

Teksty Drugie 2013, 1, s. 147-166  
Special Issue – English Edition



# **Stereotypes of Maternity in Prose Works of Anna Nasiłowska and Manuela Gretkowska.**

Jeannette Slaby

Przeł. Marta Skotnicka

## Jeannette SLABY

### Stereotypes of Maternity in Prose Works of Anna Nasifowska and Manuela Gretkowska

Research on stereotypes proves how important they are for comprehension of the world and communication with it, keeping in mind that stereotypes should not be the only source of cognition, “Stereotype precedes using the mind; it is a form of perception which imposes a certain character on our senses before they reach our mind.”<sup>1</sup> Psychology explains this phenomenon from two different perspectives. On the one hand, conventional thinking saves us from making an intellectual effort. It integrates us with the group and helps us obtain general appreciation. On the other hand, stereotyping also means the unconditional imposition of one behaviour and activity pattern on a particular community. As a result, one needs to conform to generally functioning matrices in fear of being “a stranger/the other”: “their [stereotypes] presence is validated by the community which uses them to clearly mark the borders of their own and the others’ identity, even for the price of considerable simplification.”<sup>2</sup>

A stereotype is, therefore, a type of a cognitive net defining the dynamics of the relation between the community and the individual; it also helps people categorize and conceptualize the world, including their own emotions and beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

Literature that perpetuates stereotypes is not bad literature. It rather refers to the common (even if it’s certainly erroneous) view and reception of images firmly embed-

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Lippmann *Public Opinion*, after: D. Piontek “Stereotype: Genesis, Features, Functions,” [in:] *Among Myths and Stereotypes*, ed. K. Borowczyk, P. Pewelczyk, Poznań/Toruń 1993. 21.

<sup>2</sup> B. Tokarz. “Creator – Stereotype – Profiling: i.e., Alternative Literary Reality,” *Przestrzeń Teorii* 2003 no 2. 23.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 23-34.

ded in the social consciousness. Stereotypes order our world and effectively, they make it seem better known or familiar, and so it seems safer. According to Zofia Mitosek, the relation between stereotype and literature is based on three rules: stabilization, creation, and decipherization.<sup>4</sup> The first of them – stabilization – means that a stereotype we come across will not question anything. It will summarize and describe for the reader his own knowledge about a given subject. Due to lack of the objective distance, a recipient of a given work will not have any doubts. Moreover, stereotype stabilization will preserve their conviction that the world from their books does not differ from the real world: “It is how it is.” This phenomenon is most often encountered in popular readings of mass culture: criminal novels, Harlequin romances, etc.

Another possibility of stereotype’s existence in literature is its creation. According to Kamila Budrowska, however, it has not taken place yet in Polish literature since 1989. It is uncertain whether it will happen at all. As Mitosek explains, creation of a stereotype means “adapting literary images in descriptions of experiences that are close to the reader” and that it concerns a situation of “identification of the recipient with fictional characters.”<sup>5</sup> Put simply, it means that the reader would use the “I am Mrs. Bovary” formula, only replacing the name of Flaubert’s heroine with names of subsequent characters from his or her books.

The last method to note existence of stereotypes in literature is its decipherization. This term covers all activities of the author aimed at ridiculing and pointing to it a given stereotype which results in exhibiting the very moment of schematic thinking creation. This theory underlines probably the most important feature of stereotype in literature: its participation in literary communication. In this sense, stereotypes can be treated as “units that locate themselves not only inside or outside the act of communication, but also in the sphere of presupposed meanings: i.e., assumed to be known and which – being components of the recipient’s knowledge – condition the positive influence of the very utterance.”<sup>6</sup>

Since Zofia Mitosek’s publication, it has not been clarified whether stereotype is or is not a literary category. It is the least risky to follow Bożena Tokarz’s definition and treat it as a borderline phenomenon in the humanities, similarly to myth or topos.<sup>7</sup> Stereotype in literature could also be considered a figure of thought which underlines its proximity to rhetorical activities. This means that stereotypes often take various forms: linguistic – sayings, idioms; literary – in the form of themes, plots, styles; and iconic – presenting culture related behaviour or finally, in the sphere of rituals (*sacrum*) and customs (*profanum*).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Z. Mitosek *Literature and Stereotypes*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1974. 174-190.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 180-181.

<sup>6</sup> G. Grochowski. “Stereotypes – Communication – Literature,” *Przestrzeń Teorii*\*2003 no 2. 68.

<sup>7</sup> B. Tokarz *Creator – Stereotype...22.*

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 25.

## Stereotypes of maternity and attempts to challenge them

In every culture there is a stereotype of maternity: i.e., a group of commonplace views on the mother's role, her rights and duties. This image often changes as it is shaped by a political (war) or social (women's emancipation) situation. It is impossible to speak about maternity without the social context in which the mother exists by means of her ability to reproduce. Here, stereotypes linked with her maternity are formed around one rule: the child is most important.

