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**ECOLOGICAL, FEMINIST, AND MONSTROUS TRENDS AGAINST  
WOMEN AND NATURE’S OPPRESSION IN OLGA TOKARCZUK’S  
WORKS**

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**Abstract:** In the last twenty years, the publication of original novels broadly categorized as “ecofiction” signals the emergence of a new sensibility in many cultures. The *fil rouge* running through these catastrophic scenarios seems to be the annihilation of men persecuted by unexpected predators: women and nature. This paper aims to investigate the trend reflected by these rebellious heroines allied with natural elements that occur systematically in numerous works of the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk. Considering as examples some of the Polish author’s novels, like *Primeval and Other Times* (1996), *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009), and stories such as *The Ugliest Woman in the World* (2001) and *Transfugium* (2018), this article seeks to analyze these transgressive female characters through the theoretical approaches of ecocriticism, ecofeminism, and Monster Studies and highlight their challenge to the anthropocentric and androcentric viewpoints, aimed at liberating all minorities from oppression.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, ecofeminism, Monster Studies, androcentrism, nature, women, Tokarczuk

**Context**

Over the past two decades, the severe repercussions of environmental destruction deriving from the exploitation of wildlife have not gone unnoticed. Instead, the urgency of the resulting ecological imbalance has strongly encouraged critical

reflections, which seem to have occupied the imagination of different cultures and, in particular, all kinds of artistic productions more and more extensively. My study pertains to the Western literary scenario which has been no exception since it has gradually been filled with ecological concerns explored in the so-called “ecofiction”, a genre dealing with “environmental issues or the relation between humanity and the physical environment, that contrasts traditional and industrial cosmologies, or in which nature or the land has a prominent role” (Dwyer 2). These environmental anxieties have been primarily identified in Anglophone literature as demonstrated by popular novels, like Bruce Sterling’s *Heavy Weather* (1994), Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003), Kim Stanley Robinson’s trilogy *Science in the Capital* (2004-2007), Jeff VanderMeer’s *Annihilation* (2014), and many others (Malvestio 26). The stories narrated are inhabited by characters impersonated primarily by the minorities of the patriarchal society, such as women, animals, and natural elements, that is to say, the direct victims involved in the subjugation of nature and the historically primary opponents to their oppression. The innovation brought by these groundbreaking protagonists consists in overturning the classical dynamics of predation belonging to the traditional and patriarchal stereotypes. The morally upstanding and powerful man triumphing over wild beasts and conquering the natural world (and, usually, woman as well) becomes the casualty of climate dissolutions, like in Robinson’s trilogy, or of mysterious natural creatures which, in VanderMeer’s novel for instance, threaten human’s survival, placed, at last, in the hands of a woman (Buell, “Ecocriticism” 97-105). In these new narratives, the leading male figure is often substituted by a female character, an unusual heroic oppressor, who, needless of being saved nor conquered, seems to ally with natural elements to seek revenge for the mistreatment inflicted by men (Doyle 9-36). This paper aims at shedding light, amongst others, on the Polish literary scene and, in particular, on some of the works of the winner of the Noble Prize for Literature (2018) Olga Tokarczuk. The writer seems to reiterate the representation of what can be defined as the “transgressive type”, a revolutionary and radical prototypical character recurring in many of her works, which is typically embodied by a woman having an intimate connection with nature. Her narrative appears to follow the patterns of ecofiction as the “transgressive types” combat men’s exploitation of the natural world while fostering a closer human-nature relationship. After outlining the new theoretical backgrounds

in which the writer's rebellious figures can be framed and described, I will briefly analyze their innovative and "dangerous" power taking as examples some of her short stories from the collections *Gra na wielu bębenkach* (Playing on Many Drums, 2001), *Opowiadania bizardne* (Bizarre Stories, 2018), and novels, such as *Primeval and Other Times* (1996) and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* (2009).

