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ABSTRACT

Taboo does not just indicate a sacred entity; it also designates a dangerous and uncanny prohibition, as illustrated in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913). This latter interpretation typically stems from something deviating from the norm that evokes fear and is therefore marginalised. The offensive label "menstrual literature" coined by male Polish critics can stand as an example. This tag was supposed to define the rising number of female authors in the 1990s who were considered inadequate and too eccentric in their way of portraying the world. In wider terms, whether they were narrative voices or fictional characters, unconventional women were perceived as dangerous and monstrous. This article sets out to show the case of the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk who in some of her works has represented new hybrid identities as the woman-man and the woman-animal challenging the boundaries between mankind and the human or non-human 'other'.

KEYWORDS: Taboo; Tokarczuk; gender studies; monster studies; patriarchy.

1. Introduction

Flipping through the pages of *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud presents a variety of intriguing theories about the concept of 'taboo', whose origins seem to lie in the earliest human communities. The term itself bears a twofold meaning: it

can denote that which is sacred or consecrated, yet it can also indicate that which is "uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean" (Freud 1913, 37), standing in contrast to the concept of *noa,* which encompasses all that is "'common' or 'generally accessible'" (ibid.). Psychologist Wilhelm Wundt attributes this curious ambiguity to an overlap between the 'sacred' and the 'unclean', explained by an alleged "dread of contact" (Wundt 1906). This widespread belief in primitive populations claims that certain animals, human beings, and objects were presumed to possess a demonic power[1] associated with a supernatural and divine nature and should therefore not be touched. Such an assumption leads to a simplified interpretation of taboo as a moral prohibition and restriction, not to be confused with a religious interdiction. If the spiritual is generally motivated by specific reasons, the ethical seems to have no grounds and is therefore particularly unsettling. According to various psychologists, taboos constitute the "oldest human code of laws" (Freud 1913, 37), with their transgression triggering retributive actions. Such violations are met with punitive measures by either the tabooed entity itself or the community, which aims to prevent the supposed 'power' from spreading through physical contact with objects, clothing, or other items. There can be three main categories of taboo, depending on their subject. The first relates to animals and includes prohibitions against killing and eating certain species. The second pertains to human beings and comprises those considered in 'unusual conditions', such as women who are temporarily tabooed during menstruation and childbirth, as well as the dead. The last type is directed at 'objects' like plants, trees, houses, and places which could cause fear and be subject to taboo.

Taboo always generates fear and terror, which are conventionally embodied in the figure of the monster, created to incarnate extraordinary and disturbing features, as shown by Jeffrey Cohen in *Monster Theory Reading Culture* (1996). In this seminal work belonging to the field of Monster Studies, Cohen lists the characteristics determining 'monstrosity'. One of them is based on the body, which becomes a vehicle of fear and anxiety because it symbolises a precise 'cultural moment', as Cohen calls it, namely a frightening place, time, and emotion. On these grounds, these figures can be defeated and expelled from

[1] The tabooed person, animal or object was believed to possess a form of power called *mana*, which could be intrinsic or transferred.

society through specific rituals recognised and performed by the whole community. To mention some examples of these practices, the monster can be driven through the heart with a stake or buried under a crossroads, a strategy to disorientate it. Besides, these creatures are fleeing since they naturally tend to disappear and reappear abruptly. This characteristic gives their bodies immateriality, which is therefore perceived as a distressing and unsettling attribute that is impossible for human beings to comprehend. In addition, monsters defy categorisation: they do not belong to the normal 'order of things', which disrupts social stability because they cannot be included in any group and be clearly defined. In this respect, the monster is also a synonym for difference: these creatures embody everything that is rejected by the reference model established at the cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual, and gender levels. These dreadful figures also "police the borders of the possible" (Cohen 1996, 12), meaning that only they can venture into the unknown, whereas 'normal' or 'common' human beings must not cross the boundaries of what is legitimate and acceptable. According to Cohen, this repulsion is also tied to desire: monsters are often depicted as engaging in polygamy and cannibalism, behaviours that are prohibited by the human social order: all rules and stereotypes are defied by monsters, who are therefore rejected (ibid., 3-25).

