderful, so expensive and unobtainable. She had looked at it and imagined that one day, the red heart will find its place in her cupboard, on a crocheted doily, next to the teeth. She had dreamed about it in daytime, it had appeared in her dreams at night, she had drooled over her pillow – until, one day, she asked for the chocolates (Karpowicz 2014: 23).

These descriptions, through a vivid depiction of the lifestyle of the older characters, so different from the city one, demonstrate the distance between the countryside and city characters. Above all, the Mickey Mouse tracksuit or dreams

8 I use the notion of “rural working class” in the sense given to it by, among others, the authors of the report *Praktyki kulturowe klasy ludowej* [*Cultural Practices of the Rural Working Class*], who, in turn, are inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's theory regarding class. In this perspective, class division is based not only in the differences of economic capital, but also social and cultural one. See: Gdula, Lewicki, Sadura 2014: 35.

about a chocolate box evoke associations with children, draw to mind infantile people. In both fragments, what comes to the foreground in childlike straightforwardness of the characters which, although it is not provided with valuation by either Igor or Roma, becomes a lens through which we see both women.

Both Sońka and *mamulka* are open and direct when talking about their needs (“You will go get the beer from the shop”; Rudzka 2018: 19). They are not ashamed of their looks, habits, conditions they live in. However, they seem uneasy in situations in which they should express positive emotions. When Roma approaches her mother and leans to embrace her, “she escapes me like a feral cat. No kisses. No such thing, she repeats” (Rudzka 2018: 42). In turn, Sońka’s most frequent reaction is silence – “If one were to count minutes of her life, it would turn out she was quiet throughout her own life” (Karpowicz 2014: 138).

This distance, or, sometimes, emotional frigidity of the characters can be explained by their slowly revealed past. In the monologue Roma’s mother addresses to the well, it is suggested that she had had an affair with her sister’s husband. Sońka tells Igor the story of her relationship with a Wehrmacht soldier. The price of these forbidden loves lied in the subsequent emotional crises of the characters. The reminiscences of both women continue to oscillate around wartime events connected with the experienced raptures of love. And the result of experienced tragedies is that the only lasting state for them in their old age is frigid distance.

A similar lack of tenderness and difficulty in expressing emotions that characterize Sońka and *mamulka* are ascribed to the rural working class women in reports cited by Kuciel-Frydryszak in her book *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*. One of her heroines says the following about her mother: “Mom was unable to teach me how to build relations with people, I had a hole here which I had to fill myself, because my mom did not experience the treasure of relationships and was not aware that they are what provides safety and support” (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2023: 586).

It seems significant that in Kuciel-Frydryszak’s reportage we also have to do with the perspective of the generation of the heroines’ children. The daughters, seeing their own difficulties in building relationships, start to notice lack of tenderness in how they were treated by their mothers. The plot of Rudzka’s novel is constructed in a similar way – Roma’s problems connected with romantic and erotic relationships with men, as well as the family ones focused on the daughter lead to an apparent source, namely, Roma’s relation with her mother.

Women’s History

The women characters’ personal life tragedies take place during World War Two. The so-called great history, focused around political, military or economic matters only appears in the background of both texts. In its stead, the foreground consists of family histories and details connected with countryside life. *Mamulka*’s and Sońka’s histories are of entirely local dimension, and within them, animals, the river or the well become actors of equal importance to

people. Obviously, this introduction of women's histories connected with the everyday life into both novels has a similar dimension to the aforementioned writing histories from the perspective of heretofore overlooked groups – it is a gesture of resistance towards traditional history writing.

Both characters are completely aware of the insignificance of their life stories in the face of the 20th century history, although both were its victims. Roma's mother says the following about surviving the war: "I am just a *perfekte Hausfrau* with a fiery bungle on my head. *Jo?* I crawled out of the shooting, lightly shot. To comfort and propagate wounds. These years stretch like a black veil" (Rudzka 2018: 155).