### **The theoretical background**

The transgression of this new heroine is a significant element encompassed in a bigger picture composed of threatening ecological crisis and protagonists like beasts, natural calamities, and rebellious women identified with a relevant frequency by several scholars in Western literature from about the mid-XX century and especially in the last two decades of the XXI century. As Rowland Hughes and Pat Wheeler noticed in one of the earliest and most meaningful records of these ecological literary trends, a massive presence of ecological themes seemed to unfold inevitably through the gloomy filters of dystopian realities. As a result, "Climate change is most commonly, and most forcefully, communicated in the language of disaster, which seems to provide the most compelling and persuasive means of persuading its audience" (Hughes, Wheeler 2). Along the same lines, the representation of hostile and disastrous atmospheres in literature has been labeled by Francesco Muzzioli (2021) as "writings of catastrophe". These catastrophic motives are identified and analyzed also by Katarzyna Kowalewska (2020), who observes an increasing presence of novels, short stories, movies, and TV series belonging to the Western culture, released more and more frequently in the last twenty years, and combining natural, feminist, and monstrous elements. Kowalewska refers to these original "ecological genres" by the names of "natural horrors", "ecological thrillers", and "eco-futuristic novels", new kinds of writings probably originating in the pioneering trend of "ecopoetry", developed during the 90s in the English-speaking countries and later spread in other Western cultures, which seems to have influenced prose production in the first place (Fiedorczuk, *Cyborg* 188-199). The systematic presence of natural and feminist elements assumed aspects of actual trends, which can be identified as the reflection of a general paradigm shift occurring in a number of literary works marked by dark atmospheres, dystopian scenarios, as well as rebellious characters with specific and recurring features.

The *fil rouge* running through all these literary personas is the call for rebellion to which they respond opposing resolutely to anthropocentrism and androcentrism being, not accidentally, at the basis of the Western culture grounded on patriarchal thinking. These new characters challenge all kinds of stereotypes in their same essence, reversing what has always been the model, the male hero fighting to conquer the natural world and create a controlled and ordered civilization, of which he was supposed to be in chief. All minorities and marginalized living beings are now at the center of attention and become the protagonists of a new literature. A major part of these characters is embodied by female figures — clearly in sharp contrast to the male ones — who are usually allied with natural elements and beings, like plants or animals. The fact that these two oppressed groups become the new points of reference reinforces their undermining of the dynamics of domination inherited by patriarchal thinking because they cease to be the victims and develop into the new heroic persecutors. Their transgression against both anthropocentrism and androcentrism is motivated by the fact that these two perspectives have historically devalued precisely what is associated with “women, emotions, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind” (Gaard 5). For this reason, features like violence and emotional distance embodied by these rebellious figures appear particularly dangerous and unsettling because they do not normally relate to women. However, in a number of cases, these terrifying heroines seem to take advantage of their stereotyped characteristics, such as their nurturing and caring functions, which, through an act of re-appropriation, are fulfilled towards nature to break the boundaries of patriarchy and propose an alternative, anti-hierarchical, and inclusive society (Mellor 50-81).

The rise of narratives generally referred to as “ecological fiction” or “ecofiction” seems to reflect the significant impact that the environment and its inhabitants have had in the challenge of power dynamics of the anthropocentric society. These new literary manifestations can be framed in the interdisciplinary field of study of ecocriticism developed in the 1990s, which explores the relationship among humans and nonhumans in literary works: in particular, its representatives’ aim is to highlight and value the subjectivity of natural creatures, offer critical instruments to address the nature-culture dualism, and contribute to the ways we deal with the environmental crisis. The final purpose of this theoretical orientation is

to dismantle anthropocentrism, which, placing human beings at the center of the world, consequently devalues all other natural living beings recognized as inferior and, therefore, exploitable for men's means, as if they were "goods" and lifeless "things" at humans' service. In contrast to these ideas, ecocriticism introduces an "ecocentric" or "biocentric" perspective, which reverses the anthropocentric one in order to restore a more balanced and close relationship between mankind and nature (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 1-6). To attain this goal many scholars believe it is necessary to fight the discrimination of nature, which takes the name of "speciesism", defined as a sort of "prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one's own species and against those of members of other species" (Singer 35). In this sense, Hubert Zapf (2016) argues that literature can function as a tool of education that could eliminate all kinds of prejudices and establish a new and sustainable order of things, in which plants and animals are safeguarded.

