

# Fear of unjust memory or desire for secure identity?

## Remembering the era of 1989 transition in contemporary Polish novel

*Olga Szmidt*

Jagiellonian University

ORCID ID: 0000-0002-6190-309X

Contemporary Polish novel explores the memory about the era of 1989 transition not only in various poetics, but also in a contradictory way. The end of the Communist regime – the peaceful process of national transition into democratic and capitalist society, initiated by the ‘Solidarity’ movement<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Solidarity’ (full name: Independent Self-Governing Labour Union ‘Solidarity’) is a Polish trade union which initiated the non-violent revolution and the final political and economic transition of 1989. ‘Solidarity’ was a mass movement with approximately 10 million members in 1981. The most

– is undoubtedly the most crucial and founding event for contemporary Polish identity at its many levels: political, historical, and cultural. This variety of perspectives applies to ideology, visions of history, and national heroes as well as the definition of social justice. Contemporary novel does not necessarily share the point of view of previous historical, political, and also fictional narratives about this period. The era of 1989 transition is perceived as an equally ambivalent period. One could say that it raises dilemmas about the Polish People's Republic as well as about liberal society of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The questions about the meaning of this social, economic, and political change have not been answered until today. The generation born in the 1980's and in the early 1990's takes part in this discussion in a surprisingly active way. Moreover, Polish artists and writers use the nostalgic wave in international popular culture to question, investigate and reconsider national experience. There is no doubt that the American or Western European nostalgia for the 90s is significantly different from its Central-Eastern European version. What is described as satiation of postmodernist culture as well as of late capitalist societies in Poland should also be considered as a colorful novelty, something awaited for a long time (Klein 2017, 6). The era of transition promises a long-awaited change, the advent of what was previously unattainable. At the same time, this revolution can be seen as a source of hidden fear of liberal and capitalist utopia. Lack of stability or unusual shift in framing of national identity are among the symptoms of more complex, transnational processes.

The younger generation of authors faces social and aesthetic challenges of the transition. Their personal memory of this period

---

prominent leader and co-founder of the 'Solidarity' movement was Lech Wałęsa, who worked in the Gdańsk Shipyard as an electrician. Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983.

can sometimes be blurred or mediated by culture, but social imaginary seems to be rather vivid. The authors show interest in overlooked groups, but their paradoxical literary portraits carry more general observation of contemporary Poland and the country's most recent history. I would like to analyze three novels, in which the main characters are rather unknown to earlier Polish fiction. There are, for example, sadomasochistic transgender old men, poor matriarchal families living in Warsaw, or little girls who grow up in Silesian apartment blocks. The choice and depiction of the characters is probably the most recognizable change in the contemporary novels focused on the people's history of the transition and the period soon after 1989. For this purpose, I analyze a drama by Dorota Masłowska *Między nami dobrze jest* (We're All Good, no English translation, originally published in Polish in 2008), a novel by Michał Witkowski *Lovetown* (English translation by William Martin published in 2010; originally published in Polish in 2004 under the title of *Lubiewo*), and another novel by Dominika Słowik *Atlas: Doppelgänger* (no English translation, originally published in Polish in 2015). These three literary pieces are examples of literature published between 2004 and 2015 by authors born between 1975 and 1988. I chose them carefully from a larger group of writers of this trend due to the complexity and exemplarity of their works. I argue therefore that new Polish prose allows us to reconsider the national fear of unjust memory. It addresses multiple topics and perspectives such as the representation of people's struggle during the Communist regime. In particular, it concerns the choice or depiction of characters, omission of minorities and underprivileged groups while projecting the 'brave new world'. To bring forward an extreme example: the Polish right proposes the idea of re-writing the most recent Polish history in order to deprive Lech Wałęsa of his role as the leader of 'Solidarity' and

the position of the national hero. Consequently, he would be depicted rather as a coward and a traitor. But the idea of unjust memory does not have to produce radical historical and political examples to serve its goal. It is enough that it plays with the era of transition itself, memory of it and marginalized perspectives. The people's experience (represented in culture and expressed in the public debate) of the early stages of capitalism and the process of normalization can be seen as an act of oppression and unethical othering. Therefore 'just' memory is inclusive and varied, built on experience and social, economic and gender diversity. The above-mentioned fear of 'unjust' memory equals, in fact, the fear of social abandonment and the loss of identity in favor of recurrent uniformization. For younger writers, the process of exploring the idea of new forms of identity is not necessarily based on affirmative vision of nationality, religion (that is, Catholicism) and heterosexual masculinity.

