“What will be born, what can be born in Poland, in the souls of a ruined and brutalized people when one day (in the future) the new order that has stifled the old one disappears and nothing follows” – asked Witold Gombrowicz about Poland after communism in his Diary of 1953. This “nothing,” sounding both pessimistic and intriguing, came in 1989 and it has been a time of transition, revolution and transformation. From “nothing” – an indeterminate state of things with an ambiguous but big potentials - many things can be created. Indeed, the year of 1989 can be seen as giving Polish prose an unique opportunity to create new characters, new stories that would not conform to any political or ideological standards and expectations. Also, the year of 2004, the beginning of a new Europe with apparently no borders, brought a new notion of freedom, especially for the new migrating writers. Yet, there are fears, disappointments and failures that accompanied this time of hope.

This lecture is based on my book to be published this Spring – Melancholic Migrating Bodies: Contemporary Polish Women’s Writing (CSP, 2015). Still, the conclusion goes further in my reflection on migration and literature

Structure
Introduction:
• What about emigration?
On émigré literature and the change in literary geography after 1989.
• Women’s writing and melancholic themes as a reassessment of the contemporary Poland.

1This text is a lecture and has a character of presentation of argumentations used in my book. In case of quoting, please contact me or address directly my book, Melancholic Migrating Bodies: Contemporary Polish Women’s Writing (2015). Contact: U.Chowaniec@gmail.com; U.Chowaniec@ucl.ac.uk.
On emigration in the context of women’s writing and its understanding of the new Poland

- Does gender matter?
  Tracing the differences in describing and evaluating the world. A note against self-orientalisation in contemporary migrating literature.

Émigré literature?

1989 year was a year of birth of new period and also or at the same times the point where many deaths and ends were announced – the end of communism, the end of history, the end of émigré literature. Émigré literature as a literary category that for decades defined Polish cultural production had ceased to make sense after 1989. After all the political division between East and West seemed to collapse altogether with the Berlin Wall. Of course there were still texts about the migrations, the last asylum seekers of the mid 1980s were still writing about it. Yet, even though in Izabela Filipiak’s Niebieska menażeria (1997) or Manuela Gretkowska’s My zdes’ emigranty (1995) one could trace the elements of émigré experience, everybody got very cautious when speaking of contemporary Polish literature as émigré literature. The beginning of 1990s was a time of saying goodbye to that category, as in Jerzy Jarzębski’s book Pożegnanie emigracji (1998). This new freedom from the barriers and borders between the East and West was also associated with diversity, kind of Kundera-esque lightness of being.

And here, it should be added at once, following Jerzy Jarzębski Farewell to Emigration (1998) that writers such as Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Miłosz, Jerzy Stempowski, Józef Wittlin, Stanisław Vincenz, Andrzej Bobkowski and Gustaw Herling-Grudziński were far from being a homogeneous group. Thus to put them all within one category has always been a sweeping generalization; they were rather émigré rebels than nostalgic writers crying for a lost homeland (“emigracyjni buntownicy,” according to Jarzębski 1998). Bearing in mind that the actual correlations between emigration, migration and literary activity have always been very complex, it is fair to say, I believe, that émigré literature as a term has always been politically determined, with the main assumption being that the émigré writer was forced rather than chose to leave her/his home country. As such, the notion of

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2 Jerzy Jarzębski writes that one of the characteristics of Polish literature is that it is “loaded beyond measure with social servitudes” (Jarzębski 1998, 7). And of post-1989 émigré writers: “Those younger writers were not emigrants any more, at least
emigration, as seen in the in case of Filipiak’s texts, is still present in women’s writing during the first half of the 1990s, yet this writing, while entering into a debate with the intellectual heritage of traditional émigré literature, tries to break with the political and national paradigm of displacement.

Are we/literary critics and scholars still interested in emigration?
Are writers writing about it?

Unquestionably, Polish literary critics are still interested in the category of emigration; it may refer to the author’s place of residence, but is often also connected to the themes treated in the texts. As a result of recent socio-political changes, such as postcommunist transformation, the extension of the European Union and Poland’s accession to it, as well as the general economic crisis and search for better earnings or the need for cultural change, there are many Polish authors working abroad and, especially in the last decade, many books on migration have been published, such as Wioletta Grzegorzewska Notatnik z Wyspy (Notes from the Island, 2011) and Guguly (Unripe Fruits, 2014), Marek Kaźmierski (Damn the Source, 2013), Grażyna Plebanek Illegal Liaisons (translation 2013, Nielegalne związki, 2010), Katarzyna Tubylewicz Rowieśniczki (Peers, 2014), Piotr Czerwiński (Międzynaród, Nation in Between, 2011; Pigułka wolności, The Pill of Freedom, 2012), A.M. Bakalar Madame Mephisto (2013, written in English) or Jan Krasnowolski, Afrykańska elektronika (African electronics, 2013) and many others.