In this respect, feminist thinking seems to have heavily contributed to the development of new ecological trends in culture, since these transgressive characters are embodied mainly by female figures having the purpose of belying the presumed superiority of male individuals sustained by the patriarchal society, where a woman, despite being "a free autonomous being like all human creatures — nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other" (De Beauvoir 27). In particular, considering her alliance with the natural world, it is ecofeminism, amongst the others, the theoretical field, where this new prototype can be framed and analyzed since it combines both feminism and political ecology. The term "ecofeminism", first introduced by the feminist Françoise D'Eaubonne in 1974, was used to indicate a historical, experiential, symbolic, and theoretical connection between the discrimination of women and the exploitation of nature, whose interrelation has been further demonstrated by specific strategies of oppression, such as the "animalization" of women and "sexualization" of animals, where these two minorities overlap. According to Karen Warren, both women and nature are subdued to the so-called "logic of domination" or "logic of colonization" which must be dismantled precisely by women, since animals and plants are defenseless (*Ecofeminist Philosophy* 24-5). Apparently, at the root of patriarchy and male domination lies the purported "womb envy", that is the jealousy of the female ability to give birth. Because of this reproductive power, men feel threatened by these

women's natural capability because they perceive to have a marginal role in the birth process on the whole, not to mention their consequent sense of disqualification and impotence typically censured by patriarchal society. In light of these considerations, ecofeminism seems to assemble the priorities of feminism and ecological movements, which, according to Warren, should be joint to make the fight against both anthropocentrism and androcentrism complete and efficient.

Women's and nature's revolt could not be considered anything but a monstrous transgression. According to Jeffrey Cohen, monstrosity is usually determined by deviation from the norm established by the fixed and perpetuated stereotypes of patriarchy. Not only beasts, ecological disasters, and hybrid creatures are dangerous and threatening, but also those women who break taboos and appear or behave differently from what is expected from them in society: "I argue that the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other known only through process and movement, never through dissection-table analysis" (x). The innovation lies precisely in the fact that in the last twenty years, more and more of these figures taking the center of the literary stage are represented as "good monsters" fighting for just causes. Within the Monster Studies field particular attention has been devoted to the female evil characters, quite extraordinary prototypes, since, as the scholar Barbara Creed affirms they do not seem to be very popular:

Although a great deal has been written about the horror film, very little of that work has discussed the representation of woman-as-monster. Instead, emphasis has been on woman as victim of the (mainly male) monster. [...] All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject (1).

According to Creed (1993) and, more recently, to Sady Doyle (2019), a series of traditional female monsters appear predominantly in Western cultures, like the castrating mother, the vampire, the witch, the dead girl, the demon daughter, the old deceiver, the old psychopath, and others. In most male fiction, these monstrous creatures are usually defeated eventually because men have to show that they are in control and can successfully restore order in society. In light of these considerations, the fact that women are not common in the role of monsters is particularly

interesting because it seems to reveal the deep and hidden male fears of being defeated and dominated by women.

The “disaster heroine” identified by Cynthia Belmont (2007) clearly shows her solidarity with the natural world against patriarchy. The latter is linked to the threatening charge of environmental disasters, a phenomenon in which nature becomes dangerous because it seems to “wreak revenge” on men, who are the ones to blame for the dramatic consequences of its exploitation due to their need for conquest. Belmont refers to this compulsion for domination as a “plague of culture” which will inevitably lead toward “the doom of civilization, and the Earth if we continue on our current exploitative path” (349). As far as women are concerned, what strikes more fear is the rejection of the female stereotype produced by patriarchy: instead of being meek and passive, they are “capable, intelligent and employed” (350). The “natural disaster heroine” prototype reveals an authoritarian attitude as a demonstration of strength comparable to that of nature and, most importantly, superior even to that of men. As a consequence of their personal, material, and social empowerment — even though it is ephemeral — women create chaos in the patriarchal world because they challenge its values, but in Belmont’s examples of literary works and movies, they are still doomed to failure as a punishment for their transgression.

