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The Female Body as a Site of Rebellion: How Olga Tokarczuk's Cornspike from *Primeval and Other Times* Defies Patriarchal Norms

Abstract

The female body as a site of rebellion: how Olga Tokarczuk's Cornspike from Primeval and Other Times defies patriarchal norms. In response to feminist calls for bodily emancipation from objectification, many contemporary female authors have challenged representations of women's bodies perpetuated by dominant narratives and circulated within the cultural sphere. Among them is Olga Tokarczuk, who, in her novel *Primeval and Other Times* (1996), focuses on the character of Cornspike. Through her non-normative physique and rebellious attitude, this heroine can serve as a symbol of insubordination, challenging the patriarchal norms surrounding women's embodiment, motherhood, and sexuality.

Keywords

Women, bodies, monstrosity, patriarchy, Olga Tokarczuk

1. Introduction: The Female Body Between Patriarchal Stereotypes and Bold Heroines

In patriarchal societies, women – along with children, racialised others, plants, and animals – have been systematically cast as deviations from the norm, relegated to the status of minorities or non-conforming identities (Butler 1993, Kristeva 1980). The ideal of bodily perfection has rarely been extended to female figures, since from antiquity, the male reference model has dominated as universal image of physical and intellectual excellence, and thus the “measure of all things” (Braidotti 2013: 2). This structural marginalisation resonates in the works of many women writers who interrogate the cultural mechanisms of bodily and, therefore, symbolic discrimination. Among them, Olga Tokarczuk offers a particularly compelling case, as numerous female characters of her fiction can demonstrate. Specifically, Cornspike from *Primeval and Other Times* (1996) can stand as a

symbol of ambiguity, monstrosity, and marginality, challenging patriarchal assumptions while proposing alternative models of feminine subjectivity.

Tokarczuk's production frequently addresses women's oppression, tracing its origins at least in part to psychological responses to female bodily capacities, such as their reproductive power. In this sense, although the expression "womb envy" is not directly invoked in her writings, the concept seems to emerge as a deep-seated discomfort or even horror towards menstruation and potent gestational abilities, which are often perceived as threats to male control (Creed 1993). In her narratives, she actively deconstructs men's impulse to suppress female empowerment by inscribing rigid gender roles onto women's bodies. For instance, she questions the cultural expectation about men and women (Bienias, *et al.* 2013), according to which the former should embody precise traits and be "masculine, independent, invulnerable, tough, strong, aggressive, powerful, commanding, in control, rational, and non-emotional". Then, within the binary logic of patriarchy, the latter should adjust to be "dependent, vulnerable, pliant, weak, supportive, nurturing, intuitive, emotional, and empathic" (Becker 1999: 27). As the Polish writer shows, these entrenched assumptions have traditionally confined women to caregiving roles while aligning men with culture, authority, and reason. This binary framework is often dismissed by the author's female figures, who resist this kind of categorisation and present hybrid identities that blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine. Among others, this defiance surfaces in *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead, 2009), where the protagonist, Janina Duszejko, exhibits a form of female aggression and rationality rarely legitimised in female characters. In doing so, Tokarczuk implicitly disentangles the concepts of "gender" as a cultural construction from "sex" as an assumed biological foundation, a distinction that many feminist theorists have identified as central to patriarchal control, which positions women inherently distant from cultural and intellectual authority (Butler 1993, De Beauvoir 1949).

Her fiction also interrogates the symbolic split between the sacred and the profane ascribed to the female body, according to which, on the one hand, women are idealised as maternal figures, virgins, or divine entities, elevated to a "holy" realm that often denies them subjectivity or desire. On the other hand, they can be relegated to the profane and are, in this case, demonised: sexualised, abject, and associated with bodily functions that evoke cultural anxiety – menstruation, lactation, and sexual autonomy (Kristeva 1980). The writer systematically rejects these contradictory projections in which the female body exists primarily for "reproduction, and for male pleasure" (Sabala, Gopal 2010: 44). She intervenes in this cultural logic by destabilising these oppositions: through bodily agency, often portrayed by way of sexual freedom, her female characters reinterpret desire as a source of expressing

selfhood rather than undergoing submission. This dynamic becomes particularly apparent in the novel examined in the present article, where the writer foregrounds female sexual autonomy on both symbolic and material levels.