Although Central-Eastern European intellectuals and opposition fighters are also represented in the works of fiction, these works seem not to challenge steady Polish imaginary. In contrast, I would like to focus on this kind of prose, which redefines, experiments, and questions national history, national norms of identity, and social roles. To put it another way, I would like to reconsider Polish contemporary novel not only as an act of criticism, but also as a part of the process of recreating the era of transition. In fact, influential poets and writers such as Czesław Miłosz (Nobel Prize in Literature in 1980), Zbigniew Herbert, or Tadeusz Konwicki would not find a common ground with the young generation of authors as to the visions of memory, national imaginary of the transition, or even the historical meaning of The Polish People's Republic. It can be safely assumed that the reason for these contradictions and discrepancies lies in the generation gap and significantly divergent experiences of the

Communist regime that these writers had. The above-mentioned authors survived the entire time of the Polish People's Republic, including the dark period of Stalinism. Even if they lived abroad for some periods like Miłosz, their perspective was deeply critical and often based on personal suffering; moreover, it mirrored the experience of painful lack of artistic freedom.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that every form of artistic expression in this period was of a serious tone, expressing primarily moral concern. The criticism of the Communist regime found humorous and absurd forms especially in cinema. Stanisław Bareja, Marek Piwowski and other comedy directors presented highly influential portraits of Communist officials as well as of the whole socio-political system. Series of parodies, absurd jokes, unbelievable plots, and familiar characters (often turning into caricatures) are the most recognizable features of their movies. From this point of view, Poland of this period is also far from utopia, but it seems to be quirky and quaint rather than frightening. The Communist system, even if disappointing or tiring, seemed to be at least familiar, well-known, and somehow close to the people. Normativity of the current system in terms of identity formation seems familiar and possible to be overcome. Meanwhile, the normativity of the new system (presented as a promise of freedom) seems much more difficult to define. It can be even more difficult to see the limitations of new normalization, new freedom and, at the same time, new rules of exclusion.

## Norms and normalization after 1989 in Polish society and culture

Eventually, cultural and social innocence were not long-lasting due to national conflicts and ideological discussion about the

new Polish identity and evaluation of contemporary history. At the same time, with the deep economic reforms proposed by Leszek Balcerowicz, a sense of social injustice grew among underprivileged groups, especially among the former workers of State Agricultural Farms.<sup>2</sup> It has to be pointed out, however, that new problems such as unemployment, lack of social security, and new forms of democratic participation (i.e. freedom of speech, elections, political campaigns, influence of international institutions) were the most obvious, but not the most troubling in the long run. Permanent internal conflict pertaining to ideological fundamentals of the country can be internationally recognized up to this day. The clash between right-wingers and liberal democrats excludes other perspectives and pushes them to the margins. The false symmetry is one problem; the other is small social visibility of minorities and underprivileged groups, characterized by separate discourses. While neglected by public and political sphere, people unheard and people unseen found their representations in contemporary fiction. Obviously, non-fiction writers and directors of documentary films have paid attention to these groups and individuals for a long time. Even though former workers of State Agricultural Farms had the chance to share their experience in movies by Irena Kamieńska or Joanna Warecha, that kind of deep social change required artistic experiments to elicit complexity of the social transformation. Magda Szcześniak points out:

The only possible hero of the Polish transition is a “normal” man. What is at stake is the implementation

---

<sup>2</sup> State Agricultural Farms were created in the late 1940's and existed until the fall of the People's Republic of Poland. The closing of the SAF (PGR in Polish) brought about a social and economic change, which was drastic especially for its workers and resulted in unemployment, social marginalization, poverty, or even hunger in extreme cases.

of the standard (black) as opposed to various non-normative behavior: nouveau riche's excesses and sexual diversity (white and other colors worn on the feet). It turns out, however, that being normal, understood as a kind of visual transparency, requires in fact constant attention and considerable effort. ... Another dimension of the concept of normality refers to the relationship between the state and citizens. Repeated in the press and colloquial statements, the desire for a normal state is connected with the need to stabilize the chaotic institutional changes and the transition of power. Western European countries become the pattern of normal relations. ... Normality in the culture of transition is understood not as the surrounding reality (norm equals everyday life), but as a state that has yet to be achieved, the goal of endeavor. (Szcześniak 2016, 14–23)<sup>3</sup>

The terms 'norm' or 'normalization' are crucial for understanding Polish ambitions accompanied by the common feeling of shame. Norm is seen as an object of desire or even an ideal position. Due to this point of view, Polish culture and society are seen as possibly excluded from European culture as something dirty, chaotic and impetuous. In spite of this observation, Polish society has to achieve or even grow up to universal standards by abandoning peripheral identity and shameful taste. This type of national distinction, to reframe Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) term, is co-created by the ideology of transition. Everything that was internal and familiar has to be not only hidden, but most of all surpassed. Polish national identity seems like a burden that drags the country to the bottom. In this case, Dorota Masłowska creates

---

<sup>3</sup> All quoted fragments, originally written in Polish, are translated by me. The only exceptions are paragraphs from Michał Witkowski's book *Lovetown*, which has been translated and published also in English.

self-ironic monologue which re-uses internally contradictory Polish dreams of being European and at the same time develops a new Sarmatian identity:

LITTLE METAL GIRL: ... I have decided a long time ago that I am no longer a Pole, just a European. I've learned Polish from CDs and tapes, which were left by a Polish cleaning lady. We are not Poles, just Europeans, normal people! This is not my mother, this is our private saleswoman from Tesco. She carries Tesco on a forklift to our house, and we only show what we don't want and she carries it back. How she slides on the turns! This is not our neighbor, this is our private leaflet distributor. She is so fat that we keep her in the house, she won't sneak up to normal people in front of their eyes. She brings an underpass to us, and she gives leaflets here, she doesn't take them instead of us and she throws it away behind the first turn. And here is not my grandma, here is our cleaning lady. She is so old and transparent because she came on this wheelchair directly from Ukraine. We're all good! We're all good! We are no longer Poles, just normal people! We came to Poland from Europe for bio and real good potatoes from real soil, not those watery ones from Tesco, and we've learned Polish from CDs and tapes. (Masłowska 2015, 68–69.)