The paradoxical importance of women's histories does not consist solely in the weight they carry throughout their lives, but also in the simple fact that they survived. For Sońska, this miracle comes down to the continuously experienced absence she talks about when she describes herself:

I am Sonia the White, I am Sonia the Lamé, I am the last as my dog Borbus the Twelfth, as my cat Jozik the Mouse Shepard, the last of the family, my blood was erased from the world during the war and then it was just drying up. I am from Królówce Stojło, where proud kings stopped for pasture, I am born Trochimczyk, I am a mother whose child was killed, I am a sister whose brothers were killed, I am a wife whose husband was killed, I am a lover whose lover was killed, a neighbor without neighbors, despair without vocal cords, complaint without a confessor, confession without absolution (Karpowicz 2014: 128).

This statement points to the specificity of women's histories during the war – not taking direct part in the fighting, they are more likely to survive, but, at the same time, it is more likely their close ones will die, an absence they will later have to live with. Obviously, this is not the only price for being a woman during the war.

In Sońska's and Roma's mother's stories there recur memories concerning violence, especially sexual violence they experienced not only from the soldiers, both also their own families. The characters describe this violence in a brutal, direct way, almost in passing, which reflects the currently growing awareness of the commonality of violence against women, especially during wartime.

Indeed, women's histories are, to a large degree, histories connected with corporeality. In both texts, the body is a carrier of experiences, not only those in which women were victims of violence. Key events in their stories have corporeal dimension. For instance, when talking about the loss of her sister Ingeborga, Rudzka's protagonist describes her cut braids. This perspective follows how Hélène Cixous defines women's literature in her classic work *The Laugh of the Medusa*, calling for women's bodies to become audible (Cixous 1993: 152). Although Sońska and *mamulka* do not write their stories directly, their narratives are clearly inscribed into the postulate of what women's perspective, ac-

according to Cixous, should introduce into literature. The act of writing “will not only “realize” the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (Cixous 1976: 880) – the French philosopher continues.

This call is also realized in both women’s histories. Both Sońka and Roma’s mother reminisce their relationships, seen as wrong by local communities, without shame and sense of guilt. They describe sexual sphere in similar way, despite the common imagined conservatism concerning social mores of people from the rural working class⁹. They dedicate considerable space to discussing sexual experiences, marginalizing motherhood. It seems, thus, that in talking about themselves, the characters succeed in “tear[ing] themselves” away from the superegoized structure in which [they have] always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being ‘too hot’; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and not enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing...) – tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvelous text of her self” (Cixous 1976: 880). Living and telling their stories gives them power over those who wanted to see them as guilty ones and whose voices are no longer audible.

Non-Polishness

Just as sexual relations of the characters are not inscribed into the stereotype of a woman living in the countryside¹⁰, so their identity exceeds alleged identification with Polishness. Interestingly, in neither novel do the women directly define their national or ethnic belonging. About herself and her family Sońka says: “we are not theirs, we are nobody’s, we are our own”, emphasizing that her locality is not connected with Polish, Belarusian or Russian nationality. In turn, Roma’s mother mentions the time right after the war, when the goal of the people’s authorities was to achieve national homogeneity of the country. This process was connected with resettlements, as well as with Polonization of members of ethnic and national minorities. The protagonist of Rudzka’s novel admits: “I started a new life with a new name, but I didn’t have the inclination to live in a new way” (Rudzka 2018: 71).

The way Rudzka’s protagonist experiences her own identity does not require a direct indication of being Silesian. In both histories, national or ethnic

9 The imagined conservatism of the rural working class is shown well by such monikers as: *ciemnogród* (place of ignorance), *zaścianek* (backwater), Poland B. They refer, on the one hand, to provinciality and small cultural capital of the people they describe, while on the other, to their apparent reluctance towards changes and progress.

10 A character following such a stereotype would be Handzia from Edward Redliński’s *Konopielka*. Her attachment to traditionally perceived social norms is seen, for instance, in the scene in which she refuses Kaziuk to have intercourse in other positions than the traditional one.

labels seem to come from the dominating group that uses them. For the characters, local belonging, understood as neighborly community and connection with particular land and village, is more important. This approach is in accordance with the opinion concerning the fact that in the 20th century the concept of the nation was still produced by intellectual elites¹¹.

