

**Izabela Filipiak, Olga Tokarczuk and Others  
(and Their Literary Migrants, Tourists, Travellers  
and Vagabonds)**

As mentioned above, the texts chosen for this study are short stories and novels published by Polish women writers after the systemic transformations which started in 1989. The political transformation of 1989 is the chronological threshold for my study. I look at literature from the point of view of the social, political and cultural changes that have been taking place in the new, globalized and westernized Polish society, and I analyse literary representations of change in the figures of contemporary migrants (or perhaps still emigrants), tourists, travellers and melancholic vagabonds. The main objects of interest in this investigation are the literary devices used for representing the physical body. Mainly taking into consideration Julia Kristeva's theory of exile as a condition of subjectivity, along with her insight into women's emigration (Kristeva 1991), as well as many theoretical texts on exile and women's writing (Elizabeth Grosz, Elaine Showalter, Susan Sontag, Virginia Woolf), I concentrate on women writers and their literary "picture of the transformed post-communist" Polish society. Has the change been vivid? Is literary production sensitive to this political and social transformation? If so, what do the literary stories tell us about the physical aspects of the omnipresent displacement, which is the main characteristic of the "liquid society" (Bauman 2000)?

As I mentioned above, all the texts are connected to each other through the shared theme of displacement, travel or various forms of migration, whether it be emigration with its need for legal visas and asylum seeking, economic migration, tourist travel or modern nomadism (in search of new experiences). These texts are written by two different generations of women, those born in the 1960s and those born in the second half of the 1970s or the beginning of the 1980s. The women representing these two generations have slightly different formal and peer education, and varying life and political experiences and standpoints. The two main writers whose books on migration are discussed here in detail are Olga Tokarczuk (b. 1962) and Izabela Filipiak (b. 1961), but there is also Manuela Gretkowska (b. 1964), whose experiences of displacement are likewise connected in some way to the old communist regime, when travelling abroad was almost impossible and migration was likely to be the once-in-a-lifetime decision to emigrate. Texts by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (b. 1975), Marta Dzido (b. 1981) or Sylwia Chutnik (b. 1979) are free from engagement with the old system on a personal level. They are engaged

rather in the postmodern idea of searching for identity in an ever-changing and destabilized world. The works of Grażyna Plebanek (b. 1967), Joanna Bator (b. 1968) or Inga Iwasiów (b. 1963), which will also be mentioned in various parts of the analyses, are situated somewhere in between the generational span. I indicate here the problem of generation as one of the interesting incentives for reading contemporary Polish literature, since—as I wish to show—it can be read as a particular discourse on contemporary European identity (Chapter Two).

Many of the above-mentioned authors, but also others, situate their literary protagonists in moments of destabilization of healthy portrayals of the body (invisible, in fact, as they are mentioned only in general or purely aesthetic terms, rather than in detailed descriptions). Examples of such moments are sudden wounds, disgusting spots, bleeding, images of excrement, menstruation, white hair, nails, peeling skin or the unexpected death of a human being (or animals or dolls as human metonymies). In such moments, the narration suddenly opens up to human physicality. These portrayals of the disturbed body (or, as I often call it, the “ruined” body, because it is partial or in decay) are always connected to some practice of melancholy resulting from political and cultural oppression (for example in *Total Amnesia* by Izabela Filipiak), historical transformations (as in *Bambino* by Inga Iwasiów) or social changes (as in *Clam* by Marta Dzido). These “ruined” cultural images of the body can be seen at the same time as melancholic ways of challenging tradition as well as normative contemporary culture. As I mentioned before, I look at women’s writing by taking into account the now long-established tradition of feminist and women’s studies. “When Beauvoir does talk about woman’s bodily being and her physical relation to her surroundings, she tends to focus on the more evident facts of woman’s physiology,” writes Iris Maron Young. And she continues:

She discusses how women experience the body as burden, how the hormonal and physiological changes the body undergoes at puberty, menstruation and pregnancy, are felt to be fearful and mysterious, and she claims that these phenomena weigh down the woman’s experience by tying her to nature, immanence, and the requirements of the species at the expense of her own individuality. (Young 2005, 29)

I examine literary images of the “ruined” melancholic body, searching for representations of female voices rebelling against a culture that discredits female individuality. My analyses aim to present both a representative reflection of the literary and cultural environment of the post-communist time in which they were produced, taking into account the

many political and social transformations and different generations, as well as close readings of the texts themselves. Questions of Catholicism, nationalism, the patriotic ethos, Polish history, Romantic mythology, and the problems of memory are tackled at various points in these interpretations.

### **Inscriptions of Migration**

The texts discussed deal directly or indirectly with migration. Some of them are about migrants and vagabonds and as such touch on migration through their thematic dimension. Some texts are written by authors who live outside Poland and speak indirectly about their experience of migration. I believe that migration in contemporary European literature is a new category (as discussed in Chapter Five). It is no longer the political division between East and West in Europe that demarcates the home literary production from the *émigré* one. What designates literature as emigration/migration literature is rather the particular existential dimension of being separated from one's own language and culture, the experience of dislocation present during the creation of the text, and inscribed as such into the text. Therefore, it can be argued that rather than speaking about migration/emigration/*émigré* literature we should talk about e/migrating inscriptions or inscriptions of migration. The experience of migration understood in this way is a combination of the subject (author) position (often appearing in a melancholic mood), the position of the speaking subject (narrator/protagonist being abroad, though this is not always present), and the themes of the texts and their narrative strategies (for example, the sometimes politically determined choices of characters, places or themes). Inscriptions of migration can be seen as possible ways of interpreting the text and can be used as particular reading keys, within which the following extratextual knowledge is present: glimpses (not necessarily the full spectrum) of the author's biography as well as the socio-political context in which the text was created, including gender aspects. Inscription as a dictionary entry is defined as (1) a descriptive or dedicating passage at the beginning of a book, or (2) a geometrical term, where "to inscribe" is to draw a figure within another so that their boundaries touch but do not intersect. Using both these explanations as analogies for defining inscriptions of migration, I see them as (1) interpretative strategies in reading the text written abroad or about migration and (2) as a general interpretative scheme in which the whole body of literature on migration is situated within a general literature. My reading of contemporary Polish women's writing uses both understandings

of inscriptions of migration in order to reveal the various messages offered by the representations of melancholic migrating bodies.