Bodily reclamation is central to the feminist project of dismantling patriarchal systems that objectify, discipline, and erase female embodiment. This "subversive agenda" (Sabala, Gopal 2010: 50) – to which Tokarczuk contributes – encourages women to perceive their bodies "as a resource, recognise their personhood and identity, then agency and empowerment come into play and women take possession of their body" (ibid.). This approach transforms dissatisfaction into action, as women actively commence "altering the discourses of feminine beauty and addressing the ambivalence directed towards their bodies, creating symbolic spaces for alternative identities" (ibid.). In the wake of Luce Irigaray's idea of radical reconfiguration of the symbolic order through the famous metaphors of the "two lips" and "the mucous" (Irigaray 1980, 1982), Tokarczuk appears to participate in the creation of a new cultural framework in which female difference – historically silenced or distorted – can be reappropriated through new images and meanings grounded in feminine corporeality. She presents women whose bodies, dreadful or sensual, become sites of narrative and symbolic resistance: not only do they reject the norms tied to femininity, but also engage in acts of embodied self-definition that destabilise the male gaze. As it will also become evident in the following section, the author reimagines female corporeality not as an object of surveillance or containment, but as a generative force capable of producing alternative epistemologies between the sexes.

The female body, when it resists or deviates from patriarchal norms, is often perceived as threatening. Once women reject victimhood and begin to challenge the roles imposed on them, they unsettle their androcentric stereotypes and appear monstrous (Creed 1993). This has been long demonstrated through enduring myths like that of the *vagina dentata* – a woman with weaponised genitals capable of castrating men – or other cultural archetypes ranging from "demon daughters" to "witches", "old hysterical women" and others (Doyle 2019), which exemplify male anxieties about female autonomy and domination, reflecting an impulse to control what appears uncontainable in female embodiment. However, feminist thinkers have argued that these monstrous figures, though rooted in misogyny, can be reappropriated and reclaimed as potent symbols of subversion and resistance. Drawing on these assumptions, Tokarczuk often explores the mechanisms of monstrosity, revealing how signs of bodily excess, abnormality, or transgression can effectively be vehicles of female rebellion. Rather than merely reflecting fear, the monstrous feminine can become a site of resistance, defying the "logic of domination" (Warren 2000),

a series of oppressive strategies adopted against all non-normative identities. Popular examples of Tokarczuk's characters whose bodies radically depart from normative expectations can be found, for instance, in *Najbrzydsza kobieta świata* (The Ugliest Woman in the World) from the collection *Gra na wielu bębenkach* (Playing on Many Drums, 2001), where the protagonist, inspired by the Mexican woman Julia Pastrana, affected by hypertrichosis, challenges both aesthetic and gendered norms through her beast-like aspect. Likewise, in *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (House of Day, House of Night, 1998), the story of Saint Kummernis – whose female sanctity is inscribed through her transformation into masculine bodily features – destabilises the understandings of woman as an object of desire, making her daunting and frightening. In these and several other occurrences, Tokarczuk constructs a counter-mythology in which female monstrosity or abnormality becomes a form of narrative and symbolic resistance.

2. Cornspike: The Representation of a Woman's Rebellion through her Transgressive Body

As outlined, Olga Tokarczuk frequently explores the theme of female resistance through the depiction of abnormal or transgressive bodies. This motif of counter-prototypical female corporeality appears particularly salient in her novel *Primeval and Other Times* (1996) in the figure of Cornspike, a character who rises in rebellion against androcentric norms not through words or ideology, but through the radical embodiment of her difference.

This sense of otherness is primarily conveyed through the book's style. The novel's fragmented structure, composed of chapters centred on the "times" of the characters, including Cornspike – that is, their experiences and sensations – emphasises a mode of perception rooted in intuition and emotion, traditionally linked to feminine sensitivity. This stands in contrast to the rational and linear view of the world typically associated with the male perspective and interpretation of reality (Bienias *et al.* 2013, Darska 2014).