Western societies have long been characterised as anthropocentric and androcentric, a framework that sets men as the normative standard of humanity. This paradigm, however, is not a natural given but a socio-historical construct (Ortner 1972; Butler 1990). Within this system, women, together with non-human entities, have been relegated to 'otherness' (Budrowska 2000; De Beauvoir 1949; Janion 1996). The association of women with taboo, as suggested by Freud (1913), reflects not an inherent 'dangerous power', but rather social anxieties about female bodies and their reproductive capabilities. Contemporary feminist scholarship (Grosz 1994; Kristeva 1982) reframes these 'exceptional physical states' not as deviations from a male norm, but as different expressions of embodied experience. Such a perspective invites us to examine social taboos around female bodies that reinforce gender hierarchies rather than reflecting any innate 'danger' or 'power'. As also Barbara Creed affirms, "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. [...] When

woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" (Creed 1993, 1). For example, menstruation and childbirth cause physical changes, leading to exceptional circumstances that may seem threatening because they are beyond men's control (Lerner 1986). In response to these terrifying features, men have tried to suppress these powers described almost as demonic manifestations. Female monsters often do not conform to the women's stereotype elaborated by patriarchal society. From the archetypes of the deviant and unemotional mother – able to give and take life – to the seductive and luxurious *femme fatale,* female monsters can take many horrifying and repulsive shapes: they can look like hybrids, a combination of animal and human elements, or they can be merely cruel and unmerciful individuals, as Jude Doyle illustrates in *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers: Monstrosity, Patriarchy, and the Fear of Female Power* (2019). Amongst the typical monstrous-feminine creatures, Doyle describes "dead girls", "demon daughters", "living dead girls", "vampires", "beauties and/or beasts", "Faery Serpents and Lizard People", "sirens", "old deceivers", "witches", "unnatural goddess[es]", "femme fatales", "bad mothers" (Doyle 2019).

These monsters are the emblems of society's attempts to confine what is 'above the normal' under taboo. In Poland in 1989, a year of a literary turning point, there was an 'explosion' of women authors labelled as "menstrual literature" by male critics and writers like Jan Błoński – who is believed to have coined the term – and Andrzej Stasiuk (Filipiak 1999). They aimed to show the 'monstrosity' of both the eccentric female characters represented in this kind of literature and the authors themselves, because they were both violating taboos. The journalist Bożena Umińska comments on the review of Maria Bigoszewska's poem by Andrzej Stasiuk, implied in the "menstrual literature" tag. This label seemed to indicate something of little value to the male writer, "babskość, maciczność, fizjologiczność kobiecą, czyli coś, co z definicji jest gorsze i drugorzędne"[2] (ibid.). Even though nobody had ever mentioned 'male literature' before, during these years much attention was paid to the so-called 'feminist literature'. Moreover, various male Polish writers seemed convinced that poetry "była trudnym, acz cenionym kunsztem" and "znała kilku

[2] "la femminilità, l'utero, la fisiologia della donna, cioè qualcosa che per definizione è peggiore e di secondo piano" (Filipiak 2005, 207. Translated from Polish by Amenta).

mistrzów"[3] (ibid.) who were largely male. Amongst the most well-known 'monstrous' women writers of that time were Izabela Filipak, Magdalena Tulli, and Olga Tokarczuk.

2. The Taboo of Physical Hybridism

The 2018 Nobel Prize for Literature winner, Olga Tokarczuk, has been included in the "menstrual literature" phenomenon due to her portrayal of eccentric female personalities in many of her works (ibid.). Her novels and tales often host bizarre characters with unusual features exhibited through physically deformed and hybrid bodies, rebellious attitudes, and unconventional behaviour, paying particular attention to the most vulnerable categories of the anthropocentric and androcentric society, such as women, foreigners, plants, and animals[4]. Two of the most noteworthy hybrid identities in her works are Wilga, or Saint Kummernis, from the collection *House of Day, House of Night* (1998), this latter representing the figure of the woman-man, and The Ugliest Woman in the World from *Playing on Many Drums* (2001) designating the woman-animal.

The story of Wilga, the first character, unfolds through different short tales by a fictional writer, a monk who happens to find a booklet about her life in the village of Wambierzyce. According to the author's words, Wilga's initial flaw is her gender. Her father seems disappointed that she is a woman because he considers her the weaker sex: "Kummernis was born imperfect in her father's eyes, but only according to a human understanding of imperfection – for her father longed for a son" (Tokarczuk 2003, 52). Being a woman means being seen as imperfect in the eyes of the patriarchal society[5]. This is because women naturally embody diversity and are seen as deviating from the norm due to the significant bodily changes they experience, such as lactation, menstruation, and pregnancy, which men do not experience[6].

