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## SOLITUDE, DUPLICITY AND RESILIENCE IN DARK TIMES

Monika Zgustova brings to the American literary scene her Czech and Central European upbringing and her current Spanish authorship. Her exile background doesn't lack even an American experience. To this rich life and culturally diverse roots she adds a refined talent, an acute critical knowledge and approach to literature, recently reiterated by her new novel *THE SILENT WOMAN* (Feminist Press, 2013), that may be seen as a "global" narrative (moving back and forth from Prague to New York, Sarajevo, Boston, Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Detroit) during a large and essential period of the brutal XX century and its aftermath.

At the center of the novel we find an appealing and complex female character, the "silent" Sylva, seen first in Prague of 1974, not long after the promising *Prague Spring* and the Soviet invasion that followed.

*At that time, "this woman is not the old Sylva, the one who lived in Paris, where they called her Madame l'Ambassadrice. No, she isn't the muse of the Surrealists, not any more, she is no longer Mnemosyne, the goddess of beauty; this seventy year old Sylva, whose age coincides exactly with that of the century, is somebody else. Who is that solitary woman with a bunch of white narcissi on her head, with a lace veil woven so tight it seem to have been engraved on her face? It is her, Sylva, and it isn't her: we swim in the same rivers and we do not, we are and we are not."* Her troubled life, as troubled as the century itself, already went through tough moral and psychological tests and traumas, typical in an oppressive system, be it Nazi or communist. Giving in, after prolonged and painful hesitations, to

the pressure of the sly and brutal agents of Power, signing opportunistic agreements with the German invaders and with the communist police state, she tried to protect family and friends. The cynical adjustment imposed by a hideous governing Power, under German occupation or under the pressure of the communist dictatorship, were for her a tribute of affection and solidarity with her loved ones. She rightly will later remember that *"when the goings get rough it's difficult to see things clearly and it's easy to make mistakes, which you'll regret for the rest of your life."* It wasn't easy for her to compromise with her own moral ideals; her regrets are authentic and lasting, indeed, and also forcefully challenging now the simplistic and opportunistic way a lot of post-communist and post-fascist rhetoric are selling out, in our apparently safe environment, that historical bloody past. That overwhelming nightmare full of ambiguities and grey zones and of human silent suffering, not only of heroes and villains.

The writer adds even a quite valid warning about the questionable sides of the new pragmatism in the late capitalist free world, which has its own cynical agents of Power. The Power of money, this time, of course. More trivial and common, apparently harmless, this trap is still not a spiritually rewarding alternative.

Her son, Jan, had his own troubled experience in the communist dictatorship, due to his father sentenced to the Gulag and the dubious social stand of his mother. When *"he had finished university, the political authorities hadn't allowed him to enter the Academy of Music because of his family origins"*. Now a cybernetics scientist in America, confronting the temptations of financial improvements by gradually giving up his real identity, he is also obeying in his own way the pressure of a new time. Again, in order to satisfy his family, this time his Russian wife. The dealers representing the new ubiquitous Power of money have their own strategy : *"Your salary...vow! It's finger lickin' good! Good enough to lick these fingers twice over!"* The potential

new captive, still a free one and in a free society, is hesitating, as his mother did. Yet, Jan is finally signing in, as his mother did in much more difficult times. *"For some men a times comes when they have to give a big YES or NO, I said to myself. Over and over, I repeated to myself : NO. But then I told myself that if I worked for the Ford Motor Company from college... I wouldn't be betraying my big NO, and Katya would stop naggings. I nodded: OK. Fine. I'm in."* After not too long, the immigrant finally moves to Detroit, to work at Ford.

In her Prague refuge, Sylva said, some time: *"During the darkest periods of our recent history, the times of Hitler and Stalin, our moral values began to deteriorate ; that process is continuing now, nobody knows the difference between good and evil. Monika Zgustova's intense and acute questioning of the contradictions and conflicts of the social-political environment and of the individual's traps and traumas doesn't stop at the "end of History" how some fashionable commentators called the collapse of the European communism.*

The novel summons mainly exiles and focuses on a generalized estrangement in the current modern and mercantile society. Sylva feels more and more exiled in her own country, where she was born in an aristocratic family of mixed ethnicity (Czech and German), under her father's name, von Wittenberg, where she spent her childhood in a magic chateau in northern Bohemia and married a bizarre German diplomat, cultivated, polite, impotent, jealous, anxious, count Heinrich von Stamitz, who committed suicide, where she was assiduously courted by her French teacher nicknamed Beauvisage and she developed a tense, deep erotic and affectionate relationship with a Russian modernist painter, the sensitive and arduous Andrei Ivanovich Polonski. Andrei also came from aristocracy, first engaged on the side of the Communists then with the White Army and ended up as a marginal expatriate in Prague. He returns to his homeland,

only to be immediately arrested by the Soviet secret police and sent to a concentration camp in Siberia, where he works in terrible conditions. Sylva's son is the result of this profound and sad relationship with Andrei, shattered by the frosty and criminal Soviet exile that followed his Czech exile.

Other memorable characters in the novel, the Czech Jew Bruno Singer and the Russian Jew Semyon, as well as Katya or Helena or the monstrous Soviet nurse Leila complete a significant group of interesting characters described with a nuanced understanding of the inner life and with a lucid, intelligent scrutiny of the never simple choices the human destiny is offering in such bleak, hostile circumstances. All inhabitants and wanderers of this remarkable novel live in the Kingdom of Shadows that dominated the planet and its calendar for too long a period.

The *Silent Woman* is the work of a sensitive, cultivated, skilled and original writer who deserves our full attention and admiration.