The new nomenclature (cleaning lady, private saleswoman, leaflet distributor) shows not only the artificiality of language, but also the incompatibility between characters' lifestyle and public discourse. While their life and jobs are demanding and socially underestimated, the new language of liberal society creates a gap between experience and expression. Przemysław Czapliński calls this literary strategy 'decycling' in contrast with 'recycling':



Recycling mental equivalent, but also primary product is a picture of closed circuit of symbols and things, where products turn into trash, while trash turns back into products. Due to this illusion of full circulation, in which dumpsite can be a part of the process of production, secondary products hide their trashy origin. ... Decycling as an artistic practice does not find a rapid exit from this circulation, neither it discovers any marvelous source of original and uncontaminated primary products. In this sense it belongs to the same culture of disordered circulation of preserves in which we are being immersed by capitalism. It is, however, different from re-usage practice by not hiding traces of its trashy origin, and it is also unpredictable. (Czapliński 2011, 9.)

Czapliński claims that the literary practice of 'decycling' stimulates development and progress of social and individual consciousness. As a result, it would be less autonomic and more fluid. No clear boundaries between texts allow us to think about literature and communication as a whole. The author also explores the idea that this perspective paradoxically favors forms which are 'weak, forbidden or defective' (Czapliński 2011, 10). Masłowska's drama effectively uses this aesthetic and ideological strategy. Traditional relationships between family members and neighbors are corrupted by their own language. Nevertheless, the new forms of language do not hide its origins or national roots. Its usage is therefore connected with family's aspirations and shame. Everything what is familiar has to be re-named to be modern and adequate. While the aesthetics and poetics of Masłowska's literature can be effectively described as postmodern, the society's ambitions and the process of normalization of the characters' lives should be labelled as

‘modern’ and ‘modernization’. Their separation from the new nomenclature is at the same time a separation from the shameful identity in the name of progress and standards of modern (in contrast with backward and provincial) society. The desire to be European equals the desire to be normal. Polish, as well as Polish identity, loses its value of something transparent and stable.

## Language of the transition

Discussing Polish complex identity during a period of change brings also the topic of the new language and its unusual forms. It is worth mentioning that the interpretation of Masłowska’s creative language finds unpredictable directions. For instance, Dorota Dąbrowska rejects the idea that *Między nami dobrze jest* criticizes Polish identity and national ideology. Her interpretation can be found controversial or wishful, but she rightly recognizes Masłowska’s focus on devaluing the narrative:

Although *Między nami dobrze jest* is full of grotesque and mockery, it bends towards the opposite extreme. It offers a perspective of overcoming the negation of Polishness as something imagined and aggravating with phantasms into its positive value. The point of criticism represented in the drama is directed precisely against devaluing narratives, it is intended to reveal their simplifying character. (Dąbrowska 2015, 90.)

Therefore, Masłowska’s characters’ fear of being left behind seems to be deeply connected with their fear of not being able to modernize themselves and their identity. The transition offers a new identity that is directly focused on the normalized Europe (or to be precise: the idea of normalized Western Europe). The

architects of the transition expect people – in a Faustian manner – to be unconditionally ready for a change and, moreover, to make place for modernity and progress. Marshall Berman suggests that:

Here the tragic dilemmas that Goethe defines have remained urgently in force. It has turned out – and Goethe could have predicted it – that under the pressures of the modern world economy the process of development must itself go through perpetual development. Where it does, all people, things, institutions and environments that are innovative and avant-garde at one historical moment will become backward and obsolescent in the next. Even in the most highly developed parts of the world, all individuals, groups and communities are under constant relentless pressure to reconstruct themselves; if they stop to rest, to be what they are, they will be swept away. (Berman 1983, 78.)

The expectation of people to pass happily from the socialist community to the capitalist market can be seen rather as a demand. Everyone who is left behind, stays behind. The cultural shaming that accompanies this ideology is striking in the case of Poland of this period. It applies to small cultural phenomena like color of socks, choice of restaurants, or counterfeit products (Szczęśniak 2016, 10–15, 52–86). Moreover, it concerns personal and social ability to modernize, to leave former habits behind.

