

# Motherhood and Mothering in Olga Tokarczuk: Reflections on Representations of Mother Characters in Contemporary Literature and Culture

ULLA (URSZULA) CHOWANIEC<sup>\*(1)</sup>, JUSTYNA WIERZCHOWSKA<sup>\*\* (2)</sup>

1) Krakowska Akademia im. Andrzeja Frycza Modrzewskiego and Lund University

2) Uniwersytet Warszawski

The article examines Olga Tokarczuk's selected literary works from a maternal perspective, a dimension often overlooked despite extensive scholarship on her *oeuvre*. While Tokarczuk's narratives do not explicitly focus on motherhood, mother characters feature prominently. Examples like the short story "Ariadna na Naksos" (Ariadne on Naxos), the novel *Flights*, and the story "Przetwory" (Preserves) illustrate this presence. Tokarczuk's avoidance of making motherhood a central theme is a deliberate literary strategy. By subtly integrating mother characters, she sidesteps reinforcing patriarchal notions of motherhood as a predefined institution while avoiding didacticism. Mothers influence other characters' motivations and struggles despite their often marginal presence, enriching the narrative texture. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of motherhood, creating space for maternal agency and failures without conforming to conventional tropes. Tokarczuk's representations transcend traditional associations of motherhood with national or ethnic obligations, offering more profound insights into human relational dynamics. Through her literary portrayals, Tokarczuk challenges conventional narratives and invites readers to reconsider the complexities of maternal experiences. Her works provide a platform to appreciate the multifaceted nature of motherhood and its impact on characters' development, steering away from simplistic interpretations and fostering a deeper understanding of relational dynamics within narratives.

KEYWORDS: motherhood, Olga Tokarczuk, Polish Mother, maternal literature, Yiddishe Mame

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\*E-mail: urszula.chowaniec@sol.lu.edu  
ORCID: 0000-0003-1670-9850

\*\*E-mail: j.l.wierzchowska@uw.edu.pl  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0078-6018

**Macierzyństwo i matkowanie w prozie Olgi Tokarczuk.  
Refleksje nad przedstawieniem postaci matek  
we współczesnej literaturze i kulturze**

Artykuł analizuje wybrane utwory Olgi Tokarczuk pod kątem przedstawienia postaci matek, tematu często pomijanego pomimo obszernych badań nad jej dorobkiem. Chociaż narracje Tokarczuk nie koncentrują się wyraźnie na macierzyństwie, postacie matek odgrywają w nich ważną rolę. Przykłady takie, jak opowiadania *Ariadna na Nakos*, *Przetwory* lub powieść *Bieguni* ilustrują tę obecność. Artykuł pokazuje, że umieszczanie matek na drugim planie jest świadomą strategią literacką Olgi Tokarczuk. Poprzez subtelne wplecenie ich postaci w treść akcji pisarka unika bezpośrednich odniesień do patriarchalnej koncepcji macierzyństwa jako z góry określonej instytucji oraz unika łatwego dydaktyzmu. Jednakże mimo swojej marginalnej obecności, matki w istotny sposób wpływają na motywacje i zmagania innych postaci. Takie przedstawienie tworzy przestrzeń dla ukazania matek w sposób wielowymiarowy bez ulegania stereotypom. Reinterpretacja macierzyństwa u Tokarczuk przekracza tradycyjne skojarzenia z narodowymi czy etnicznymi obowiązkami i oferuje głębsze spojrzenie na dynamikę relacji ludzkich. Poprzez swoje literackie obrazy, Tokarczuk kwestionuje konwencjonalne narracje i zaprasza czytelników do ponownego rozważenia złożoności doświadczeń macierzyńskich oraz jego wpływu na rozwój postaci literackich.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** macierzyństwo, Olga Tokarczuk, Matka Polka, literatura macierzyńska, Jidysze Mame

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*Ordinarily, maternity is a strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism.*

Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2010, p. 556)

## **Introduction**

Even though Olga Tokarczuk's scholarship and literary criticism are abundant, only a handful of authors have analysed her *oeuvre* through maternal lenses. This article aims to fill this gap by reading selected excerpts from Tokarczuk's prose, focusing on mother characters, especially

their experiences and positioning within relationship networks. Few of Olga Tokarczuk's works centre on motherhood *per se*, yet every novel, maybe even every short story, has at least one mother in the background. Possibly, the short story "Ariadna na Naksos" (Ariadne on Naxos) about a mother of twins, the novel *Flights*, which narrates the story of a temporary subway-nomad mother who has escaped her situation of providing constant care for her disabled son, or the story "Przetwory" (Preserves) from *Opowiadania Bizarne* (Bizarre Stories), where a mother posthumously poisons her heartless son with her pickled mushrooms: these come closest to what we have elsewhere termed "maternal literature" (see Chowaniec & Wierzchowska forthcoming 2024). Here, we will argue that Olga Tokarczuk's avoidance of motherhood as a central topic is a literary strategy that allows her to write about mothers without directly addressing the concept of motherhood as a patriarchal institution (Rich 1976, Glenn et al. 1994, Bassin et al. 1994) and to avoid cheap pedagogy.

