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**FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY AS THE AXIS
MAGICAL WORLDS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSES OF
ANGELA CARTER'S AND OLGA TOKARCZUK'S
HEROINES**

In the not too distant past, two concepts became fashionable terms, and for some time now they have pleurably been defined by nearly all fields of humane sciences, they are 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. Dictionary sources can hardly deliver exhaustive overviews of both categories. Usually, these terms are contrasted but the attributes of femininity include changeability, passiveness, submission and feebleness (Brown, ed. 1993:933; Cayne, ed. 1994:345; Scott Marshall, ed. 2005:218). Predictably, masculinity uses the opposite categories (Brown, ed. 1993:1706; Kopciwicz 2005:57–71; Cieślak 2005:85–86). Apart from numerous theories concerning the physical and cultural sexes, it is worth stressing that both the situation and awareness of women are evolving, causing various social repercussions (Butler 2008; Nasiłowska, ed. 2001; Hołówka, ed. 1982). Along with the transformations taking place in contemporary societies, many changes have been observed in the field of literature. After all, literature has always been a reflection of the real problems facing and troubling mankind. As mentioned by Anna Węgrzyniak, literature created by female authors is utterly different from texts written by their male counterparts, which is revealed through the choice of subject matter, creation of heroes and the way of constructing *milieu* (Węgrzyniak 2007:56; Kłosińska 1999:7–25; Lasoń-Kochańska 2008:133–139).

It is not surprising, then, that it is possible to observe the presence of certain constantly repeating motifs in the literature created by women. While in European literature this type of tendency had appeared much earlier, in Polish literature only after 1989 did there appear real chances of transition. After all, a significant role in this 'retardation' was played by political and historical imperatives (Fidelis 2006:421–423; Chybicka, Pastwa-Wojciechowska 2009). Undoubtedly, all of Olga Tokarczuk's works constitute a *novelty* in Polish

literature and at the same time visibly correspond with the tendencies present in the European literatures which (the tendencies) aspire to be 'progressive'. A completely different category is represented by the works of Angela Carter as it is a long time since feminising threads in Great Britain have had the right to appear on the pages of novels, and to show a different, more radical form of relations between women and men. Moreover, women could count on more understanding from the male element of society, or at least silence which did not thwart the energy put by women into the building of a better (through being fairer) world. The constructions of female characters both in Olga Tokarczuk's and Angela Carter's texts are full of shades. Each of the heroines, as each of us women, is different – i.e. has a trait of uniqueness and is a collection of unitary individual features which make her different from the whole population.

The acceptance of the distant perspective, which allows the possibility of noticing the main attributes, results in the individualisation of the basic groups of heroines from women characters. A systematic specification of the types of femininity based on Olga Tokarczuk's prose might be presented in the following way, although it is in no way claimed that it is a comprehensive and exhaustive index: the woman – a mother managing the matters of the whole family, devoted to the upbringing of her offspring, but not necessarily happy in her marriage; an emancipated woman but not negating the world of men; a young woman representing an aspect of untamed free and unconstrained sexuality; the woman – happily married, or a widow mourning her husband; a married woman who loves someone from outside the marriage; a woman harmed by her husband; a young unmarried woman without clear traits of a sexual nature; a divorcee or a woman left by her husband; a woman bringing up her child on her own; an elderly lonely woman; a goddess. The particular groups of this classification can be represented by several characters in various novels; a fact which does not mean that each heroine can be 'pigeon-holed'. It happens that a heroine is a construction which is complex to such an extent that it encompasses features chosen from among several categories.

The most widely represented group of women characters is the variant of woman – a devoted mother. This group includes: Mrs Eltznier in the novel *E.E.* and the heroines of *Prawiek i inne czasy*: Genowefa Niebieska and Misia Boska, Szenbertowa and Rachela Szenbertówna. Genowefa and Szenbertowa represent one generation, while Misia and Rachela belong to the next generation, and what is more they are schoolmates. Genowefa is a simple country woman who loves her husband Michał. Faced with the outbreak of war and the recruitment of soldiers, she did not break down, but continued all her duties which belonged to the head of the family. In this partly natural way the initial androcentrism and patriarchy were for some time ousted (Lipsitz Bem 2000:49–61). Not until she was faced with lameness did her attitude change. Genowefa's daughter, Michalina, inherited from her mother not only