Yet it is important to bear in mind the differences in usage of the category of émigré/emigration literature between the pre-1989 period and the contemporary period. To put it very bluntly, emigration turns out to be a special kind of experience of being in between. And another thing is that contemporary emigration “does not like” the prefix “e” and prefers the somewhat lighter “migration”, since the latter is devoid of coercion, the need to seek asylum or desperate efforts to get a visa. **Contemporary (e)migration is often connected to the difficult experience of loss of language, a loss difficult to accept since it is a loss on request, it is a loss that seems to be a choice, and this is why we can talk rather about a certain key to open up the text – the inscriptions of migration. These inscriptions act as connectors between the dislocation of the authors and loss of language (and its

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the works by Jerzy Łukosz, Manuela Gretkowska, Marek Jastrzębiec-Mosakowski, who live temporarily or permanently abroad, have never been read as émigré literature…” (p. 242).
melancholic dimension) within the texts. Such connections bring the literary text close to a form of therapy for treating melancholy, in which we see grief, sadness and attempts to work through the damage. We see this, for example in Grzegorzewska (2011), where she realizes she is in the dangerous moment of losung her language:

**17.01.2011:** I am becoming intrigued and surprised by the Polish language: its etymology, tame transmutations, ellipses, phraseology and the reflexive pronouns which we overuse. The mechanisms which since birth I have accepted as “mine” and natural are starting to erode and cause me to struggle more and more in my native tongue. And English? To my mind, it is still in its infancy, perhaps never to progress beyond nappy stage. It neither delights nor depresses me. Mr de Saussure, I have got myself into this, so where should I go next? In which language should I seek more of me? (Grzegorzewska 2012, 29).

7.10.2011 Zaczyna mnie intrygować i dziwić język polski: etymologia, oswojone metonimie, elipsy, frazeologia i zaimki zwrotne, których nadużywamy. To, co od urodzenia przyjmowałam jako „swoje” i naturalne, zaczyna się we mnie wytracać i coraz trudniej mi posługiwać się rodzimym językiem. A angielski? Wciąż w moim umyśle jest w zarodku, który być może nigdy się nie rozwinię: ani mnie on parzy, ani ziębi. Panie de Saussure, tak się urządziłam i gdzie mam teraz wyjechać? W jakim języku siebie odnaleźć? (Wioletta Grzegorzewska, Notatnik z wyspy, s. 79)

The protagonist of the diary, Grzegorzewska, struggles with melancholy, which she overcomes through writing her notes, slowly discovering the pleasure of acquiring a foreign language. This struggle frequently results from an emigration question about language and one’s own identity that is disturbed by the fact of loosing the bond—characteristic of one’s native language—between the words and the “reality;” this problem becomes a significant element in contemporary fiction concerning (e)migration. The fiction shows some sort of dialectics between the lack of understanding and the loss of comfortable connection between the users of the language. Here, the figure of the mother is very interesting, since one of the striking phenomena in migration is the loss of a common language between generations. The native language, the mother tongue (in English) and father tongue (język ojczysty, in Polish), of the migrants’ children is the language of neither their father nor mother.
In general, in the works of women writers focused on movement, change, dislocation, I can see this transgressive movement: writing from the perspective of someone who looks at Polish culture from a distance. Thus, the critical tone in the literature of women is often linked to specific nomadic themes. Only the one who has seen something else (traveller, vagabond, immigrant) can see home in a different light, hence, the popularity of female tourists and migrants in the recent literature.

To summarize the question whether there is still an émigré (or a migration) literature, I enumerate several features of traditionally understood émigré literature. Among the most important elements I see various contextual determinants, such as a particular hermetic character, a “closedness” to the literary circles in which traditional émigré literature was created. This is also a psychological determinant, the feeling that one is creating a work in a language that will probably never be read by the broad audience. This “closedness” (zamkniętość, the limited émigré circles, limited audience, limited possibility of publishing the works) is also connected to various critical limitations, such as limited exposure to critical readings. These limitations on émigré literature are the result, of course, of the political situation that has also affected the existential situation of the authors (often a drastic change from being a celebrated author to being an unemployed and unrecognized emigrant). All the above features were also connected to the limited publishing possibilities faced by émigré authors.