We maintain that the mother's presence, although subtle and often marginal, is, in fact, essential. This presence is carefully interwoven into the very texture of the literary text and creates psychological threads that frequently underpin the characters' motivations, struggles, and development. However, presenting mother characters inconspicuously, Tokarczuk creates semiotic fissures that allow these characters to impact the story without blatantly juxtaposing them with traditional motherhood scripts. This way, they can act without being immediately co-opted into clichéd and retroactive readings of institutionalised motherhood (Glenn et al. 1994, Bassin et al. 1994). We claim that in her literary representations of motherhood, Tokarczuk successfully trespasses the traditional connection of motherhood to national and ethnic obligations and creates affective and cognitive spaces for maternal agency and failures and an appreciation of human beings' inherently relational origin.

This text follows Adrienne Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood as an institution and motherhood, or mothering, as a lived,

empirical experience that centres on care practices. In Western culture, institutionalised motherhood has long functioned as a mechanism of social reproduction in its national, religious, and ethnic dimensions<sup>1</sup>. Lived motherhood, on the other hand, traverses these categories since practices of care can be performed in a myriad of relationships, including non-kin, transnational, or even trans-species bonds (see, for example, such works as Akbari, 2015 for empirical research on the topic, as well as literary analyses examining the significance of animals, as exemplified by Brown 2010). As such, lived motherhood is radically subversive since it challenges or dismantles symbolic divides that organise patriarchal culture. Perhaps this is why Olga Tokarczuk avoids crude dichotomy, which, as we want to claim, makes her prose more discerning than simply resenting motherhood as a subject of deconstruction.

Our methodology is deeply informed by feminist thought. We generously borrow from the French thinker Luce Irigaray, who argues that “woman” is a silent condition of representation (in Holmlund, p. 283) and that patriarchal culture is based on symbolic matricide (Irigaray 1985a, Irigaray 1985b). For Irigaray, these conditions generate scandalous social and biological results that require bringing feminine and maternal experiences into the social order. The visibility must embrace what Marianne Hirsch has called “the mother-daughter plot” (Hirsch 1989), which, for Irigaray, involves a two-way path of desire: it is not only the mother who desires her child but also the daughter who desires in return (Irigaray 1985a). We revisit Irigaray’s exploration of “matricide” and the promotion of the development of a non-matricidal perspective on subjectivity that avoids the maternal body’s rejection or “abjection” (Kristeva 1982). This is vital for two key reasons: acknowledging the profound impact of our

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between ideology and experience is also discussed in: Glenn et al. 1994, Bassin et al. 1994.

relationships with our mothers on our self-formation and fostering a more harmonious mother-daughter dynamic, astutely explored by Irigaray in her essay "Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother" (Irigaray 1993a). What is the matricide foundation of our culture? Irigaray explains this as follows:

One thing is plain, not in our everyday events but in our whole social scene: our society and our culture operate on the basis of an original matricide. When Freud [...] describes and theorizes about the murder of the father as the founding act for the primal horde, he is forgetting an even more ancient murder, that of the woman-mother, which was necessary to the foundation of a specific order in the city. (Irigaray 1993a, p.11)

Thus, demanding the reinterpretation of the culture, Irigaray emphasises the importance of recognising the maternal as a distinct and essential aspect of human existence, separate from masculine norms and, most importantly, fundamentally disfigured in the concept of institutional motherhood. Not surprisingly, Irigaray argues that lived motherhood offers a unique form of subjectivity, relationality, and desire that have been historically silenced and debased by the dominant social structures. Irigaray's theory of motherhood calls for re-evaluating societal norms and values to incorporate the maternal perspective and appreciate mothers' role in shaping individual identity and collective consciousness.

Like Irigaray, other significant concepts for this article have also been worked out within the field of psychoanalytical feminist thought and in proto-feminist psychoanalytical thought. Julia Kristeva's notion of feminine monstrosity and the already mentioned abjection; Betty Friedan's conceptualisation of the "problem that has no name"; and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's lengthy exploration of female madness offer helpful conceptualisations of womanhood, which are not normative within

the patriarchal order. Kristeva's monstrous woman is anyone who poses a threat to the patriarchy by appearing too powerful or independent. The abject is anything that destabilises the typically Western sharp division between the subject and object, demonstrating the continuity rather than separateness and hierarchy of being. Embodied motherhood (pregnancy, birth, the exchange of fluids through the placenta) is Kristeva's prime example of abjection. Friedan's feminine mystique, or a problem that has no name, expresses the disastrous psychological effects on women whose life is reduced to domesticity and motherhood. Putting in brackets the particularities of the life of Friedan's interviewees (the American white middle class in the 1950s), her book shows a massive hiatus between motherhood as an institution and as a life experience.