[3] "era un'arte difficile"; "aveva diversi maestri" (ibid., 204).

[4] See also Chowaniec 2015, 183-94; De Carlo 2017, 119-31; Świerkosz 2022, 346-67; Witosz 2009, 115-25.

[5] For further analysis of the female sex perceived as a lack in patriarchal society see Cixous 1975.

However, Wilga grows up, becomes a beautiful young woman and receives numerous marriage proposals. Her attractiveness meets the expectations of the patriarchal female stereotype, according to which women should attract men's eyes, get their attention, and be the object of their desire[7]. As soon as her father returns from the wars, he arranges marriages for all his daughters, except for Kummernis, who is sent to a convent where she finds peace and the true meaning of her life. But her father is convinced that her fate, like the one of all women, is to marry. So, after some time, he settles to make her marry a friend from the wars, Wolfram von Pannewitz. She refuses because she wants to take her vows in the convent. After a series of adventures that lead her to her home and then to the mountains before returning to the convent, she is kidnapped by her father and her intended husband even though she has already taken her vows. To force Kummernis to marry Wolfram, the girl is locked in a windowless room without food or water. She feels that her beauty has become a heavy burden and the cause of all her troubles. One day, she asks God to help her and to free her from her feminine aspect, because it no longer holds any meaning for her:

> You provided me, O Lord, with my sex and my woman's body, which has been a bone of contention and a source of all manner of desire. Deliver me, O Lord, from this gift, for I do not know what I am to do with it. Take back my beauty and give me a sign of covenant that You love me too, unworthy as I am, and have destined me for Yourself since birth. (ibid., 62)

After the request, the miracle happens and Wilga's face changes into that of a bearded man. Waiting for her to change her mind, Kummernis' father encourages her future husband to force her to marry him by any means possible, which highlights the patriarchal tradition of controlling women's sexual and social lives by the 'male elders' (Lerner 1986). Convinced by the words that the girl's father had told him, Wolfram enters the girl's room and is left in a state of complete shock:

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[6] For further analysis of the role of the female body, see Butler 1993; Shildrick 1996, 1-15; Wehrle 2016, 323-37.

[7] For further analysis of the objectification of women's bodies, see Dworkin 1974; MacKinnon 1987; MacKinnon 1989, 314-46; Papadaki 2010, 16-36.

> In the windowless room stood Kummernis. But it was not the same woman that they all knew. Her face was covered with a silky beard and her hair fell flowing to her shoulders. From the tattered bodice of her dress there protruded two naked, girlish breasts. (Tokarczuk 2003, 63)

Her transformation seems to refer to the figure of Lamia, a popular mythical creature from Greek mythology who is portrayed, for instance, in *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (1658), a collection of illustrations of legendary specimens created by the clergyman Edward Topsell. In the book, this creature is depicted with a phallus, which today could be interpreted as an allusion to a transgender identity. In the light of this figure, Saint Kummernis can also represent a transgender character becoming taboo because of her ambiguous traits associated with a non-normative and indefinite identity halfway between woman and man[8]. The taboo of the new hybrid protagonist is encouraged by the horror it causes to people like Wolfram, who cannot help but feel fear and rejection, making Kummernis the anthesis of the female stereotype:

> His face was the picture of horror – he was opening and closing his mouth, and pointing behind him. The din in the hall fell completely silent. The baron sprang to his feet and rushed in the direction of Wolfram's pointing finger, and after him slipped the curious guests, servants and musicians. (ibid.)

Also, the radical transformation of Kummernis is better understood by the change of her name from 'Wilga' to 'Kummernis', which underlines a deeper identity mutation, as if she had become a new living being.

A physical hybrid aspect is also presented by The Ugliest Woman in the World, the protagonist of the short story in the collection *Playing on Many Drums* (2001)[9]. The Ugliest Woman, whose first name is unknown, is described as a horrible creature who works in a circus shocking people and making them laugh by exploiting her disturbing and terrible body, which is similar to that of a monkey:

[8] See also Larenta 2020, 83-113.

[9] As a result of the unavailability of the collection translated into English, the bibliographical references will be given using the volume which contains the English version of the short story by Olga Tokarczuk (Hemon 2011, 179-92).