Hence, there can be enumerate the most important three determinants of émigré literature: the political situation, the psychological closedness of literary production and the limited publishing possibilities. All the three determinates are very different now, especially, he publishing possibilities altered: most books on migration or written by migrants in Polish are published by Polish publishing houses and promoted in Poland. They function as part of Polish literary production as books with a thematic angle; they take part in literary Polish competitions or are promoted by advertising. The very fact that an author lives abroad is often taken as a marketing strategy in promotional activities (TV interviews, press releases etc.) This is why we can hardly speak now of émigré literature, and why I suggest using instead the term emigration or migration literature, or about inscriptions of migration onto the texts, which would
include both the thematic dimension of a book and the existential factor of the author being based abroad.³

**Women’s Writing: Gendering Migration**

Let us examine selected examples of Polish women’s writing from the 1990s to the present day, in which the notion of emigration (exile, movement and displacement) has been captured. Many descriptions of touring, visiting new places, short-term working abroad or images of different countries—where the authors and/or their protagonists have freely chosen to live—appear extensively in Polish literature after 1989. The experiences of migration have been scrutinized by women’s writers and from this scrutiny three especially important shifts in the cultural understanding of migration (displacement) emerge:

1. the shift from the notion of a stable identity to a variable identity. The identity that changes depending on place, cultural neighbourhood and—which is probably the most important—language;
2. the shift from narrative of locality to the one of glocality, where the known and the cosy mingle with global elements. There appear more and more narratives that include the globally recognized elements, behaviours, and languages, such as McDonalds or global language.
3. the shift from the universalized experience of emigration or migration to the gendered experience of displacement, where the feminine aspect is especially emphasized. The shift from I-(e)migrant to I- migrating woman.

In my book on women’s writing in Poland all the texts are connected to each other through the shared theme of displacement, travelling, or various forms of migration, whether it be emigration with its need for legal visas and asylum seeking, economic migration, tourist travel or modern nomadism (in search of new experiences). These texts are written by two different generations of women, those born in the 1960s and those born in the second half of the 1970s or beginning of the 1980s. The women

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³ On new emigration literature and books such as *Dublin. Moja polska karma (Dublin. My Polish karma)* by Magdalena Orzel or *Single (Singles)* by Piotr Kępski, see Max Fuzowski 2009. Also on recent publications (including the prose debut of Wioletta Grzegorzewska Gąguly, *Unripe Fruits*, 2014), see Sobolewska 2014a, 2014b.
representing these two generations have slightly different formal and peer education, and varying life and political experiences and standpoints. The two main writers should be undoubtedly mention here: Olga Tokarczuk (b. 1962) and Izabela Filipiak (b. 1961), but there is also Manuela Gretkowska (b. 1964), whose experiences of displacement are likewise connected in some way to the old communist regime, when travelling abroad was almost impossible and migration was likely to be the once-in-a-lifetime decision to emigrate. Texts by Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (b. 1975), Marta Dzido (b. 1981) or Sylwia Chutnik (b. 1979) are free from engagement with the old system on a personal level. They are engaged rather in the postmodern idea of searching for identity in an ever-changing and destabilized world. The works of Grażyna Plebanek (b. 1967), Joanna Bator (b. 1968) or Inga Iwasiów (b. 1963), who are crucial for Polish literature after 1989, are situated somewhere in-between the generational span. I indicate here the problem of generation as one of the interesting incentives to read contemporary Polish literature, since it can be read as a particular discourse on changes in the contemporary European identity.

Further to this, the most important diagnosis of contemporary Polish literature is the identification of the connection between women’s writing, the reappearing themes of the destabilised body image and the notion of melancholy as a critique of contemporaneity.

Many of the above-mentioned authors, but also others, situate their literary protagonists in moments of the destabilization of healthy portrayals of the body (healthy bodies are invisible in fact, as they are mentioned only in general or purely aesthetic terms rather than in detailed descriptions). The moments of bodily destabilisation are the moments of sudden wounds, disgusting spots, bleeding, images of excrement, menstruation, white hair, nails, peeling skin or the unexpected death of a human being (or animals or dolls as human metonyms). In such moments, the narration suddenly opens up to human physicality. These portrayals of the disturbed body (or, as I often call it, “ruined” body, because it is partial or in decay) are always connected to some practice of melancholy resulting from political and cultural oppression (e.g. in Total Amnesia by Izabela Filipiak), historical transformations (e.g. Bambino by Inga Iwasiów) or social changes (e.g. Clam by Marta Dzido). These “ruined” cultural images of the body can be seen at the same time as melancholic ways of challenging tradition as well as normative contemporary culture. As I
mentioned before, I look at women’s writing by taking into account the now long-established tradition of feminist and women’s studies.

**Category of Women’s Writing**

The category of women’s writing itself opens up a potential space for conflict: Polish literature has largely been seen through its social and political role of reinforcing certain (national or citizen-orientated) identities as an objective construction of belonging, hence to divide it into “men and women” is perceived to be a lessening of this alleged objectivity. Generally speaking, the focus on women’s writing in any culture requires some sort of justification, especially concerning the omission of masculine representation, as if the choice of subject as such was not complete or too arbitrary and biased. This is all the more true in the case of Polish culture, where, despite the long tradition of the term women’s writing, “serious” studies of women’s writing and feminism, involving academic engagement, were not initiated until the 1990s.