The earlier conceptualisations of femaleness and motherhood are also elucidating. Joan Riviere's concept of the female masquerade is a brilliant analysis of the performative character of womanhood. This performance includes clothing, make-up, a particular way of formulating thoughts, and even the pitch of the voice. Riviere argues that women may "put on" the female masquerade to achieve social gains while maintaining critical distance. She productively dialogues with Simone de Beauvoir's seminal observation that "nobody is born a woman but rather becomes one" and her acute analyses of pregnancy and motherhood. Finally, Sabina Spielrein's astonishing analysis of language development adds a deeply intersubjective, embodied dimension to motherhood. Based on empirical observations, Spielrein argues that, for a small child, the word "mama" reproduces "the act of suckling" (p. 304). She stresses the primacy of the affective domain in language acquisition. She links its development to olfactory, tactile, or gustatory events long before the child enters what Lacan would later call the Symbolic (culture).

The above ideas delineate our conceptual matrix (pun intended) for analysing Tokarczuk's prose. We will use some of them to demonstrate

their inapplicability to the presented mother characters; others to argue for the growing visibility of the mothering experience in literature, to which Tokarczuk's characters contribute. These multifaceted representations call into question the earlier idealised visions of motherhood that, for far too long, petrified women in a state of silence and subordination and offered them a very impoverished life experience.

### **National Mothers. Motherhood as Institution**

Numerous scholars have observed that, in patriarchal cultures, motherhood is fixed into oppressive constructs (de Beauvoir 1953, Rich 1986, Irigaray 1985a). During the nation-state formation period in Europe, various political powers appropriated women's birthing abilities by harnessing them into ideologies of national reproduction. This oppressive reductionism, a derivative of the authoritarian and masculine character of nationhood, dismissed the lived maternal experience into the sphere of non-representation. Instead, it generated a gallery of ready-made figures, including the Mother Russia, the Polish Mother ("Matka Polka"), the Yiddishe Mame, and the German Nazi Mother: so grotesquely portrayed in the cinematic character of Fräulein Rahm in *Jojo Rabbit* (2019). In one of the scenes, Fräulein Rahm proudly announces: "I've had eighteen kids for Germany". This statement succinctly encapsulates the essence of patriarchal motherhood: giving over one's body in the service of fatherland while renouncing the relational, co-creative, and largely unpredictable quality of lived motherhood.

In the Polish context, the figure of the Polish Mother emerged in the early nineteenth century to serve as a symbolic bedrock of the lost Polish nationhood and as a beacon of hope for independence. Largely modelled on the ever-selfless figure of the Virgin Mary (see Titkow 2012,

Kościańska 2012), the Polish Mother sacrificed her sons on the altar of Poland's struggle for independence during the century-long occupation by the Russian, Prussian, and Austrian hegemony. During the Romantic period, the most celebrated authors, and philosophers, including Adam Mickiewicz and Andrzej Towiański, developed a compelling narrative of Poland as the Messiah of the Nations, which added a religious-metaphysical dimension to the already robust nationalistic framework (Mickiewicz 1832, Towiański 1882; also see Janion 2006, Lutosławski 2015). At the same time, the narrative of Polish Messianism reinforced the link between motherhood and sacrifice and delineated a connection between Polishness and Christianity. This connection problematised the relationship between the Polish Mother and another crucial cultural figure, the Yiddishe Mame, in a country where, until the Second World War, ten per cent of the population was Jewish. The Polish Mother became an archetype of suffering, endurance, and acceptance, whose reproductive contribution to the nationhood formed an inviolable core of her identity. At the same time, the Yiddishe Mame remained in the background.

The Second World War marked a turning point in Polish history, and the discourse of the Polish Mother was readjusted to the new political context of a post-Holocaust Communist bloc country. One significant variable was Poland's dependence on Soviet Russia; the other was a fundamental upturn in the Polish demographics. Before the war, cities like Warsaw or Łódź were 30% Jewish; by 1945, over 90% of Polish Jews were dead, and the majority of the remaining handful would emigrate from Poland within the next three decades. So, while in the pre-war context, the Jewish Mother was suppressed for nationalistic motivations, after the war, Jewishness was often silenced, as it evoked trauma and formed an obstacle to one's assimilation into the new, monoethnic population. Bożena Keff's excellent book-poem, *On Mother and Fatherland* (2008/2021), brilliantly articulates the psychological costs of being Jewish in post-war



Poland. Dubbed by literary scholars “the Polish *Maus*” (Czapliński 2008). Keff shifts the post-Holocaust narrative away from *Maus*’s preoccupation with the father-son relation to that of a mother and a daughter. Keff poignantly articulates the relational destruction caused by the Shoah and explains the mother character’s inability to bond with her daughter: “The mother completely fails to comprehend any other aspect of closeness. She can only feel close to another victim. To be a victim is to know what is most important; victims are sacred” (Keff 2012). The mother’s emotional impoverishment has disastrous effects for her daughter who struggles to resist assuming a victim identity and antagonises her mother in the process. The fact that Keff’s narrative is autobiographical adds further layers of poignance to the drama of maternal failure that her text depicts.