The protagonists' non-Polishness is also the reason why the war, despite its effects being keenly felt, in a sense does not concern them – they do not belong to any side of the raging conflict. Therefore, although they describe events so deeply rooted in Polish historiography, their perspective is far from the one seen by the Polish nation as a subject of historical events. A good example can be seen in Sońka's statement regarding living conditions after the Third Reich army entered Podlasie in 1941: "It had never been that easy to live: neither in Prussia, nor in Czar or Soviet Russia, or in the noble Poland, the *staryki* [old people] would say. We knew that we were Adolf Hitler's subjects now" (Karpowicz 2014: 28). The words of Karpowicz's protagonist are clearly marked by class context – the Nazi occupation for the inhabitants of the novel's village in Podlasie was simply another form of servitude, not much worse than the previous ones. Thus, the folk memory of this period differs from the memory of intelligentsia, which had come to dominate historical discourse.

In an obvious way, the strategies of building identities of the women protagonists are supposed to provide nuance to the binary division of us – Poles and others – Germans, Russians, Belarusians. Thus, experiences resulting from women's ethnic belonging are supposed to break the omnipresent Polish-centric narration, especially that around World War Two and post-war years. They show a minority look at history and in this way, precede the aforementioned non-fiction books based on a similar idea.

In both novels, this minority approach is connected with the protagonists' statements. Historical background is present in the texts due to the stories of Sońka and Roma's mother. Therefore, they treat history as a sphere that is subjective, narrative and affective. In turn, the construction of plot in the novels draws to mind the concept of oral history, in which the research subject is not written sources, but rather, statement by the events' participants and witnesses. This results in appreciation of a perspective wherein World War Two or the beginning of Polish People's Republic are discussed not through the lens of political or military history. Their place is taken up by a relation regarding the daily life of people who had to live in those times.

Language

The orality of the protagonists' histories is also connected with the tradition of orality, which, according to Myśliwski, is passing away, similarly to the toll of

11 As Michał Rauszer notes, this opinion is a certain simplification, although the sense of Polish national identity did actually spread on such a wide scale among rural working classes in Polish People's Republic with the growth of the literacy within society (Witkowski 2025).

working in the field (Myśliwski 2003). According to the writer, these two losses contribute to the aforementioned decline of peasant culture. It thus seems significant in this context that in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels younger protagonists are writers by profession, while the older characters provide them with matter in the shape of spoken word. This conclusion leads us to the issue of the language – exceptionally important in creating older women in both novels.

Czapliński notes the importance of this issue with regard to peasant novels created in the 20th century. In the classification of ways of using language, he emphasizes Edward Redliński's strategy consisting in juxtaposing dialect with literary language (Czapliński 2024: 83). A similar device is used by both Karpowicz and Rudzka, the difference being that in their texts, dialect is contrasted with literary language. In Sońka's speech there appear many phrases drawn directly from Belarusian. In turn, Roma's mother intersperses her speech with phrases resembling German ones (*fotografujemy*) or dialect ones ([*córucha*]) *barbelucha* – *berbeluch* in many dialects refers to cheap alcohol), simplifying words phonetically, as present in many kinds of dialect (*chlyw* instead of *chlew*; *chopy* instead of *chłopy*), adding the dialect interjection *jo* at the end of sentences or, finally, using idioms or syntax that is supposed to bring associations with the language of rural working class (idiom: *ciemno tu jak u Murzynów*, [dark here as if at the Negroes'], inversion: *ja mojej szpuntce nieba przychylałam* [for my szpuntka I would bend the sky]).

In turn, in fragments pertaining to the younger characters, the language becomes metaphoric, uses plays on words and changes register between regular and literary language (“As if metaphysics was a word that sometimes met the world” – „Jak gdyby metafizyka była słowem, które niekiedy spotykało się ze światem” [Karpowicz 2014: 53]), “One more hour and he will dissolve, and the dirty stain of his ego will wash under my boots” – „Jeszcze godzina i rozpuści się, a brudna plama z jego ego podmyje mi botki” (Rudzka 2018: 47).

Although Igor and Roma grew up surrounded by dialect and they understand it, they only use it when quoting or imitate countryside inhabitants. Czapliński notes that in Redliński's prose, this linguistic “conflict confirmed the insurmountability of class difference as showcased in the plot and the impossibility of developing a common language” (Czapliński 2024: 83). In Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels this conflict has a similar function – it shows the irreversibility of the advancement of the protagonists who construct their city identities in separation from their places of origin.