### **A Pole on Polish Culture**

It is important that I should mention my personal involvement in this study: both my melancholic moments and my constant moving and migrating have been inextricable aspects of writing this book. I began to write it in Finland (at the University of Tampere), and it has been part of my partly academic, partly personal migration between Poland (Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski Kraków University) and London (School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London). I—a Polish reader—propose particular readings of these Polish women’s narratives. I cannot leave the Polish context unnoticed. These are Polish texts about Polish people, about Polish history by Polish authors. I am a Polish reader. However I am not investigating nationalist clues in these novels and short stories. On the contrary, I will try to oppose a hegemonic political and nationalist understanding of “Polishness” and concentrate instead on exposing and describing the figure of the body as a stranger, a foreigner, the source of pain and suffering, as well as the body created by the utopian notion of the (universal) human being, the body shaped by patriarchal ideas of gender relations, by other political notions and by national borders. My reading of these novels and short stories resembles a meeting between women, between neighbours. I read women’s writing about women as a woman, and I recognize my own experiences. I read them as a Pole but I write about them in English for an international audience, yet this very context of a different language puts me in the position of a stranger, the foreigner who “suffers because she cannot speak her mother tongue” (Oliver 1993, 136). My counterparts are the heroines with their stories and bodies that hurt, transform, give birth and want to be beautiful and attractive. The authors are also present in this meeting of minds, in their biographies, from which the stories are woven. It is inevitable that I read the stories in their cultural context, as partially autobiographical,<sup>1</sup> stories that are “writing a woman’s life,” as advocated by Carolyn Heilbrun, who said: “Women must turn to one another for stories; they must share the stories of their lives and their hopes and their unacceptable fantasies” (Heilbrun 1989, 44). There are stories of the private, intimate sphere. There are stories about home, in which “big history,” politics or ideology are smothered by the sound of the radio, as well as intimate

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<sup>1</sup> Also see my investigations in Chowaniec 2001.

conversations, photographs, or very personal, physical suffering. Yet home in these stories is the place where the most important events happen. “Jane Austen was born knowing a great deal—for one thing, that the interesting situations of life can, and notably do, take place at home,” wrote Eudora Welty (Welty 1969, 4–5). Welty described the private sphere as one that should be praised by women, an approach that was criticized by Carolyn Heilbrun as nostalgic writing. “Nostalgia [...] is likely to be a mask for unrecognized anger,” says Heilbrun in the context of Welty’s writings. It is anger because of women’s difficulty in finding their own language to express their experience. Nostalgia, and even melancholy—which also suggests the notion of mental illness—in women’s writing is a “forbidden anger” (Heilbrun 1989, 15). The stories that I read here are melancholic, they talk about forgotten women and their spaces, and the way in which they come to be silenced by political discourses. The narrators and heroines of these novels suffer as I do, while the readers witness a suffering that can never be soothed, unless their stories can be told and heard.

I read about women, the authors tell me about women, the heroines talk to me—as if in a symbolic meeting of minds. Such a reading, in close association with the heroines and their authors, in the context of my own and their Polishness as well as my own and their foreignness (in the context of migration), is also a move toward what Teresa de Lauretis called “consciousness raising,” that is, being aware of our stories and the importance of what is meant by home, of how we construct our spaces and what we understand by belonging (De Lauretis 1984; Heilbrun 1989, 45). My reading aims to reclaim women’s stories about melancholic migrating bodies as told in recent women’s literature.

### **Travelling Theories: Methodological Postscriptum**

In the study of Eastern European culture, however, one has to remember the always-problematic connection between East European literature and/or art and so-called Western theory. My analyses indeed use Western theories on melancholy and the body, including the notions of gender, inequality, class or identity politics. Yet the texts are contextualized against the background of Polish culture. Western “travelling theories” are therefore carefully appropriated here.

Gudrun-Axeli Knapp, in her book on race, class and gender, describes the career of Anglo-American theories across the world in academic discourses. She mentions that since Edward Said’s essay “The World, The

Text,” the concept of travelling theories has become, interestingly, very popular.

In the 1980s taking “theories” or “concepts” as travelling objects was more than a reminiscence of established academic exercise in the humanities. The new perspective was emphatically connected with a cultural turn, focusing on theories as embedded cultural practices involved in power struggles. A growing awareness of the ways in which theories are shaped by and charged with the historical contexts of their articulation has inspired reflections on historicity, on cultural difference, on the translation and the articulation of theories that have left home (whatever that meant, before it was—rightly—deconstructed). (Knapp 2005, 250)

This inspires Knapp to see the metaphor of travelling or migrating in a new light. She states:

In postcolonial studies and transnational feminism, notions of exile, displacement and migration have been critically set against the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images that accompany the metaphor of travel like a shadow of its noble and later bourgeois past. Sometimes “smuggling” may be the word more adequate for describing the moves of theories: a lot of smuggling of books to and fro took place before the Berlin Wall came down. Today, notions of the “theoretical parachutists” (Petö, 2001) reflect the ambivalent and in parts degrading experiences accompanying the transforming of academies in all Eastern European countries (Braidotti and Griffin, 2002). (Knapp 2005, 251)

In this context, academia, according to Knapp, becomes more and more part of the capitalist system, while knowledge is treated more and more as a commodity, hence recent developments “include far-reaching changes on the institutional level in systems of higher education and research that have come to be termed ‘academic capitalism’” (Knapp 2005, 252). Furthermore, Knapp refers to Jacques Derrida’s important text of 1990 where he “reflects upon the field of forces influencing the states and the interstate travels of theory. He exemplifies the hasty trafficking in ‘theory’ by looking at the cantankerous lot of ‘neologisms, newisms, postisms, parasitisms, and other small seismisms’ (Derrida 1990, 63), describing them as symptoms of a ‘frenzied competition’ under the institutional conditions of the academic system” (Knapp 2005, 252).