During the four decades of socialism in Poland, the Polish mother was again co-opted into the service of politics. Government officials routinely used the figure of the Polish Mother as a propaganda symbol of the country’s undivided nationhood and of women’s wilful participation in the creation of a new political order. They also shed a censoring curtain on the Polish-Jewish past. At the same time, the Polish Catholic church, especially after John Paul II was elected Pope in 1978, was perceived as the only domestic body that could effectively oppose the political *status quo* and offer a haven for dissidents. Thus, in Polish literature, it was not until the 1990s that the connection between motherhood, nationalism, and the cult of the Virgin Mary was researched and critically addressed (see Janion 2009, Hryciuk and Karolczuk 2012, Mroziak 2012).

The academic reflection was paired with a proliferation of literary publications that challenged or even deconstructed the myth of institutionalised motherhood and recognised a multiplicity of maternal positionings and practices. Novels, short stories, and poems started to engage with the lived experience of motherhood with empathy and awareness of the existential and symbolic stakes. This broad conceptual shift is particularly vivid in the

literature of Izabela Filipiak, Manuela Gretkowska, Magdalena Tulli, Ewa Madeyska, Ewa Kujawska, Anna Augustyniak, Anna Nasiłowska and Olga Tokarczuk. These authors, in multiple ways, have given representation to lived motherhood. They unapologetically expose how old cultural scripts still influence the private and public spheres in Poland: the mother's expected complete devotion to children, her infallible silent presence, and patriarchal subordination. They also thematise the immediate legal and political results of this objectification, including the curtailment of abortion rights, lack of state-funded contraceptives for young people, and the absence of sexual education in Polish schools.

The following two examples may illustrate the clash between the feminine gender and the formation of the post-1989 Polish national identity. In the 1990s, Izabela Filipiak offered an excellent literary voice that connected motherhood and women's suppression with the exclusionary male politics of the Solidarity movement. In *Total Amnesia* (1995), the mother of Marianna, the main protagonist, abandons her daughter for the sake of political activism in the Solidarity movement, only to be rejected by the male decision-makers. In 2009, during the National Congress of Women, the major annual women-centred initiative in Poland, one of the most prominent Polish literary scholars, Maria Janion, concluded that "Polish democracy has a masculine gender" (in Chowaniec & Phillips 2012, p. 5)<sup>2</sup>. It is striking that Janion delivered her speech almost a decade

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth quoting a longer passage from Maria Janion's 2009 speech, in which she overviews the inequality between sexes in Polish culture: "For centuries, an image has been crafted of a continuum of generations passing down the ideal of a fighting male community, culminating in the contemporary Solidarity movement. Patriotism reigns supreme here, elevating brotherhood more than anything else, forged and sustained through collective action. Heroic narratives of shared struggles are woven, all under the recurring call and slogan: God, Honour, Fatherland. It is impossible not to appreciate the significance of the male community in shaping the

before the inhuman radicalisation of the abortion bans in 2017 and the momentous Black Protests in 2019, and also before the creation of the so-called LGBTQ-free zones in eastern Poland, which were approved by the then-local authorities.

The maternal turn is still taking place in Poland. Mothers are essential agents of social critique in the works of the above-listed authors and those produced by younger writers such as Marta Dzido, Sylwia Chutnik, Justyna Bargielska, and Mira Marcinów. They are no longer posters for national unity, caught up in stereotyping and idealisation, but rather, they are flesh-and-blood human beings: struggling, imperfect, diverse, and often internally conflicted. These women writers form a network of voices, which over the last several decades, have been deconstructing the myth of motherhood as an institution that dismissed mothers' lived experience for the last hundreds of years. It is thus essential to understand Tokarczuk's mothers within this complex richness of maternal representations in contemporary Polish literature.

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modern concept of the nation, often defined as fervent brotherhood. Contemporary notions of nationhood, along with emerging nationalism, became intertwined with the stereotype of masculinity, the mythology of male camaraderie. In this national drama, the only prescribed role for women is that of the mother. There is a special reverence for the mother in all such male communities. She is elevated to a divine status. According to cultural researchers, the mother represents the ideal figure of femininity, securing male relationships and male history. Within the realm of the national canon, there exists only one model of sexuality - unequivocally heterosexual and oriented towards reproduction. A mother is necessary for this purpose. She becomes the guarantor of the national heterosexual community, its decency and socio-political correctness. The mother of the brethren is the Mother of Poland and the Motherland. The prevailing Polish public narrative deems the most ideal of mothers - The Virgin Mary - as the patroness of the Polish nation. Through the cultural exaltation of motherhood and maternity, Polish masculinist culture has secured its patriotic consensus" (Janion 2009).