The increasing visibility of women’s writing and women’s studies immediately met its critique and opposition. Mainstream literary readings of women’s writing in Poland have been persistently intertwined with political and social concerns. The irony is that Polish literature—following the collapse of communism—was expected to be “free” from ideological, and therefore from politicized, readings. Freedom was understood here, however, as liberation from politically engaged literature. The unfortunate effect then has been that the notion of women’s writing or women’s literature (pisarstwo kobiece, kobieca literatura) has been perceived as a new type of such engagement, including an ideologically stigmatized perspective predominantly imported from the West. While 1989 is seen as the beginning of a new, democratic Poland, the starting point of a new order and new era of some mythical freedom affecting the political sphere and social psychology, the discourse on the particularity of women’s writing has been considered to be something that limits this freedom. Women’s writing and feminist theories were seen as a new means of linking literature to ideology. In the postsocialist context, the term ideology fell completely into disrepute, associated above all with the loathed Marxist-Leninist theory. The result of this is that feminist interpretations of literature, with

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4 As elaborated in Chowaniec and Phillips 2012.
their focus on the politics of gender representation, power and social inequality between men and women, have become a part of the Polish literary landscape since 1989 but at the same time they have remained controversial and ostracized. Polish women’s writing, however popular, widely published or discussed, particularly in the 1990s, was seen as a new way of politicizing literature, and thus became the target of criticism from established literary circles situated around academic departments and editorial teams of specialist journals (see Czapliński 1997). This criticism was as vivid in the 2000s as it was in the 1990s, as Dorota Kozicka (2014), a literary academic from the Jagiellonian University, demonstrated in her critical discussion of women writers and women critics during the 2011 Feminist Congress in Kraków. Kozicka refers particularly to two texts by Igor Stokfiszewski (2008) and Grzegorz Jankowicz (2008) that discuss feminist engagement in politics. Stokfiszewski saw this as one of the characteristics of the contemporary feminist movement in Poland and considered the connection between politics and literature to be important, while Jankowicz considered this way of understanding the role of literature as anachronistic and insufficient. In all these discussions of literature and its engagement in politics, one element stands out as surprising, namely the fact that such a connection is somehow perceived as diminishing the very value of literature. This old, structuralist position exposes the conservative belief that there is a literature beyond any sort of intrinsic ideological suppositions, which in fact implies that there is a stable canon which, according to some authorities, is named as non-ideological or objective. Because a narrative always presupposes some kind of political standpoint, we can consequently see that this kind of thinking about literature reveals something more than distrust of an openly political position, namely a tendency to separate ideologies into the good and the bad, the objective and the subjective.

Melancholic Themes Against Melancholy

Popular or not, women’s writing as a gendered understanding of literary studies are present in contemporary literary discourse and it can be taken as a research subject. Having researched the representative body of women’s texts since 1989 I see the melancholic themes as a very frequent and repetitive. I see the melancholic

moments as being special incentives towards exploring particular themes, namely motherhood in the sense of being a mother and/or the relationship with a mother, and connected with this: journeys away from home or loss of home, as well as physical pain (the abject body), travelling and emigration, and finally the rediscovery of childhood and adolescence and our connection with nature. I treat these moments as a social critique, a voice against the cultural mechanisms involved in gender relations, something Kelly Oliver calls social melancholy, which she explains as lack of social support of the marginalized groups that results in depressions of the members of the groups (women, mothers).

Among the most important melancholic themes in contemporary women’s writing is that of the lost home (and hence the lost mother) and the need to move away in order to rediscover it, even if the chances of finding another home are negligible. Of importance also is alienation from one’s own body, the constant need to confirm one’s own attractiveness (looking in the mirror) and the simultaneous search for autonomy (the non-narcissistic gesture of looking in a mirror), as well as the feeling of loneliness in a group, within the family, within loving relationships.

**Longing for a Lost Home: Emigration and Displacement in Women’s Writing**

Manuela Gretkowska (*My zdies’ emigranty*) and Izabela Filipiak (*The Blue Menagerie*) introduce a protagonist who functions in a post-industrial, postmodern civilization, emancipated from patriotic obligations, and yet who cannot find herself fully in the role of the nomad, vagabond or global tourist:

> Only supposedly one only travels somewhere, to somewhere. In fact, one does so in order to see the order of things from a different perspective. (Filipiak 1997, 247).