I have found it very important to frame my analyses within the context of Knapp’s reflections. For more than a decade now a lively discussion has been conducted on how Western theories have influenced gender studies as well as scholarship on women’s writing in Poland, especially French

and Anglo-American theories (as presented in Iwasiów 2002; Chowaniec et al. 2008, 2010; Chowaniec and Phillips 2012).<sup>2</sup> In this debate, the travelling of Western theories is often seen as a form of colonization or foreignization of the home culture. In taking up Western theories on melancholy and the body, I am not trying to repeat this gesture. I take the travelling theories on melancholy from various authors and various approaches (including also Polish philosophers, such as Antoni Kępiński) and then construct a methodological framework in order to interpret the chosen Polish women writers. I use the foreign mirror of these travelling theories with caution, aware of the possibility of colonizing the texts. As is well known in feminist scholarship, women's texts reproduce the structures of normative (often very patriarchal) discourse (Smith and Watson 1998). However, one of the main assumptions of this book is that it is absolutely essential to read women's writing repeatedly through strategies of deconstruction, finding gaps and omissions in the texts in which new subversive meanings may be found—beyond those already signified, classified and typified by patriarchy itself.

Nevertheless, I try to negotiate between the presumed subject and the “truth” of the text (the meaning towards which the text is leading us). This, according to Leigh Gilmore—who writes about women's self-representation—is the role of an Introduction:

An Introduction presumes the existence of a subject, and turns upon that existence necessarily, for turning to introduce the subject, one expects to find it properly named and placed within the interpretative framework that makes it recognizable, makes it, finally, either symbolically or semantically identical to its name. (Gilmore 1994, 1)

I have devoted a lot of space in this Introduction to defining the notion of melancholic moments as seen in descriptions of the bodies of migrating subjects, the notion of women's writing, and feminist strategies of reading. All these form essential parts of the interpretative framework into which I now invite the reader.

I begin my literary analyses (Part I: Recognition and Appropriation) with two main groups of problems that aim to convey a general overview of Polish contemporary women's prose. Firstly, I discuss the phenomenon of women's writing and its problematic identity as well as the debate on the role of the body within it (Chapter One: The Appropriation of

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<sup>2</sup> On the various strategies adopted by feminist and gender research in the Polish academy as well as the search for one's own voice, see my discussion in *Women's Voices and Feminism in Polish Cultural Memory*, Chowaniec et al. 2012.

Women's Writing). Secondly, I sketch a picture of the melancholic and bodily themes as portrayed in post-1989 Polish women's writing (Chapter Two: The Themes of Melancholia and the Body in Pain).

The second part of my analysis (Part II: Women Migrants, Strangers, Travellers) focuses on the literary representation of the "volatile" identities appearing in contemporary literature that re-examines the notions of home and the experience of travelling and immigration. Chapter Three discusses the experience of travelling as connected to discussions in previous chapters of notions of melancholy and displacement (Visible and Invisible Women Travellers). Subsequently, I sketch a general overview on the notion of Polish contemporary women's writing as seen from the perspective of migration in relation to post-communist transformation and the notion of writers' generations (Chapter Four: New Realities and the Generations of Writers). Chapter Five (Revisiting the Notion of *Émigré* Literature) aims to provide a general summary of women's experience of emigration and a discussion of the notion of emigration in Polish contemporary literary studies.

In the final part of the book (Part III: The Body as an Abject) I focus on the literary representations of what I call "ruined bodies"—illness and the body as object of disgust and disability—in order to investigate their roles in women's narratives. Following a discussion of the notion of illness and abjection in literature and the literary manifestation of corporeal experiences in selected Polish women's texts (Chapter Six: The Ruined Bodies), I scrutinize in particular Olga Tokarczuk's short story "Numery" (Room Numbers, 1998) in a "close reading" from the point of view of feminist scholarship on the notion of abjection (Chapter Seven: Cleaning Ladies and the Poetics of Abjection). Here, I utilize the notion of the abject, which "disturbs identity, system and orders [...] does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982, 3). I look furthermore at the ways in which the other's body is represented in the gender-related social role of a cleaning lady, as well as at the interconnections between representations of the female body and sexuality. Lastly, I continue my discussion of Olga Tokarczuk's works in the context of contemporary discussions on ecology and posthumanism. I look at literary images of alienation from nature, especially in the literary scrutiny of the bodily experience of puberty: the experience of menstruation, descriptions of animals and landscapes as others (Chapter Nine: Nature, Ecocriticism and Posthumanism). In conclusion, I enumerate the most important features of contemporary Polish women's fiction that arise from the above analyses.

The motto of this introduction, "We are the emigrants here," is inspired by the title of the 1991 novel by Manuela Gretkowska (born 1964),



published under the Russian title (in Latin transcription) *My zdies' emigranty*. The protagonist of this novel, a young Polish female emigrant in Paris, presents a new post-1989 transformed attitude to nationalism and patriotic obligations. She feels free of such obligations and shows a liberal approach to any—national, gender or social—identity. Therefore she feels she is an *emigrant* wherever she is. Yet the emigrant is someone who can both enjoy and suffer from her/his freedom, and this opens up a space for melancholy, but it can also be seen as a way of negotiating a new position for a woman in society, politics or literature through a critique of the present, which is the ultimate aim of the following investigations.



**PART I:**

**RECOGNITION AND APPROPRIATION**



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE APPROPRIATION OF WOMEN'S WRITING

I hesitated a long time before writing a book on women...