In the realm of Polish literature, there are a few examples that showcase the trend of the “transgressive” prototype, albeit partially. Among the forerunners of ecological writing and, particularly, of ecopoetry, we can mention popular poets like Małgorzata Lebda or Julia Fiedorczuk to whom our attention can be drawn. In some of the latter’s prose works, the new transgressive character seems to emerge, even though the author does not display it systematically. By way of illustration, in her collection *Bliskie kraje* (*Close Countries*, 2016), the short story *Medulla* can be considered one of the most meaningful examples: the female protagonist Leda is presented as a weird- and unusual-looking girl with leaves and blades of grass in her hair. Her transgression lies in the planting of ivy in her house which overgrows trespassing the borders of her neighbors’ apartments, an event which becomes quite a case and is also reported in the local newspaper with an article entitled “Plants are attacking” marking the threatening sense of invasion that human beings feel when nature is not under their control.

**Monstrous-feminine and nature combined: the “transgressive type”**

In Olga Tokarczuk’s works the “transgressive type” is readily discernible, since the author consistently depicts characters who defy and oppose the distorting lens of patriarchy through which women and nature are viewed. Her overall curiosity in challenging societal stigmas, taboos, and prejudices surrounding women and nature can be evinced in many of her books. She has openly expressed her artistic interests in her collection of essays *Moment niedźwiedzia* (*The Time of the Bear*, 2012) and, in particular, in *Maski zwierząt* (*Masks of Animals*) in which she delves into the roots of the anthropocentric thinking dating back even to pre-Socratic era. In this text, she firmly rejects this perspective and suggests a new set of values aiming at respecting all living beings, whether human or nonhuman. The author also emphasizes the necessity of their deep connection, and advocates for empathy as the most important quality. This manifestation of solidarity and care is not lost in the “transgressive type” but is only directed towards nature while male figures embodying patriarchal stereotypes are persecuted to highlight the author’s opposition to androcentrism regarding men as superior to other living beings. I argue that in Olga Tokarczuk’s novels and short stories, the monstrosity of the new heroine appears to derive from two distinct aspects: first, the woman’s physical appearance, and second, her behavior. The writer seems to represent and re-use these features in numerous pieces of her writing: just to mention an example, in the tale of Saint Kummernis in *House of Day, House of Night* (1998), she recounts the famous story of the ‘bearded Saint’, whose visage has been miraculously transformed into that of a man while retaining her feminine physique, a circumstance which could be interpreted as a depiction of a transgender identity. The changes occurring in bodies are also the main components of the short stories *The Ugliest Woman in the World* from the collection *Gra na wielu bębenkach* (*Playing on Many Drums*, 2001) and *Tranfugium* from *Opowiadania bizardne* (*Bizarre Stories*, 2018).

In the first tale, the protagonist is portrayed as an ugly woman who works in a circus because of her ape-like body, which is consciously used by the ringmaster to attract the audience’s attention. Her mild and kind character is completely hidden by the repulsiveness of her aspect which, according to the crowd, is terrifying and resembles more an animal than a human being:

She had a large head covered in growths and lumps. Her small, ever-tearing eyes were set close under her low, furrowed brow. From a distance they looked like narrow chinks. Her nose looked as if it was broken in many places, and its tip was a livid blue, covered in sparse bristles. Her mouth was huge and swollen, always hanging open, always wet, with some sharply pointed teeth inside it. To top it all off, as if that wasn't enough, her face sprouted long, straggling, silken hairs. The first time he saw her she emerged from behind the cardboard scenery of a traveling circus to show herself to the audience. A cry of surprise and disgust went rolling over the heads of the crowd and fell at her feet (*The Ugliest Woman* 134).