The main character (and narrator) of Izabela Filipiak recognizes, similarly to Grzegorzewska above, the problem of language in the experience of displacement. It is the mother tongue where she finds osmosis between language and the things around her:

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Every detail, (…) dried up flowers, decorations, old-fashioned lamps remind me of the life I left behind (…) One has to be close, very close to me to feel this enduring stream of pain flowing through me (p. 7). (In Poland) there is no hidden barrier (…), (In Poland) I can feel there is something like a subtle osmosis between me and the space of language. (Filipiak 1997, 288).

The experience of displacement is one of alienation from language as well as of physical exclusion. Filipiak notices the importance of the language barrier, against which her new position (the position of a foreigner) is constituted. Yet this melancholic struggle with language creates the character. For Julia Kristeva alienation and exclusion, which are the consequence of emigration, are the conditions of identity. Through rejection one can fully understand one’s position in the world and rethink one’s beliefs. Exile shows that identity is not a stable, once given and persistent quality, mainly because it changes with the language (how well we can see this in Eva Hoffman’s book Lost in Translation). Kristeva emphasizes the fact that “The stranger suffers because she cannot speak her maternal language” (Oliver 1993, 7). Through efforts to acquire a new language, when the mother tongue becomes redundant, the subject is “liberated” from the discourse that “made” her/his identity (as if describing her/him on their identity card).

Manuela Gretkowska in her 1995 novel My zdies’ emigranty (We Are the Emigrants Here) parodies the politically engaged emigration of the 1980s. She sketches a character that deliberately rejects any links between her life, her geographical choice and the political situation of her native country:

In the Arab shop on my street, they think I am Russian. If I told the curious shopkeeper that I am Polish, he would nod that he knows where Poland is, that Wałęsa, that Jaruzelski… And I am not interested either in Jaruzelski or Wałęsa. (Gretkowska 1995, 38).

I am not interested either in Jaruzelski or Wałęsa… Such a position expressed by the female protagonist, who later devotes herself to writing a thesis on Maria Magdalena, can been seen as a generational statement on the part of women writers, who would shift their interest away from centralized cultural themes (such as politics, men, Christ’s suffering and its connection with national struggle), to the cultural margins
(private experience, women, or the suffering of Maria Magdalena). But this personalized experience of exile should not be taken as an individual experience. It is perhaps the most universal experience of being a foreigner, a stranger (Kristeva 1991). The notion of emigration within the literary domain exposes today not only the politically determined problems such as nationality, obtaining a new visa and the necessity to act in the foreign language, but also—in more general terms—the notion of being a foreigner. The foreigner is bound at some point to be (or to feel) lonely, misunderstood and rejected. Understood in this perspective, the re-thinking of the interconnection between the notion of migration, exile, emigration and contemporary Polish writing is and always will be significant.

Manuela Gretkowska—similarly to Filipiak, albeit without her fine narrative sensitivity—recognizes these difficulties of being a foreigner in both of her earlier novels, *Kabaret metafizyczny* (*Metaphysical Cabaret*, 1993) and *My zdies’ emigranty* (1995). Gretkowska, however, does not let her characters dwell on the usual problems of the emigrants. She moves them around; has them speak in different languages. She creates artificial, caricature-like epitomes of postmodern cosmopolitans (as a provocative move against the conventionally understood émigré narrative). The main character of the personal narration considers changing her origin from Polish to German or Jewish in case she cannot stay in France:

I do not feel like being German and explain all the time that I speak badly in German, because I was persecuted for using the language of my fathers (ancestors) already in my childhood, on the streets of Toruń. If it appears that I cannot live in France any longer, however, I will go to West Germany. It is clear that for learning Hebrew and becoming a Jewish woman, I am far too old. (Gretkowska 1995, 9).

Nationality, understood as an official registration, is juxtaposed with the notion of national identity (intertwined with the problem of memory, childhood, and tradition) while they are both mocked as fluid, changeable, and a matter of decision. Moreover, the position of the foreigner in Gretkowska’s novel is not created by the idealistic or political opposition between the fatherland and the foreign country, but rather the opposition between the Polish (or Slavic) language-users and the French people:
We sit altogether on the floor. The Romanians, Bulgarians, Czech, Poles; more and more cigarettes; we drink tea, wine and we feel so well, so safe together. (Gretkowska 1995, 15).