(*The Second Sex*, Beauvoir 1989, 3)

Women's writing as a practice and critical term has a long tradition in Polish literature, going back to the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet the first historical overview of Polish women's writing appeared only in 2000, and was a general guide or supplement to the canonical history: *Polish Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present Day: A Guide* (*Pisarki polskie od średniowiecza do współczesności: Przewodnik*), 2000, compiled by Grażyna Borkowska, Ursula Phillips and Małgorzata Czermińska. I believe "the date of this publication can be seen as symbolic; two millennia had to pass before women's participation in literature was acknowledged in a systematic compendium" (Chowaniec and Phillips 2012). Indeed, in the 1990s feminist critique, and within it women's artistic and literary creativity, improved considerably<sup>1</sup>; for example the very first Polish feminist magazine *With Full Voice* (*Pełnym Głosem*) appeared in Kraków in 1993, and was later transformed into *Splinter* (*Zadra*, from 1999). This was also a time of dialogue between Polish women and women from various countries in the West and from other so-called post-communist countries. Certainly, the beginning of the 1990s saw the first wave of research on women's writing appearing in magazines, books and academic articles. The first attempts to promote the strong presence of the term "women's writing" on the Polish literary scene were the collection of articles published by *Teksty Drugie* (1993, numbers 4–6) and Grażyna Borkowska's book *Alienated Women: A Study on Polish Women's Fiction, 1848–1918* (*Cudzoziemki: Studia o polskiej prozie kobiecej*, Borkowska 1996, translated by Ursula Phillips: see Borkowska 2001a).

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<sup>1</sup> I have written on the feminist movement and literary research after 1989 in Chowaniec and Phillips 2012.

Women's writing as a term appears also as a reading strategy and was associated primarily with feminist reading (see also the elaboration of this issue in the introduction to Phillips 2013). The need to invent a new methodology and rediscover a different history of literature became an important task within literary scholarship, and it was done by following several distinct paths. As I argue elsewhere:

Looking back at the past twenty years, we can see various modalities for "mediations and de-compositions" of the literary tradition. It is useful to distinguish three general strategies, in which feminist methodologies and their devices have been present in Polish studies. There have been adaptations of western feminist theories, re-writings of Polish women writers' literary history, and the finding of Poland's own feminist critical voices, a kind of vindication of the Polish feminist voice. (Chowaniec and Phillips 2012, 12–13)

A feminist reading of Polish women's writing involves a particular game with patriarchy.<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy is understood here as the system of political, social and cultural (and linguistic) procedures whereby what are in effect traditional male values are evaluated positively (relating, for example, to such dualistic strictures as man–woman, white–black, mind–body, culture–nature and others; see Moi 1999). In order to be heard a woman must not be too radical, but at the same not time too timid, which would reduce the effectiveness of the message. This is how one prominent Polish writer and literary academic, Inga Iwasiów, describes her position as a feminist literary critic and scholar (*Rewindykacje*, 2002). Iwasiów says that "each of us, feminist critics, has her own story: it is reading while being ill; reading in a foreign language; or encountering a strong female

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<sup>2</sup> The term patriarchy is used here as a general notion for the social and cultural processes and constructions that privilege men and are dominated by men. I shall not summarize here the feminist debate on patriarchy and the views of its main theorists, such as Kate Millett (1971), Shulamith Firestone (1972), Christine Delphy (1992) and many others. Patriarchy as a concept has undergone much criticism as being too narrow and confusing (proposed instead, for example, is kyriarchy, a term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza). What Deniz Kandiyoti states in her article on "Bargaining Patriarchy" (1988) remains valid: "of all the concepts generated by contemporary feminist theory, patriarchy is probably the most overused and, in some respects, the most undertheorised" (p. 274), and further it "is treated at a level of abstraction that obfuscates rather than reveals the intimate inner working of culturally and historically distinct arrangements between the genders" (p. 275). Nevertheless I shall use this notion here as it is used in the Polish feminist and gender debate as denoting the mechanisms that marginalize women or prevent them from reaching decisive positions of power.

leader” (Iwasiów 2002, 15), and whatever the story may be, each of us feminist readers often “scars herself on the edges of patriarchy.” All feminist academics experience confrontation with some kind of patriarchal mechanism, whether it is in the traditional home, at work or in a publishing industry dominated by a conservative hierarchy; nevertheless, they continue their struggle to tell their stories. Every feminist tale is a product of that game, involving, on the one hand, a compromised relationship with mainstream discourses, and on the other the decisive and competent assertion of one's own voice.

This reasoning reflects the case of the feminist story of Polish contemporary women's writing. The category of women's writing itself opens up a potential space for conflict: Polish literature has largely been seen through its social and political role of reinforcing certain (national or citizen-orientated) identities as an objective construction of belonging, hence to divide it into “men and women” is perceived to be a lessening of this alleged objectivity. Generally speaking, the focus on women's writing in any culture requires some sort of justification, especially concerning the omission of masculine representation, as if the choice of subject as such was not complete or too arbitrary and biased. This is all the more true in the case of Polish culture, where, despite the long tradition of the term women's writing, “serious” studies of women's writing and feminism, involving academic engagement, were not initiated until the 1990s.

The increasing visibility of women's writing and women's studies immediately met its critique and opposition. Mainstream literary readings of women's writing in Poland have been persistently intertwined with political and social concerns.<sup>3</sup> The irony is that Polish literature—following the collapse of communism—was expected to be “free” from ideological, and therefore from politicized, readings. Freedom was understood here, however, as liberation from politically engaged literature. The unfortunate effect then has been that the notion of women's writing or women's literature (*pisarstwo kobiece*, *kobieca literatura*) has been perceived as a new type of such engagement, including an ideologically stigmatized perspective predominantly imported from the West. While 1989 is seen as the beginning of a new, democratic Poland, the starting point of a new order and new era of some mythical freedom affecting the political sphere and social psychology, the discourse on the particularity of women's writing has been considered to be something that limits this freedom. Women's writing and feminist theories were seen as a new means of linking literature to ideology. In the post-socialist context, the

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<sup>3</sup> As elaborated in Chowanec and Phillips 2012.