Despite her disturbing appearance, she eventually gets married to a man who makes her believe he is in love with her, while he is determined to take profit off her horrific body and make a fortune out of her “abnormality.” Her physical hybridity is considered an abnormal element for a two-fold motivation. Firstly, the woman does not fit into the standard female figure promulgated by patriarchal society because her physical appearance prevents her from being the “object of desire” of men: being rejected by the male gaze is a sign of disregard toward the female traditional role of pleasing men's desires. Secondly, she breaks the taboo of hybridity and crosses the borders between humankind and nature, destabilizing the hierarchical order of Western society, and rejecting the idea of humans as superior to all other living creatures. Further add other elements of transgression because, later in the story, she gets pregnant and finally gives birth to a female child-animal, who appears to look just like her:

She gave birth in the night, without any fuss, quietly, like an animal. The midwife only came to cut the umbilical cord. He gave her a wad of bills to make sure she didn't spread any stories too early. His heart thumping, he lit all the lamps at once, to be able to give the thing a close inspection. The child was horrible, even worse than the mother. He had to close his eyes to keep from retching. Only much later did he satisfy himself that the newborn child was a girl, as the mother had proclaimed (143).

The woman's husband is so shocked by the news that he runs away from home and drinks daily to anesthetize his feelings of abhorrence, but then recovers to organize tours all around the world to show people the two “mutants” and make a profit out of his misfortune. Unfortunately, after a widespread epidemic of Spanish flu, both

mother and daughter fall ill and, shortly after, die. On the verge of madness, the husband calls a professor and eventually sells the wife and daughter's bodies to him for research purposes, which marks the defeat of the "ugliest woman in the world", overpowered by patriarchal society: "Afterward the professor handed him a piece of paper and the widower signed it with his right hand, taking the money with his left. But that same day, before vanishing into the port, he helped the professor to transport the bodies by carriage to the university clinic, where soon after they were secretly stuffed" (145).

The protagonist of the second tale *Transfugium* is Renata, a woman who wants to radically change her life, and therefore goes to a special and futuristic clinic named Transfugium to be transformed into a wolf. This specific title appears particularly relevant because of the plot: the word comes from the Latin *transfuga*, meaning "deserter", which might either be an ironical reference to the woman's 'betrayal' of patriarchal expectations, or it might indicate someone who abandons their own convictions to move to new or even opposite ideas. Again, the crossing of species boundaries does not fulfill patriarchal expectations not only concerning the protagonist, whose physical aspect undermines the process of female objectification. The same idea of interconnectedness at the basis of an ecocentric perspective implies equality among all living creatures and inevitably denies men's superiority. As explained by Professor Choi, the doctor responsible for Renata's transformation, there is no qualitative difference among the species because, in an evolutionary sense, human beings have previously been different kinds of animals and elements of nature. "Transfugacja" – the word used by the doctor to indicate the process of metamorphosis – is precisely intended to highlight similarities among the species, as he states:

Metamorphosis was never based on mechanical differences. The same is with 'transfugacja'. It accentuates similarities. In an evolutionary sense, we are chimpanzees, hedgehogs, and larches, we have all that within us. At any time we can reach that out. We can't be separated from that by gaps to come. We're separated from each other only by fugues, little gaps of being. *Unus mundus*. The world is one (*Opowiadania* 64)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> "Metamorfozy nigdy nie zasadzały się na mechanicznych różnicach. Tak samo jest z transfugacją: ona akcentuje podobieństwa. W sensie ewolucyjnym wciąż wszyscy jesteśmy szympancami, jeżami i modrzewiami, mamy to wszystko w sobie. W każdej chwili możemy po to sięgnąć. Nie dzieli nas od

This means that all Earth's inhabitants are interrelated and must cooperate to survive on the same planet. The dangerous transgression of the character lies precisely in the revolt against the idea of the superiority of humankind declared by anthropocentrism, which also brings dissatisfaction with the incarnation of the female stereotype.