Thematically, a first trait establishing the woman as a non-conforming female individual is her way of life. Her curious name derives from her habit of eating ears of corn, an unusual activity that, combined with other behaviours, marks her as eccentric: she lives alone in a cottage in the woods, and is, therefore, an outcast from society. Her rejection of the cultural sphere, both physically and morally, is especially evident in her decision to inhabit the forest. As the narrator describes:

She felt drawn to the forest. As soon as she went in among the trees, she was aware that everything smelled different, stronger and sharper. She walked towards an abandoned house in Wydymacz, where she sometimes

spent the night. The house was the remains of a burned-down hamlet, and now the forest had grown over it. (Tokarczuk 1996: 15)

The forest stands in symbolic opposition to the town, not just geographically, but also ideologically. While the latter represents a structured, anthropocentric culture, the former is disordered, disorienting, and wild. By choosing to live in this space, Cornspike positions herself outside human-centred hierarchies and norms, aligning instead with a natural world that is often coded as feminine, irrational, or threatening in patriarchal society. In ecofeminist interpretation, the environment is not only associated with women, but it also represents a location at the margins, where all 'othered' categories are relegated. In contrast to the male separate sense of self, the female "interconnected" self emerges, which allows one to empathise with other minorities and build a different ethical system based on care and liberation of the oppressed (Gaard 1993, Mellor 1992). In the novel, this element is further emphasised by her relationship with the animals who live in her cottage: a snake, an owl, and a kite. These creatures, not typically associated with domestic life, introduce a subversion of the order, as they are not objectified or treated as lesser beings. Instead, they coexist with the woman as companions with distinct roles:

These creatures never got in each other's way. The snake lived by the hearth in the kitchen, and Cornspike put out a bowl of milk for him there. The owl sat in the loft, in an alcove where a window had been bricked in. He looked like a statuette. The kite kept to the roof beams, at the highest point in the house, but his real home was the sky. (Tokarczuk 1996: 59)

The strongest relationship develops between Cornspike and the snake, whom she tames gradually through acts of care, which are particularly unsettling because they are directed to a dangerous animal, which is normally kept at a distance: "Every day she put out milk for him, gradually moving the bowl closer to the inside of the house. One day the snake crawled up to her feet. She picked him up, and she won him over with her warm skin, which smelled of grass and milk" (ibid.). By naming him Goldie and wearing him on her body as a bracelet or necklace, she evokes a complex, intimate relationship that fuses maternal affection, symbolic rebellion, and perhaps dangerous power: "During the day she let him lie on her bed. She carried him round her neck like a silver chain, tied him around her hips and wore him instead of a bracelet, and at night, as she slept, he watched her dreams and furtively licked her ears" (60). Rather than subjugating the animals, Cornspike enters into an interspecies kinship that challenges dominant models of domesticity and power dynamics. Moreover, not only are the creatures not de-subjectified, but they are also almost personified, through the opposite strategy of "animalisation" generally employed with women (Adams 1990). In the novel, each animal has its own space in the house, as if they were humans

occupying their designated room. This relatability to humanisation is also conveyed by other factors, such as the naming convention, particularly evident with the snake.

Cornspike's intimate bond with animals – especially with the reptile – does more than merely blur the boundary between human and nonhuman; it also aligns her with longstanding symbolic motifs. According to Jungian theory (Jung 1916, 1964), the snake can represent danger, the phallus – and therefore life –, earth, transcendence, and acts as a mediator between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The owl, similarly, is connected to wisdom, spiritual awareness, and the ability to see into the night – that is, into the unconscious and the unknown. These symbolic associations can be further enriched by Slavic traditional folklore. Mythical creatures such as the *rusalka*, a complex, feminine spirit often represented as a reptile; the *domovoy*, a serpent-guardian of the house; and the *zmey gorynych*, embodying chaos and, contemporarily, a vital and destructive force, all contribute to this imaginary framework. The owl, in turn, can evoke the *strzyga*, a female predator with the body of an owl, and the *sirin*, a half-woman and half-nightbird being, both of which function as omens of death and misfortune (Bane 2016). Viewed through these symbolic lenses, Cornspike can be interpreted as an ambivalent and liminal antiheroine defying classification. Notably, she is at once nurturing and dangerous, maternal and threatening, while carrying quasi-magical and subversive meaning linked with the natural and the unconscious realms. In embracing the monstrous and the mythic, she epitomises female transgression, a role traditionally typified by the figure of the witch (Bienias *et al.* 2013). This association becomes explicit when she is confronted by the parish priest, who, watching her, recoils in horror:

“You sorceress!” he cried, waving his stick. “Keep away from Primeval and Jeszkotle, and my parishioners. Do you go walking about with the devil around your neck? Haven't you heard what the Scriptures say? What the Lord God said to the serpent? 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, she shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bite her heel'”. (Tokarczuk 1996: 60)

The woman's reaction – who laughs and provocatively lifts her skirt to reveal her underbelly – turns the accusation into a moment of empowered defiance, reclaiming both her sexual and bodily autonomy in the face of religious condemnation. The snake, long associated with sin and the fall of the woman in Christian iconography, here becomes both companion and symbol of resistance. In this sense, Cornspike recalls the archetype of the witch: a woman who lives on the margins of society, and usually in the forest, possesses forbidden knowledge, and maintains a spiritual and practical connection with the natural world. Her origins are tied to the notion of “carer” and “healer”, functions that she fulfilled through the creation of herbal or

animal medicaments and concoctions, which can explain her titles of "herbaria" (the one who collects the herbs) or "femina saga" (the wise woman) linked to the Proto-Slavic **věděti* meaning "to know", which underlines her role of custodian of ancient knowledge (De Blécourt 1994). As "the woman at the edge of the woods" (Doyle 2019: 205), she brings forth not only the images of these folkloric witches but also the demonised versions of this figure in early modern Europe (Kramer, Sprenger 1487), when women were often accused of heresy, sexual deviant behaviour, and unnatural powers. Feminist scholars, such as Roper (2006), Zwissler (2018), and Purkiss (1996), have pointed to the personage of the witch, especially as embodied by mythical characters like Lilith, as a potent counter-stereotype, reappropriated by radical feminism which makes her an icon of autonomy, defiance, and spiritual alternative to patriarchal order. Cornspike's rejection of religious authority, her erotic alignment with a snake, her bond with the natural world, and her presence in male-coded space – such as the parish domain – connect her to this reimagined figure: a woman dangerous not because she is evil, but because she is powerful, self-governing, and unreadable within conventional moral and, overall, cultural categories.

Aside from her symbolic identification with the witch, Cornspike's rebellion also manifests in more tangible and physical ways, such as her appearance, attitude, and position outside social norms. Firstly, she rejects the traditional conventions of civilisation: "she was poorly dressed and barefoot" (Tokarczuk 1996: 7), a detail that highlights her distance from urban-coded custom as well as civil, refined femininity. Her marginality is further emphasised by her actions, such as stealing potatoes in the autumn, and regularly visiting the local inn: "Then in autumn she stole potatoes, and once the fields were empty in November, she spent her time at the inn" (12). These actions do not solely suggest poverty or a struggle for survival, but they reinforce her refusal to conform to societal rules of ownership, discipline, and respectability, a transgressive behaviour especially for women. Additionally, Cornspike's body itself becomes a medium of defiance. She is not in compliance with normative standards of beauty: "Cornspike was big and buxom. She had fair hair and a fair complexion that the sun hadn't ruined. She brazenly looked everyone straight in the face, even the priest. She had green eyes, one of which wandered slightly to the side" (ibid.). Her bodily presence challenges the ideal of a slim, flawless, and demure woman shaped by the male gaze (Shildrik 1996, Wherle 2016), which expects unrealistic physical standards, often internalised by female individuals through cosmetic discipline or surgery in contemporary society (Bordo 1993). Instead, Cornspike's body is unruly and visible, further resisting societal efforts to civilise or sanitise women's appearances.

The character's rebellion manifests not only in her nonconforming physique but also in her body language and sexuality. Her refusal to match

cultural prescriptions of femininity is evident in her bold bodily stance, such as her challenging gesture of revealing her underbelly in front of the priest, or her unflinching gaze. Her provocative and irreverent look reclaims agency and transforms an attitude of female docility within the conventional meekness associated with women into defiance. Through her actions, Cornspike's body confirms itself as a tool of resistance. Her rebellion extends into the realm of sexuality: rather than conforming to the ideal of the virtuous, passive woman, traditionally shaped around the image of the Virgin Mary, she aligns more closely with the figure of the *femme fatale* – one who unsettles men through her sexual autonomy (Creed 1993). She engages in transactional sex not out of submission, but as a pragmatic choice in a society that offers her few options:

Sometimes someone stood her a shot of vodka, sometimes she got a slice of bread and lard. But people are unwilling to give something for nothing, for free, especially at an inn, so Cornspike started whoring. A little tipsy and warmed up by the vodka, she would go outside with the men and give herself to them for a ring of sausage. And as she was the only woman in the district who was young and easy, the men hung around her like dogs. (Tokarczuk 1996: 12)

In this dynamic, her body becomes a commodity, but not passively, because Cornspike is aware of the economic exchange and uses it to survive. Still, within these encounters, she refuses to submit to androcentric expectations of apathetic female sexuality. If patriarchal culture reduces women – and animals – to “absent referents”, fragmented, objectified, and silenced (Adams 1990), the heroine defies this type of objectification: her sexual partners are left disturbed, not satisfied. She asserts herself during sex, demanding equality in both posture and power:

The men who took Cornspike in the bushes always felt uneasy afterward. They'd button up their flies and go back into the fug inside the tavern with flushed faces. Cornspike never wanted to lie on her back in an honest way. She'd say: “Why should I lie underneath you? I'm your equal”. (Tokarczuk 1996: 12)

This declaration subverts the gendered dynamics of sexual submission, since she refuses to stay ‘under’ a man – both physically and symbolically – and insists on taking a position of mutual equality. Her attitude challenges the dominant cultural script in which women exist to pander to male passion. Here, the woman becomes an active agent of desire, not an object. As Gerda Lerner (1986) suggests, patriarchal structures have long positioned female sexuality as passive, denying women the right to self-determined pleasure. Cornspike disrupts that pattern by asserting control over both her body and the terms of intimacy. In contrast to the survival-based sexual encounters she has with village men in exchange for food, the narrative introduces a striking

and unsettling scene of intimacy between her and a plant she cultivated in her garden, that is to say, a masterwort that has grown to enormous proportions. Here, the woman no longer serves as a passive object, but she becomes the observing subject, directing her admiration towards the plant. The lingering gaze, traditionally coded as male, is here reconfigured through her perspective: "In the summer of 1927 a sprig of masterwort grew in front of Cornspike's cottage. Cornspike observed it from the moment it put a thick, fat, stiff shoot out of the earth. She watched as it slowly developed its large leaves" (Tokarczuk 1996: 61). Moreover, nature – embodied in the masterwort as a superior, dominant and autonomous entity – is here anthropomorphised and shown as sexually desirable:

And one night, when Cornspike had finally fallen asleep, a young man with fair hair stood before her. He was tall and powerfully built. His arms and thighs looked as if they were made of polished wood. [...] The young man came inside the room and stretched both hands out to Cornspike. She snuggled in between them and pressed her face to the hard, powerful chest. He lifted her slightly so that their mouths could find each other. From under half-closed eyelids Cornspike saw his face – it was rough like the stem of a plant. (61-62)

The eroticism of the encounter is intensified through sensory language, particularly olfactory imagery, which conveys the plant's overwhelming and irresistible presence: "On Saint Michael's Day it bloomed, and for a few hot nights Cornspike could not sleep for the bittersweet aroma that pervaded the air. [...] The whole room was full of seductive aromas. [...] I know. The smell of you disturbs the senses" (ibid.). As evidenced, smell – one of the five senses, not rationality – becomes a medium of erotic and metaphorically superior connection, dissolving the human-nature barrier. For these reasons, the love scene, with its pronounced emphasis on mutual desire, seems to be in stark contrast to the hierarchical dynamics of Cornspike's earlier relationships with men. Instead, it portrays a symbolic reunion and symbiosis between woman and nature, an intimate bond in which both participants occupy equal footing, free from dominance and subjugation:

"I have desired you all summer", she said into a mouth tasting of sweets, candied fruits, and the earth when rain is going to fall. "And I you". They lay down on the floor and brushed against each other like grasses. Then the masterwort planted Cornspike on his hips and took root in her rhythmically, deeper and deeper, pervading her entire body, penetrating its inner recesses, and drinking up its juices. He drank from her until morning, when the sky became grey and the birds began to sing. (62)

This imagery of rooting and reciprocal nourishment offers a vision of erotic union grounded not in possession or hierarchy, but in mutual transformation and according to a principle of "heterarchy" that promotes equal and non-

linear positions for all beings, which do not hold dominance over one another (Tokarczuk 2012).