term ideology fell completely into disrepute, associated above all with the loathed Marxist-Leninist theory. The result of this is that feminist interpretations of literature, with their focus on the politics of gender representation, power and social inequality between men and women, have become a part of the Polish literary landscape since 1989, but at the same time they have remained controversial and ostracized. Polish women's writing, however popular, widely published or discussed, particularly in the 1990s, was seen as a new way of politicizing literature, and thus became the target of criticism from established literary circles situated around academic departments and the editorial teams of specialist journals (see Czapliński 1997). This criticism was as vivid in the 2000s as it was in the 1990s, as Dorota Kozicka (2014), a literary academic from the Jagiellonian University, demonstrated in her critical discussion of women writers and women critics during the 2011 Feminist Congress in Kraków.<sup>4</sup> Kozicka refers particularly to two texts by Igor Stokfiszewski (2008) and Grzegorz Jankowicz (2008) that discuss feminist engagement in politics. Stokfiszewski saw this as one of the characteristics of the contemporary feminist movement in Poland and considered the connection between politics and literature to be important, while Jankowicz considered this way of understanding the role of literature as anachronistic and insufficient. In all these discussions of literature and its engagement in politics, one element stands out as surprising, namely the fact that such a connection is somehow perceived as diminishing the very value of literature. This old, structuralist position exposes the conservative belief that there is a literature beyond any sort of intrinsic ideological suppositions, which in fact implies that there is a stable canon that, according to some authorities, is named as non-ideological or objective. Because a narrative always presupposes some kind of political standpoint, we can consequently see that this kind of thinking about literature reveals something more than distrust of an openly political position, namely a tendency to separate ideologies into the good and the bad, the objective and the subjective.

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<sup>4</sup> II Kongres Feministyczny (Second Feminist Congress) in Poland, held in September 2011. The debate on literary studies is available in *Women Online Writing* no. 3 (2014) at <http://www.womenonlinewriting.org/issue-no-3-history-of-polish-feminism-in-academia-in-polish.html> (Accessed: 1.08.2014).



## **“I Do Not Like the Category of Women's Writing”**

A text by the Polish critic Jerzy Sosnowski and his reluctance to use the term “women's literature” is symptomatic of the above-mentioned critique. His main argument is based on the assumption that the term “women's writing” dismisses the notion of general “human experience” (*ludzkie doświadczenie*), which does not require the gender context in order to be taken into consideration. I quote here a long passage to demonstrate the particularity of his reasoning. Jerzy Sosnowski (2008) writes as follows in his article entitled “Joyce była kobietą, czyli dlaczego nie lubię pojęcia ‘literatura kobieca’” (Joyce was a woman, or why I do not like the notion of “women's literature”):

The division between women's and men's literature hides a particular obscurity, and such an obscurity is a fact, even though it acts against its promoters. What I mean is that when we inscribe into the category of “women's writing” the meaning of “anti-logocentric literature,” which stresses the bodily experience rather than the paradigms of the mind, then, according to the logic of the dictionary, we will most of all look for the experiences of women within this category. Excellent: if we learn about the world through the body, the gendered experiences seem to be obvious. But isn't the inter-sexual experience lost in this case? Don't we falsify this experience as a product of a male culture, confined to the identifying of the “neutral” with the “male”? Among the untranslatable experiences of women and men don't we lose the experience of being human? When Sorana Gurian repeated the words: “read Shestov, Miłosz” on her deathbed, she meant it as a message beyond any gendered domain. [...] The experiences of the betrayal of other human beings (and the loneliness), the experiences of the betrayal of one's body (including illness or death) are the easiest, but not the only experiences, during which we can repeat the sentence of Maria Komornicka, Piotr Odmieniec Włast, “sex is only a phase in being a human.” A phase as a moment in time but also as an element in a network among various lines that are to us the sources of power. (Sosnowski 2008, translated by MK)

This passage is illustrative of the debate that was held around the concept of women's writing and the confusions that were made. The critic makes a few popular errors here in theorizing the term. Firstly, he overlooks the fact that the term “human being” in Polish as in many other languages actually designates a man (as in “a man,” “człowiek,” or in “humanity,” “człowieczeństwo,” designating, in fact, a masculine, white, healthy subject). Therefore, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, “In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the

common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (Beauvoir 1998, 5). The need for universalized experiences seems here to be a gesture towards protecting a so-called “objective” reading and, as a result, towards protecting what is universally understood as “humanity” but, in fact, is a conservative move towards restoring well-known canons, themes and rhetoric (rhetoric that keeps literature free from gender identity, as Sosnowski demonstrates later at the end of his short article when he says that he “does not like the term of women’s writing” even though he likes reading Tokarczuk and Woolf).

Also, “human thinking,” as represented by Sosnowski, assumes dualistic rational thought that situates the body against the mind. Within such Cartesian duality, there is assumed, prior to the bodily existence of the egological self, an egological reality that is independent of the body. Following Beauvoir’s lesson in *The Second Sex*, it is precisely due to reason that the position of women in society is so unjust; women, because of their roles as child-bearers, were associated with the physical body as part of nature, as opposed to the mind which was part of culture. For Beauvoir, the body needs to be taken into consideration as part of humanity and only as such can it be seen as an inseparable part of identity. However, the body has to be seen as a situation rather than a destiny. It is a situation that connects the biological body to various cultural interpretations, and turns those interpretations into a political entity. This is in fact the very beginning of the gender and sex divide, already evident in *The Second Sex*. Judith Butler, analysing the mind/body dualism in Simone de Beauvoir’s writing and her idea of the body as situation writes as follows:

The body as situation has at least a twofold meaning. As a locus of cultural interpretation; the body is material reality, which has already been located and defined within a social context. The body is also the situation of having to take up and interpret the set of received interpretations. No longer understood in its traditional, philosophical senses of “limit” or “essence,” the body is a field of interpretive possibilities, the locus of a dialectical process of interpreting anew a historical set of interpretations which have become imprinted in the flesh. (Butler 1998, 38)

Sosnowski does not operate within the categories of gender and sex, nor does he take into consideration the varied processes of interpretation and re-interpretation of the mutual relations of these categories. The critic’s reasoning actually consists of a set of neatly combined syllogisms: women’s writing is by women; women write about the body; women’s

writing is about the body. The role of such reasoning is to drive home its conservative and dismissive point, despite previous gender-orientated scholarship published in Poland (such as the collection of articles edited by Anna Nasiłowska 2000).<sup>5</sup>

The criticism presented above does not engage in the actual problem of what the term women's writing may mean: in terms of literary production, in the promotion of literature, or in the reading and teaching of literature.