Gretkowska treats ironically this feeling of safety among the emigrants, gathered together in the state-subsidized house, the symbolic space of the social abjects, the unwanted. The illusion of safety is therefore only possible through the common experience of being foreign. They are all foreigners (with allusions to their similar Slavic or communist experience). Through their emigrants’ narratives, they maintain their old identity, their previous philosophy of life, acquired from experience in the native land. The old identity is still valid for a little while in the asylum for emigrants. It is outside the asylum where they will have to face exclusion, act in the foreign language and, through the experience of exclusion, revise their identity. Returns are also different. The protagonist of The Blue Menagerie returns home to Poland, does not find her land, her home, desired land is always somewhere else. “Melancholy, which always sets the point of desire beyond the reach of the one doing the desiring, finally presents the hero with the dialectic of unrealized dreams”—says Przemysław Czapliński about nostalgia in the prose of the 1990s. This sense of dissatisfaction, according to Julia Kristeva, must however be overcome by the narration. This is why women writers describe the tiniest details of their homes, of homes betrayed, unwanted, given away, and abandoned. Just such a tamed, yet still alien home is that of the protagonist/narrator in Olga Tokarczuk’s House of Day, House of Night (2002, Polish edition, 1998). The “homelessness” experienced by Tokarczuk’s protagonists ‘begins’ in the story about the loss of a small motherland in Primeval and Other Times (1996), and Runners (Bieguni, 2007).

Women writers, such as Grażyna Plebanek (Przystupa, 2007) or Joanna Pawluśkiewicz (Cleaning Lady, Pani na Domkach, 2006), in their books about

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8 Literature and literary criticism try to show, following, for example Lochak and Kristeva, that the emigrant, the foreigner is “…is a “symptom” (Danièle Lochak): ”psychologically he signifies the difficulty we have in living as an other and with others; politically, he underscores the limits of nation-states and of the national political conscience that characterizes them and we have all deeply interiorized to the point of considering it normal that there are foreigners, that is, people who do not have some rights as we do.” (Kristeva 1991, 103)

9 See Chapter 3, also: Chowaniec 2002.

protagonists who sweep, work as nannies, travel and wander, show their homes from the perspective of foreign (non-Polish) families.

**Final Point**

**Gender Matter: On Risky Games with Stereotypes and Jokes and Against Lad Literature**

Many of the book on migration seems to use the easy opposition between: “we” and “they”, “here” and “there”, “normal” – “weird” etc. These kinds of narratives use the humour and supposedly comic strategies to offer a critical look. Nevertheless, I call them the narratives of self-orientalisation or self-foreignisation, in which gender is especially important as these narratives always reinforce the heteronormative structures.

For the sake of juxtaposition of the women’s writing’s perspective, I will present a book published last year and dealing directly with the theme of migration, Jan Krasnowolski’s *Afrykańska elektronika* (African electronics, Ha!Art 2013). There are four short stories in *African electronics*: “Dirty Heniek,” a short story about the old policeman/militiaman who is trapped in postcommunist Polish capitalism, in which the past cannot be forgiven. This funny in places text appears to be a script for a film and such a narrative trick may be an excuse to overlook the annoying repetitions in sentence construction, a real carousel of epithets and comparisons (for example – taken from just two sentences: … “like a rabid animal,” “like sardines,” “sweaty uniforms,” “unwashed male bodies,” “oily odour, hot grease” and following baroque sentence: “With their immovable, strained faces, illuminated with yellow like a corpse light, they look like post-mortem masks, as wax casts removed serially in some morgue,” p.8). There is a lot of sword words and rhetoric of the so called “lad lit,” - loaded with sexist jokes, uttered by the caricature of a strong man, about female drivers and the woman’s body.

The next three stories are in the forms of recalling the nightmares: the psychoanalytical records of deep anxiety, told by the narrators aware of cultural differences and aware of the fact that these dissimilarities are fearful. The eponymous

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11 For example, Madame Mephisto by Bakalar; books by Pior Czewiński or Daniel Kozierski.
12 jak rozjuszony zwierz, jak sardynki, przepocone mundury, męskie niedomyte ciała, tłusta woń, rozgrzany smar. Ich nieruchomo, napięte twarze, oświetlone trupiozółtym światłem, wyglądają jak pośmiertne maski, jak woskowe odlewy zdjęte seryjne w jakiejś kostnicy (8).
African electronics is meant to be a joke, colonial look, prank on Africa by the provincial, but with a sense of moral superiority and super-conscious white, yet, superstitious, in fact, crypto-Catholic protagonist (the reference to the priest and confession unveil him). The narrator, similar to the protagonist, wants to make him a person open to otherness, filled with kindness and happy to help others (with an accidental yet considerable earnings). Throughout the story, however, we note the unbearable “messiah complex” (characteristic for narratives that tend to lecture the reader rather than to tell the story and let the reader enjoy the literary games), with formulation such as “each of us will meet one’s own nightmare” (109), and others platitudes. The story is simple: the protagonist, Polish boy, meet Tom, the back young man whose relative in Africa is a powerful shaman, expert in voodoo so he can help in solving some problems of people in UK (cheating in marriage, false friends, ruthless bosses at work etc.). The business of solving problems by voodoo goes well and both men – using the African magic - are doing well: but – here it comes concealed Christian conscience with old Dostoyevskian dilemma – money is weapon in an evil hand, punishment is a God’s matter (“You may not know it, but you need to pay for everything sooner or later”, 91). Even though the narrator is playing with statement such as that using of voodoo would be “the revenge for years of colonisation, slavery, discrimination and apartheid” (90), in fact, none of the issue is taken seriously. The final scenes are complete caricature of back-white worlds conflict, such as capitalist, imperialist colonisation (in this caricature the dubious organisation wants to use voodoo to pay back the World for hamburgers and hip-hop on African streets, for greedy Jewish bankers, and responsible for the world’s crisis). Mind you, though, it is hard to consider this caricature genuinely. The book is far for mastering a rhetorical irony, within which everything, all statements can be suspended and ambiguous in a multiplicity of interpretations and reading. Instead Krasnowolski’s stories are filled with stereotypical, social superstitions, coarse fears, and thus they are simply at the level of reception of crudeness: chauvinism, racism and description of social conflict based on the inability of understanding what is the Other or a real difference.