> She had a large head covered in growths and lumps. Her small, ever-tearing eyes were set close under her low, furrowed brow. From a distance they looked like narrow chinks. Her nose looked as if it was broken in many places, and its tip was a livid blue, covered in sparse bristles. Her mouth was huge and swollen, always hanging open, always wet, with some sharply pointed teeth inside it. To top it all of, as if that wasn't enough, her face sprouted long, straggling, silken hairs. (Tokarczuk 2001, 179-80)

The taboo lies not only in the issue of categorisation proposed by Cohen, but also in the combination of human and animal elements, which suggests a union of two normally separate realities: civilisation and nature[10]. When humans surpass the limitations imposed by their society, they become monsters difficult to control because they enter a natural world that is unknown to them. In this respect, the deformity of the woman seems particularly threatening not only because of its complex classification, but also because it is the outcome of nature, a complex whole with different laws (Diehm 2007). Early ecofeminist and ecocritical scholars, such as Carolyn Merchant (1980) and Val Plumwood (1993), highlighted the historical association of women with nature, emotions, and the body, in contrast to men's association with culture, logic, and the mind. However, this binary framework has been extensively criticised to reinforce essentialist notions of gender and potentially reify problematic nature/culture dualisms. Contemporary scholars like Stacy Alaimo (2010) and Catriona Sandilands (1999) have called for more nuanced approaches that take into account the entanglements of gender, nature, and culture. These approaches emphasise the 'fluidity' of these categories and their social construction, and also acknowledge the material realities of bodies and environments. Moreover, intersectional ecofeminism (Kings 2017) highlights how experiences of nature and embodiment are shaped not only by gender, but also by race, class, and other social factors, complicating simplistic gender-nature associations. Thus, the whole composition of animal and female features makes the ape-woman extremely frightening (Gaard 1993; Poks 2023). The woman's appearance is so unbearable in its deformity and ambiguity that people feel horror when looking at her (Mellor 1992):

[10] See also Haraway 2008.

> The first time he saw her she emerged from behind the cardboard scenery of a traveling circus to show herself to the audience. A cry of surprise and disgust went rolling over the heads of the crowd and fell at her feet. She may have been smiling, but it looked like a woeful grimace. (Tokarczuk 2001, 180)

Despite her terrible aspect, the woman is married to a man who has incessantly pursued her with flowers and gifts. As the story unfolds, he turns out to be an impostor because he uses the marriage as a business opportunity to exploit her horrific body as a freak show. He therefore organizes tours and meetings all over the country, exploiting her for money:

> They began the next season on their own. He had some photographs of her taken and distributed them worldwide. The bookings came by telegraph. They had numerous appearances and travelled first class. She always wore a hat with a heavy, grey veil, from behind which she saw Rome, Venice, and the Champs-Élysées. He bought her several dresses, and laced up her corset himself, so when they walked down the crowded streets of the cities of Europe, they looked like a proper human couple. (ibid., 187)

Besides, he demonstrates that he has to fight against the disgust he has always felt when looking at her. He seems to feel slightly better when he keeps watching her because he 'gets used' to her abnormality:

> He needed this spying, because day by day his disgust was lessening, melting in the sun, disappearing like a puddle on a hot afternoon. Gradually his eyes were growing used to the painful asymmetry of her, the broken proportions, all her shortcomings and excesses. Sometimes he even thought she looked ordinary. (ibid., 184)

Her husband is so haunted by her aspect that he vilifies her through story tales alluding to her, which lets the reader understand what he truly thinks about her. Furthermore, his disgust is so utter that it prevents him from touching her and being intimate with her, which recalls the "dread of contact" of ancient civilisations mentioned above:

> "Let's go now, my love," she whispered in his ear. But he clung to the edge of the table, as if pinned to it by invisible tacks. The more observant guests might have assumed he was simply afraid of being intimate with her, naked—afraid of the obligatory post-nuptial intimacy. Was that in fact the case? "Touch my face," she asked him in the darkness, but he wouldn't do it. (ibid., 185)

Nonetheless, after the marriage, he has an intimate relationship with her and has a child who resembles an animal and is as scary as his wife.

3. The Taboo of Disruptive Behaviour

The physical hybridity of the two protagonists is accompanied by deviant behaviour which substantially contributes to the rejection of the standard female patriarchal stereotype and turns the two women into objects of taboo. As far as Wilga is concerned, she is destined to marry and has no other choice, like all girls her age. According to the society's androcentric tendency, women had to be 'passed' on from one master (the father) to another (the husband)[11], as also her father remarks (Lerner 1986): "So he said to her: In the body, you belong to the world and you have no other lord and master than me" (Tokarczuk 2003, 56). However, she dislikes her promised husband Wolfram and does not want to marry and have a family, but to take the vows and stay in the convent. Not only is this a groundbreaking decision, but she also resists her father's impositions and decides to flee from her house against his will, refusing to satisfy his expectations when he brings her back home after a period spent with the nuns. This is unusual behaviour for a young girl who could not be independent and rebel against her father's desires. Moreover, according to patriarchal stereotypes, women are supposed to have a mild and condescending character, whose purpose is to satisfy all men's requests (Frye 1983). Women become dangerous and rebellious when they revolt against male control and the "logic of domination" (Warren 2000).

