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WHEN EPIDEMICS BECOME NARRATIVE, WOMEN GET BOGGED DOWN IN SCRIPTS?

Kiedy epidemie stają się narracjami, kobiety grzęzną w skryptach?

Abstract. In the article, I follow the fate of women - heroines of the pandemic non-fiction literature in Poland, in order to verify the thesis that when women's experiences, such as pandemics or epidemics, become narratives, they themselves get stuck in women's narrative scripts and their variants characteristic of a specific culture. Treating storytelling, in the vein of anthropologists, as a primarily cultural practice, I wonder whether and how the attribution and/or adoption of stories about their own experiences by the heroines of the pandemic and epidemic, enables them to transgress the boundaries of scripts harmful to them, not invalidating their agency, but loudly manifesting their own point of view, different from the one established in culture.

Keywords: women's narrative scripts, pandemic non-fiction literature, patriarchal gaze, women's voices

Streszczenie. W artykule śledzę losy kobiet - bohaterek pandemicznej literatury non-fiction w Polsce, aby zweryfikować tezę, że kiedy doświadczenia kobiet,

takie jak pandemie czy epidemie, stają się narracjami, one same utykają w charakterystycznych dla konkretnej kultury kobiecych skryptach narracyjnych i ich wariantach. Traktując opowiadanie, śladem antropologów, jako przede wszystkim praktykę kulturową, zastanawiam się czy i w jaki sposób przypisywanie i/ lub przejmowanie przez bohaterki pandemii i epidemii opowieści o własnych doświadczeniach, pozwala im przekraczać granice krzywdzących dla nich skryptów, nie unieważniając ich sprawczości, a jednocześnie głośno manifestując własny i różny od utrwalonego w kulturze, punkt widzenia.

Słowa kluczowe: kobiece skrypty narracyjne, literatura pandemiczna *non-fiction*, patriarchalne spojrzenie, głosy kobiet

Introduction

The critical analysis of the place and role of women in Polish pandemic literature proposed in the text arises from the assumptions of the anthropology of storytelling (Maggio, 2014, p. 89-106). I treat the stories told about or by women as „the act of telling, (...) [that is I.S.] the process of understanding, making sense of, placing the subject in a broader social and cultural context (...)” (Matysek 2007, p. 42). As Magdalena Matysek writes, „(...) narrative understood in this way allows us to think about narrative identity, allows us to see not only narrative structures but also people telling their stories, allows us to bring the story back to the body” (Matysek 2007, p. 42). Therefore, it is the body: of a woman, a man, a person, that creates or recreates a story. Whether the subject telling/called to tell a story creates or rather recreates a story remains unclear and depends on her/his position and the context, in such a way that those who create a story „have a variety of goals at their disposal and it is never clear how will refer to the future and the resulting present” (Matysek 2007, p. 48, MacIntyre 1996, p. 385, Steiner 2004, p.146), while those who recreate it rather follow a certain scenario. They can only find and arrange ready-made stories in different ways” (Matysek 2007, p. 42-43, MacIntyre 1996, p. 386). In the first case, as Matysek writes, each story is created to the

extent that it can be a part of another story, developed as its new thread. In this view, each story therefore has the potential to develop in upcoming stories. In turn, each of us can create our own story in such a way that by telling our own life we act as the main character, and it is he/she who decides what will happen next, and therefore what he/she will tell us soon (Matysek 2007, p. 42-43, MacIntyre 1996, p. 386). This is an almost ideal situation, but the point is where this telling of one's own life takes place. In the case of women, it is still more of a private sphere, in the case of men - public, dominated, as Ewa Graczyk notes, by the patriarchal gaze:

When a man leaves home, meets other men and switches to the „agoral mode”, he unconsciously and consistently segregates - trivial and invisible women to the left, men important as agoral players to the right. When we, women, enter a public space, we find ourselves in a strange place and we feel bad there. In the media, at conferences, at party meetings, and at public meetings at work, it is difficult to speak up, it is not easy to formulate thoughts (Graczyk 2017, p. 1).

Then, ready-made stories are at hand as narrative scripts well embedded in local storytelling practices, maintained by men, but also recreated by women out of concern for their own safety in public space. But does it have to be this way?

In the article, I follow the fate of women - heroines of the pandemic non-fiction literature in Poland, in order to verify the thesis that when women's experiences, such as pandemics or epidemics, become narratives, they themselves get stuck in women's narrative scripts and their variants characteristic of a specific culture.

I analysed women's narrative scripts in the pandemic non-fiction literature included in six works that were published on the Polish publishing market at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries. They refer respectively to: the Spanish flu epidemic, polio, smallpox, leadwort and the Covid-19 pandemic and are: (1) a historical essay by Łukasz Mieszkowski on the Spanish flu (Mieszkowski 2020); (2) Jerzy Ambroziewicz's report on the smallpox epidemic (Ambroziewicz 2016); (3) Michał Jędryka's

reportage on ‚lead children’ (Jędryka 2020) and (4) Magdalena Majcher’s novel entitled ‚Doktórka od familoków’ (Majcher 2023), (5) a collection of Agnieszka Sztyler – Turovsky’s reportages on Covid-19 (Sztyler-Turovsky 2020) and (6) Paweł Kapusta’s on the same subject (Kapusta 2020).

