

The Voice of Melancholy in Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation

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The condition of exile from one's native land is often endowed with many emotions. Eva Hoffman in her autobiography Lost in Translation describes a full range of them. She begins her story with a nostalgic look at the past in Poland, continues through the pain of exile to Canada, and closes with the affirmation of her new home: the United States. In describing her assimilation to the American culture and translating her past experiences into a foreign language, she uses a voice of melancholy. It is a special kind of melancholy, however, the kind Danuta Zadworna Fjellestad in her essay "The Insertion of the Self into the Space of Borderless Possibility: Eva Hoffman's Exiled Body", would say is characteristic of those raised in the Communist regime of Eastern and Central Europe (2). It is also a language characteristic of the cosmopolitan citizen of the modern world, whose condition Eva Hoffman describes in "The New Nomads", a retrospective essay, in which she takes a critical look at her own autobiography. Yearning for the safe haven of childhood and the distance from the past create a certain style of narrative. The moodiness of melancholic dejection and the nostalgia for the childhood are only two of its prevailing characteristics. There is also the profound idealization of the past and the fantasy of Paradise, or some 'promised land', as well as the constant observation of an alien culture from a marginal position. The exiled person stands insignificant and

unimportant in the New World, and that is the point from which the autobiography of an émigré is often written. That is also the reason why such an autobiography often turns into a cultural or political critique, and accordingly bears some similarities to the American feminist writings, as discussed by Rita Felski in "On Confession" and Susan Stanford Friedman in "Woman's Autobiographical Selves: theory and Practice". Hence, the voice of melancholy in Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation is much more than a testimony of the romantic, and often fatalistic, nature of the Eastern European culture. This melancholy is intensified in exile by the feeling of marginality followed by the inevitable process of idealization of the native culture and an attempt to intellectualize the inner suffering. In Hoffman's case the idealization of the Polish culture is most evident in her silence about her Jewishness.

It is hard, however, to classify Hoffman's autobiography solely as a feminist writing. In many aspects, discussed in detail by Felski and Friedman, Lost in Translation is not at all 'feminist'. Especially in contrast to Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior Hoffman's autobiography is much more of an intellectual memoir. In so far as the contents of the two books are concerned, Kingston's story is concentrated on the 'feminist issues', especially her stormy relationship with her mother and other women in her community; Hoffman hardly speaks about her mother and sister. While Kingston describes in detail her attempts to free herself from the stereotypes of what a woman in a Chinese culture is supposed to be like, Hoffman has no such troubles. Even as a teenager she seems quite happy with the person that she is, and the women she knows certainly reinforce her self-esteem, rather than

diminish it. But, apart from the 'feminist' issues, there is another very important contrast between the two stories. The cultural perspectives, from which the two women write, are very different. To Kingston the American exile is a chance of a lifetime. It is a chance to lead a life different from that of her mother's. Maxine embraces the American culture as superior to her own, and seek a refuge in it. For Hoffman the Canadian exile is a source of intellectual pain and disappointment, and her new American home a source of confusion. Consequently, the way each of the women ends her story is also a contrast. While Maxine finally comes to terms with the Chinese culture, embraces it and finds strength in it, Eva finally accepts the American culture, and stops insisting on the superiority of the Polish culture.

The desire to intellectualize the suffering Eva Hoffman experiences in exile becomes a great motive for writing. According to her, it is the ultimate fate of an immigrant to become some kind of a critic: "'Where did you learn how to be a critic?' an editor of magazine for which I've written an article has asked me [...]. 'At Harvard, I guess,' I answered. 'No,' he said, 'there's something else.' 'I suppose it's that I'm an immigrant,' I said. 'Ah yes,' he said. 'That must be it.'" (Lost in Translation 226-227). The experience of dislocation as well as the feeling of loss and alienation gives the immigrant a certain perspective on the past, the present and the future. The past becomes idealized, the present is constantly scrutinized and the future poses no guarantees. Consequently, many immigrants have the overwhelming need for putting all of those conflicting emotions in writing, although they hardly ever act upon those feelings. There is not only the "impulse to

memorialize" (The New Nomads 51) one's past, but there also is the overpowering need to record one's discoveries of the new understanding of the world one acquires in exile. There is always a point in the immigrant experience where certain naïve innocence of the intellect is lost. An immigrant has to face the fact that the culture of the homeland is one of many, and that there is no such a thing as the right interpretation of the multiplicity of feelings and emotions that exile brings. The reality of an émigré becomes shockingly relative:

For to have a deep experience of two cultures is to know that no culture is absolute -- it is to discover that even the most interstitial and seemingly natural aspects of our identities and social reality are constructed rather than given and that they could be arranged, shaped, articulated in quite another way (The New 51).

Hence, the perspective that the condition of exile offers is a double-edged sword. On one hand one gains a great appreciation for one's native culture, and on the other hand the new awareness of the relativity of truth, or rather the conspicuous nonexistence of ultimate truth, becomes a hard burden to carry.

The feeling of overwhelming cultural alienation as well as the burden of the deeper understanding of cultural relativity may be the reason why many immigrants do not chose to record and publish their experiences. And even if they do, their writings are usually published and "scrutinized primarily as documents of social history; seldom are they treated as literature in the sense of belles-letters" (Fjellestad 3). Many choose to write in their native languages and for their fellow countrymen precisely for the

fear that the American audience is oblivious to and uninterested in the immigrant plight. Moreover, even between the volumes of the existing immigrant literature there are very few books describing the immigrant experience of exile from Eastern and Central Europe, a fact that makes Hoffman's autobiography a valuable source. Why is it that "the refugees from the Communist system have seldom bothered to document their plight" even though "among the hundreds of post Second World War 'Communist' emigrants a substantial number can boast of university education" (Fjellestad 30)? There are many reasons and some of them have a lot to do with the Polish brand of melancholy (*tesknota* in Hoffman's book), that is characteristic of the Slavic people in general, and that often becomes an obstacle, rather than an asset, in any attempt to materialize experiences in writing. But there is one major reason that Fjellestad is able to pinpoint: "Central and East Europeans have grown up in political and social system which created specific cultural techniques for constructing, monitoring, and controlling the self, techniques which were radically different from those of the West" (2-3). A retrospective writing is not one of the modes of such a cultural expression in that part of the world. That is why Hoffman's book is such a pearl in a sea of conspicuous silence of the 'Communist' refugees. Moreover, Hoffman's book is a, probably unintentional, statement of defiance of her own culture because it betrays the unwritten law of the Polish cultural sensitivity, which forbids such a deep, psychological discourse about one's suffering to wide audiences.

The suffering of spiritual and linguistic alienation will last for Hoffman until she finally masters the English language. The road to such mastery, however, leads Eva through an almost schizophrenic state of spiritual confusion. She knows two languages and as a result she has a separate consciousness for each of them. The decision of getting married to an American man, even after many years of living in the New World, will change her psyche into a battleground for a cultural wrestling match:

Should you marry him? the question comes in English.

Yes.

Should you marry him? the question echoes in Polish.

No. (Lost 199)

As a result of the conflict of the two cultures Eva develops a double consciousness. It is, however, different from the kind of double consciousness Friedman describes. Friedman argues that women develop the schizophrenic-self because of the fact that they are constantly judged by other people, especially men: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Friedman 40). Hoffman's double consciousness is not created by the fact that she is being judged from outside. It is a result of a painful inner self-judgement. The Polish Eva always watches and castigates the American Eva. A cultural displacement, therefore, can be as effective as social oppression in creating the phenomenon of double consciousness in women. This schizophrenic double soul finally disappears when Hoffman is able to reconcile the

two cultures through an open expression of her suffering. Felski's contention that pain becomes meaningful through confession is illustrated by Hoffman's autobiography. But while Felski asserts that "the act of writing promises power and control, endowing subjective experience with authority and meaning" (Felski 84), Hoffman shows that only an actual act of confession in front of another human being can have that effect. The validation of her pain doesn't come from writing but from therapy: "For me the therapy is partly translation therapy, the talking cure a second-language cure. My going to a shrink is, among other things, a rite of initiation: initiation into [...] a way of explaining myself to myself" (Lost 272). It is only when she is ready to admit that the Polish voice inside of her doesn't have monopoly on her happiness, and when the American culture stops to feel like "the other", Eva finally finds peace.