In the other works by Tokarczuk, the challenge of patriarchy can be seen mainly in women's behavior and attitude, as in the novels *Primeval and Other Times* and *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. In the former, the main "transgressive type" is embodied by Cornspike, whose curious name derives from her habit of eating ears of corn. She is an outcast disapproved by society because she breaks social taboos concerning sexuality and manners: she lives in the woods, walks barefoot, and has loose morals. Because of her deep connection with nature, she can be compared to the prototype of the "witch," a kind of monster traditionally evoked to identify transgressive women, historically linked to nature. In addition to this, menstruation, lactation, and in general female power of giving birth were considered manifestations of witchcraft, precisely because they could not be controlled by men. In this sense, Cornspike is particularly monstrous because she manages to give birth to her daughter alone without other people's help and, moreover, she conceives her with an anthropomorphized plant:

"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 (*Primeval* 133-4).

As a "witch", she decides to live in the woods, in a liminal space away from the village, choosing the natural environment over the cultural, another unsettling characteristic according to patriarchal society because it proves an unusually close relationship with nature, a world out of men's control. Not only does she live in a cottage far from the "civilized" society but she also cohabits with different animals, in

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tego jakieś przepaści nie do przebycia. Oddzielają nas od siebie zaledwie fugi, drobne szczeliny bytu. *Unus mundus. Świat jest jeden*" (My translation).

particular with a snake, an owl, and a kite. The choice of these animals is not casual, it underlines her connection with the figure of the witch, especially in a scene when she wanders in the woods to collect herbs with the snake around her neck. Not by chance, the priest of the village accuses her of sorcery:

One day Cornspike went through the meadows to pick herbs by the River with the snake around her neck. There she ran into the parish priest. The priest saw them and recoiled in terror. “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’ (130).

Her friendship with the snake is particularly meaningful because the animal traditionally reminds him of the Devil, who — according to popular beliefs — is also the lover of witches: as a result of their intercourses, women could obtain magical powers. The transgression of the character is further reinforced by her reaction to the priest’s accusations; she is not intimidated, as the man would expect, but she provokes him showing arrogance and self-confidence: “Cornspike burst out laughing and raised her skirt, showing her naked underbelly” (130). Her cocky behavior appears quite radical, also when she has sexual relationships with men of the village and she demands to be treated as equal, a request that seems to unsettle them: “The men who took Cornspike in the bushes always felt uneasy afterwards. 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” (25). Her attitude appears particularly threatening and transgressive because male characters seem to be dethroned from their roles of masters, which they usually adopt also in the sexual sphere, where women are considered as objects functional to men’s desires.

Likewise, Janina, the protagonist of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, seems to embody the “transgressive type” mainly as a result of her brutal actions. She is an old woman living in a quiet village, who acknowledges the superiority of natural forces: she deeply respects and is willing to understand them, that is why she practices astrology, convinced that the future of all human beings is

written in the stars. On many occasions, she asks people their birthdates, so that she can calculate and extrapolate details about their future:

In giving me their date of birth, people are actually revealing their real name to me, they're showing me their celestial date-stamp, opening their past and future to me. [...] But what really matters is the time of birth. That's not recorded in the documents, and yet it's the time that's the real key to a Person. A Horoscope without the exact time is fairly worthless – we know WHAT, but we don't know HOW and WHERE. [...] In a natal Horoscope the date of birth determines the date of death as well. That's obvious – anyone who has been born is going to die (*Drive Your Plow* 256-8).