This selection of sources was not accidental and is representative of the Polish literature concerning pandemic topics created after 1989. At the same time, I justify the choice of forms of expression, essay and historical novel, as well as reportages, by the fact that they are all, by definition, non-fiction, authorial and reflective (Wroczyński 2016). In addition, they contain a large dose of information drawn from sources and experience (non-fiction), fast-paced action (fiction), are written in an accessible language (journalism), addressed to a wide audience (popular literature), and as book publications, they constitute a permanent resource of knowledge on the topic of the epidemic and pandemic in Poland and its female heroines (Osiadacz 2015).

I read the above-mentioned works, like many Polish readers, during the difficult period of the Covid-19 pandemic, having constant access to interviews, conversations and reports published at that time on the two largest Polish portals - Onet.pl and Wirtualna Polska. Then, as a woman, I became interested in how the authors of pandemic literature describe other women - heroines of the times of pandemics and epidemics. At this stage of the research, I put forward a thesis that, despite the complexity of women’s experiences in such difficult circumstances as pandemics and epidemics, in non-fiction literature, they are still cast in traditional roles that are captured with the use of narrative scripts.

Narrative scripts arise from particular cultures of telling things to each other in the same or similar ways. Eric Berne describes them as dramatic patterns „characteristic of a particular society (...) which, like theater scripts (...) have a theme, main characters, agreed roles, stage instructions, costumes, decor, subsequent images and a final scene” (Berne 2013, Karkowska 2020, p. 169). Magdalena Karkowska, explains that the imprint of scripts takes place in a long process of upbringing and socialization, and their persistence is ensured by everyday life, in which they are

maintained thanks to rituals and routine, influencing the lives of those who are subject to them (Karkowska 2020, p. 173).

Women's narrative scripts

A special type of narrative scripts are those relating to the female characters of the story. The above-mentioned Magdalena Karkowska undertook their reconstruction, pointing out those that appear most often in Polish storytelling culture. These are: the „woman-mother” script, the „woman-tomboy” script and the „daddy’s girl” script (Karkowska 2020, p. 172-174).

The script of the „woman-mother” has its Polish equivalent of „the Mother Pole”, which, as Karkowska writes, developed in the context of the difficult historical experiences of Poles, when women „due to wars, armed conflicts, and partitions were left alone, deprived of the support of a man. (...) Nowadays, the cause of a similar situation may be the separation of spouses. However, usually (...) a „the Mother Pole”, is a woman with a family - both a husband and children” (Karkowska 2020, p. 173-174), combining household duties for which she prepares in the female world with professional duties that she develops and implements in the male world, when the first of the patterns, home and feminine, is already working. Both at home and at work, the „Mother Pole” copes better the more difficult the situation she finds herself in, and the more effectively, the more alone she faces it. Moreover, being introduced to the role of a mother predisposes her to perform typically female professions, including: nurse, doctor, educator, teacher, therapist, social carer, volunteer, as well as cook, saleswoman, beautician or hairdresser. At the same time, the wide spectrum of care tasks ranging from family and home to professional work means that the „Mother Pole” rarely plays a managerial role. Her domain is therefore acting for and/or under the dictation of others, often men (Karkowska 2020, p. 174).

The second female narrative script concerns „the tomboy woman”, or, as Karkowska writes, „girls and then women whose fathers wanted

to have sons. Having never had a male heir, they transferred some of their ideas, dreams and projections related to him onto their daughter” (Karkowska 2020, p. 174). As a consequence, girls growing up in the male world of fathers, who are a strong centre of shaping their attitudes and behaviours, puts them in opposition to the world of „women-mothers” (Karkowska 2020, p. 174). „Tomboy women” do everything to meet their fathers’ expectations, they also know that in order to gain the recognition of male members of society, they must renounce the world of women and compete for success, which is „based on external criteria - winning competitions, specific skills, completed studies” (Karkowska 2020, p. 174). The possible failure of a „woman-tomboy” is related primarily to the professional sphere, not the family sphere (Karkowska 2020, p. 175). The „tomboy woman” also more often commits great, but also repulsive, deeds.

Unlike the „tomboy woman”, the advantage of the „daddy’s girl” is her broadly understood femininity. It is a girl, and then a woman, surrounded by admiration, attention and positive energy of a father, brother, husband, and in her professional life, a boss or co-worker, regardless of her actual qualities. Unconsciously competing with her mother, and then with any other woman who threatens her privileged position, „daddy’s girl” is convinced of her uniqueness, usually very self-confident and feminine, after all, it is her femininity that has gained the recognition of those around her, she does not tolerate criticism and does not cope with failure, which she treats very personally (Karkowska 2020, p. 176).

Within the spectrum of the three female narrative scripts discussed above, there are also their variants: „victim women” and „warrior women”, as well as „witch women” and „Baba Yaga”.

Analysing the script of a „woman - mother” in the universe of European culture, Beata Waligórska-Olejniczak writes about the masculine aspect of this role and mentions the figure of „Baba Yaga”, „a woman personifying, at the same time, experienced motherhood and the destructive power of a blood-sucking vampire, constantly demanding new „victims” (Waligórska-Olejniczak 2017, p. 99).

In a similar way, Bernadeta Niesporek-Szamburska writes about a „woman - witch”, a variant of the female script, which involves „being

a woman and witchcraft and having a bad disposition”, and then „ugliness, old age and evil” (Niesporek-Szambirska 2022, p. 2).

All the above scripts and their variants are part of a broader, patriarchal view of women as „warriors” and/or „victims”.