Is it possible for an immigrant, however, to be totally cured of cynicism and the constant suspicion of the other culture? There is a certain joy and pride in the moment when one can finally understand the shades and connotations of once alien cultural sensitivities, and when one is finally able to understand the dialects and vernaculars of a foreign language. Hoffman's autobiography provides a profound description of how the patient observation of the American people can become the source of deep understanding of their language and culture. Finally, through her ability to recognize and comprehend the many voices of the 'American' language, Hoffman becomes "a vigilant Culture watcher" (Lost 221), and consequently a writer for The New York Times:

All around me, the Babel of American voices, hardy midwestern voices, sassy New York voices, quick youthful voices, voices arching under the pressure of various crosscurrents. I've become a skilled diagnostician of voices, and of their neurosis. I know how people feel, how they are, not from what they say but from how they sound (Lost 219-220).

In "The New Nomads" Hoffman admits that the pleasure of such a deep understanding of the new culture can be intoxicating. On one hand it can spark great creativity of intellectual thought. But it can also endow a person with a false sense of superiority over the scrutinized culture and its people. This "relish of sharpened insight" and the "savviness of skepticism" (The New 52) can very easily accompany an idealization of the native country and its culture. For many immigrants the separation from the mother country is similar to a child's separation from the mother. According to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical theory, discussed in detail by Friedman, a "child's separation from his mother is followed by the mirror stage and a narcissistic identification first with his own image and than with others like him" (37). Likewise the immigrant's separation from the native land often causes a narcissistic stubborn belief in the infallibility of one's own culture. The homeland becomes idealized beyond recognition and it becomes the mirror of unquestionable perfection, against which the other alien culture is always judged. That is certainly the case with Eva's memories of Poland, and it is an explanation as to why this war devastated and anti-Semitic country should be perceived by her as Paradise. "The New Nomads" also discusses another possible form of such an imaginative picture of one's homeland or culture. The second possibility is that

the homeland may be demonized and the past and the culture abandoned, as it is initially by Maxine Hong Kingston in her story of assimilation The Woman Warrior. Depending on what the "psychological choice" is, Eva Hoffman comments, "the realm can be idealized or demonized, but the past can all too easily become not only 'another country' but a space of projection and fantasy. Some people decide to abandon the past, never to look back. For others, the great lure is the nostalgia -- an excess of memory" (The New 52). Both rejection and idealization of the native culture is a process that women often go through in the solitude of their individual experiences. Friedman's argument that women don't feel themselves existing "outside of others, and still against others, but very much with others" (Friedman 56) is an overgeneralization when considering both Eva's and Maxine's stories. It is precisely the feeling of alienation from the society that drives those women to action. Eva feels distant to the American culture, while Maxine resents her Chinese culture, but both of them must fight their way through times of extreme resistance to some aspect of their environments. The road to the feeling of collective power, thus, always leads through dark avenues of individual struggle with alienation and women, after all, do oppose themselves to others and often become what Gusdorf would call the individualistic "biographical selves" (Friedman 56), always characteristic of autobiographies written by men.

Why, one could ask, would anyone want to idealize a country that was a Communist and anti-Semitic regime? The most superficial and the easiest answer is that Eva idealizes Poland because it is the only home she knows. Eva's idealization of Poland is, however, a function of a

specific kind of Polish melancholy, for an outsider hard to understand. It is a melancholy that it taught in school and at home by the constant glorification and romanticization of the turbulent Polish history. It is a melancholy that finds its expression in the serious and teary words of the "farewell" verses Eva's friends write before she leaves for Canada:

Most of them choose melancholy verses in which life is figured as a vale of tears or river of suffering, or a journey of pain on which we are embarking. This tone of sadness is something we all enjoy. It makes us feel the gravity of life, and it is gratifying to have a truly tragic event -- a parting forever -- to give vent to such romantic feelings (Lost 78).