No, don’t take me wrong: I appreciate irony very much, I think it is important to exposed cruelty of the reality, unjust and stupidity with laughter. Yet, to play with stereotype is a risky game: one need to be aware of its double edged construction: it may be a way of criticism only when you find a way to create a balanced sincere
narrative, in which the most horrible character are not just implausible brutes, but presented in their simplicity against complexity of life. Otherwise, one has to be careful to juggle with stereotypes: we should be vigilant in choosing what jokes we want to say; some of the jokes we laughed at are funny just for us or for our mates and – in fact – our jokes may expose our own limitations and overgeneralisation we made when describing of the world. The motto of the book is that you can destroy a monster with laughter: no, not all the laughter has this power. Some laughter makes the monster feels quite comfortable in its world of simple dichotomies (white-black, woman-man, the rich and the poor), of simple solutions, and of simple critique. To accept Otherness is to stop seeing it: the stubborn repetition of statements such as “I like the other” (the black, poor, disadvantaged) exposes only resentment.

The rest two stories are in the similar tone, let it be the story about Che and Castro, who after failed project of communism in South America – become vampires indulging in capitalist pleasures in the so hated once West (title taken from the last words of the farewell letter of Che Guevara to Fidel Castro, Hasta siempre, comandante). And Kindoki, a story of a little African boy who is smuggled by Polish slyboots (yet, moral and better than everybody else) to the UK. They both are followed by the people who want to kill the little boy for his amazing ability to control people (another clever, but somewhat uncomfortable narratives, similar to American comedies about the African kings coming to visit NYC).

Yet, you will read all the stories quickly; the language is simple, yet vivid. There are few really funny moments and twists of action, which you will like and – in fact – you will be satisfied, you will be entertained by this “East-European” fiction, you will learn a bit about the East-European past (read: the communism past) as well as you will find a bit of Eastern European self-orientalisation (or self-foreignisation), where the Easterners, what compliant to all common characteristics, are somewhat the weirdoes. But as I presented above, the author of African Electronics, if we see all the stories together, creates a very dubious narrator, who observes the world from somewhat self-righteous distance; he meant to be ironic and even sympathetic to all the miserable creatures presented in the stories. Instead, he is over-informed and patronising voyeur, taking an almost sexual pleasure in observing human indecencies, greediness, and survival instinctual behaviours.

It fact, it is this narrative construction, the intrinsic narrator, that emerged in the whole book, that made me angry and I called him a sexist, colonial, racist,
chauvinist. I wrote it in skirting gesture as a comment to some on-line undeveloped and not all-accurate enumeration of the best Polish emigrant literature. I knew I had no intention to write or talk seriously about Krasnowolski’s book so this was rather a way of voting against rather then any attempt of serious critique. I knew also that some people disagree with me since I talked to readers, well orientated in Polish contemporary literature, and they did not understand my objections to the book, I also knew that the book is being translated by very good and engaged in the literary discussion translator. All these should made me aware of the fact that either I should have refrain from negative comments about the book or write a review with a decent argumentation. Yet, I – innocently - thought the comment is rather for me than for everybody else, and that it does not matter. It does: I hurt the author (who send me few massages saying something in the line that people like me – spending a whole life in library and academia - have no idea of life and I better stay within my milieu of writing about women’s writers), I hurt some readers and emigrant authors. I had no idea that the comment was “Facebooked”, and it will be known very quickly and obviously it will be misleading as all the quickly uttered sound-bites of opinion rather that decent argumentation. This all made me write the review/ lecture on the text. Yet, my critical reading of the book by Jan Krasnowolski is a bit flamboyant, I feel like I am hitting a fly with a cannon, but I have a feeling that this naive narrative with a protagonist of a boy from Eastern (Central?) Europe, who understands the world better then any other is a ridiculous repetition of platitudes, maybe dangerous in indulging in one’s own otherness (obviously sprung from a sense of inferiority).