The role of a warrior and/or victim has two aspects. The first, martyrological, turns women into tragic figures who, after fighting a heroic fight, die on the altar of a great, usually male, cause. The second, naive one, deprives women of their agency, making their life stories regrettable but meaningless. As Elżbieta Matynia, Sławomira Walczewska and Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech unanimously admit, „the romantic paradigm, reinforced by literature (...), created the cult of women as the key to nature and the cosmos with a quite specific gender contract between ‚knights and ladies’” (Walczewska 1999, Chmura – Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2015). In this approach, the „lady” is a woman - victim embodying „patriotism and the spirit of sacrifice (...), so still discriminated against, but disguised ‚in a mask of admiration’, ‚condescendingly adored’ and ‚graciously humiliated’” (Chmura – Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2015, p. 56 by Walczewska 1999, Matynia 2008). A „knight” is a woman warrior who works on the front line, „sacrificing her life - alongside men and independently of men (...). However, this role ends with the arrival of peaceful times, when the sacrifice of life and struggle is no longer necessary, and women can finally go home” (Chmura – Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2015, p. 56, Walczewska 1999, Matynia 2008). Ultimately, both „ladies” and „knights” share the fate of sacrifice, about which Maria Solarska and Edyta Głowacka-Sobiech write that it is a product of the “patriarchal view” on women that dominates in our culture and is insufficient because it does not take into account women’s experiences, nor the way they think about them and talk about them (Chmura – Rutkowska, Głowacka-Sobiech, Skórzyńska 2015, p. 48, Solarska 2011, p. 71-78). Carol Gilligan puts it this way:

For centuries, we have listened to the voices of men and theories of development built on their experiences. Recently we have begun to notice not only the silence of women but also the difficulty in

hearing what they say when they speak. And yet it is in the different voices of women that the truth about the ethics of care, the connection between relationship and responsibility, the origin of aggression and the failure of bonds lies. The inability to see the different realities of women's lives and hear the difference in their voices is partly due to the assumption that there is one way of experiencing what is social and interpreting it. By accepting the existence of two perspectives, we arrive at a more complex understanding of the human experience that sees the truth of separation and attachment in the lives of women and men and understands that these truths are guided by different ways of speaking and thinking (Gilligan 2015, p. 242).

Women and the Spanish flu: the male gaze

Łukasz Mieszkowski's historical essay on the Spanish flu pandemic begins with a female thread, namely the death of the popular singer Janina Damm nee Kantak, who died on October 17, 1918 due to a sudden illness after „short and severe suffering” (Mieszkowski, 2020, p. 9). Who exactly was Janina Damm? According to the author of the essay - the successor of great men, i.e. the granddaughter of „a distinguished defender of the Polish cause, an insurgent in 1848 and 1863, and then a respected positivist and member of the Prussian Parliament and the Reich” (Mieszkowski 2020, p. 10) and the wife of the aspiring military prosecutor Rudolf Damm (Mieszkowski 2020, p. 10-14).

As an artist, Janina Damm travels around the Polish territory, giving concerts in various places of the then enslaved country, which probably contributed to her illness and premature death. In this sense, her importance for the story being told is negligible, and she only serves to set up the intrigue, and then, conquered by death, she disappears from the narrative, sharing the fate of an insignificant flu victim.

In the story told by Mieszkowski, her place at Rudolf's side is taken by another woman - Janina, about whom we learn even less than about the singer, only that she bore Rudolf children, among whom was also the future grandmother of the author of the essay (Mieszkowski 2020, p. 203-207). The justification for introducing women's threads at this stage of the

story is a derivative of the explanation of the personal motives why its author, a man, undertook studies on the history of the Spanish flu.

But there is also a third, female heroine of Mieszkowski's essay - a collective of anonymous women who, on the threshold of Polish independence, faced not only the epidemic but also the war and its consequences, because both of these disasters claimed hundreds of thousands of male victims, leaving women behind at the mercy of the state reborn after 123 years of slavery. These were, as Mieszkowski writes:

representatives of all social classes. Ladies and maidens from aristocratic and bourgeois homes who had not worked before the war, competed with representatives of the intelligentsia and the bourgeoisie for positions in the emerging administration, state institutions and foreign humanitarian organizations, which in turn pushed representatives of the impoverished middle class and workers down the professional ladder. For those at the bottom - the masses of unemployed soldiers' wives, i.e. 'reservists' and expelled domestic servants - there was laundry, door-to-door trading, begging, prostitution, or - less obvious (...) standing in lines for a fee (...). There was no shortage of work for women only in the countryside, but it was among the hardest and most devastating. The woman, although still under thirty, looked 60 years old, had a wrinkled face and a bent, emaciated figure (Mieszkowski 2020, p. 94).

In the absence of men and in order to feed the family, especially rural women worked themselves to death, which „was ultimately hyperbolized in the figure of ‚Baba Yaga’ a mother in childbirth, without milk, too exhausted to take care of her newborn, sentenced to death” (Mieszkowski 2020, p. 94). In this approach to the history of ‚women - mothers’, poverty, war and disease were the victors, while they themselves were almost exclusively their victims. Ultimately, the female heroines of Mieszkowski's essay were stuck, like the first Janina in the highly simplified script of „daddy's girl” and like the second Janina in the „woman-mother” script, both of them cast in the role of „women-victims” of familism and motherhood perverted and degraded by war and disease. This image of Polish women at the beginning of the 20th century contrasts strongly with the

fact that they were extremely active in the fight for their own rights. The fight ended, among other things, with them gaining voting rights in 1919. However, the statistics remain inexorable: in 1919, 700,000 people died in Poland as a result of war and disease (Adamkiewicz 2022). They were more often men than women, on whose shoulders the responsibility for taking care of themselves and their family fell - not because there was some reconstruction of male and female roles in society, but because fate wanted it so!

