

The Posthumanist Dimension of the Novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk. A Commentary

Malgorzata Kowalcze¹

Since being awarded the Man Booker International Prize in 2018 for her 2007 novel *Flights* (transl. Jennifer Croft), Olga Tokarczuk, the laureate of many previous national and international literary awards, has attracted significant attention from international readership. The interest in her writing increased even more after she was awarded with the 2018 Nobel Prize in Literature in 2019 “for a narrative imagination that with encyclopaedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life” (The Permanent Secretary, 2018). Admired for the philosophical dimensions of her novels, a bent for creating minutely crafted psychological depictions, and the flair for folkloristic and mythological storytelling, Tokarczuk exhibits an outstanding literary talent supported by her profound cultural knowledge.

Her novel *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead* (Pl. *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych*, 2009), translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones and published in 2018, was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize as well. It provides the reader with an opportunity to experience the thrill of mystery typical of a crime story, at the same time inviting them to reflect on the relationship between the human and the non-human in a truly posthuman spirit. Although not easy to classify, the novel appears to belong to the genre of crime story or mystery fiction, as a series of enigmatic deaths constitute the plot of the novel, however, the absence of complex intrigues, accumulating clues, or detailed detective investigations make it a quite untypical one. Written in the first-person point of view with abundance of natural scenery, the narrative provides useful material for ecocritical, feminist, or anthropological analysis as it shows a plethora of intermingling concepts involving the themes of nature’s agency, human ontological and epistemological status or a gender inequality placed within the microcosm of a small-town community.

The protagonist of the novel, Janina Duszejko, is a retired bridge engineer employed as a village schoolteacher, who also takes care of local summer houses. Most of her attention is directed towards the natural environment which to her is an inexhaustible source of life strength and inspiration. Determined to follow her own sensitivity towards the animate and inanimate beings around her, the heroine is perceived by others as a person “gone off her rocker living in this wilderness” (Tokarczuk, 2018, 143). Energetic and eager to develop intellectually and spiritually, she translates William Blake’s poetry and delves into astrology. This is quite significant for the overall message of the novel as it invites the reader to transcend the boundaries of the anthropocentric perspective and assume a much broader and more inclusive point of view. When a series of mysterious murders takes place in the area, she

¹ Malgorzata Kowalcze, Pedagogical University of Cracow. E-mail: malgorzata.kowalcze@up.krakow.pl.



describes it as retribution on humans for their maltreatment of animals, performed by animals themselves. Only towards the end of the novel do we find out that her involvement in the crimes was far from coincidental and understand the reasons for her desperate flight from the town.

What I wish to focus on in this commentary is the striking posthumanist streak of the novel, which is exemplified by the character of the protagonist, and which reveals its many dimensions as the plot develops. What she embodies is a close interconnectedness between all sentient beings that provides a human being with the kind of corporeal understanding which makes the differences between species unimportant. She sees the world in terms of relationships, connections, the unceasing influence beings have on one another, which Karen Barad's vital materialism refers to as "intraactive relationships" (Barad, 2010, 240-268; 2003, 824-827). It is within these relationships that the apparently dissimilar forms of matter, both organic and inorganic, actively inform one another, developing their meaningful existence. The material world around her brims with uncanny phenomena, mysterious connections and deep meanings which are waiting for a sensitive soul to discover. In that sense the novel presents the kind of spirituality—not limited to or defined by any particular religious system—which "introduces a further 'more than human' horizon to the ecology of the (post)human: that of divinity, transcendence or the sacred" (Graham, 2020, 29). The matter which the protagonist touches is vibrant, offering a profound insight into the core of all beings. Being tuned in to the frequencies of its vibrations makes it possible for her to feel that a house wants to be "left in peace to carry on decomposing" (Tokarczuk, 2018, 45) and slender flowers look "as if they'd been to the gym" (24). It is thanks to those perceptive remarks that the uncanniness of everyday experiences is revealed: apparently, there are "angels watching over" (12) people alongside powerful astrological forces from whose influence no one is excluded.