**Let’s be serious when we are funny**

The main line of conflict here is my understanding of self-orientalisation or self-foreignisation as a literary strategy, which I find dangerous and often completely fruitless. The self-orientalisation is an curious literary move, well described by the post-colonial critique; it is a sort of a survival by the dependent mentality within the dominant culture, in other words – it is a strategy of making oneself different from everybody around, usually very weird in behaviour, look and habits or beliefs, hence interesting for the surrounding environment. Often, it is the only way to be noticed and to be visible in the mainstream discourse. Self-orientalisation includes the methods of emphasizing the most idiosyncratic features of one’s social, class, geographic, cultural, body, gender, and political positioning.
Post-communism gives a lot of space for these strategies: the states that—for half a centuries where subdued to the diabolic system and paradoxically inhumane in modern understanding ideology—now can be seen as a space for a new freedoms, such as a freedom(s) from political correctness, from language of respects to the difference, from understanding the equal-opportunity policies.

Indeed, these new freedoms can be used as a marvellous marketing propaganda: in the Western culture that is a way to sell the culture from the second world. In the capitalist, market-driven, globalist cultural production that is what counts: the sell-ability, pleasing to the marketing potentials rather the decency of expression, search for the comprehension of the reality, needs of adequate language, and awareness of complexity of social world, followed by its contemplation in aesthetic creations.

Krasnowolski’s book present simple structures, the characters are frightfully familiar (from the Polish low rank comedies, cabaret jokes, and overgeneralisation of the post-communist reality), hence the whole game is predictable. Some of the narrative solutions are really good, though, and we cannot condemn the book as all-too-bad at all. After all, there is also a space for an easy read in the literary production. What is unacceptable for me is this pseudo-ironic, familiarly-naïve way of exploiting the chauvinist culture, the white-Europe stereotypes, the emigrant’s fears of marginality. What is the purpose of this: just a game, a story, a story-telling? To show off the ability of self-irony and distance? To blur the boundaries between better West (UK) and the rest (Eastern Europe and Africa)? I do not buy it. I find it sad and unworthy. I prefer literature, which is a decent engagement, an attempt to show the deeper, complex and intriguing dimensions of our living.

**Mea culpa: let’s be serious when we criticize**

My doctoral thesis supervisor from the Jagiellonian University and a friend, prof. Stanislaw Jaworski, gave me once a very good piece of advice: not to write a negative reviews. The unspoken words speak more about the art of work. The silence vis-à-vis an aesthetic object is the most vivid criticism. The literary work that does not evoke needs of discussion and sharing experienced aesthetic emotions should be covered with dust of reticence. Even though such a position is unrealistic in the omnipresence of self-promotion of contemporary media-driven world—I still want to say: Mea culpa, I did write a comment that may seem unreasonable when not
followed by the structured reasoning. I did Facebook the evading comments, with no intention to engage in the text, which is not a good practice. Therefore, the text above, which is partly about *African electronics*, the book that really did not appeal to me at all, and partly a warning about the carelessness circumventing commentary that can really hurt, which is just not fair. Thus, this text: it is not as much about Krasnowolski’s book (which is rather than excuse) as about the omnipresent of simplistic usage of stereotype and overused of self-foreignisation strategies in many recent emigration novels, which should be avoid: there even in so called popular literature: There are ways to tell the story, interestingly and captivating, funny and believable, nor especially high-brow and ambitious, still without creating making it easily digestible, predictable or based on stereotypes we possess. I can only repeat what Witold Gombrowicz was complaining about already over a half century ago when referring to émigré press, which reminded him of “a hospital where the patients are given only soup that are easily digested.”

“Why open wounds? Why add more rawness to the wound life has already afflicted upon us?” (*Diary*) - ironically summarized Gombrowicz. And now, it still seems that some Poles prefer the position of the one who is special and misunderstood, and writes an easy texts rather then open the discussion about the faults of their own culture and the texts that challenge us or our traditions in reading through the Other. Whereas it is exactly the ability of understanding the Other that is the basis of social harmony, basis of humanity and the mutual tolerance.

I will finish with this note against self-orientalisation and Gombrowicz’s ironic warning against easy writing. Women’s wringing is not free from examples of such strategy, though in majority, as we saw in the examples I mentioned, the relations between the authors and texts are often autobiographical, even intimate and therefore much more genuine in constructing the characters and narratives. Analyzed together women’s writing in contemporary Poland draw a landscape of much injustice with a hope of changing it and not just a pointless laughter of a narrator with a complex of superiority. Perhaps, it is because in Polish culture women’s writing and women writers for long time has been the Others, and now they contribute to the process of accepting and giving a space to the differences. In this way Gomrowicz’s transitional NOTHING (Nic) is taking a shape of a more open and multivoiced literary reality.

Thank you.