In both novels, the linguistic image of the countryside is built, above all, from the fragments of statements of the inhabitants who are passing away forever and descriptions of decline of countryside spaces conducted from the perspective of the arriving city dwellers. Czapliński describes this strategy as ghost stories (Czapliński 2017: 27), and the stories using this device, among which he lists *Sońka*, according to him, reach directly to the war, and indirectly, into deep past, showing Polish culture as the producer of the countryside's

phantom existence. It took on the shape of a dependent, servile countryside, discursively contingent. The paradox revealed by the writers manifested itself in the fact that the most effective defense against cultural domination turned out to be transforming the countryside into a phantom. Thus, if the literature of the turn of the 20th and 21st century sought chances to renew energy of country life, the writers of the next decade, with grotesque interest, discovered, above all, energy of death (Czapliński 2017: 30).

The energy of death mentioned by the scholar also touches the language. After all, the protagonists' idiolects (rooted in dialects), similarly to their places of residence, are marked by the women's inevitable deaths.

The Rural Working Class and the Middle Class

In *Sońka* and *Krótką wymiana ognia*, the dependence of countryside existence that Czapliński writes about is visible in the very structure of a story-within-a-story, the mediation with which we are dealing in case of stories of women from the rural working class. We learn about the lives of both women characters *post factum*, it functions as a story about a past that contextualizes the life stories of socially advancing protagonists. Igor's and Roma's arrival at their places of origin becomes for them a pretext to discover the sources of their own conditions, not autonomous stories of the women. When *Sońka's* or *Roma's* mother's stories are discussed in the novels, what is really discussed are their descendants. "*Sońka* busies herself in the barn, plays white fugues of milk on the walls of the bucket, grunts and curses the animal in a friendly way, and then Igor focuses on himself, or more precisely, on his emptiness [...]" (Karpowicz 2014: 19). In Karpowicz's novel the suggestion concerning instrumental usage of *Sońka's* history by Igor appears repeatedly from the very start – for the protagonist, a director, meeting the woman is, after all, inspiration for another play.

The audience's interest in the subject of the play, as mentioned in the novel, can be treated as foretelling what will actually soon happen in the real, not just literary world – in the publishing market, folk histories will start appearing one after another, in the cinemas, these will be films portraying peasant life, and in television studies, the issue of the so-called folk turn will be discussed. The reasons behind this popularity of folk subjects are bluntly indicated by Antonina Tosiek:

Were we to look for the actual reason why publications connected with the "folk turn" gained such popularity, we should probably indicate the communal need for intervention in fake collective genealogies and simplified identifications. The impulse appeared out of the wish to deconstruct history, recover memory of camouflaged dimensions of violence and systemic strategies that aimed at its collective repressing. It was accelerated by resistance to hegemony of a single narrative of the nation's self-determination and creation; subsequent paragraphs and plays were supposed to facilitate finding its fissures, inconsistencies (Tosiek 2024).

All functions of describing folk histories indicated by the author appear in both novels in fragments pertaining to women's minority histories. Similarly to many Polish novels concerning social and political subjects published after 1989, they aim to revise historical narrative, mainly through talking about what has been overlooked so far. However, their meaning does not end there – using women's minority stories in the novels says a lot about how the middle class perceives itself.

The histories of rural working class women make it possible for the protagonists, and, as follows, also the readers, to look at themselves in them as if in a mirror and see something that will supplement their own story or identity gaps. In this reflection, one can see what had admittedly not been unavailable before, but what remained outside the sphere of interest of the middle class. The cited women's stories are created as sources – the violence experienced by the previous generations explains the issues faced by the younger protagonists. A similar parallel, albeit in a social dimension, is drawn by Czapliński. In his approach, people of the middle class “recognize their place in the social structure in the same way as peasants do – through the *worseness* in which they are stuck” (Czapliński 2024: 341). This worseness does not need to have only the economic dimension that Czapliński writes about. These are also difficulties with relationships, underappreciation, issues in dealing with problematic situation. Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels indicate the “therapeutic” potential that in the situation of such a sense of worseness can be found in women's minority histories. They demonstrate that the current condition is not one's blame, but, rather, a result of what ancestresses faced.