## Olga Tokarczuk's Mothers

It is impossible to define the mother in Tokarczuk's prose. Her maternal characters fill a spectrum of personalities and life situations. Throughout her literary works, the author portrays mothers with a nuance that reflects their psychological struggles, multifaceted societal roles, and often troubled family dynamics. A recurring theme of her prose is the tension between belonging and being an outsider. This tension is particularly salient in the case of mother characters, as their positioning often affects those with whom she is relationally bound. Tokarczuk's interest in the figure of the foreigner or someone who oscillates between acceptance and rejection allows her to trace human psychology in various ethnic and national configurations with inter- and transgenerational repercussions. This literature offers an exciting overview of the contemporary European human condition: be it the figure of a German who visits his parents' former land in a small village in Lower Silesia, which they had to abandon overnight in 1945, or an obsessed woman who kills the hunters because she cannot stand animals being senselessly slaughtered, or women whose loneliness is mirrored only thanks to their friendship and homoerotic fascination with each other, or a free-spirited herbalist who has a daughter with a male-bodied angelica plant.

The span of maternal characters in Tokarczuk's prose is indeed striking. She narrates maternal figures as a source of resilience but also collapses amidst the challenging circumstances in *Primal and Other Times* (1996). She highlights maternal bonds' sacrifices and unconditional love in *The House of the Day, the House of the Night* (1997), and offers snippets into mothers' (non-)coping mechanisms in *Flights* (2017b), and, in numerous other works, lavishly weaves together ancient mythology, Biblical stories, and children's tales in ways that radically recast canonical narratives of the Western world. These semantic operations create a gallery of human

situations that normalise lived motherhood and elude the easy trap of one being labelled “a bad mother” or the interpretation succumbing to such detrimental constructions as “maternal instinct”, “female monstrosity” (Kristeva 1982) or “a problem that has no name” (Friedan 1963). Tokarczuk does not critique the patriarchal order in a second-wave feminist fashion but goes beyond the logic of patriarchy to narrate some of her mother characters, not reactively, but in their attempt to be agents of their own life.

*Primal and Other Times*, one of Tokarczuk’s most recognized novels, offers a very bleak picture of motherhood. Scarred by rape, forced displacement, and every imaginable type of abuse, most mother characters presented in the novel are unable to mother. An only child, Misia is filled with maternal regret at the news of another and yet another pregnancy while her marriage crumbles and her children grow gradually alien and withdrawn. She lacks a mother herself after her mother Genowefa was traumatised into paralysis and muteness at the sight of her young Jewish lover being shot dead by the Nazis. The fact that the two had never made love due to Genowefa’s loyalty to her husband and the fact that she was pregnant with her second child adds what seems like an unbearable layer to her sense of loss and sacrifice. For the rest of her life, Genowefa remains in a catatonic state, mothered by her husband, Misia’s father, who, though in a superficially selfless and caring way, executes control over his wife and daughter. Misia’s daughters – Adelka, born fifteen years before the twins Lila and Maya – form a forced mother-children union because of Misia’s age and fatigue. Adelka spends her late teenage years babysitting her sisters instead of studying and enjoying her youth. Not surprisingly, she wishes that they would die. Within this family saga, the women balance conforming to societal rules with the impossibility to do so. And yet, on the concluding pages of the novel, we find out that, to Misia’s husband’s disappointment, all their grandchildren are girls. When two decades later Adelka visits home to say that she has managed to

graduate from college and get a job, her father complainingly replies: "Why didn't you have a son?... You've all got girls. Antek has two, Witek has one, the twins have two each, and now you. I remember it all, I keep a rigorous count and I still haven't got a grandson. You've disappointed me" (p. 266).

Adelka picks up a coffee-mill, an object that connects her to the now deceased Misia, kisses her father "awkwardly" (p. 268) and leaves her childhood behind. One can only wonder if the contrast between Adelka's bitter, ageing father and his eight granddaughters is a marker of hope and cultural revision that may offer them a fuller, happier life.

Other mother characters in *Primal and Other Times* locate themselves squarely in the outcast realm, superficially falling into the ready-made patriarchal scripts of monstrosity and madness. The toothless, fragile Florentynka goes insane and curses the Moon after suffering the consecutive deaths of seven of her nine children, multiple miscarriages and abortions, and finally – being abandoned by her two remaining children. The village whore, Cornspike, outcast and ridiculed by her tormentors and their wives, is unable to protect her children against societal arrangements: her infant son dies as she gives birth alone in the cold; her daughter Ruta is gang raped while Cornspike is busy digging a hiding place for the two of them. Ruta will re-enact the violation by getting married to a rapist, Ukleia, against her mother's will. In a desperate mothering act, Cornspike makes a deal with Ukleia to share Ruta's presence cyclically. She has to offer him seven months with Ruta against her five to make the deal viable. Possibly, it is thanks to this Demeter-Persephone gesture of her mother that Ruta finally summons the willpower to escape her torturer. Ruta leaves behind the "female masquerade" (Riviere 1929/1999) of expensive dresses, high heels, and make-up to plunge into the night. It is unclear whether she reconnects with her mother, fails on her way, or achieves a sense of personal agency. We do not know if she ever has children. At one point

in the novel, Cornspike and Florentynka momentarily amend their broken pasts by bonding as a daughter and mother of choice. Florentynka's tears of happiness at becoming a mother to Cornspike and grandma to Ruta make it possible for her to forgive the moon for all the evil that she has suffered. This transgenerational alliance is an apt illustration of Luce Irigaray's famous invocation that "one doesn't stir without the other" and of the affective porousness of bodies that Irigaray perceives as central to maternal and daughterly subjectivity (pp. 60-62).