These manifestations of transgression against the traditional canon are blocked by attempts at submission and restoration of the norm through the reinforcement of the taboo, put into action by different characters. For instance, the main measures taken by the father of Kummernis consist of various forms of violence. Amongst the most common strategies of oppression are "reduction, immobilisation, and molding" (Li 1993, 285). In Kummernis' case, her father uses "immobilisation": "The *immobilization* of women eventually reduces their own needs, values, and capacities" (ibid.). To

[11] For further analysis on women linked with social justice, see Nussbaum 1999; Nussbaum 2002, 398-403; Okin 1979.

make his daughter marry his friend, the father imprisons her to control and convince her to accept his orders:

> So he incited Wolfram and together they committed a terrible sacrilege – by force of arms they attacked the convent where Kummernis was living, recaptured her, tied her to a horse and kidnapped her. Despite the fact that she begged and implored them, reminding them over and over that she no longer belonged to the world but to Jesus Christ. They ignored all her pleas, locked her up in a windowless room and left her alone for some time, so that her will would be crushed and her belief in marriage would return. (Tokarczuk 2003, 61)

However, Kummernis' father cannot accept her rebellious behaviour and uses violence as a strategy of oppression to dominate her: "Oppressive institutions use various tools of subjugation (e.g., violence, threats, exploitation, colonization, exclusion) to reinforce the power and privilege of Ups in oppressive systems and to enforce the subordination or domination of Downs" (Warren 2000, 54-55). His punishment becomes even more extreme after seeing her face changed and her future husband gone. Mad with rage, he kills his daughter in the same way Jesus was executed:

> Blinded by rage, he threw himself upon her, and shouting oaths, he stabbed her with a dagger. But even this was not enough for him, so he raised her body and nailed it crucified to the roof beams, crying out as he did so: If God is within you, then die like God. (Tokarczuk 2003, 67)

Also, in "The Ugliest Woman", the protagonist rebels against her husband: in effect, when she discovers his escapades from time to time to drink and meet prostitutes, she blames him for his behaviour. The protagonist transgresses the female stereotype according to which women are passive, while men are believed to have a more active temperament (Mills 2003). In this case as well the weapon employed by the Ugliest Woman's husband to suppress her revolt is violence:

> He'd start sweating and choking, and so take a wad of cash, grab his hat, and run down the stairs, soon finding himself, unerringly, slumped in one of the dives near the port. Here he'd relax, his face would go slack, his hair would get ruffled, and the bald patch usually hidden under his slicked-down locks would emerge insolently for all to see. Innocently and joyfully he would sit and drink, letting himself ramble on, until finally some persistent prostitute would rob him blind.

> The first time the Ugliest Woman reproached him for his behavior, he punched her in the stomach, because even now he was afraid to touch her face. (Tokarczuk 2001, 188)

In addition, the husband's exploitation of her horrific aspect to make money, and exhibit her as if she were a freak show and an object he possesses, represents a strategy of oppression similar to 'colonisation' which is generally used to refer to the body of women. His domination and control over the Ugliest Woman continue even when she becomes pregnant because he starts thinking about the profit he could make from this event:

> When he came back several days later, he had ideas for their itinerary and promotional engagements all ready. He wrote to the professor and arranged for a photographer to call, who with hands shaking through flash after flash of magnesium recorded the monstrous ugliness of both creatures. (ibid., 190)

This exploitation is rational and deprived of any form of emotion, whereas, in front of her pregnant belly, even the audience no longer considers her unsightliness. People become more and more interested in her story and start to feel sympathy for her:

> "Ladies and gentlemen, here we have a freak of nature, a mutant, an error of evolution, the real missing link. Specimens of this kind are very rare. The probability of one being born is about as miniscule as the likelihood of a meteor hitting this very spot as I speak!" […] Her belly gave the audience courage, and made it easier for them to forgive her monstrous ugliness. They started asking her questions, which she would answer shyly in a quiet, unconvincing way. Their closer acquaintances began to make bets on what sort of child she'd have and whether it would be a boy or a girl. She took it all as meekly as a lamb. (ibid., 188)