I see the concept of women's writing as a field experiencing a new transformation. Mainly because of its connection with feminist studies and its ability to destabilize the established literary canon, it is one of the notions that have provoked many critics and academics, and may thus be seen as a test of the new democracy. Therefore, it is useful to examine certain aspects of the development of the category of women's writing within the Polish context.

### **The Myth of Women's Identity**

As was partly shown above, the 1990s generated a dynamic discussion on the reinterpretation of the old category of women's writing, which was dominated by various presuppositions (it was romantic, sentimental, unambitious, populist, and so on). Today, the term itself still arouses controversy; yet, it is also used—though not widely—without pejorative connotations. I use the term very broadly to designate “literature written by women.” The gender of the author is not necessarily crucial for the interpretation of the text itself, but may be important in contextualizing the text within literary production generally, in the text's reception and also in the way we interpret its “message.” The category of “being a woman” is understood here in sociological terms: gender is seen as a specific incentive that determines upbringing, education, social encounters, role playing and choices made, including the use of the plots and dialogues in literary texts. I do not try to use the category in an essentialist way, neither do I claim that literature produced by women is different from that produced by men in the essential aspects of its use of language. Nevertheless, differences in gendered roles are undisputed. The perception of the world and auto-perceptions differ in relation to gender; hence the

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<sup>5</sup> The Polish literary journal *Teksty Drugie* (1993, 1996) had published sets of texts on feminism and women's literature by this time: Kazimierz Ślęczka had published a substantial volume on diversity within feminist thought, while Maggie Humm's *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* had been translated, etc. Later on, Monika Świerkosz (2008) published an article trying show the incomplete character of the corporeal understanding of feminist thought.

importance of analysing gender in the production of art and culture, including literature. Therefore, the category of women's writing may be seen here as an essentialist strategy rather than as an essentialist category.

Inga Iwasiów was one of the first Polish feminist critics, alongside Grażyna Borkowska, Maria Janion, Małgorzata Radkiewicz, Krystyna Kłosińska, Anna Nasiłowska and others, who tried to re-invent the term "women's writing" within Polish academia, literary criticism and gender studies. She argued that women's writing tends to reveal the sex of the narrative voice, and for this revealing of gender she advocates a particular gendered reading strategy.

Summarizing the achievements of the 1990s in her 2002 book, Inga Iwasiów says that women "could have been— and for a short time were—the body of the anti-canon, the common figure of anti-patriarchy" (Iwasiów 2002, 22). Women's writing as a fact and as a theoretical concept gave hope to the "writing and reading community" (Iwasiów 2002, 22). And yet this feminist scholarship, as I wish to refer to it, which is dependent on a strategically essentialist view of womanhood in society, has always generated heated debate. This debate was launched when women writers broke into the literary mainstream, as evidenced for example by the literary discussion between Przemysław Czapliński and Piotr Śliwiński in July and August 1997, published under the enigmatic title of "They" (in the original Polish clearly phrased to suggest the female gender: *One (They)*). The title was meant to refer to women's writing, and its authors wondered whether the literature produced in Poland in the 1990s "had a female face," stating that it was women who had reanimated the poorly performing novel form "not only as amateurs, but also as creators, or mothers, so to speak." "Perhaps we are witnessing the taking of the cultural mantle away from men," the critics debated. The very choice of title immediately suggested the distance these literary experts—both the men themselves and the critique they presented—felt towards this superficially lauded women's literature or writing. "They"—the women who were writing, keeping active, bravely tackling stereotypes, ambitious, telling the tales of their experiences, of their bodies, marriages, mothers, journeys, tales of being rejected by families, politics, the fatherland, not only offered readers interesting reading, but also became—mainly as a result of this "distanced" critiquing—an interesting subject with which literary debates could be spiced up. Inga Iwasiów noted that after 1989,

liberated (self-liberated in fact) from patriotic limitations, women writers began to look for formulas which they could apply to writing about the experiences closest to them: socio-cultural, psychological, corporeal. (Iwasiów 2002, 22)

Iwasiów shows how this attempt at the promotion of women's writing began with the topic of migration, although now free of political contexts. Under the topic of migration, we may include the writing of Manuela Gretkowska—*My zdies' emigranty* (1992), *Paris Tarot (Tarot paryski)* (1993) and Izabela Filipiak's *Death and the Spiral (Śmierć i spirala)*, (1992). Furthermore, as Iwasiów goes on to note, also of importance are:

the body, the taboo topic of lesbianism, the initiations of girls (especially in *Total Amnesia*, 1995), the myths of women in Olga Tokarczuk's *Primeval and Other Times [Prawiek i inne czasy]*, 1996, [2001], the linguistic conciseness of Natasza Goerke (*Fractale [Fractals]*, 1994; *Księga pasztetów [The Book of Pâtés]*, 1994; *Pożegnanie plazmy [Farewells to Plasma]*, 1999 [2001]), descriptions of the subconscious in the novels of Małgorzata Saramonowicz (*Siostra [Sister]*, 1996; *Lustra [Mirrors]*, 1999), the poetic precision of Magdalena Tulli's prose (*Sny i kamienie, [Dreams and Stones]*, 1995 [2004]; *W czerwieni [In Red]* 1998 [2011]; *Tryby [Moving Parts]* 2003, [2005]; *Skaza [Flaw]* 2006 [2007]), sexuality in the writing of Zyta Rudzka (*Białe klisze [White Clichés]*, 1991; *Uczty i głody, [Feasts and Hungers]*, 1995), the theme of motherhood in... Anna Nasiłowska [...], the sentimentality of Hanna Kowalewska, mythography and psychoanalysis in the work of Anna Bolecka, the postmodernism of Ewa Kuryluk. (Iwasiów 2002, 22)

All too soon, however, this dynamic development in women's writing dissolved into debates about breakthroughs, changes, new currents, decades, postmodernism, and their roots in modernism. Alongside this appeared the general trend of women writers themselves renouncing their belonging to any type of women's writing. Women writers did not want to be *one* (they), they wanted to be included in the general debate on literature without the critical gesture of stigmatization—which in the above-mentioned debate was signified by the gender-specific title *one* (they, plural feminine), because in this way, the critics were simultaneously pointing to an interesting group of writers to whom we assign a sex, and automatically distancing themselves from them.