The main characters of *Między nami dobrze jest* are an old lady who constantly recalls the Second World War and the Warsaw Uprising, her daughter Halina who works in a hypermarket, and a granddaughter called Little Metal Girl. In a sense, they are constructed as a mockery of the ideal successful woman of the era of transition. The one that likes ‘modest, elegant fashion

instead of ostentatious jewelry and showy make-up' (Zborowska 2017, 30), is excited by new job opportunities in business while in her free time reads color magazines. A normal woman. Although the author depicts the characters very carefully, they are sketches rather than developed characters. The essence of the texts consists of grotesque dialogues about trivia, as well as fundamental modern and particular postmodern problems such as identity, the idea of nation, globalization, or social exclusion. Masłowska offers an insight into Polish complexes in particular and in general. The shame mentioned above is not only the effect of feeling uncivil, but also of feeling underestimated. These two problems need to be considered together. Poland is depicted in the drama as some kind of unjustly forgotten empire:

RADIO: In the old times, when the world used to be ruled by God's law, all people were Poles. Everyone was a Pole, a German was a Pole, a Swede was a Pole, a Spaniard was a Pole, everyone was Polish, just every every every one. Poland was a beautiful country back then; we had wonderful seas, islands, oceans, a sea fleet, which was sailing on them and still discovered new continents that also belonged to Poland, there was a famous Polish discoverer Krzysztof [*Christopher in Polish*] Kolumb [*Columbus in Polish*] who was obviously re-baptized to Christopher or other Chris or Isaak. We used to be a great empire, an oasis of tolerance and multiculturalism, and everyone who did not come here from another country (as we mentioned, there were no other countries) was welcomed here with bread... (Masłowska 2015, 64–65.)

RADIO: ... and salt ... But good times are finished for our country. First they took America, Africa, Asia and Australia from us. Polish flags were being destroyed and repainted with other stripes, stars and other

flourishes, the Polish language was formally changed to fancy foreign languages. Nobody knows these languages, nobody can speak these languages, and people use them only to make us, Poles, not understand them and not know them, and feel like the worst rags... (Masłowska 2015, 65.)

The messianic idea that Poland is Christ among nations, explored also by Polish romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, brings contemporary imaginary to its liminal point. Furthermore, Poland as a nation is taken care of by Virgin Mary (Czapliński 2011, 128) who is at the same time the queen of the country. The fear of being overlooked as a nation is brought to the extreme. Now it is not only about getting back the signature, but about finding Polish footprint on everything that has any value or is considered as important for the development of the 'civilized human being'. Masłowska uses popular phrases about Poland being 'an oasis of tolerance and multiculturalism' and implicitly confronts it with Polish xenophobia and social homogeneity. The absurdity of these paragraphs lies in the hyperbolic usage of Polish proverbs and catch phrases. The desire to be recognized as the chosen nation with a special role in the salvation of humanity also sheds light on the difficult history of Polish-Jewish relations. As Marek Radziwon states about Masłowska's drama:

... it is a grotesque, absurd joke about stupid advertisements, about artificial language that does not serve anything anymore besides informing about pseudo-promotions. The whole text, as it used to be in the previous works of Masłowska, is precisely stylized, as if glued from various scraps, trimmings and waste. Words, all sentences are worn out, taken out directly of advertising leaflets, they are like ready-made elements of a fiber wall pushed into a small resident of Little

Metal Girl. The characters can talk and think only by using such ready-mades. (Radziwon 2009.)

The characters are not able to think outside the new language of advertisement or business nomenclature, but they are also unable to think about Polish identity outside of the national-romantic framework. If the national complex is challenged, the only escape is the soulless language of normalization. The main dilemma is being 'too much' and 'not enough' at the same time: too much or not enough Polish and too much or not enough European and normal. The consequences of these presumptions are not obvious. Masłowska delves into the language of and after the transition in order to elucidate the clash between idioms and cultures that they represent. Everything that has any meaning is based on the self-reflection about the language and its transgressive forms. Moreover, Masłowska does not endow her characters with any kind of secure identity, but rather explores the idea of transition. By focusing on the oddity of the language she allows her literature to flirt with half-baked ideas and national imaginary which influences her Polish to the same extent as advertisement and media jargon do.

## Gender performance as an act of de-normalization

Dorota Masłowska occupies a very special place on the map of Polish literature. Her debut novel *Snow White and Russian Red* (English translation by Benjamin Paloff was published in 2005, originally published in Polish in 2002 under the title of *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą biało-czerwoną*) is undoubtedly one of the biggest literary scandals in the history of contemporary

Polish literature. In this respect she was accompanied by Michał Witkowski who published his novel *Lovetown* two years later. It could have been predicted that a novel focused on two transgender men with sadomasochistic tendencies would not be only a literary, but especially moral scandal. The novel is uncompromising in how the characters are depicted. Besides the portrayal of the characters such as Patricia and Lucretia, the scandalous aspect of the novel was its very brutal and vulgar language. The controversies concern especially the parts about characters' sexuality and sadomasochistic practices they engage in with strangers, including Soviet soldiers. Another key point is that both characters are cross-dressers. It is necessary to add that their performance of gender is not aimed to be perfect or transparent. Contrariwise, both of them are enjoying being bizarre versions of a hypersexual woman. The author characterizes them not as gender fluid people or transgender women, but as representatives of a non-binary camp identity straddling between the two normalized gender roles:

They refer to each other as she and her, call each other *sister* or *girl*, and it wasn't all that long ago that they were still picking up men – in the park, behind the opera house, and at the train station. Who knows how much is true, how much is legend, and how much is simply taking the piss. But one thing is sure: they're just two of the innumerable legion of sex addicts. Connoisseurs of cock! Even today, pot-bellied pensioners, they have a few tricks up their sleeves. Neither has ever heard of plastic surgery or sex-change operations. They get by with a flourish or two of their plain black satchels, which they call 'handbags'. They make do with what they've got – the quintessence of communist-era mediocrity. All they have to do is hold their cigarettes a little differently, shave every day, and put their words,

their language, to use. For their power lies in their words. They have nothing; whatever they do have they've had to make up, lie up, sing up. Today you can buy anything you want: your sex, your eye colour, your hair – there's no place left for the imagination. Which is why they would rather be poor and 'have a bit of fun'.

'Oh *stop*, darling!' Patricia gets 'dramatic' and pours tea into a chipped cup; old and grimy though it may be, it still comes on a saucer and with a serviette. Form, form is all that matters. And words. (Witkowski 2011, 5.)

The transgression of characters' identity performance lies in tiny gestures which de-normalize their social and gender positions. They do not hide their biological sex and do not try to make their gender performance perfect or even appealing. Their make-up is cheap, their gestures are exaggerated and melodramatically feminine. Their behavior, lacking solemnity or dignity, plays with stereotypes, gender clichés, and something that others might call self-hatred. As a result, they can be easily described in terms of camp strategies. As Maria Gołębiewska claims, following Susan Sontag famous work:

Camp is what is extravagant in a consistent and passionate way, that is, consistently aesthetic experience of the world, which at the same time commands to go beyond what is universally recognized and accepted. It expresses the victory of style over content, aesthetics over morality and irony over seriousness. A camp follower is trying to find entertainment and pleasure by ironically referring to what is considered noble and high, but also finds pleasure in the most primitive and common mass entertainment. (Gołębiewska 1999, 30.)



Patricia and Lucretia are socially underprivileged in almost every possible sense. They are not heteronormative, but they are also not accepted by the generation of young LGBTQ movement. They are transgender, but they do not profit from any kind of make-up veil; rather expose themselves in their imperfect gender performance and violent sexuality. Both characters are extremely poor, but do not really focus on their poverty. Even though their biological sex is ostensibly ignored, they identify themselves not as women, but as men who play cheap performance of hyper-femininity. Patricia and Lucretia love places which are dirty, risky, and most of the time disgusting, but at the same time express desire to be splendid and beautiful. Maciej Pawlikowski observes that Witkowski's characters occupy an ambivalent place in the society of the transition era. Their strategy is simultaneously apparent and unequivocal:

Camp appeared when a man played a woman. Every gesture, inflection, mischievous winking, every emotional admiration of the margin was almost dripping with camp. "Faggots", like no other, were suitable for the elite dance of an impoverished aristocracy, played in the middle of a marching, ruins of a burnt public toilet, or a dangerous night park on whose benches they could roll their "faggot's tales", sipping them with warm, cheap vodka. The whole spectacle – that's probably how we should treat it – is a humorous, funny pose with tragic mask. "Forms, forms are the most important," says Michaśka the Penman, looking at a dingy cup put on a tablecloth. (Pawlikowski 2010.)

Another aspect of their problematic position is determined by how sincerely they miss the Polish People's Republic. Back then they were relatively well-off. Yet more importantly, they

displayed a controversial devotion to Soviet soldiers. Soviet soldiers' presence in Poland was universally condemned as a symbol of Poland's unwanted dependence on the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, for Witkowski's characters they were a symbol of sexual excitement, a chance to seduce masculine and violent men. The undertone of this generally funny and ironic novel is deeply troubling and disturbing. The two main characters enjoy violent sexual behavior, but they truly do not see any other way to build a new identity or even become a part of community. They are not only pariahs, but also some kind of hostile social element on the map of Polish struggle to normalize the country and its society. They are opposed to be normalized in any way. The act of resistance is also based on their anticapitalistic perspective and unapologetic opinions about the most recent history:

And as it happens, someone had lined this arsehole with sawdust and rags especially for them. All comfy and cosy.

No one ever went hungry with that tinned soup, with those potatoes, the subsidies of socialism. There was always enough to eat and a roof over your head; a lady doesn't need much to get by. Now they're building a great big shopping mall in that park of theirs; they're burying their entire history. Patricia insists she will protest. But she's only kidding. More bitterly and sadly every time.