Women and smallpox: the male perspective from a distance

The „woman-victim” script, which dominated the narrative order related to women in the essay about the Spanish flu, also works in the story about smallpox, although here it seems to be, like the other „woman-witch” script, more the subject of criticism by the author of the reportage, than its acceptance.

Sketching an early evening landscape of a sun-warmed summer in Wrocław, Jerzy Ambroziewicz, author of a reportage about smallpox, writes about an ambulance taking a young nurse, Lonia, to the hospital. Lonia needs medical help because she fainted while taking a professional exam. „A strange case - said the doctors. Initially, simple exhaustion was assumed. Then pneumonia, finally scarlet fever. However, this suggestion did not hold up”, (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 4) (just as the possibility that Lonia was suffering from an infectious disease was prematurely ruled out (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 6). At the same time, as a practicing nurse, liked and respected, Lonia received the best possible care at the hospital, so much so that a council of three doctors even gathered on her case ((Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 6). The council worked in extraordinary mode on Sunday, so the men participating in it had to break away from their afternoon siesta. Hence, after seeing the patient and diagnosing her with leukemia, they willingly returned to the comfort of their home to continue relaxing. The next day, Lonia - a woman, nurse and mother, died (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 6-8).

Parallel, in another hospital in Wrocław, a doctor named Zawada was being treated for a disease diagnosed as chickenpox. His friend, also a doctor, named Hawling was watching over him. Concerned about the rapid course of a childhood disease, chickenpox, in an adult man, Hawling notified a sanitary inspector named Arendzikowski about this fact. It was then that, for the first time, there was a suspicion that what Zawada was fighting against might be smallpox. Arendzikowski treated this assumption as very probable and began, unofficially, an epidemiological investigation. Meanwhile, next to the sick Zawada, in the same hospital ward and with similar symptoms, there was a little boy who was suffering from smallpox similar to the first one and almost identically to Lonia. What's more, during the investigation it turned out that Lonia's mother, a hospital attendant, had a similar illness even earlier, and after Lonia's death, her brother had that illness. He, in turn, shared a hospital room with a little boy suffering from a strange form of chickenpox, which ultimately turned out to be smallpox in both, him and Zawada. This is how Zawada became the first patient to receive the correct diagnosis - variola vera, because as a doctor and a man, a friend of another doctor - a man, and unlike Lonia, and previously her mother, he attracted special attention of the doctors. Otherwise, Lonia's death, which, as Ambroziewicz put it ironically, turned out to be useless for medicine, „the period of illness was too short for medicine to be of any use from this case” (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 8).

Next to Lonia - a mother, nurse and caregiver of sick people, who became a silent victim of smallpox, another woman appears in Ambroziewicz's reportage. This is Alicja Surowcowa, who, by the decision of the male management, became the head of the smallpox hospital in Szczodre as its manager. The very creation of such a hospital is a challenge for Surowcowa. There is a lack of people willing to work, both among doctors (many were already isolated or imprisoned in their home hospitals) and among nurses (one of them, although she volunteered, resigned at the hospital gates and returned home) (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 98). The actual staff of the smallpox hospital included: Dr. Surowcowa - the head of the facility, the volunteer doctor Oleksin, the already well-known doctor Hawling, as well as nurse Jureczek and Mrs. Pilatowska, and finally Mr.

Jasio, who served as a link between the closed hospital and the outside world (Ambroziewicz 2016, p. 103).

Of the three doctors in the closed hospital, the most controversial is Dr. Surowcowa, who is promoted by the local media as a heroine of the fight against smallpox, for which she receives unfavorable comments from men whose contributions in this fight, in their opinion, are not appreciated enough. „They write about smallpox, about some woman who runs the hospital” (Ambroziewicz 2016, p.118) says Arendzikowski’s driver in the report, referring to Surowcowa, while she herself invariably emphasizes in the media the merits of the entire team in the fight against smallpox, also appreciating the men. But that’s not enough. From the beginning of the reportage, the role of Surowcowa develops in the wrong direction, from the script of a „woman-tomboy” who is successful in the male world of medicine, through the script of a „woman-warrior” when she runs the smallpox hospital in Szczodre, to the script of „a woman-witch” when Surowcowa and her hospital arouse resentment among men and fear among the local community, which manifests itself in criticism, protests and even threats to set fire to the smallpox hospital.

Women and ”lead”: Another voice

But here is another report and two more women, this time in a lead poisoning story. The title character of Michał Jędryka’s reportage are children, or more precisely, „lead children”, to whom he classifies himself as one of them due to the fact that he lives and attends the same school. The action of the reportage begins in the early 1970s in Dąbrówka Mała, close to the Non-Ferrous Metals Smelting Plant in Katowice - Szopienice, which smelt lead and zinc. Despite the title, „Lead Children” is, however, more the story of two Silesian doctors than of their little patients, one of whom was confronted with the high incidence of children from Dąbrówka with something that resembled deep anemia, and the other, being her superior and academic, undertook to make a diagnosis and to deal with the effects of the disease, using their professional position and family connections,

in a country where mining and metallurgy are the apple of the eye of the government, to raise the issue of environmental pollution and the health of children - victims of this pollution (Jędryka 2020).

The first heroine of the reportage is a local doctor and pediatrician, Jolanta Wadowska-Król, also called the Queen in the reportage. The second one is her superior, also a pediatrician, Professor Bożena Hager-Małecka.