Iwasiów continues, emphasizing the fact that “the specific persons writing did not intend to form a feminist front. Perhaps they felt the possible and dangerous likelihood of being treated in some ‘special’ fashion. Or perhaps they wanted to be themselves and did not intend to make any sort of point?” (Iwasiów 2002, 22). Yet, the literary criticism of the first twenty years after the fall of communism forced the term “women's literature” to become embroiled in detailed, even convoluted, debate. Although they elaborated various reading and writing strategies, focusing on various ways of presenting and comprehending female

experience, the writing women were often ridiculed and patronized by the literary establishment, which gave birth to such terms as “menstrual literature,” and concentrated on debates about linguistic nuances, the repetition of certain themes appearing in women’s writing, the pretentiousness of their poetics, and so on. As noted by Inga Iwasiów: “The revolution began with women. But it did not lead to the taking over of ‘patriarchal discourse.’ Rather, at least initially, to the questioning of it. An enthusiastic speaking with ‘full voice’” (Iwasiów 2002, 22). And yet from these debates, even the one that remained hostile to the concept of women’s writing, we can see that the 1990s brought a realization that to talk about women’s experience is to talk about something of importance, of an experience which has, over the ages, been debased by the language of official rhetoric and by all the limitations imposed on women by the social, legal and economic structures that separate the sexes.

The reading of literature written by women—as a certain reading strategy—reveals a new reality, a new sensitivity and new horizons that are worth studying. What then is female literature, women’s writing, or what some call *écriture féminine*?

As shown above, these concepts indeed create a great deal of consternation among critics, readers and of course writers of both genders, even though—as Grażyna Borkowska reminds us—the concept of women’s writing “made its home in Polish literature” in the second half of the nineteenth century (Borkowska 2001b, 65). Specialized studies on women’s writing add up to an impressive library today. Anna Burzyńska, in her description of feminist critiques and of the unique aspects of women’s writing, draws—in an interesting, though superficial way (as her survey was intended as a basic textbook)—on the most important findings of research focused on women’s writing in English-language literature (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Barbara Johnson, Ellen Moers, Mary Daly, Elaine Showalter, Annette Kolodny et al.) and French literature (the arachnology of Nancy K. Miller, Hélène Cixous’s characterization of women’s writing as a “dark continent,” and the post-Lacanian theories of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray; see Burzyńska 2006). Gender studies, feminist studies, any sort of work on women’s writing—with its ever-broadening library of texts—appear to be well grounded both in contemporary humanistic analytical thought as well as in everyday experiences. And yet women’s writing remains a rather awkward and unwelcome term, despite the lengthy discussions on the subject undertaken by many Polish literary experts (Borkowska, Filipowicz, Kłosińska in her 2001 anthology; see Nasiłowska 2001 and Hanna Jaxa-Rożen 1999). We still hear women writers renouncing the category of women’s writing (as

in the case of the famous rejection of women's, or specifically feminist, writing, by Manuela Gretkowska), a category that still seems to somehow demean the writing in question.

One reason for this reluctance to engage with the term is the whole host of stereotypes associated with feminism. Another might be the association of women's writing with presentations of femininity seen as something blasé, abstract, quintessential, or else the idea that the category of women's writing is related to a certain kind of poetics: over-written, over-emotional. Not that this is solely a Polish phenomenon. Writing about Russian literature pre- and post-perestroika, Helena Goscilo notes that Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, one of the most popular writers of the time, stressed repeatedly that she wrote in a "male mode," meaning she was "focusing on the essentials of plot and character, as opposed to wallowing in ornateness that she, like many others, associated with women's style" (Goscilo 1996, 16). Goscilo, in her fascinating description of the Russian reception of the term of women's writing as a sociological and literary phenomenon, also refers to the opinions of another writer, Tatyana Tolstaya, for whom "women's writing was synonymous with superficiality and a philistine outlook, with a saccharine air and a mercantile psychology" (Goscilo 1996, 16).

Coming back to the Polish context, Piotr Śliwiński, in his discussions with Przemysław Czapliński on the subject of women's writing, emphasizes that "femininity—not unlike masculinity—is [...] a complex aspect of being human" (Czapliński and Śliwiński 1999, 224). And this fine turn of phrase would seem to be in accord with Grażyna Borkowska's definition, which states that we talk about women's writing when "the subject of the work reveals their own sex [...] regardless of the biological sex of the author" (Borkowska 2001b, 76). Hence, femininity reveals itself thematically—through the manifestations of gendered features. And yet "women's writing" understood in this fashion, separated from actual biological identity, seems to arouse even more suspicions. In the Polish language, the category of gender identity becomes ever more abstract and troublesome. Gender identity assumes the existence of a range of characteristics specific to all women and all men, regardless of time, place and social and historical context, all combining to produce the categories of Woman and Man. Problems appear however when we try to clearly define who this Woman is. Definitions based on biology (related to the body) entangle us in a number of essentialist puzzles and produce a biologically determined identity. Seen from such a perspective, Woman is the sum of her biological and cultural sex (gender). The cultural aspect of this approach, in which Woman and Man are categories constructed

through culture, imposes identity as a binary heterosexual oppression, though in fact there may be as many genders as there are people (Butler 2006). A proponent of the latter perspective, Judith Butler, takes a decisive stand against the category of the feminine as a stable and coherent concept, and sees heterosexuality as an oppressive means of regulating and reifying gender relations (Butler 2006, 7).