His feelings do not change even at the end of her life, when she and her child fall ill with the Spanish flu. On this occasion, not knowing what to do, the husband calls a scientist who had already examined her, and brings the two inanimate bodies to him, where he is offered money to carry out further studies:

> Afterward the professor handed him a piece of paper and the widower signed it with his right hand, taking the money with his left. But that same day, before vanishing into the port, he helped the professor to transport the bodies by carriage to the university clinic, where soon after they were secretly stuffed. (ibid., 192)

The final taboo characterising these figures concerns their extraordinary abilities which pertain to their disturbing behaviour, especially for a patriarchal mindset. As for Kummernis, her faith in God gives her the supernatural power to perform miracles. The monk describes two of them. Firstly, the Saint heals some children who had eaten poisonous mushrooms and, lastly, she cures a man possessed by the Devil:

> When his family brought him to the saint, she leaned over him and spoke a few words in his ear. Those present heard how she addressed the Devil that inhabited the unfortunate man. They conversed for a while, and then suddenly the Devil left the sick man through his mouth, and was seen bolting into the forest in the shape of a wolf. The man recovered and lived in health and happiness to a ripe old age. (Tokarczuk 2003, 58)

Similarly, the Ugliest Woman seems to be particularly intelligent, a characteristic remarked precisely by her future husband who seems shocked. As a woman (and an animal-like individual), he envisions her to be emotional rather than cerebral, in line with patriarchal expectations:

> […] he found her to be quite clever. Of course, she could speak, and make perfect sense too. He observed her closely, wrestling with his fascination with this freak of nature. She could see right through him. […] She was making witty remarks, she was coherent and specific – not at all what he'd been expecting. (Tokarczuk 2001, 180)

But above all, what truly shocks the man is when the woman exercises her most natural and scary power: childbirth. In effect, the Ugliest Woman completes this incomprehensible 'ritual' alone, without any help, resembling an animal more than ever:

> She gave birth in the night, without any fuss, quietly, like an animal. The midwife only came to cut the umbilical cord […] The child was horrible, even worse than the mother. He had to close his eyes to keep from retching. Only much later did he satisfy himself that the newborn child was a girl, as the mother had proclaimed. (ibid., 190)

4. Conclusions: The Message of the Monsters

The phenomenon of the purported "menstrual literature" seems to unveil a feeling of threat in male writers caused by female authors' determination to affirm themselves in the literary scene. This tag reveals the everlasting conflict between men and women, the dichotomy constructed by patriarchy that has separated culture from nature, mind from body, and reason from emotion. In the 90s, in Poland, the association of the rising number of female writers with menstruation, an obscure and non-controllable condition guarding the power of giving birth, brought to light men's feelings of fear, anxiety, and jealousy towards women's power. Hence, the reason why male individuals feel the need to control them through the establishment of stereotypes is to blur their visibility and eccentricity, under penalty of being regarded as a taboo. According to Freud's research, this concept aims at safeguarding the rules imposed by a given society while censuring the horrible creatures and dangerous practices that turn our world, namely Western societies, upside down. Monsters seem to be created for the same reason: as Cohen argues, these figures were born precisely to express the frightening and unacceptable impulses of humankind and to show the community that breaking a rule is a cause of problems. Monsters and taboos serve to defend civilisation and keep potential threats at a distance, sublimating horrific figures into frightening beings. As explained above, dread is caused by deviance from a norm and women have always been considered 'anomalous' in comparison to men. In a patriarchal society, female figures can be accepted but only under special conditions, or under precise models which gave them only the chance to be mild, tranquil objects of desire, dependent on men's lives. The heroines of "menstrual literature", like Saint Kummernis and the Ugliest Woman in the World depicted as subversives just as their creators, have courageously fought against the prejudices and all strategies of oppression. They have proclaimed themselves revolutionary through their hybrid and terrifying physical aspects, and their rebellious behaviour towards the anthropocentrism and androcentrism that made them taboo objects and thus monsters. Jeffrey Cohen writes: "These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have

misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression" (Cohen 1996, 21). As demonstrated in the analyzed works, Tokarczuk challenges the patriarchal stereotype of women by representing hybrid, deformed and monstrous female characters who defy their traditional perception as weak and passive objects of desire.

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