'What can a bag lady like me do? Lay into Big Capital with my walking stick? Hit it over the head with my handbag? What should I tell them, that it's an historic site? Oh, go and get the ashtray, Lucretia, the gentleman has nowhere to put his (ha! ha!) *aaaassshh!*'

Patricia realises she's called herself a 'bag lady', and she's delighted at her new joke. Somewhere deep down it contains a trickle of indignity, and Patricia is already

planning to drink it, to lick it up like a drop of eggnog from the bottom of a glass. Tonight. (Witkowski 2011, 6.)

Their paradoxical strategy is to enjoy humiliation and thus oppose the regime of the new taste. The author of the novel uses terms generally considered humiliating and not politically correct in describing non-heteronormative sexuality. The characters of *Lovetown* seem to be rather disgusted by the new nomenclature. ‘Gay’ or ‘homosexual’ sound outlandish to them; these terms do not describe their identity. It is rather clear that they do not want to have any secure identity or become more socially visible. The humiliation as an effect of drastic exclusion is re-branded as an excitement and liberation from boring and strict social norms. Notably, the identity of Witkowski’s characters can be interpreted in the context of ‘gaga feminism’. Although it uses Lady Gaga’s nickname, the concept is more general. ‘Gaga feminism’ explores the idea of identity’s proclaimed artificiality and its surprising opportunities for the self. The process of proposed self-creation includes experiments, masquerades and any form of gender flexibility. J. Jack Halberstam suggests that ‘unbecoming a woman’ could be a social and aesthetical experiment that leads to liberation from binary gender. Witkowski’s characters are placed somewhere near this perspective, but there are at least two important differences. The first one is the fact that they are ‘unbecoming a transgender woman’, not a woman herself. You can see the seams of their queer performance, because they proudly play with feminine stereotypes and not directly base their identity on them. The second is Patricia’s and Lucretia’s doubtful freedom and liberation. One could describe them as being addicted to sex, violence, and social hostility. Their self-humiliating subjectivity would not be a free act of creating

identity. Playing a 'ladylike identity' would be another step towards indulging in a self-deprecating state of mind.

Halberstam's anarchic and subversive conception of the self is accompanied by the directly expressed hope that 'gaga feminism' would 'participate in big and meaningful forms of critique' (Halberstam 2013, xxv). The gist of his argument is as follows:

Gaga feminism, or the feminism (pheminism?) of the phony, the unreal, and the speculative, is simultaneously a monstrous outgrowth of the unstable concept of 'woman' in feminist theory, a celebration of the joining to femininity to artifice, and a refusal of the mushy sentimentalism that has been siphoned into the category of womanhood. (Halberstam 2013, xii.)

Patricia's and Lucretia's chaotic resistance could be seen as gender flexibility or anarchic gestures against the normative social system. Nonetheless, Halberstam's view seems to be rather elitist: he does not take into account extreme poverty, hostile environment, or inadequately educated non-heteronormative subjects. Two characters of the novel use the strategies mentioned by Halberstam, although not as a tool to achieve a higher level of emancipation. For them, female gender is not only worse than the male norm, but also more exposed to sexual violence that they want to experience. Thus, they are doubly humiliated, doubly excluded, and doubly despised.

According to Szcześniak, the problem of social unification also applies to 'gay politics of normalization applied from the early 1990's' (Szcześniak 2016, 260). Czapliński, on the other hand, sees the conflict between the older and younger generations of homosexuals represented in *Lovetown* as a simplification (Czapliński 2009, 360) which overlooks similarities between their social positions. The first part of the novel focused on

Patricia and Lucretia offers, however, a deep insight into life of non-heteronormative individuals in the 80s in Poland. The image is not only vivid and complex, but it also allows us to ask some unobvious questions about Polish community before and after the transition, about forms of exclusion – especially among minorities – and ambivalent forms of resistance. The second part of the novel is artistically and historically weaker. What is even more symptomatic, Błażej Warkocki, among other critics, accuses the author of simplifying struggles with identity and normalization. Warkocki also observes a process of infantilization of homosexuals' identity, culminating in stereotypes and homophobic images, which he ascribes to Witkowski's depiction of the new generation of gay men in Poland (Warkocki 2013, 117–129). It can be also argued that Patricia and Lucretia are depicted as transgressive, subversive selves who oppose any form of normalization, whereas gay men from the second part of *Lovetown* draw political profits from this process. Westernization and normalization of Polish public discourse is, to some extent, double-edged. The author ostensibly backs up the older generation in their acts of resistance, but at the same time explores the idea of insecure identity and its consequences for the self. Neil Bartlett suggests that the narrator of *Lovetown* is somehow entrapped by the couple of characters:

Overpowered (and occasionally diddled with) by these self-obsessed creatures, the journalist himself gradually becomes seduced by their values as well as their triumphantly inventive, gender-harassing language. The young man who is first shocked and then made jealous by these tales of love among the ruins finds that he has, by the time we reach the delirious final pages, been translated into a flaming old queen himself ... (Bartlett 2010.)