And yet, regardless of which approach we take to defining Woman (and Man), we cannot avoid trapping both in “gender relations,” defining them on the basis of gendered identities. However, the identity of being a woman or man is the basis of every other identity, as explained by Toril Moi:

Whether I consider a woman to be the sum of sex plus gender, to be nothing but sex, or nothing but gender, I reduce her to her sexual difference. Such reductionism is the antithesis of everything feminism ought to stand for. In this context it makes no difference at all whether the woman’s difference is taken to be natural, essential or constructed. All forms of sexual reductionism implicitly deny that a woman is a concrete, embodied human being (of a certain age, nationality, race, class and with a wholly unique store of experiences) and not just a human being sexed in a particular way. The narrow parameters of sex and gender will never adequately explain the experience and meaning of sexual difference in human beings. This shortcoming is not repaired by adding on new factors. To think of a woman as sex plus gender plus race and so on is to miss the fact that the experience of being white or black is not detachable from being male or female. (Moi 1999, 35–36)

As a result, analysis of “women’s writing” demands a careful review of the issue of identity; otherwise we are likely to be trapped in restricted channels of critical thinking. Following Toril Moi and her analysis of Woman from the perspective of the philosophies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, it is worth taking a closer look at the category of women as closely related to the physical body, though stressing simultaneously that the physical body or “the bodily structures have no absolute meaning” (Moi 1999, 40), yet, as shown by Beauvoir, “our bodies are an outline or sketch of the kinds of projects it is possible for us to have, but it doesn’t follow from this that the individual choices or social and ethical norms can be deduced from the structure of the human body” (ibid.). The fact that a person might be born a girl influences the course her life, but it does not ultimately determine (as a biological act) her whole life, even if her choices will ultimately be determined socially, given that a woman’s position in society (and in language) is both different from and inferior to that of a man due to predetermined social pressures



(as well as psychoanalytical assumptions regarding human development). Hence a similar reading of women's literature—discarding the myth of identity as inextricably entangled in abstract concepts and concentrating instead on a definite set of experiences—seeks to differentiate the world of women from that of men specifically in the individual experience of producing literature, where “blood, history and fate” all come together. Women's writing was therefore seen as taking on board women's specific and often marginalized experiences of these universal human phenomena, and hence the diminishing description of it as “menstrual literature” appeared. In the case of Russian literature, the above-mentioned writer Lyudmila Petrushevskaya is a pioneer who took up themes previously marginalized in literature such as “suicides, alcoholism, child abuse, fictitious marriages, one-night stands, part-time prostitution to augment the miserable income, unwanted pregnancies, homelessness, abject crushing poverty and physical and psychological violence” (Goscilo 1996, 18). As Helena Goscilo poetically summarizes in relation to Petrushevskaya's writings, “Life for her is the penalty we all pay for having been born” (Goscilo 1996, 19).

The intensity of these “controversial” themes in women's texts was the foundation of the term “menstrual writing,” coined in Polish literary circles. This description finds its Russian equivalent in the term “gynaecological fiction” (“ginekologicheskaia proza,” Byalko 2004). Both these terms, figuring in an ironic context in the literary criticism of both countries, are based on a superficial interpretation of female identity. The concepts of “women's identity” or “women's writing” often act as catch-all definitions, into which we can toss an infinite variety of ideas relating to this still relatively new and under-studied, and hence misunderstood, phenomenon. On the other hand, the appearance of ideas within literary texts relating to menstruation and/or gynaecology functions as a kind of newly created myth, generating platforms for communication, understanding, the sharing of certain experiences in a language which, however, though common to us all, may still be inadequate. I use the notion of myth here as a broad concept of communal belief, as suggested by Olga Tokarczuk in conversation with Czapliński and Śliwiński:

A myth is a way for information about the world to be inherited by us, encoded in us—whether we want it or not. Our individual worlds are separate, like glass baubles rubbing against each other. Sometimes one penetrates the other, when we fall in love, for example, or through friendship and other deep bonds, but at heart we are terribly separated, all of us stuck in our individual baubles. And myth is the territory these

baubles move across. Myths are our only chance to communicate with one another. (Czapliński and Śliwiński, 1999, 245)

In this poetic way, Tokarczuk exposes the true nature of myths. The myth-like manner in which women's identity is formed in women's writing does not however explain the phenomenon, for it does not include its complex, heteronomic character. The problem lies in the fact that communication through myths is superficial and fails to engage in dialogue with other perspectives on women's/feminine/feminist writing, which halfway through the 1990s were already quite advanced. The notion of "scandalous" women's writing and the emergence of themes related to women's bodily experiences and other gender-related issues are indeed phenomena that may not appear innovative or unique from the perspective of world literature, when we consider, for example, the provocative writing of Anaïs Nin. Western literature of the 1970s and 1980s reacted to the rise of feminist literary theories and feminist research, hence gender issues in literary works by women writers indeed appeared openly much earlier than in Polish, as in the writing of Jeanette Winterson, Angela Carter and Margaret Atwood (see Watkins 2000). Nevertheless, research into new literary themes in the post-socialist context has been a very important sociological and literary phenomenon, connecting various literary developments, opening up the possibility of mapping influences and presenting particular situations from the perspective of cultural history.

### **For Everyone to Be a Girl: Appropriating Menstruation**

Menstrual literature ("literatura menstruacyjna") was coined as a term in full awareness of the shameful and banal connotations of the word "menstruation" and as such it was meant to denote the weakness of women's writing.<sup>6</sup> The term itself is the result of a patriarchal reading of women's writing, first used with reference to Izabela Filipiak's (b. 1961) 1995 novel *Absolutna Amnezja* (*Total Amnesia*). Her book is perhaps the most important novel of the decade with regard to gender discourse: the protagonist, a teenage girl, Marianna, is trapped by all kinds of disciplining practices in a family dominated by a despotic father, as well as by traditional forms of schooling. The family can be seen here as a metaphor for society, the state and wider personal interrelationships. The

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<sup>6</sup> See my elaboration on menstruation in Polish literature against the cultural background of the interwar period in Rytönen 2010.