*Primal and Other Times* does not romanticise motherhood, nor does it offer solace. In the blurb of the Polish edition, Tokarczuk states that she has always wanted to author a book where everything is a function of time (1996, back cover). Yet, read from a maternal perspective, the novel offers much more. It encodes the brutality of Polish history in a semi-oneiric narrative that blends realist fiction with a gendered revision of the basic symbolism of the patriarchal order. The book fantasises eight different versions of the creation of the world, teasing God's accomplice in the omnipresent cruelty and abuse. It experiments with the idea of the biblical God, imagining him as a genderless or female being. It damns the God who has created a world of systemic violence so brutally executed by its beneficiaries. This violence breeds transgenerational trauma that destroys the ability to be a mother. It is not accidental that the only characters capable of care are either well-enough established men or women like Cornspike, who renounce society to such an extent that they can mentally reverse the violence and symbolism of rape into an act of absorption ("[She] took in their wives, their children, and their stuffy, stinking wooden cottages around Maybug Hill. In a way, she took the entire village into herself, every pain in the village, and every hope") and whose "bottom would shine in the darkness like the moon" (pp. 16, 15).

In *The House of the Day, the House of the Night*, Tokarczuk intricately explores the dynamics of maternal relationships, exemplified by the portrayal

of Marek Marek's mother, the village wanderer. Through vivid imagery, Tokarczuk portrays Marek Marek's upbringing, marked by a poignant blend of tenderness and irony, shedding light on the complexities of familial bonds and the impact of parental neglect:

His mother didn't want to stop breast feeding him: as he sucked at her, she dreamed of turning into pure milk for him and flowing out of herself through her own nipple – that would have been better than her entire future as Mrs Marek. But Marek Marek grew up and stopped seeking her breasts. Old Marek found them instead, though, and made her several more babies.

Despite being so lovely, little Marek Marek was a poor eater and cried at night. Maybe that was why his father didn't like him. Whenever he came home drunk, he would start beating Marek Marek. If his mother came to his defence, his father would lay into her too, until they'd all escape upstairs, leaving old Marek the rest of the house to fill with his snoring. Marek's sisters felt sorry for their little brother, so they taught him to hide at an agreed signal, and from the fifth year of his life, Marek Marek sat out most of his evenings in the cellar. There, he would cry silently, without any tears (p. 21).

Despite the lyrical elegance of Tokarczuk's prose, the narrative of Marek Marek delves into childhood struggles, shedding light on the harsh realities of dysfunctional family dynamics. Yet, the narrative subtly manifests a profound maternal longing for complete self-sacrifice in devotion to her child, as depicted in the mother's fantasy to transform herself into pure, nourishing milk. Tokarczuk skilfully explores this maternal longing, echoing Beauvoir's insights in *The Second Sex*, wherein maternal love transcends reciprocity, highlighting the mother's selfless dedication amidst the fragility of existence:

Like the woman in love, the mother is delighted to feel needed; she is justified by the demands she responds to; but what makes maternal love difficult



and great is that it implies no reciprocity; the woman is not before a man, a hero, a demigod, but a little stammering consciousness, lost in a fragile and contingent body; the infant possesses no value, and he can bestow none; the woman remains alone before him; she expects no compensation in exchange for her gifts, she justifies them with her own freedom (p. 556).

Marek Marek, now a grown man but still yearning for maternal comfort, epitomises the human capacity for resilience in adversity. Tokarczuk's narrative invites contemplation on the transformative power of empathy and solidarity in life's tumultuous journey. Marek Marek emerges as a lonely figure, yet his uniqueness, quirks, and the right to be accepted reveal Tokarczuk's commitment to portraying otherness with curiosity and recognition. Her prose champions an emancipatory ethos, affirming everyone's right to be embraced, provided their individuality respects the freedom of others – a vital theme present throughout Tokarczuk's body of work.

In another part of *The House of the Day, the House of the Night*, we meet an esoteric figure of saintly Kummernis, who is born in her father's dream for having a son:

Kummernis was born imperfect in her father's eyes, but only according to a human understanding of imperfection – for her father longed for a son. Sometimes, however, what is imperfect in the world of men is perfect in the world of God. She was the sixth daughter in a row. Her mother died giving birth to her, and so one could say that they crossed paths – one came into the world as the other departed it. Kummernis was baptized Wilgefertis, or Wilga [Oriole] (p. 52).