Having encountered cases of strange anemia among children under the care of the clinic in Dąbrówka Mała, where Wadowska-Król worked, she decided to send them to Bożena Hager-Małecka, a provincial consultant in Zabrze, where the children were then treated in the pediatric ward. Wadowska-Król had the best interests of the children at heart, as she had three children herself and lived in an area where, as it soon turned out, there was also a risk of lead poisoning. So, in agreement with Hager-Małecka, the Queen had been secretly keeping a register of young patients with anemia for some time and reporting on the disturbing increase in the number of illnesses among children in her region.

Meanwhile, in 1974, Professor Hager-Małecka took part in an international symposium in Switzerland, where she first heard about lead and the particularly disastrous effects of lead poisoning in children. Equipped with new knowledge, after returning to the country, she contacted Wadowska-Król. "Lead is absorbed throughout the body. In food, from the air, from the earth..." (Jędryka 2020, p. 49). It is all the more dangerous the more difficult the living conditions of families are, the less access to running water, fresh vegetables grown outside the contaminated area, nature and sun, which are hard to find in the vicinity of the steelworks. This enterprise was considered one of the most modern in Poland, which made the party officials of Upper Silesia proud. To tell them it was poisonous seemed like suicide" (Jędryka 2020, p. 49)

Having a justified suspicion that there was an epidemic of childhood lead in the vicinity of the smelter, both doctors continued their research in the greatest secrecy, first of the dispensary group, and then of others, in order to properly document the scale of the problem to which lead had contributed. The test results left no doubts - lead was present in Dąbrówka

Mała and the surrounding area. Knowing its scale, Professor Hager-Małecka decided to go to the Silesian Voivode, Jerzy Ziętek.

The problem was so delicate that she went there alone, without the Queen, and so important that when talking to the voivode, she referred to his acquaintance with her father, a Silesian insurgent and friend of Ziętek for a long time. No one voivode in the Polish People's Republic, even the one highly respected by Silesians, was independent. And each time he was supervised by the first secretary of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party. In 1974, in Upper Silesia, it was Zdzisław Grudzień, a hard-line apparatchik and careerist who competed with voivode Ziętek, expecting that leadership in the region would ensure his promotion to the party headquarters.

Voivode Ziętek was aware of the complexity of this party arrangement, but he did not refuse Hager-Małecka's help. At the same time, the Queen visited the steelworks to make the management aware that its activities were contributing to the development of the lead epidemic among children. In parallel, both doctors sent „lead children” to preventives, and the Queen organized talks with their parents on health hygiene, including nutrition, making mothers aware of the threat that the smelter posed to their offspring. Looking for more effective means of combating lead poisoning, Hager-Małecka met the first secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Edward Gierek, and had enough time to explain to him the tragic situation of children - her patients. This apparently had an effect, because „after a year, children began to return from the preventories to their new apartments, the steelworks declared that it was no longer poisonous as before, and the Queen had research material for her scientific work” (Jędryka 2020, p. 202).

And here came the twist. Inspired by Hager-Małecka, Maria Wadowska-Król wrote a PhD thesis on lead, which turned out to be impossible to defend for political reasons. Her victory in the fight against the „poisoner steelworks” also turned out to be partial, because although after the doctor's intervention, the steelworks polluted less, the Sanitary and Epidemiological Station blocked further tests of children for lead, according to the principle: no tests - no problem. Moreover, frightened by

the prospect of closing the steelworks, its workers began to defend their workplace, turning away from the doctor who, narratively, shared the fate of „Baba Yaga” - a degenerate mother attacking the „Nursing Mother” that the steelworks was for the local community.

In the light of the reportage, the story of Professor Hager-Małecka, a „tomboy woman”, took a different course. In addition to her academic career, she also started a political career and moved to Warsaw.

Gender story

Unlike the heroines of Mieszkowski’s essay or Ambroziewicz’s reportage, Michał Jędryka developed the Queen’s thread in „Children of Lead” so effectively that it grew into another story. This is a historical novel by Magdalena Majcher (Majcher 2023). The novel was created as a result of a series of conversations that Majcher had with, among others, Wadowska-Król and was conducted in the spirit of gender history, where the alternating narrative belongs to two women, affected in different ways by the problem of lead poisoning.

These are Jolanta Wadowska-Król and one of the mothers of children affected by lead poisoning, Helena Kościelniak. The story of the novel’s heroines begins with the Queen’s disturbing medical diagnoses regarding children from Katowice-Szopienice and ends with the suspension of the doctoral procedure and the ‚arrest’ of the Queen’s dissertation by the rector of the University of Silesia. The doctorate was about lead poisoning and politically it was a ‚time bomb’ that the communist authorities could not afford to set off. This novel, however, is primarily a story of two women in the spectrum of two different and non-obvious female scripts.

The first is the story of a local doctor and a pediatrician in the role of a tireless „warrior”, a term that literally appears in the text. As a warrior, the Queen consistently researched and pointed out the scale of the lead epidemic among Szopienice children, so that, with the support of an academic, Professor Hager-Małecka, she could lead to systemic solutions in the treatment of children, as well as to the resettlement of Szopienice

families from the endangered area to new apartments, more distant from the „poisonous steelworks”. In this field, the Queen achieves complete victory, which is possible at the expense of her family life, where, however, she receives the support of those who understand her actions - her mother and husband. So, in the private (read: traditionally feminine) sphere, the Queen triumphs. It is different in the public sphere (read: traditionally male), where she experiences a spectacular failure, i.e. the refusal to accept a doctorate.