There is no doubt that Hoffman shares the inclination to melancholy with her Polish friends and that she identifies with the Polish culture. She is conspicuously silent about her Jewish identity, a fact Mark Krupnick, the author of "Assimilation in Recent American Jewish Autobiographies", describes as "her relative unconcern with her Jewishness" (7). Eva Hoffman is very persistent in her desire to cling to the Polish identity. She does not allow the gentlest words of critique to ruin the 'perfect picture' of her childhood in Poland. For that reason "Hoffman's Poland is barely recognizable as a communist society at all. It appears, instead, as the great good place, outside of time" (Krupnick 6). Felski would argue that such an idealization is an inevitable result of retrospective construction of the subjective self in an autobiography (Felski 89). That is certainly true about Hoffman's attempt to present herself as a Polish person and the willingness to silence her Jewish identity. But the silencing of the Jewish voice in her book

plays another important role. Faced with the multiplicity of meanings and expressions in the land of "borderless possibility"(Fjellestad 1), Hoffman needs to hold on to the heritage that represents some concrete contrast to the American culture; otherwise she wouldn't be able to claim to be an outcast in it. The freedom she experiences in America is a blessing but it is also a terror to her soul: "Within the limits of my abilities and ambitions, I can go anywhere at all, and be accepted there. The only joke is that there's no there there" (Lost 196). Hence, by choosing to cling to the Polish identity, as opposed to her Jewishness, Hoffman chooses to be an outcast that needs to be assimilated, rather than person who, by the very virtue of the Jewish tradition, wouldn't be able to claim that exile is an extraordinary condition: "There would be no one to do the adopting if we were all orphans. And of course that means there would be nothing special about the Jewish situation" (Krupnick 7).

Although Eva's marginality is multiple, her autobiography is focused on her feelings of cultural and linguistic alienation. Her peripheral position as a woman, and as a Jewish person, is simply discussed in her book in terms of a general social critique. The discussion of her melancholic nostalgia for her lost native country and her perfect childhood there is magnified by the marginal position in which she finds herself in exile. Not even the anti-Semitism that she was subjected to as a child, and because of which her family had to migrate to America, could erase her love for Poland: "No, I'm no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love. It lives within me despite my knowledge of our

marginality, and its primitive, unpretty emotions " (Lost 74). Remarkably, on a surface Hoffman's autobiography is free from feelings of guilt and anxiety, which in Felski's essay are described as the inevitable results of literature born in the climate of tension between certain social groups. But a deep analysis of the description of Eva's marginality as an immigrant supports Felski's argument that "the internalized cultural values which define specific identities as marginal, inferior, or deviant can come to the surface in feelings of anxiety and guilt" (88). Although Hoffman does not criticize her own culture, the fact that she insists on its perfection throughout the book is an unintentional sign of anxiety in itself! Furthermore, Sarah Phillips Casteel, the author of "Eva Hoffman's Double Emigration: Canada as the Site of Exile in Lost in Translation", argues that Hoffman uses the negative description of the Canadian landscape and culture as a way to further the idealized picture of the superiority of the Polish culture (7).

The pessimistic mood of the Canadian narrative "Exile", the second part of Lost in Translation, serves as a bridge between the idealistic Polish and the optimistic American narratives. The negativism of "Exile" makes the positive mood of the third part "New World" possible: "the designation of Canada as the place of exile leaves the American section free to move forward towards a brighter future" (Casteel 7). There is also a similarity between the way Hoffman marginalizes the story of Holocaust, which her parents survived, and the Canadian exile. It seems that by dismissing the Canadian experience as a negative one and by moving to the United States, and thus creating an actual physical distance between herself and her parents, she is able to be silent about the Holocaust. She is able to