resourcefulness and the ability not to surrender to hardships, but also the inclination to create a warm family atmosphere. Her marriage to Paweł, though contracted for love, did not belong to those of a successful nature. With Misia's death, the order in the family and all that was known and accepted was forever gone. Without doubt this fragile woman symbolises strength coming from maternal feelings. The women who in a similar way pay homage to family values are a merchant's wife, Jewish Szenbertowa and her daughter. Szenbertowa was created as a woman full of warmth even in her contacts with the customers of the shop she ran. Into her mouth Olga Tokarczuk puts the apotheosis of femininity: *We generally need daughters. If all of them, and at the same time started giving birth to daughters, there would be peace on Earth* (1997:10). Szenbertowa's daughter, Rachela, grew up to be an educated and clever woman. She helped Misia in learning, tried to dissuade her from a premature decision to get married and to show that a woman's world does not have to revolve around those matters connected with home and family. Rachela and Misia are characters matched according to the contrast rule. They belong to one generation but represent different attitudes to life, have different expectations and ambitions, and head for different ideals. Rachela is a young woman, aware of her values, while Misia feels incomplete and, because of this, aims at marrying Paweł disregarding the opinions of her parents and her friend and not waiting for the best time to do it. Another character caring for hearth and home and at the same time realizing unusual ambitions is Mrs Eltzner in the novel *E.E.*. Like Genowefa and Misia, Mrs Eltzner is the personification of care for the goodness and peace of the family. In fact, however, everyday life and the similarity between the days overwhelmed this energetic woman. Thanks to the discovery of mediumistic skills in her daughter Erna, many aspects of her life were changed. The banality of life, her husband's lack of understanding, being practically a single mother, constant life in her flat in Wrocław, unfulfilled dreams, oversensitivity, and the awareness of the passage of time and the rapid aging process make Mrs Eltzner unhappy. That is why she is able to make use of her child and get out of torpor and reactivate her social life.

A different vision of femininity is carried by Olga Tokarczuk's stories. The heroines of these short stories belong to the contemporary world and are equipped with a set of characteristics indicating emancipation. They do not negate the men's perspective of the perception of the world, nor do they try to show men in negative light, but they do show the differences between 'their' world and 'ours'. A meaningful thing is the fact that the narrator assumes an attitude which favours women and that she enunciates numerous advantages of femininity:

[...] *Since for men the world is more a bazaar than a theatre. They prefer to pay for everything, even in advance. Only then are they free – when they pay.* (Tokarczuk 1997:11)

She always got her best ideas at night, as if at night she was a completely different person than in the daytime. It is banal, he would say. He would change the subject of discussion or begin a sentence with I. (Tokarczuk 2002:139)

Often the heroines are not named, but under the initials of the name or a form of the personal pronoun 'she' is always hidden a thoroughly shaped character. As it was noticed by Kamila Budrowska, a collection of typical features is always expanded by individual elements which allow one to obtain as accurate an image as possible, not deprived of details (2005:5–18). And so, the heroine of the story *Otwórz oczy, już nie żyjesz* – C. – appears to be a reader of detective stories of different weight, in whose imagination fiction compensates for the boring and bleak reality; the character in *Najbrzydsza kobieta świata* presents not only the tragic nature of physical disability, but also hypocrisy, calculation and a man's egoism. Among these short forms it is easy to find trends which in a very subtle way bring up a subject of complex relations between women and men. However, the final balance is more beneficial to women. They are more emotional; thanks to their intuition they notice even small changes in their partner and demonstrate responsibility. Regardless of his age, a man in Tokarczuk's stories has a feature or a collection of features which are a source of his lower value. He can be cowardly, mischievous, inconsistent and first of all, subordinate to the sexual realm, and thus with inclinations to be unfaithful and to deceive. Ida, the heroine of the first part of *Ostatnie historie* presents contemporary femininity. She is a mother and a professionally fulfilled tour guide. Very weak and cold contacts with her mother did not bring in delight coming from femininity. She does not feel the complementariness of the family, lives according to their own rhythm and taste, creating a *personality ultra modern* (Szapkowska 2006:439–445; Wierzbicka 2006:447). Her husband was an intellectual of a gentle character, but very awkward in all everyday situations: *As a matter of fact, he always means the same: I am helpless – says his checked jacket, his balding head and a handkerchief in his buttonhole [...]* (Tokarczuk 2004:60). Nikolin is a positive character arousing mercy, engaging in a discourse with the traditional system of values which propagates the men's strength, determination in pursuance of his aim, ensurance of security, independence, strength, power, endurance, individualism, etc. (Vedfelt 1995:23). In the case of *Ostatnie historie*, all the heroines perform these functions and are given these 'men's' features of character. Maja, the daughter of Nikolin and Ida, successfully performs the free job of a guidebook writer and a traveller, and also raises a son. We meet a similar attitude in *Prawiek* too – Adela, the oldest daughter of Paweł and Misia, is the mother of a daughter, a well-off and independently living

woman who works for a living. However, it is worth mentioning that the masculinity as it is understood traditionally can constitute a value and deserves opting for, since Tokarczuk does not negate it. Yet, she shows strong and unusually modern women characters who are aware of their values, and they are the people who are more easily and more frequently noticed in the contemporary world.