This field of knowledge is particularly “monstrous” because it recognizes the superiority of nature while leaving no chance for control to men, whose lives are quite precarious: they do not seem to be in charge of their fate, which has already been established, a fact that they cannot avoid and must eventually accept. The sensation of complete disorientation and uncertainty is not tolerable for a patriarchal society: not only are men not the masters of the world, but they are neither in chief of their existence. Furthermore, this awareness is brought to light by a woman, who, like a witch, is able to read and understand the cosmos decoding the messages and predictions of the celestial bodies. Apart from having deep faith in nature, Janina is resolved to protect it by any means: after discovering the remains of her little dogs and the carcasses of other hunted animals, she decides to punish the hunters and murders them to seek revenge for their horrible actions aimed at exploiting nature. Her choice is particularly transgressive not only because she becomes a murderer, but because she is a woman, who subverts the patriarchal power relations between the genders becoming a threat to men. What appears more shocking is her determination and her emotional distance when planning the homicides and directly assaulting the hunters, which is a particularly disturbing image, especially since she is an old woman. In different passages, she appears strong and violent, therefore dangerous in the men's eyes. One of the most meaningful examples is when, one day, she overhears gunshots in the forest: on that occasion, she drives in her car named “Samurai” in the woods – a significant nickname associated with images of fighting – and sees hunters going after animals. She desperately tries to stop them, but she is inevitably walked away by the men. She is so determined to protect the animals, that she aggressively pushes the hunters back without being afraid of contrasting them:

At that point I felt a surge of Anger, genuine, not to say Divine Anger. It flooded me from inside in a burning hot wave. This energy made me feel great, as if it were lifting me off the ground, a mini Big Bang within the universe of my body. There was fire burning within me, like a neutron star. I sprang forward and pushed the Man in the silly hat so hard that he fell onto the snow, completely taken by surprise. And when Moustachio rushed to his aid, I attacked him too, hitting him on the shoulder with all my might. He groaned with pain. I am not a feeble girl. ‘Hey, hey, woman, is that the way to behave?’ His mouth was twisted in pain as he tried to catch me by the hands (145-6).

Both the strong emotions and the violent actions of the woman contribute to making her look dangerous and threatening from a patriarchal point of view: the boundaries defining what is manly and what is womanly get blurred when, instead of her biological maternal role characterized by traditional caring functions, Janina does not conform to the gender stereotypes behaving like an aggressive man. Besides, she declares to the police officers that the assassinations are carried out by the animals themselves, which seek revenge against their murderers. Even though she knows that it is not true, she firmly believes that she was chosen by animals to kill their persecutors highlighting the “monstrosity” of her tight connection with nature:

They chose me from among others – maybe because I don’t eat meat and they can sense it – to continue to act in their Name. They appeared before me, like the Stag to Saint Hubert, to have me become the punitive hand of justice, in secret. Not just for the Deer, but for other Animals too. For they have no voice in parliament. They even gave me a Weapon, a very clever one (545).

Her empathy towards animals (and not humans) is further demonized and represented as a sign of madness — typically associated with women — because she confuses the patriarchal hierarchical order of beings proposing a new one characterized by an equal consideration of all living creatures (human and nonhuman) which are inherently connected.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in various artistic and cultural fields, patriarchy has now become an unbearable burden: sentiments of intolerance and vengeance towards the oppression

perpetrated against minorities are progressively arousing and leaving space for other protagonists, other battles, and other voices, which had been historically silenced. An innovative trend has emerged, showing the uncontrollable and subversive power of women and nature to fight back and seek revenge against men's maltreatment and exploitation, in order to establish a new set of values in society, based on the connection with other living beings, environmental protection, empathy, acceptance of diversity, and freedom from patriarchal stereotypes. In the Polish field, Olga Tokarczuk can be considered one of the most popular representatives of this change, who seems to adhere to this new sensibility sticking to the famous statement of the feminist Audre Lorde: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (43). Lorde thought that all persecuted beings had to demolish conventional models and values imposed by patriarchy throughout time to end all kinds of discrimination, a purpose that can be fulfilled either by becoming new models and points of reference for the marginalized ones or by provocatively subverting the traditional roles of oppressors and oppressed. In this respect, Tokarczuk has represented a counter-stereotype, that is the "transgressive type", embodied by disturbing rebellious women allied with natural elements, who, disowning the female prototype, can effectively destabilize the "house" of patriarchy by transforming themselves into calamities, beasts, or men.

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