escape what she cannot describe by projecting "of the past and of Holocaust memory onto the Canadian landscape" (Casteel 8). But Hoffman's silence about her Jewishness and about her parents' past is troubling to her even as she tries desperately to avoid it: "There's no way to get this part of the story in proportion. It would overshadow everything else, put the light of the world right out" (Lost 253). And yet she must do so in order to preserve the coherence of her narrative, a fact Felski describes as an inevitable outcome of the desire to construct one's identity through writing: "not only does the life call into question the authority of the text, but the text begins to undermine the reality of the life" (84). Thus, Hoffman's autobiography is a great illustration of the fact that to construct the narrative self in such a way that it would satisfy a certain audience, one must distort or at least silence some facts of life. Hoffman's confession "serves as a painful reminder of the impossibility of narrative, of what has been pushed aside so that her story can move forward" (Casteel 7). Only by silencing the Jewish part of her identity can Hoffman focus on the pain of alienation she, the Pole, feels in America. Hoffman's past is idealized and the past of her parents is marginalized, hence she is able to shift the focus of the anxiety elsewhere.

The cause of anxiety in Hoffman's autobiography is an internal struggle for identity, which finds its expression in the desire to rationalize the emotional suffering Hoffman endures. Lost in Translation is essentially a memoir of intellectual growth and a slow process of assimilation to a foreign culture. In contrast to Maxine Hong Kingston story, which is full of detailed descriptions of her every day life, Eva's story is much more intellectual and at times reads like psychological self-analysis. Fejellstad concludes that this

peculiar character of Hoffman's book is a direct result of the fact that Eva "tries to intellectualize even her suffering" (8). There is a marked difference between Eva's approach to mental pain and the way Eva's mother suffers: "My mother cannot imagine tampering with her feelings, which are the most authentic part of her, which are her. She suffers her emotions as if they were forces of nature, winds and storms and volcanic eruptions" (Lost 269). Unlike her mother, Eva tries to evaluate her feelings from a distance. She tries to be a spectator of her own play of emotions. That is why her writing is full of references to books she had read and theories she had studied. According to Fjellestad even the subtitles of the three major parts of the autobiography play a certain role in Eva's attempt to intellectualize her suffering: "The titles of the three parts of Lost in Translation (Paradise, Exile, The New World) bring forth a whole range of biblical and cultural associations, the most prevalent of which is a loss of innocence coinciding with leaving behind one's childhood and entering one's teens" (8). Thus, Hoffman's autobiography brings a new element into the description of the immigrant experience. The use of generally familiar biblical, and otherwise known, cultural symbols and concepts is an attempt to find audience beyond the obvious circle of interested readers: the immigrants, and to universalize to experience of exile by showing it as the struggle of human soul. As she exposes her psychological wounds to the reader, it is obvious that her suffering knows no boundaries of race or gender; not a woman nor a Jewish person, she asks only to be seen as a human.

The motif of Paradise is often used to picture idealistic or simply unattainable, utopian conditions. The use of this

biblical symbol is often telling of the direction in which the narrative is moving, because for some it may be Paradise to be gained (Maxine Hong Kingston), and for some, like Eva Hoffman, it may be Paradise that was lost. While Hoffman's autobiography is an attempt to idealize her native country, Kingston's story, at least initially, idealizes the American culture. While Hoffman stubbornly insists on the superiority of her native culture and thinks of Poland as the lost Paradise, Kingston tries to distance herself from the Chinese culture and thinks of America as the Paradise to be gained. The stories of both of those women, however, imply that some sacrifices must be made or some suffering endured before the painful feelings of distance from the 'Promised Land' could be alleviated. There is a paradox in the very nature of the immigrant experience, however, which brings serious doubts whether such a Paradise on Earth exists, for it appears that it is a figment of the immigrant imagination, or better yet, a part of human nature. It is often the complaint of those who have several homes, and live in several lands, that their happiness lays always in the place which they just left, or to which they going, but never where they are at the moment. To find happiness in the present is the great challenge not only for an émigré but also for those who travel only in their imagination. According to Hoffman's own reflections on exile "it may often be easier to live in exile with the fantasy of paradise than to suffer the inevitable ambiguities and compromises of cultivating actual earthly places" (The New 63). Thus, Hoffman's story speaks not only about the peculiar condition of immigration but also about more general human condition: that of the struggle for the ability to fully and happily live in the moment and in the place,

into which God or the fortune randomly throws each human being.

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