But here is the second heroine of Majcher’s novel, Helena Kościelniak, who, as a non-working mother of six children, in a patriarchal relationship with her husband - a steelworker, and doomed to suffer the consequences of her children’s lead poisoning, seems to be the opposite of the Queen. A woman deprived of support even in the private sphere - a victim.

However, Kościelniak’s meeting with the Queen gives the former a strong impulse to get involved in the fight for the health of her own children, becoming a mother as a fighting woman. Taking into account the different habits and positions of both women, each of them tries to avoid the role of victim by achieving victory, although not necessarily on their own terms, but on the terms created for them by men and their state. This is not only about the happy ending of this story but also about Helena Kościelniak’s deconstruction of women’s narrative scripts, including her development of women’s threads in the story, towards their complexity and non-obviousness, as Caroll Gilligan and Alasdair MacIntyre or Magda Matysek would have it (Gilligan 2015, MacIntyre 1996, Matysek 2007).

Magdalena Majcher’s historical novel, thanks to the adopted gender story perspective, became a space for staged statements of her heroines, i.e. a space where they spoke with their own voice. It gave rise to a still staged, but their own, move beyond traditional female narrative scripts.

Women and Covid – 19: In their own voice

However, can we talk about any visible permanent trend of change within women’s stories about the pandemic experience? With this question,

I read two pandemic reportages on Covid-19 by Paweł Kapusta (Kapusta 2020) and Agnieszka Szt Tyler-Turovsky (Szt Tyler-Turovsky 2020).

The first one, Paweł Kapusta, is the author of a book about the first wave of the Covid-19 coronavirus in Poland. As he notes in the introduction, he tried to collect reports and talk to representatives of many environments and professions for which the pandemic has posed new, previously difficult to imagine challenges. His interlocutors included men and women. The former are: a supermarket salesperson, a funeral home employee, a Covid patient, a farmer - beef producer, a prison guard, a postman, the Minister of Health, a doctor, a professor - an expert of the Medical Council under the Minister, a professor of economics and a professor of sociology. The latter are: a paramedic, two nurses in intensive care units, a hospice worker, a laboratory diagnostician, the mother of a boy suffering from cancer and a teacher of grades 1-3. This selection of interlocutors from the very beginning disadvantages women not only because of their number, but also because of the professions and professional positions they perform, often lower in the hierarchy than men's and not related to political power or science, but primarily to the care of children and the sick. However, it is not quantitative but qualitative data that is binding here.

The leading character of Kapusta's mini-reports is paramedic Katarzyna, who repeatedly reports on the course of the pandemic online. Katarzyna is a heroine from the front line, responsible for patients whose health and lives are at risk, taking swabs in their homes, taking care of those in intensive care and preparing medical records. Her description of everyday life in the ambulance and in the hospital emergency room is precise, fast-paced, rational, without unnecessary emotions, surrounded by questions that the narrator asks herself and answers in specific actions. The dominant attitude in Catherine's story is therefore one of mobilization and action, two characteristics, the first of which makes her a „tomboy woman” and the second, a „warrior.”

The second witness, nurse Karolina, talks similarly about the pandemic. However, strong emotions came to the fore here, including anger and bitterness caused by the low prestige and remuneration of average medical staff in Poland, and at the same time the expectation of employers

and patients that nurses will serve them wholeheartedly. When talking about the pandemic, Karolina fit into the script of a „woman-mother” and a caregiver, protesting at the same time against the elevating of this role at the expense of real recognition of her studies, strength, knowledge and skills, positioning her in her own eyes closer to a „tomboy” and a „warrior”, which roles are not only within her reach but which she fulfills - acts, thinks, talks - on her own terms, rejecting the dominant male point of view in society:

And don't let anyone talk to me about the mission, the higher goal (...). This thinking has been out of date for seventy years! Since the war! Nursing is a profession like any other! And that's what makes me laugh the most. When we protested, the entire society didn't care about us. And when I go to work today, people applaud me from the balcony. They shout that I am a heroine. Congratulations. This is hypocrisy! What are you people congratulating me on? This salary? Just a year ago, many of you were shouting that we were screwed because we wanted pay rises. We are humiliated by the system, we are humiliated every day by ordinary people. By patients' families. Called the worst names (...). For well over ten years, no one complimented me. I took care of the most seriously ill and unconscious people. I washed them. I was wiping up the feces. Nobody even paid attention to me (Kapusta 2020, p. 34-35).

Katarzyna also spoke about the low social prestige and economic capital of women nurses and rescuers, beyond the existing scripts, drawing attention to the weakness of the system, lack of social responsibility and the arrogance of politicians in a state of crisis:

They parade around the Sejm wearing FFP3 masks. They put the masks, which are worth their weight in gold, on their foreheads. Masks, the shortage of which is grounding ambulances. Masks, thanks to which we are safe and able to work, are treated as an attribute for selfies (...) from the windows of the ambulance I watched people having barbecues, frying sausages, going for family shopping (Kapusta 2020, p. 66).

The third nurse, Natalia, who works in the cardiology department on a daily basis, appears differently in Kapusta's report as a patient suffering from Covid-19, experiencing absurdities related to isolation and taking swabs from recovering patients, including indifference on the part of the hospital where she is a nurse, on her health and personal situation. "Should I be honest with you? – says Natalia – It doesn't surprise me at all. I know what the reality is. I know how we have been treated for years. Like air" (Kapusta 2020, p. 135).