In (re/de)constructing history selection is an important aspect. Academic and popular science publications of the folk turn frequently focus on peasant rebellions and acts of resistance (Czapliński 2024: 359). In the case of women's histories in Karpowicz's and Rudzka's novels what is significant is a certain kind of agency, independence or non-conformism that make it possible for the characters to survive and tell their life stories, and for the women readers to find a model of discreet women's emancipation in times and places in which feminism was not discussed.

Igor and Roma, thanks to Sońka and *mamulka*, respectively, and their stories woven for the last time, gain a certain kind of self-awareness that has both an individual and a social dimension. These histories fill a gap in the identity of middle class, wherein many people have experienced advancement, heretofore insufficiently discoursivized. They constitute a kind of genealogy, whose essence is not their truth or falseness. After all, women's minority histories in *Sońka* and *Krótką wymianą ognia* are narratives within narratives, stories conducted in processed minority language, a literary warning that in the case of folk histories we usually deal with a certain fleeting narration.

REFERENCES

- Błażejowska, K. (2023). *Bezdušní. Zapomniana zagłada chorych*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.
- Cadieu, M. (2024). *On Both Sides of the Track: Social Mobility in The Contemporary French Literature*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Chmielecka, A., Fierek, F. (2021). Od wydawcy. W: Z. Oryszyn, *Najada*. Wydawnictwo Drzagi.
- Chymkowski, R., Zasacka, Z. (2024). *Stan czytelnictwa książek w Polsce w 2024 roku – komunikat*. Biblioteka Narodowa. <https://www.bn.org.pl/aktualnosci/5611-stan-czytelnictwa-ksiazek-w-polsce-w-2024-roku.html>
- Cixous, H. (1976). The Laugh of the Medusa (trans. K. Cohen, P. Cohen). *Signs*, 1(4), 875–893.
- Czapliński, P. (2017). Śmierć, śmierć i inne życie. Wieś w literaturze polskiej przełomu XX i XXI wieku. *Teksty Drugie*, 6, 13 – 35.
- Czapliński, P. (2024). *Rozbieżne emancypacje. Przewodnik po prozie 1976–2020*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Karpowicz, I. (2014). *Sońka*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Kuciel-Frydryszak, J. (2023). *Chłopki. Opowieść o naszych babkach*. Marginesy.
- Leder, A. (2014). *Przeźniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenie z logiki historycznej*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Marks, K. (1948). *Nędza filozofii* (tłum. anonimowe). Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Książka.
- Marx, K. (1955). *The Poverty of Philosophy* (trans. by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism). Progress Publishers.
- Myśliwski, W. (2003). *Kres kultury chłopskiej*. Prowincjonalna Oficyna Wydawnicza EXARTIM.
- Okopień-Sławińska, A. (1998). Relacje osobowe w literackiej komunikacji. W: A. Okopień-Sławińska, *Semantyka wypowiedzi poetyckiej*. Universitas.
- Ostrowska, J. (2021). *Oni. Homoseksualiści w czasie drugiej wojny światowej*. Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Pobłocki, K. (2021). *Chamstwo*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.
- Rauszer, M. (2020). *Bękart pańszczyzny. Historia buntów chłopskich*. Wydawnictwo REM.
- Rokita, Z. (2020). *Kajś. Opowieść o Górnym Śląsku*. Wydawnictwo Czarne.
- Rudzka, Z. (2018). *Krótką wymiana ognia*. Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Sadowski, W. (2021). Gatunkowe obrazy świata. Sielanka, litania, sonet. *Pamiętnik Literacki*, 2, 181 – 193.
- Tosiek, A. (2024, 7 listopada). Cztery powody, dla których nie możemy mieć w domu ładnych rzeczy. *Dialog*. <https://www.dialog-pismo.pl/w-numerach/cztery-powody-dla-ktorych-nie-mozemy-miec-w-domu-ladnych-rzeczy-czyli-o-kapitalizowaniu>
- Witkowski, M. (2025, 30 stycznia). *Autor „Bękartów pańszczyzny”: to komuniści uczynili chłopów Polakami*. Klub Jagielloński. <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2025/01/30/autor-bekartow-panszczyzny-to-komunisci-uczynili-chlopow-polakami/>