The type of character referring to the motif of *fatal woman* is represented by young women whose shape is dominated by the features which make up an untamed and rather shameless sexuality (Saladin 1993:4–7). In this case, women are very similar in their pursuit of men and are represented by two characters, extreme in many respects – Kłoska and Maria Szer in *Prawiek i inne czasy*. Kłoska has many of the features typical of a witch. She is open, bold, self-confident, knows a lot about herbs, has frequent, intimate contact with nature. No-one else in *Prawiek* is so close to the natural order or aware of the magical powers accompanying man all the time. The right woman for the twentieth century is young Maria Szer. The painter from Cracow won the heart of the Popielski heir with her energy and passionate craziness, though the financial awareness remained the same. This stunning woman of statuesque beauty and in addition, an intelligent representative of futurism and tachisme in painting added a lot of passion to the orderly life of the heir. She attracted him by her dynamism and openness: *Compared with her, his wife resembled an eighteenth century classic landscape: full of details, harmonious and painfully static* (Tokarczuk 1997:63). We do not know anything about Maria's fate afterwards, but we can assume that she remained faithful to emancipation, painting and first of all, to herself.

When creating the heroines of her novels and stories, Angela Carter does not forget about fairy-tale and fabulous characters. Actually, not many of them can be regarded as typical and modern. The features she gives to her female characters usually harmonise with feministic threads and images. According to these schemes, she shaped the characters in *Nights at the Circus*: the main heroine Sophie Fevvers and her confidant – Lizzie. Similarly unusual heroines are the twins Nora and Dora Chance in the novel *Wise Children*. The women are bound to each other in an unusual mental way, though typical of twins. They understand, advise and help each other whenever there is a need. In fact, they spent their whole lives in two – they did not get married, though they did not avoid love. Anyway, the men appearing in their lives do not really harmonise with the romantic image of the noble knightly man. They are more like humans who arouse only a temporary fascination, besides being burdened with so many negative characteristics that it would be some kind of madness to treat them seriously in the category of permanent life partner. The twins reveal here their sense of realism. They treat the men like successive adventures, like episodes in their lives and thanks to it they retain happiness and optimism. In the novel there

can be found no symptoms of despair, bad humour or depression caused by a man. It seems that they are the ones who demonstrate how to live happily: not to let men influence their decisions, always be responsible for what they do and in the hard moments count on ... the twin sister. Unfortunately, in Angela Carter's novels such optimistic women who are able to create their own realities are few and far between.

The novel *The Magic Toyshop* shows the birth of femininity – the moment of transition from the world of small girls to the world of adults, and also shows femininity which tries to save its dreams and identity in a world arranged by men, who are despots as well. Melania experiences transgression. It is a dramatic experience, intensified by the loss of parents, nanny, family home and the change of living place. Margaret, on the other hand, is a woman who cares for the family, but is very unhappy at Uncle Philip's side. Her external sloppiness, lack of care for her beauty and appropriate clothing directly result from Philip's meanness. Apart from this, no-one can or wants to resist this character since he is the one to make decisions in all economical matters. In other words, Margaret's state results mostly from her dependence on the men's world, and that world has no intention of granting her the status of a companion and a partner, but the role of a servant and a subject. Margaret does not agree to such an arrangement of the world, since when Philip goes away, she lives in the house with her brothers in a completely different way. The form of existence imposed by Philip cannot last forever which is suggested by the end of the novel – it comes to light that Margaret and Francie are having an incestuous affair, and the aunt, who is dumb on the day of the wedding, starts to speak. However, Melanie is the one who has more chance to rebuild her life, indeed not only her own, since in the last scene she is accompanied by Finn Jowle.