The same group of female medical staff also includes a hospice caregiver and a laboratory technician. The first of them, in an interview with Kapusta, describes the lonely death of senior patients, including the isolation of staff and patients from their families who, in pre-pandemic conditions, helped take care of the dying, which became impossible during the pandemic. It also speaks about the empathy of the medical staff, mainly women, in dealing with patients with this lonely death.

The second woman talks about the endless sea of work with infected material and the 'invisibility' of laboratory work, where the risk of infection has increased many times with Covid-19, intensified by work overload and rushing (Kapusta 2020, p. 70). Operating such laboratories is largely the domain of women, so their invisibility is double, and their dedication must bask in their own warmth because no one else sees this work and the risk.

Kapusta's reportage also includes a first-grade primary school teacher who, like everyone else at school, switches to distance learning, without any preparation and in the face of numerous inconveniences, such as: lack of equipment, Internet access in students' homes, teaching materials adapted to remote teaching, entering students in their home and family life, at the expense of their own home and family life, which during the pandemic takes place and overlaps in the virtual and real, public and private sphere, with all its consequences. One of them is also entering students' homes and participating in the life of their families offline, including quarrels and fights between parents, especially fathers, who indiscriminately comment on the course of school lessons and the teachers conducting the lessons (Kapusta 2020, p. 163-173).

Another heroine of Kapusta's reportage is Agnieszka, the mother of a terminally ill child, with the prospect of saving him in one of the American clinics. Covid-19 is like a deferred sentence for her son. Agnieszka protected him from infection and is worried about the success of the trip to the USA, including the open status of the American hospital in the face of the virus threat and about the money that is still being collected, which does not guarantee that Agnieszka's family will be able to afford the expensive surgery (Kapusta 2020, p. 105-109).

Paweł Kapusta's reportages clearly show the discrepancy between how women themselves perceive their own professional work and in what active, often militant role they position themselves, and how they are perceived and defined by the environment, including those represented primarily by men, the authorities and the system. We can also see the unprecedented overlapping of women's private and professional spheres and the resulting complications, and finally, women's strategies and tactics of combining the roles of mothers and caregivers with the roles of warriors and professionals, belying their sacrifice on the altar of a great cause, as others see it.

The author of the second series of Covid reportages - „Infectious diseases ward. History Without Censorship” is Agnieszka Sztyler-Turovsky (2020). Her book was written as the Covid-19 pandemic developed in Poland and contains 11 stories from medics, three of whom are women. In terms of numbers, we are again dealing with the dominance of male narrators. But again, as in Kapusta's case, it is not the quantity but the quality of the story that determines the place and role of women on the front line in the fight against the pandemic.

The book begins with the story of Marzena Tadko, a nurse in a Warsaw hospital transformed into one of the largest Covid hospitals in Poland. The axis of her story is, like Kapusta's story, the lonely death of Covid patients - in isolation, without the opportunity to see their family and with limited ability to communicate with loved ones via a laptop or phone. The loneliness that Tadko talks about does not only apply to the dying but also to the dead, about whom he says that packed in bags and covered tightly with foam, they end up in a coffin, never to be cuddled by their loved ones

again. Tadko describes such a death in opposition to the experiences that accompanied the deaths of her patients before Covid, strongly empathizing with the families of the deceased. “The funeral ritual has changed drastically. On your word of honor, you must believe that your father, mother, husband is in the coffin...” (Szytler-Turovsky 2020, p. 173). The third type of loneliness related to the pandemic and death concerns Tadko herself, who constantly experiences the suffering and death of patients, but has no one to share this trauma with. Her loving family, which takes special care of her during the pandemic, is trying hard to convince her that she should take a break from work-related problems at home, which means not telling her family what she is going through there.

Considering Tadko’s account, Covid-19 is a kind of capacitor for women working in health care and having families, requiring from them increased energy, which must be enough to handle two worlds, home and hospital, each of which becomes in these special circumstances more demanding. Tadko is aware that in this sense she embodies the script of a modern Mother Pole’ who, the better copes with adversities, the more difficult things in her life are. But, as she says, she perfectly understands her pre-retirement colleagues who quit their jobs when the pandemic hit.

The second heroine of Agnieszka Szytler-Turovsky’s reportage series is Doctor Elżbieta Balcerzyk-Barzdo, a specialist in emergency medicine, head of the Emergency Department of the hospital in Zgierz. With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the hospital where Elżbieta works has become identical. For the manager of the Emergency Department, it is a double challenge to save patients suspected or infected with Covid-19 and to manage the work and protect the health of medical staff. Taking up this challenge, Elżbieta explained that she is a workaholic, which means that regardless of the costs, she will cope with the new challenge, especially since in a partnership with a court doctor, she can count on full understanding and support.

Starting work in the conditions of a single-name hospital and considering the high risk posed by its medical staff, Elżbieta leaves her subordinates the choice of whether they want to work under these conditions. Aware of the responsibility for the safety of other doctors and nurses, she

knows well how to ensure it. Hence, procedures for dealing with Covid conditions are being created on an ongoing basis: using the necessary protective measures, observing the sequence of putting on and taking off contaminated suits, masks, gloves, and various rules of work in the dirty and clean zones of the ward. Elżbieta, like her subordinates, ‚takes lessons’ from doctors from Italy, where the pandemic was previously dealt with, and from a friendly doctor from Spain, who talks about her own experiences on an ongoing basis. While caring for infected people, she encounters unexpected situations in the emergency department, for example, the appearance of aggressive patients suspected of being infected, addicted to alcohol or drugs, or a pregnant woman and her husband. Elżbieta methodically describes subsequent actions, multiplying problems, and dilemmas, as well as the choices she makes in extreme conditions in order to express the emotions accompanying these actions in a different place: ‚I feel like I’m in a hidden camera. Or I’m on a reality show. Big brother checks: ‚How much longer can you fucking stand it, huh?’” (Szytler-Turovsky 2020, p. 269).