Witkowski's characters are created as some kind of historical figures, predecessors to the contemporary LGBTQ movement. Their position as described by the narrator is ambivalent and problematic from the contemporary point of view. Witkowski seems to enjoy their performance of gender and sexual brutality because there are safely distanced, directly parodied, and in some way folklorized. Patricia and Lucretia are described as mythological figures, long-forgotten actors from our common world. Therefore, they are used to burst the picture of normalized society and normalized gay community. Witkowski's provocative pose is, however, questionable due to his ideological blind spots which make him miss some crucial questions. Are their position really voluntarily accepted? Is not their perception of femininity misogynic? Do their sexual habits allow us to think that they are not victims of social norms? Or, is normalization an actual opposition to violence as the author suggests? Selection and depiction of literary characters in novels that reconstruct the era of 1989 transition are crucial for the interpretation of these texts. Witkowski's choice is certainly controversial, but provides a real and deep de-normalized picture of Polish minorities. Patricia and Lucretia are in a way a small minority, excluded even from gay minority. Due to their economic and social status they oppose not only social mainstream norms, but also 'their' minority's norms. Manifestly, portrayals of Polish poverty are getting increasingly important due to unforeseen struggle for adaptation to the new reality of a democratic country suffered by the characters portrayed in the novel.

## Minor perspective and minor's perspective

The condition of poverty and social exclusion that it entails can be reasons why the younger generation of authors see the poor as potentially attention-grabbing characters. Underrepresentation of these groups is not, after all, the only ground to represent their point of view. Similarly, important is their uncorrupted and atypical 'literary voice'. Nevertheless, Dominika Słowik in her novel *Atlas Doppeltgänger* goes in a different direction. First, she focuses on Silesia, the region of Poland commonly associated with heavy industry. Second, she adopts a children's point of view. In Słowik's novel everything that is considered stereotypically socialist (architecture, brutal forms of industrialization, the unification of communal space) transmogrifies into metaphors and dreamy pictures. Justyna Sobolewska, a literary critic, remarks:

The initial part of the book is one of the best depictions of apartment blocks ever written. The labyrinth of flats and halls resounds with a labyrinth of language. Apartment blocks are not only a symbol of social divisions, but an equal character of the book who lives its own life. (Sobolewska 2015.)

Taking apartment blocks for a character of the novel is highly symptomatic. Słowik's prose follows the idea that reality is co-created by people and all kinds of things – architecture, furniture, gadgets, clothes. Słowik writes:

both flats and people were marked by the transition; it was as if somebody watched an intermediate stage of the pupation. in rooms, here and there, there were lego bricks laying around, a visible and undoubtable sign of wealth. ... and this transformation, political, physical

and spiritual, was not a visual effect, a randomly caught moment. this change, this transformation was synonymous with energy, some kind of unjustified, pointless happiness, when people were still young, the country was young and nobody was fucking about drinking half a shot. (Słowik 2015, 118–119.)

By following Anna's grandfather imagination and stories, two girls are exploring his collection of maps and enjoying a magical version of their reality. What is worth noting, the girls use every element of their environment to escape dark and hopeless reality. Nonetheless, the novel offers some general observations about children's perspective on growing up in the early 90s. The most important aspect is their perception – the way they see, hear, or feel things around them. They seem to be able to find a way of creating their own selves when confronted with the transition. This period, even if 'lacking of myth-creating gesture' as Szcześniak (2016, 15) states, abounds in meaning. Everything is not only different, but primarily new. What is additionally interesting, adults – except for the grandfather – are rather irrelevant in this story. The world of children is wild and unrestricted, ruled only by the children themselves. Słowik writes:

when anna and i were little, in the apartment blocks there was a shitload of kids. they were running around, screaming mercilessly, they used to beat with the stick the very few cars on the estate, which immediately provoked protests from the neighbors sitting at the windows.

– will you get the fuck out?!! – they were screaming and threatening from the balconies. it didn't impress the kids, they shrugged and walked away with dignity,



adjusting their shoelaces with keys dangling on their necks.

in the 1990's we, children, were like a separate tribe, a half-wild herd ruling the blocks. arrogant and self-confident packs were sneaking around during games through the streets as if they were being led to attack – screaming and howling; children were losing so much of their humanity that adults were looking at them with strange fear and were unsuccessfully trying to remind themselves some old, long-forgotten things, which were echoing in their heads. (Słowik 2015, 104.)

The children take advantage of the chaos caused by the transition. Still, their state of mind and adults' situation are comparable, if not analogous. The chaos of this period influences their attitude and expression. Even if challenges of the time are different for these two groups, children do not oppose the future and the progress. In fact, they enjoy the effects of the peaceful revolution. Its spontaneity, carousal atmosphere and unpredictability are somewhat exhausting for the parents' generation but are welcomed by the children with curiosity. For the main characters (who can also be considered as the narrator's alter egos or *doppelgängers*), the political change is evidently blurred, but in fact appears as a cosmic revolution. Due to the feeling of detachment the two girls gradually distance themselves from material reality and its solid norms. With their grandfather's help, they undermine social conventions as well as conventional realism and the typical understanding of time.