Apart from sexuality, Cornspike also violates maternal taboos. After an intercourse with a villager, she becomes pregnant, and as childbirth nears, she receives apparent support from Mrs Popielska, the squire's wife. However, her assistance quickly reveals itself as a manipulative behaviour aimed at "domesticating" the woman: "Mrs Popielska [...] glanced at that large belly. 'You're going to give birth any day. How do you intend to support yourself? I'll teach you to sew and to cook. You'll even be able to work in the laundry. Who knows, if everything turns out well, you'll be able to keep the baby'" (Tokarczuk 1996: 13-14). The offer is framed not as a form of protection but as a conditional acceptance and a sort of threat: Cornspike must conform to precise traditional ideals related to female activities, such as sewing, cooking, and doing the laundry, to be allowed to keep her child and be accepted in the social system. Mrs Popielska's help is embedded in the norms that restrict women to motherhood, understood within socially constructed gender duties connected to the family realm, far from culture (Bienias *et al.* 2013). However, the wild woman's refusal to be humbled is immediate and disruptive. Her gaze unsettles the squire's wife, affirming her rejection to submit: "But when the squire's wife saw the girl's alien, insolent look, as it boldly travelled across the paintings, furniture and upholstery, she hesitated. And when this gaze moved across the innocent faces of her sons and daughter, she changed her tone" (14). Mrs Popielska's shift from benevolence to rejection reflects her true motive: to expel Cornspike, since she disrupts the social and symbolic order. Her words reveal how patriarchal values are internalised and enforced by women themselves: "'People don't want you [Cornspike] here. You bring confusion and depravity. You are a loose woman'" (ibid.). The word "confusion" is particularly revealing. It points to the heroine's destabilisation of culturally prescribed roles for women: she resists classification and claims the right to exist freely. Her transgression lies not just in her behaviour, but in her symbolic presence as an individual who wants to live outside of social expectations. To the squire's wife's rejection, the wild woman responds with open defiance: "[Cornspike] You should go away from here'. 'Aren't I free to be where I want?' 'All this is mine, these are my lands and forest'. Cornspike revealed her white teeth in a broad smile. 'All yours? You poor, skinny little bitch ...'" (ibid.). This moment marks a total breakdown of any possibility of female solidarity. Instead of empathy or protection, Cornspike is met with class contempt and violence, even from other women, who, just like her, use aggressive language in contrast to the patriarchal expectations regarding civilised female figures (Mills 2003):

"You whore", said Mrs Franiowa, the char at the manor, whose husband had been crazy about Cornspike that summer, and slapped her in the face. As Cornspike reeled her way across the coarse gravel in the drive, the

carpenters on the roof whistled at her. So she lifted her skirt and showed them her bare behind. (Tokarczuk 1996: 14-15)

The woman's gesture is one of radical provocation and disobedience – a refusal to be shamed and erased. Her nudity here is confrontational because it exposes the hypocrisy of a society that moralises female behaviour while quietly enabling male desire.

In rejecting the role prescribed by Mrs Popielska, Cornspike also refuses the domestic and maternal ideals imposed on women. She returns to the forest, her symbolic home, and gives birth alone to a stillborn child. The delivery scene is raw and unsparing, centring not on the miracle of birth, but on suffering, isolation, and the terror of death: "She felt another pain, stronger this time, more terrifying. 'I'm going to die', she thought, 'now I'm simply going to die'" (15). In this episode Tokarczuk "does not romanticise motherhood, nor does it offer solace" (Chowaniec, Wierzchowska 2023: 227), rather, she undermines its perception as an inherently joyful experience, as the body becomes a site of physical anguish and emotional rupture. After the delivery, it is no less central. Cornspike awakens beside her dead child and instinctively attempts to breastfeed: "Her breast was bigger than it [the baby], painfully alive" (18). Her maternal body is not nurturing, but tragically out of sync with reality – a source of life when there is none to receive it. The repeated imagery of her trying to nurse her child, of flies circling, and of her screams shaking the house, highlights the violence of biological motherhood when severed from cultural support or meaning: "Cornspike began to scream. She screamed so loud the walls of the tumbledown house shook, the birds were startled, and the people raking hay in the meadows looked up and crossed themselves" (17). In this time of despair, it is once again nature, not society, that offers aid. The forest does not reject her but yields to her grief: "The ground was soft and yielding, as if wanting to help her with the burial" (19). This empathetic portrayal of nature stands in stark contrast to the judgmental human community. Later in the novel, Cornspike gives birth a second time to a daughter. Again, she delivers the child alone – this time not in desperation but with strength and control: "At the same time Cornspike had just swept the room and squatted down in the corner over a bundle of last year's hay. She had begun to give birth. It took a few minutes. She bore a large, beautiful baby" (66-67). The simplicity and decisiveness of this scene suggest a reclamation of the maternal body and female agency unmediated by culture, and specifically by male authority or intervention. The presence of the "scent of masterwort" (67) connects this birth to her earlier passionate, vegetal encounter, reaffirming the link between Cornspike, nature, and autonomous life. The baby girl born from this union is Ruta, whose name comes from the Greek *ryté*, signifying a healing or evergreen plant, a detail that further emphasises the environmental association. Once again, in this mother-