More than anything Janina Duszejko questions anthropocentrism which is an abiding tenet of the community she belongs to. Being the only one to outspokenly object to the common practice of hunting animals, and poaching in particular, and not hesitating to sacrifice her reputation for the sake of protecting them, the woman plays the role of an outcast, and yet she does not come across as a loner. Duszejko prefers animal presence to that of other humans and exhibits certain qualities which in a way place her in-between the human and the non-human realms. It is more than mere sympathy for animals—which, as Cary Wolfe argues, does not exclude anthropocentric attitude (Wolfe, 2009, 568-570)—that drives Tokarczuk's protagonist. She appears to be the only human character truly capable of noticing the ontological bonds between beings. The woman collects animal remains hoping that with the advancement of technology it will be possible to 'recreate' them from their DNA in the future. For her, those shreds of "dead" matter are permeated with the kind of life which persists even if the biological life comes to an end. To use Rosi Braidotti's (2006) terms, she believes in the eternal existence of *zoe*—which is the basis of *bios* (biological life) (37). Her sensitivity to the nature's call combined with the woman's relentlessness in fighting for justice and equality for both human and non-human animals put her in the position of a pariah in the community whose morality is based on deeply anthropocentric principles.

The character of the protagonist plays with the stereotypical belief that women are inherently linked with nature by their cyclicality, periodic fertility, and ability to better understand the mystery of life and death. Apart from her extraordinary sensitivity, the heroine is far from



meek and mild; instead, she proves to be endowed with a particular strength of will which springs from a profound conviction of the righteousness of her beliefs. Deeply conscious of the conventionality of social and cultural norms Duszejko resolves to protect her moral independence and personal autonomy from the corruption of anthropocentric bigotry. She displays a particular eagerness to take the world the way it is given to her and not to follow the standard categorisation; in that way, she tries to discover the meanings of things in themselves and not to rely on the conventional perception of them. This is clearly visible in her custom of giving names to people or animals on the basis of the impressions she gets from their physique, behaviour or aura, rather than calling them by their first or family names: “The naming of Big Foot occurred in a similar way. It was quite straightforward—it suggested itself to me when I saw his footprints in the snow” (19). Other names include Oddball, Dizzy, Good News or ‘young ladies’ which refers to the deer to whom she takes particular liking. The heroine does not like her first name: “I regard that the one that's written on my identity card as scandalously wrong for me and unfair—Janina. I think my real name is Emily, or Joanna. Sometimes I think it's something like Irmtrude too. Or Bellona. Or Medea,” (21), therefore she decides to ignore it, knowing that she has an unalienable right to define her identity.

The mysterious deaths which take place as the novel develops, and to which animals are suggested to contribute in some unintelligible way, apart from building suspense, make the reader redirect their attention towards the setting and the non-human actors. That underappreciated element of the narrative acquires a new status: It is the setting from where an unexpected twist may come and not the human agents. The character of Janina Duszejko tackles the fundamental ontological issues: Where does our feeling of superiority over other animals come from? How do we justify the difference between killing (an animal) and murdering (a human)? And do we really know where the borderline is between the animate and the inanimate? Is there one?

As the protagonist's anger at human cruelty and injustice intensifies, the thirst for calmness, understanding, and simple love increases as well. The novel exposes the deepest yearnings of a contemporary human being, who finds oneself unable to make sense of life's complexity. Tokarczuk does not simply bemoan the corruption of humanity based on anthropocentrism, but argues that having alienated ourselves from nature we have in fact alienated ourselves from the source of our corporeality. Thus, we suffer from lack of peace which comes from the sense of truly belonging to nature, of being one with other entities and capable of hearing the subtle voices of whatever non-human powers are there in the stars.

References

- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 824-827.
- Barad, K. (2010). Quantum entanglements and hauntological relations of inheritance: Dis/continuities, spacetime enfoldings, and justice-to-come. *Derrida Today*, 3(2), 240-268.
- Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions: On nomadic ethics*. Polity Press.
- Graham, E. (2020). Cyborg or goddess? Religion and posthumanism from secular to postsecular. *Journal of Posthumanism*, 1(1), 23-31.
- The Permanent Secretary. (2018). Press release. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2018/press-release/>
- Tokarczuk, O. (2018). *Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*. Fitzcarraldo Editions. Ebook.

228 *The Posthumanist Dimension of the Novel Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk.

Wolfe, Cary. (2009). Human, all too human: "Animal studies" and the humanities. *PMLA*, 124(2), 564-575.