The imaginary world of memories, made-up stories and alternative realities supports their different view on the reality of Silesian apartment blocks. They are fearless and wild, but also curious about the possibility of creating an unconventional vision of reality. Their resistance to the dominant narrative is

not based on their memories of the Polish People's Republic or miscalculation of the transition. The author mentions adults' discussions and never-ending complaints that children are exposed to, but neatly separates lives of these two tribes. The adults' customs and norms are blurred and stereotypical, observed by children from the distance. The main character's world is co-created by the youngest and the oldest generation. By omitting most political and historical dilemmas Słowik exposes the fact that there are other imaginations and other stories, even behind the facade of apartment blocks.

Dorota Masłowska, Michał Witkowski, and Dominika Słowik use different aesthetics and diversified types of protagonists in their novels. Their literary strategies, however, express a deep desire to avoid the process of normalization and resist unification. The desire of secure identity seems an implemented idea rather than an individually developed need. The three texts analyzed above offer alternative versions of history and alternative visions of security or happiness. What is worth mentioning is that all of them try to bring social and aesthetic justice by creating alternative points of view. In this context the mainstream nationalist discourse seems to be undermined at the same time by the widespread desire of Polish society to reach normalization. The hero of the Polish transition, to use Szcześniak's observation, is a 'normal man'. Nonetheless, participants of the Polish transition are more varied; their voices include transgressive or minor ones which offer a more complex insight into contemporary Polish identity, contradictory, inconsistent, and internally conflicted as it is. The only thing that seems to be equally important as this complexity of identity is the tireless desire to be recognized as such.

## Bibliography

- Bartlett, N. (2010). Lovetown by Michal Witkowski. *The Guardian*, 27.03.2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/mar/27/lovetown-michal-witkowski-book-review>
- Berman, M. (1983). *All that is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity*. London, New York: Verso.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Trans. R. Nice. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Czapliński, P. (2009). *Polska do wymiany. Późna nowoczesność i nasze wielkie narracje*. Warsaw: W.A.B.
- Czapliński, P. (2011). *Resztki nowoczesności. Dwa studia o literaturze i życiu*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Dąbrowska, D. (2015). O odradzaniu się potrzeby zakorzenienia – „Między nami dobrze jest” Doroty Masłowskiej. *Załącznik Kulturoznawczy*, no. 2, 88–100.
- Gołębiewska, M. (1999). Kamp jako postawa estetyczna – o postmodernistycznych uwikłaniach. *Sztuka i Filozofia*, no. 17, 27–48.
- Halberstam, J. J. (2013). *Gaga Feminism. Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Klein, L. (2017). *Polskie Las Vegas i szwagier z Corelem. Architektura, moda i projektowanie wobec transformacji systemowej w Polsce*. Warsaw: Fundacja Kultura Miejsca.
- Masłowska, D. (2015). *Między nami dobrze jest*. Warsaw: Lampa i Iskra Boża.
- Masłowska, D. (2005). *Snow White and Russian Red*. Trans. B. Paloff. New York: Grove Atlantic. Originally published in Polish in 2002 under the title of *Wojna polsko-ruska pod flagą białoczerwoną*.
- Pawlikowski, M. (2010). Chybiona powaga – kampowa lektura „Barbary Radziwiłłówny z Jaworzna Szczakowej” Michała Witkowskiego. *Polisemia*, no. 1, <http://www.polisemia.com.pl/numery-czasopisma/numer-1-2010-1/chybiona-powaga-kampowa-lektura-barbary-radziwillowny-z-jaworzna-szczakowej-michala-witkowskiego>
- Radziwon, M. (2009). Nike 2009: Masłowska sobie kpi. *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2.06.2009, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,6675023,Nike\\_2009\\_\\_\\_Maslowska\\_sobie\\_kpi.html?disableRedirects=true](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,6675023,Nike_2009___Maslowska_sobie_kpi.html?disableRedirects=true)
- Słowik, D. (2015). *Atlas Doppelgänger*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Znak.

- Sobolewska, J. (2015). Królestwo bloków. *Polityka*, 24.03.2015, <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/ksiazki/1613145,1,recenzja-ksiazki-dominika-slowik-atlas-doppelganger.read>
- Szcześniak, M. (2016). *Normy widzialności. Tożsamość w czasach transformacji*. Warsaw: Fundacja Bęc Zmiana.
- Warkocki, B. (2013). *Różowy język. Literatura i polityka kultury na początku wieku*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
- Witkowski, M. (2011). *Lovetown*. Trans. W. Martin. London: Granta Books, ebook version. Originally published in Polish in 2004 under the title of *Lubiewo*.
- Zborowska, A. (2017). 'Guy Laroche made in Bytom'. O polskiej modzie czasów transformacji. In L. Klein (Ed.), *Polskie Las Vegas i szwagier z Corelem. Architektura, moda i projektowanie wobec transformacji systemowej w Polsce* (pp. 14–43). Warsaw: Fundacja Kultura Miejsca.