The intricacies of maternal love, whether it be the yearning for a mother's love or the profound void left by her loss, expressed in the oriole double

symbolism of mystery and joy – presented subtly, sometimes just as fleeting mentions in the book – are integral to Tokarczuk's narrative poetics, wherein she skilfully situates mothers within the entangled tapestries made of her characters' individual stories. The theme of maternal absence resonates in the character of Kummernis in, where the loss of a mother casts a shadow over his existence.

Similarly, in the titular short story in *Flights*, the temporary abandonment of a son by his mother underscores the complexity of maternal relationships and their profound impact on the lives of Tokarczuk's characters. Annushka decides to temporarily escape from her home and her disabled son, Pyetia. And yet, his presence never stops to penetrate her body affectively:

Petya comes back into her body, as though she'd never given him up into the world. He's there, curled up, heavy as a stone, painful, swelling inside her, growing – it must be that she has to give birth to him again, this time out of every pore she has in her skin, sweating him out. For now, he comes up in her throat, sticking in her lungs, and he won't emerge in any other way besides a sob. No, she won't be able to eat a blini – she's full. Petya's lodged in her throat, when he could have been sitting there and reaching up with a beer can in his hand, giving it to the girl with the horse, leaning into it with his whole body, bursting out laughing. He could have been in motion, could have bent down to his boots and then lifted his arms and placed his foot in the stirrup and swung his other leg over. Sat on the back of that animal, traversing the streets sitting straight up and smiling, a scraggly moustache shading his upper lip. He could have run down the stairs, storming them, after all he is the same age as these boys, and she, his mother, would have worried about him failing his chemistry class, not getting into university and winding up like his father, worried he'd have trouble finding a job, that she wouldn't like his wife, that they'd have a baby too soon (2017b, p. 235).

Annushka experiences herself as being in a state of a perpetual primary connection with her child. She despairs at dreaming herself in a sequence of functions that fulfil the symbolic order: of being a mother – a guardian of the academic achievement of her son, being a mother-in-law, being a mother of a son looking for a job, and his becoming a part of society. Her son's incapacity to accept all these social roles is a source of suffering for Annushka because, in a world ruled by the matricidal principle, there is no possibility for subjectivity to develop without rejecting the Mother. As a disabled person, Petya has no opportunity to separate from his mother, even though Annushka wants to "give him up into the world". The story presents a chilling realisation that the bond between Annushka and her ailing son is reduced to a narrative of thwarted hopes for a conventional life.

In the acclaimed novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009), Tokarczuk delves into the mythos surrounding the maternal instinct, crafting a remarkable portrayal of motherhood in the character of Janina Duszejko – a guardian of two beloved dogs whom she affectionately refers to as her "Daughters" and who disappear mysteriously. Janina, in her desperate search for her daughters, reminiscences, dreams, or sees a ghost of her mother:

There stood my Mother in a flowery summer dress with a handbag slung over her shoulder. She was anxious and confused.

'For God's sake, what are you doing here, Mummy?' I shouted in surprise.

She opened her mouth as if to answer and tried moving her lips for a while but did not produce any sound. Then she gave up. Her eyes roamed fitfully across the walls and ceiling of the boiler room. She didn't know where she was. Once again, she tried to say something, and once again, she gave up.

'Mummy', I whispered, trying to catch her fugitive gaze.

I was angry with her, for she had died a long time ago, and that's not how long-gone mothers should behave.

'How did you end up here? This is no place for you,' I began to reproach her, but I was overcome by intense grief. She cast me a frightened look; then her eyes began to wander the walls, totally confused.

I realized that I had unintentionally brought her here from somewhere else – it was my fault she was here.

'Be off with you, Mummy,' I said gently.

But she wasn't listening to me; perhaps she couldn't even hear me. Her gaze refused to stop on me. Exasperated, I slammed the boiler room door shut and then stood on the other side, listening. All I could hear was rustling, something like the scratching of Mice or Woodworms in the timber.

I returned to the sofa. In the morning, it all came back to me as soon as I awoke (2017b, p. 64).

The unexpected appearance of Duszejko's mother and the daughter's evident frustration with the mother's posthumous presence are reflect her conflicted emotional state. Duszejko is overwhelmed by the despair at the loss of her substitute children who were her beloved companions. Her grief offers a glimpse into the depth of her struggle to cope with their absence, while there is no one to mother her. Tokarczuk broadens the narrative frame to encompass the intricacies of maternal bonds that traverse the species boundaries and are nonetheless driven by a logic of affect and attachment. Through Janina's experiences and emotions, Tokarczuk invites her readers to contemplate the profound and often overlooked emotional connection in interspecies relationships of care. By exploring the themes of loss, grief, and love in a human – more than human arrangement, Tokarczuk probes the intricate tapestry of emotions in human life and establishes connections between lived motherhood and the ongoing debates in posthuman, animal and new materialist studies.

