

VIEWING 'BLESSED ARE THE MEEK' AS KOSSAK'S GIZMO FOR SOCIAL SENSITIZATION

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Literature encloses in it experiences processed as life is encountered. Any piece, despite the difference in genre, language, style or technique, presents all that the author has lived through. The author oneself is not an individual entity. One's values and worldview, the things that happen to one and those that happen in one are subjective in nature. Where, when, how and who one is has an impact on one's creative productions-literature. Thus literature of any age cannot escape the influence of the social scene and similarly history is punctuated by changes in the society brought through literature.

Writers all along have used their pen as a tool. Depending upon the intention and calibre of the author revolutions have been mobilised, lives have been changed, conventional ideas have been shattered. The pen has been able to make people think differently, and has made people walk through yet untrodden paths. One such writer is Zofia Kossak-Szczucka (1890-1968). A Polish author, especially known as a resistance fighter for her wartime efforts to help the Jews. She was associated with the Czartak literary and wrote mainly for the Catholic press. During the occupation of Poland, Kossak-Szczucka worked for the underground press: from 1939 to 1941. She co-edited the underground newspaper *Polska zyje* (Poland Lives), and in 1941 she co-founded the Catholic organization *Front for the Rebirth of Poland*. In 1941 she edited its paper *Prawda* (The Truth), using the code-name "Weronika".

This paper intends to divulge into the depths of her work in *'Blessed Are the Meek'*. This historical novel restores in all its brilliance, adventure, and conflicts of greed, love and religion, one of the critical periods of Christian history. The era set is the end of the twelfth century- the century of the great cathedrals; it reached its climax when the crusade for the recovery of Jerusalem was diverted by suspicion and greed to Constantinople, where the crusaders sacked the last great city of the ancient world and gorged themselves with wealth. It was the age when the Catholic Church became intoxicated with worldly power, slaughtered Albigenses, made Rome world capital, and dreamed of Europe united under the Pope, with Jerusalem recovered as its jewel.

Zofia Kossak, has made this fine book a story of twenty-five years as well as a novel of the interplay of human emotions. She has the art of the tapestry designer, who knows that his tapestry will be hung as the background against which the moving figures of men and women take on significance. Her tapestry stretches from Italy to Asia to Egypt to Jerusalem.

Historical consciousness is the social consciousness found in this author but it does not end there. This book first published in 1937 had a very important task to perform in the age it was written too. Poland, the birth place of Zofia Kossak was passing through interesting times in the years 1918 to 1939. Zofia was born into a family brimming with celebrities. They were talented, cultured and socially prominent. Her father was an officer in the Austrian army who in later years became a major in the cavalry corps of independent Poland, but many of her other relatives were acclaimed artists and intellectuals. Her paternal grandfather Juliuz Kossak was one of Poland's greatest painters, so was his brother Wojciech Kossak. Zofia's cousin Maria Pawlikowska was a prolific poet, while Magdalena Samozwaniec (Wojciech Kossak's daughter) gained considerable fame as a writer. With so much art in her blood Zofia had tried her hand in painting. But by 1913 she chose literature over art. From the very beginning she was sensitive to the happenings around her. In her first novel, *Pozoga* (The Conflagration, 1922, English Translation 1927) Kossak depicted the terrors and suffering that became part of her daily life during the violent years of 1917 through 1919. The work is permeated with an idealised view of the semi-feudal estates that dominated the lives of Volhynia's impoverished peasantry until the revolution.

This was only a beginning. She published a number of historic novels over the next years which included *Beatum scelus* (1924), the story is set in Renaissance Poland; *Golden Freedom* (1928), a story of pre partition Poland; *The Great and the small* (1928), tales on Silesian themes. Many more historical Novels rolled down her pen. The Polish reading public loved Kossak's works, which they bought and read despite the poor economic conditions of the

1930's. The most important work Kossak produced during that decade was her monumental epic *Crusaders*. Published in four volumes in Poznan in 1935, it recounts the Polish participation in the crusade. By now it can be understood that Kossak had a flair for historical novels. Her presentation captured the kinds of the reader who were themselves in a tumultuous situation just as in the histories. It could be speculated that Kossak was trying to convey something more than the history to the reader. She is trying to draw a parallel.