Elżbieta rarely discusses family topics, but she does share concerns about the safety of her husband and daughter due to her job and the safety of her parents due to their contact with her family, including her granddaughter. In this context, he talks about the „hotel for medics” initiative, which appeared in Poland at the beginning of the pandemic, and about the dilemmas associated with moving to such a hotel: „(...) if we knew how long it would take, it would be easier. What if it’s months? I don’t think anyone can mentally cope with spending so much time away from home, away from their family. After all, everyone stays at home” (Szytler-Turovsky 2020, p. 248-249).)In this thread, at the beginning of the pandemic, Elizabeth keeps a packed suitcase in the hospital in case of quarantine or illness and isolation, but at some point she unpacks it. Covid-19 becomes something for her to understand better, something she can cope with better, something she owes to herself and her team. “If I ever lived in a nursing home,” Elżbieta finishes, “I would only live with you. As Mark Twain said, “let us be grateful that crazy people exist. We couldn’t be successful without them” (Szytler-Turovsky 2020, p. 270).

The third heroine of the „Infectious Diseases Ward” is Jadwiga Caban-Korbas, a doctor and head of the District Sanitary and Epidemiological Station in Słubice, in the region where Polish patient zero appeared. With his appearance, Jadwiga, extravagant and direct, with wide interests and artistic passion, convinced of her worth, appears at a press conference, broadcast, despite her knowledge, by local television.

Jadwiga, unaware of the importance that local authorities attach to the fact that it was in their area that ‚Polish Covid-19’ began, preparing for the arrival of the pandemic for several weeks, presents the pandemic situation in the district with great defiance, freely, and even in a bit funny manner and with distance, being aware of local realities and first experiences with panicked people whose fear she wants to disarm with a joke. When starting work and in the face of the appearance of Covid in her area, Jadwiga had clearly defined goals: „to control panic in the town, to explain the reasons on which I think that the contacts [it was about patient zero I.S.] will be negative, to support people mentally „so that they don’t ‚burn out’ at the beginning, because problems are still ahead of us” (Sztyler-Turovsky 2020, p. 313).

These goals guide her when she goes to a crisis session of the District Council, which, as usual, is recorded, but has never been broadcast to public media. Even more so now, when the public opinion is not to be informed about the patient zero by the district sanitary inspector, but by the Minister of Health (which he has not done yet on March 4). During the recorded session, Jadwiga feels even more secure as she knows and trusts local journalists, referring to them as „they are our guys.” The thing is that on March 4, fragments of these recordings were leaked online, and these are the fragments of her statements that, as Jadwiga herself says, were unconventional, although they were not addressed to the person who made them public or to the general public.

An experienced epidemiologist, working in the border zone, who has been in contact with exotic diseases for years, which are easier to learn about in such places, original, effective, but also prone to jokes, in fact, a performer, not only becomes the laughing stock of the entire Poland, but is punished with dismissal from work for not sufficiently pious approach

to the pandemic, for which, as she says, she is more prepared than her superiors and the government, who are the more willing to stage their own deadly serious involvement in the fight against Covid-19 in the media, the less they have any idea what to do about it.

Fitting into the script of „daddy’s girl”, Jadwiga Caban-Korbas develops the thread of her own experience, responsibility and agency, maintaining the status of contextual inconsistency that makes her a critic of the system, depriving her of recognition for her professional achievements, but making her free from the male oppression of public officials.

Conclusion

There are at least three reasons for the critical examination of women’s narrative scripts. The first stems from the belief in the historical variability of women’s fate, which, in a cognitive sense, deserves the same attention as the variability of men’s fate, which narrative scripts do not provide to either side. Secondly, from the belief that even if women’s narrative scripts contain a grain of truth about themselves, this truth is invalidated by a biased, patriarchal view of them. There is also a third reason to study scripts, although of a slightly different nature, namely that while the patriarchal view of women’s experiences during a pandemic or epidemic is still burdened with stereotypical thinking and storytelling, women themselves are increasingly aware of these simplified and harmful patterns. The condition for this awareness to occur is, in turn, speaking on one’s own behalf, which generally applies only to witnesses of past events. Therefore, historical female figures are still exposed to the risk of scripture, which, however, both contemporary men and women can defend themselves against or prevent. This happens, for example, when in the spectrum of social practices of telling women’s stories, in addition to the male perspective, there is also space for a female perspective (pandemic non-fiction literature is a vivid example of this). This applies in particular to those stories that remain open to new threads and other voices, including women’s voices, as is the case of Maria Wadowska - Król, the heroine of Łukasz

Jędryka's reportage, and Magdalena Majcher's gender story, when a story developed from another one, both quite sensitive to the autonomous life of the Queen, which was still unfolding before the eyes of their authors. This female perspective is even more visible in the narratives of the heroines of the Covid-19 pandemic, who were no longer replaced in telling about their experiences, creating a space where they themselves could, if they wanted to, transgress the boundaries of women's scripts in the direction that Caroll Gilligan described as „the existence of two perspectives [thanks to which I.S.] we can arrive at a more complex understanding of human experience, which sees the truth about separation and attachment in the lives of women and men and understands that these truths are guided by different ways of speaking and thinking” (Gilligan 2015, p. 242).

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