## Conclusions. Maternal Turn in Literature

In this article, we have argued that Olga Tokarczuk's prose is acutely aware of the historical and existential complexities of the concept of motherhood and the ways in which it influences situated mothering practices. Tokarczuk is a Polish post-Holocaust writer who narrates maternal characters as impacted by historical traumas, patriarchy, and the pressures of everyday life. Her writing forms part of the maternal turn in literature, in Poland and beyond, as it offers a revision of the concept of motherhood and creates spaces where a variety of maternal subjectivities, bodies, and positionings appear.

One of the traditional functions of motherhood is the mother's infliction of fear on her daughter. In *Recollection from My Non-Existence*, Rebecca Solnit emphasizes the oppressiveness of such protection and the limitations it implies, yet she notes that to blame the mothers for their reaction to patriarchy-bred violence is like killing the whistle-blower who wants to signal the harm. Tokarczuk's prose demonstrates the impossibility of such reconciliation within a system that offers women so little agency and self-reliance. Existentially, mothers are responsible for their own individual development. Reducing them to being reproductive links of the patriarchal system means giving them a false alternative between "emancipation" and motherhood. Viewed from a feminist perspective, motherhood can be a creative, agential act that can be emancipatory and grounding. Motherhood and feminism do not have to be mutually exclusive. Yet, such reconciliation requires radical transformations of the social system, where the diversity of maternal voices is heard, and new alliances are formed.

This change also needs to recognise the universal significance of mothering that, even though culturally suppressed, has been retained in the language. Linguistic variants of the word "mother," like "mommy",

“mammon”, “mame”, “mama”, and “mamusia” indicate the original connection between the child and its caretaker that forms a pivotal experience for countless women and children across cultures (Spielrein 1922). In “The Origin of the Child’s Words ‘Papa’ and ‘Mama’” Sabina Spielrein emphasizes the profound significance of the word “mother” in shaping early cognitive development and fostering a solid emotional bond between child and caregiver. Tokarczuk delves into this experience in her works, striving to portray it as an intrinsic facet of existential reality, liberating it from institutional constraints. Furthermore, she adeptly illustrates motherhood as an awareness of its profound impact on human life, not solely in its physical and existential dimensions but also by acknowledging its intricate interplay with ideology, a theme explored within these texts.

Finally, there is the theme of the false contradiction between motherhood and creativity. In 2001, Moyra Davey edited the remarkable anthology *Mother Reader: Essential Writings on Motherhood*, featuring contributions from renowned authors such as Margaret Atwood, Jane Lazarre, Grace Paley, Sylvia Plath, and Alice Walker: this compilation serves as a testament to the depth and diversity of maternal discourse. Similarly, the authors of this article are working on a project to craft a narrative akin to Davey’s book under the working title *Mother Reader: An Anthology of Polish Literary Texts*. As we see it, this anthology aims to display the richness and complexity inherent in women’s exploration of motherhood within the literature, as illuminated in this article. The authors of this article are also mothers writing about “writer-mothers” or writers writing about their mothers. In *Silences* (1978), Tillie Olsen calls the connection between writing and mothers “the fundamental situation.” It is a constant negotiation between time, needs, and obligations. “It is humanly impossible for a woman who is a wife and mother to work on a regular teaching job and write” (Tillie Olsen in Davey 2001, p. 109). Tokarczuk and many writers mentioned in this article write from this difficult position.

As academics and mothers ourselves, we persist in challenging the fallacy that writing and motherhood are inherently incompatible. Despite the evident reality of numerous women who manage both responsibilities, there is a need to create more welcoming spaces for mothers who aspire to write. In this article, we have focused on Tokarczuk's mothers to call for a more general recognition of lived motherhood as a creative act. Sadly, ordinary maternity, defined a hundred years ago by Simone de Beauvoir as "a compromise of narcissism, altruism, dreams, sincerity, bad faith, devotion, and cynicism" and quoted here in the epigram, continues to be operative within the present neoliberal scenario. We hope to have demonstrated that Tokarczuk's prose, it is through lived motherhood, practiced at the intersection between the intimate and the ideological that the rudiments of selfhood are made. It is not merely biology but rather the practice of care that creates young individuals next to pick up the baton of the transgenerational relay. The maternal turn in literature and culture is a significant element of this relay, as it vitally modifies the ways in which we conceptualise ourselves and our relationship with our primary caregiver(s). We believe that this revision, experienced in the bodily and cognitive spheres, may contribute to a broad transformation of our current socio-political arrangement where the regimented phantasms of motherhood will give way to a myriad of practices of care in which the mother re-emerges, as Lisa Baraitser brilliantly puts it, "not ... as a subject of interruption, encumbered, viscous, impeded", but also as a human being "re-sensitized to sound, smell, emotions, sentient awareness, language, love" (p. 3). This mother aims to live a whole life and supports her children following suit.

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