The 1930's were comparatively normal than the years that followed for Poland. The internal conflicts were overtaken by external powers. It was only in September 1st, 1939, Nazi Germany attacked Poland, defeating and subjugating a military unprepared nation within a month's time. Nazi rule in Poland was brutal and inhumane from the start. The Polish state was liquidated; deprived even of its name; it was simply called the *general government* as an occupied territory to be exploited by the Germans. Poland's cultural and moral leadership strata, the intelligentsia and clergy, were targeted almost immediately for humiliation and liquidation. Universities were shut down and intellectual life went underground, a long-established Polish tradition was oppressed. From the first days of the German occupation, Zofia Kossak was active in the underground, writing, teaching and acting as a liaison. But this is after 1939.

The signs of the impending disaster was already in the air from the 20's itself. There was strife and internal rebellion. The boundary was in a flux. Polish leaders aimed larger Polish state. The Paris peace treaty had brought some not very pleasant boundary markings. Some of the land acquired had people wanting to liberate themselves as free state. Opinions varied among Polish Politicians as to how much of the territory a new, Polish-led federation of independent states- while Roman Dmowski leader of the *Endecja* movement represented by the National Democratic Party, set his mind on a more compact Poland composed of ethnic Polish or 'Polonizable' territories (Piotr S). The 1919 Treaty of Versailles settled the German population and Polish minority was declared a free city independent of Germany, and become a bone of contention for decades. Allied arbitration divided the ethnically mixed and highly coveted industrial and mining district of Silesia between Germany and Poland, with Poland receiving the smaller in size, but more industrialised eastern section in 1922, after series of three Silesian Uprisings. Finally internal and external conflicts broke down

all possibilities of negotiations and paved way to the Polish Lithuanian war and the Battle of Warsaw.

Pilsudski's miraculous victory in the Battle of Warsaw became an iconic victory in Polish memory. But peace was nowhere near. A peace treaty was signed. The treaty gave Poland an eastern boarder well beyond what the peace makers in Paris had envisioned (Sandra). But along with it Poland had also got a large population of Ukrainian, Jew and Belarusian minorities (Margaret). Pilsudski dominated Polish affairs though he never held a formal title. Critics of the regime were occasionally arrested, but most were sued for libel. After Pilsudski's death his protégé successors drifted toward open authoritarianism. Opposing voices were increasingly harassed or jailed. The situation was not surprising in view of the regimes growing fears over national security. Like everywhere in the Central Europe the attempt to plant democracy did not succeed. Governments polarized between right and left wing factions, where both parties were not willing to honour the actions taken by the other (Polonsky).

In *Blessed are the Meek*, Kossak has taken care to diligently illustrate the arguments, decisions, internal and external conflict that surrounds a war. It is an epitome in highlighting what each person prioritises in a common crisis and how each single individual priorities contribute to the common crisis. Analysing these thoughts anybody could know what causes the war and what helps in continuing it. It also displays the effects of decision on the decision maker as well as on the other. The book is punctuated with acts of betrayals, denials and conspiracy.

The book about St. Francis' seems to be just an excuse Kossak seems to be awakening the people of her time using a parallel instance in the general history of the world. Each and every instance in the book might have evoked in the memory of the 1930's Polish reader a parallel instance in their own time. Images of impeachment, child deportation in the book would have surely stirred the mind of the Polish reader to their contemporary situation.

Kossak brings Francis as a cure to greed, selfishness and ego in her book. She places Francis exactly in the middle of all the muddle created by egocentricity. She presents Francis as an ineffectual man. His mission of peace to the sultan was futile. Yet she has been successful in portraying Francis as a person who could be courageous to be kind even in the face of cruelty. He is seen as visiting the prison trying to release a stranger who has been a victim of impeachment. He is able to be a voice of consolation to people who lost their dear ones in the war.

He is seen providing his views about the political issues without actually doing so. She portrays him in such a way that the reader understands that the mass change around him is caused by the difference in his thoughts. The vast difference in situations caused by selfish persons and selfless persons is commendable here. The tone of the book leads us to assume that the social change Kossak advocates is kindness and concern for the other.

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