A large number of amazing women characters are to be found in the collection of stories titled *Black Venus*. Brilliant reinterpretations of Grimm's and Perrault's fairy tales bring new light to the accepted and established canon of fairy tale symbols. *The Bloody Chamber*, retaining a lot of episodes native to *Sinobrody*, functions as the story of a mother and a daughter. The mother not only persistently asks about her motivations for marrying a particular man – *Are you sure you love him?* (Carter 1981:7), but also suggests that it is not a good decision. After all, the heroine's mother is unusual, so her knowledge is greater than that of the average woman:

You never saw such a wild thing as my mother, her hat seized by the winds and blown out to sea so that her hair was her white mane [...] without a moment's hesitation, she raised my father's gun, took aim and put a single, irreproachable bullet through my husband's head. (Carter 1981:39–40)

The heroine, being young and unaware, is guided mostly by fear in her direct contacts with her lecherous husband. Yet, it does not prevent her from

breaking the manipulative spouse's prohibition. And indeed, as the heroine's mother predicted, on her new path in life she does not find happiness. In addition, she is threatened by a ritual death, but she escapes this peril thanks to her mother. Eventually, everything ends well, since the spouse-oppressor becomes defenceless, and the women become very rich as a result of inheriting a fortune.

The motif of a mother present in the lives of her children even after death is raised in the story *Ashputtles: or, The Mother's Ghost*. In this case, we have to deal not only with a transformation of the fairy tale about Cinderella, but also the attempts to break free from the past, and most of all, about the autonomy of women's pursuits. On the one hand, it is a story of women's wounds whose consequence is that women become ideal for a particular man. On the other hand, it is a story of the transmigration of the souls, incarnating in new beings and helping one's child to get married. It is also the quite macabre story of a zombie mother who orders daughter to enter the coffin which results in the change of fate. It turns out that every fairy tale story includes the problem of identity and undervalued femininity, and Cinderella is a character of multidimensional symbolism. *The Tiger's Bride* in turn, is a transformation of *Beauty and the Beast*, but in opposition to *The Bloody Chamber*, she is not the one to make the decision to change the place of living. The woman is put in the beast's fortress as a result of her father's unconcern, losing her in a game of cards. The beast, though initially seems to be nothing more than *lasus naturae* (a freak of nature), turns out to be more humane than many a person. The girl gets rid of any culturally imposed on women forms and turns into a tiger:

And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shining hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur. (Carter 1981:67)

The world, with its established system where the woman has not much to say, was shown in the novel *Heroes and Villains* too. Marianna does not agree with the order created by the world of Professors and decides to escape. But outside the settlement there is no possibility to live without help, which is why she joins a group of Villains. Soon she is raped, and the one who committed the dramatic act of violence is pronounced by the fellowship her husband. For it turns out that everywhere there are some laws and cultural systems that have to be complied with: someone is in power, someone takes up the keeping of the house and someone else brings the food... At first, Marianna rebels against everything and everyone but along with the rebellion there is awareness of alienation and lack of understanding. Eventually, the 'cultural' roles, including maternity, which were imposed on her, turn out to be the most effective element that unites her with the husband-jewel and the whole fellowship.

The twentieth century, with its moral revolution and changes in other spheres of people's existence, has brought a plethora of definitions of femininity. Literature does not only raise the problem of femininity in the status of ontology, but also studies the possible ways of being a woman in the modern world. For the authors, who are women after all, the world is not based on the loud, simply 'shouted out' equality of rights. It is suggested not only by the texts of the novels analysed above. Olga Tokarczuk depicts in her novels a wealth of women characters. Among them are heroines of different age, social and economic status, women living in the country but also in towns, those who are happily married and those very unhappy and harmed. Each of the characters is an individual; fruitless are attempts to spot 'cultural copies' in Tokarczuk's works. What they have in common is: resourcefulness in life, willingness to help others, performing various social roles and ... lack of understanding from men. Women are shaped in such a way that we cannot express our doubts in their internal strength. Despite many misfortunes, they do not break down, but start living even more intensively, since they are the ones who are responsible for the family. Indeed, this kind of character shape resembles modern matriarchy. The man, not only weak and expressing the most primitive urges, but also frequently hampering woman's evolution. Anyway, men's portraits are sometimes depicted carelessly and always from the perspective that judges all their steps. Despite such a disadvantageous balance for men, we can find in Tokarczuk's works no open negation of the men's world and fatherhood. The writer does not intensify descriptions of men's brutality, as happens in Carter's works, but suggests such solutions that could make a dialogue between the two sexes more possible. The women in Angela Carter's texts appear to be very sensitive, hesitant, and most of all – misunderstood by the men's world. In this world only a woman can understand a woman and agreement with a man resembles more a contract than something else, which amounts to a certain sum, and breaking it can happen at any time with the woman not being able to withdraw. Surely, they are vivid characters, given individual characteristics and at the same time original, however all efforts aim at arousing a temporary effect, since Carter is aware that cultural changes must last long enough to be strong and permanent.

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