daughter relationship, Tokarczuk unveils the dark side of motherhood, as the daughter is raped during the wild woman's search for a safe place to hide with the girl, which demonstrates a lack of care and her failure to protect her. Ultimately, Ruta marries her rapist, and Cornspike consents to share her daughter's presence with her husband, echoing the myth of Demeter and Persephone but silently admitting her defeat in saving the girl from her aggressor (Chowaniec, Wierzchowska 2023).

3. Conclusions: The Writing of Female Bodies and the Emergence of Counter-Stereotypes

Within the patriarchal culture, as Karen Horney writes about female corporeality, "the man strives to rid himself of his dread of the woman by objectifying it" (1932: 135). In *Le Rire de la Méduse*, Hélène Cixous reflects on the urgent need for women to reclaim their bodies and the vital role of writing in the pursuit of freedom:

Il faut que la femme s'écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps ; pour les mêmes raisons, par la même loi, dans le même but mortel. Il faut que la femme se mette au texte – comme au monde, et à l'histoire –, de son propre mouvement. (Cixous 1975: 3)

The call for *écriture féminine* as a writing of the body has been disseminated among feminist theorists and is assumed to be a cornerstone from which alternative representations of the female subject can be constructed. Many contemporary women writers have followed this methodological path by creating narrative models that gainsay patriarchal representations, offering diverse, self-defined visions of womanhood. With *Primeval and Other Times*, Olga Tokarczuk seems to take part in this legacy. As discussed in this article, Cornspike can be considered an innovative, radical female prototype who refuses to conform to androcentric expectations. The heroine's body – far from being idealised or possibly contained – reclaims its physical imperfection, unruliness, sexual freedom, domestic untamedness, motherly suffering and power. This way, the woman becomes a symbol of subversion, expressed through both literal and metaphorical distance from domestic life, her assimilation to the figure of the witch, her rejection of idyllic motherhood, and her assertion of sexual agency. Her body challenges traditional stereotypes by occupying roles denied to conventional female characters. In this sense, Tokarczuk's work introduces a counter-narrative and, most importantly, a counter-stereotype that is Cornspike, who disrupts female invisibility, passivity, and submission ideals. Inspired by the notion of *écriture féminine*, this analysis aims to

demonstrate that female writing about the body is not only an opportunity for women to give voice to their embodied experiences but can also function as a methodological textual strategy promoting alternative narrative forms. It also provides evidence that the Polish writer's work does not limit itself to illustrating feminist theory but pushes its implications further, making Cixous's call for women to write about themselves a thoughtful and efficient strategy to correct female patriarchal images and imagery, substituting them with figures of realistic women liberated from cultural constraints. As such narratives suggest, the spark of *écriture féminine* is still in progress, evolving through new cultural landscapes, such as that rising from the village of Primeval, portrayed by Tokarczuk, who – by deconstructing the cultural scripts that have long confined women – reimagines innovative and self-governing feminine embodiment. Particularly, through her heroine, she illustrates how women can reclaim agency over their bodies and identities, thereby opening new pathways for feminist thought and encouraging readers to question and dismantle deeply ingrained gender norms.

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