This thought is already present in the first sentence of one's biography, "I was born on..." ("Urodziłam się dnia..."). Bogusława Budrowska writes that the active form used here [in Polish – *przyp. tłum.*] indicates complete independence of the child at its birth – the child is introduced as an active subject of the event<sup>9</sup>. The structure obviously depends on a given language's grammar. In English, the form "I was born" indicates a certain passiveness of the child, although the mother is not mentioned either.<sup>10</sup>

Another stereotype places the future mother in a position of a person who is adult enough to handle difficulties related with maternity. From the biological point of view, any girl who has already had a period can become a mother, although the physiological and hormonal readiness often does not coincide with mental maturity. It seems, however, that in its stereotypical, common meaning, nature does not need spiritual preparation, an acceptable boundary – such as the age limit – in order to become a mother. Nature formulates and applies its own rules. Paradoxically, pregnancy of a nine-year-old girl will not be perceived as a part of the natural urge of life and omnipresent nature that forced the girl to reproduction.

The age of a mother who gives birth to her first child is also crucial after the age of 35, when the risk of afterbirth complications is higher. The mother needs to be aware of the fact that maternity will entirely remodel the life she has led so far. This awareness is called the maternal instinct.

From the perspective of today's research, the problem of the maternal instinct seems to be resolved. In her analysis of social and cultural approach to this problem in France, Elisabeth Badinter pointed to the fact that the myth of maternity was constructed considerably late – the starting date set to the 1762 publication of Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Sally Macintyre claims that any evidence of the maternal instinct is rooted in the animal world (the very term "instinct" in most cases refers to natural, animal behaviour: for instance, the hunting instinct).<sup>12</sup> Anna Nasiłowska noticed a paradox in perceiving this issue from the perspective of one's social status:

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. Budrowska *Maternity as a Turning Point in a Woman's Life*, Wrocław 2000. 379.

<sup>10</sup> Formerly, there existed a form "Born out of...", which indicated the subject of the delivery – the mother. Today, this form is not used with regards to birth and maternity. It functions in a sense of "creating, conceiving" but in reference to inanimate nouns: "A thought conceived by..." Cf. *Polish Language Dictionary, Vol. 3*, ed. M. Szymczak, Warsaw 1999. 992.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 20–21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 19–20.

married women have or should have the maternal instinct, while women who are not married are not even the subject of such supposition and it is not well seen if a single woman tries to have a baby.<sup>13</sup> According to yet another stereotype connected with maternity, the sense of having children depends on the legitimate relationship between the parents. The order seems obvious: first a wedding, then a child. Long-time childless married couples are frequently the subject of cross-questioning about their offspring. Others seem to accept information about infertility of the partners more easily than their decision about not having children.

The reverse order of the above activities is also acceptable: first pregnancy, then marriage. The image of a pregnant bride – less and less socially stigmatized – emphasizes the earlier discussed scheme: for the child's good. Manuela Gretkowska and Piotr Pietucha go through this scenario. Once they learn they will be parents, Piotr quickly reacts, "Let's get married" and when Manuela asks what for, the answer is, "For you to feel more secure, people get married when there is a baby" (P 34).<sup>14</sup>

Widespread opinions on maternity depict the mother figure as an angel-like personification of patience and good. Every normal and true mother must be an angel and love her child unconditionally. If she has a job and so she gets a helper, she should naturally be full of remorse. The essence of the mother-angel is to sacrifice herself for the sake of a new life. Budrowska writes,

The role of a mother in our culture is very narrowly defined. In terms of emotions, a mother needs to have and express only positive emotions toward her child. She must sacrifice herself, ignore her needs and feel happy about it – therefore, be "amasochist." In terms of her activities, she must focus on bringing up her child and resign from or modify the path of her career.<sup>15</sup>

We are witnessing transformation of behaviour patterns and mother-child-father relations. The social role of a woman has changed irreversibly. "She is usually well educated, she snatched her job not without a difficulty and the recessive market does not encourage her to interrupt her education and career."<sup>16</sup>

Stereotypes of the mother's passiveness, the need of her being physically and mentally mature and her angel-like character are an unchanging set of basic clichés used in thinking about maternity in the discussed literary works. In Anna Nasiłowska's *Domino* and *A Book of the Beginning*,<sup>17</sup> and in Manuela Gretkowska's *Polka* there also emerge other stereotypes of maternity which are worth looking at with more scrutiny.

<sup>13</sup> A. Nasiłowska, "Nature as a Source of Suffering," *Teksty Drugie* 1993 no 4/6. 189.

<sup>14</sup> M. Gretkowska *Polka*, Warsaw 2002. Quotations localized with "P."

<sup>15</sup> B. Budrowska *Maternity*...382.

<sup>16</sup> E. Winnicka *How to Bring Up a Child during One Weekend?*, "Polityka" 2004, no 6 (2438). 3.

<sup>17</sup> A. Nasiłowska *Domino. Treatise on Birth*. Warsaw 1995; ed. *A Book of the Beginning*, Warsaw 2002. Quotations will be localized in the text after the following abbreviations: "D" and "KP."

## Stereotype I:

Maternity is normal

*Polka's* narrator is pregnant for the first time. Uncertain of what will happen, she keeps looking for others' advice and penetrating various sources of knowledge. In her search of signs that would prove normality of her state, Manuela Gretkowska comes across stereotypes of thinking about a nine-month unity of the mother and the child, hidden under "good advice" and helpful procedures. First, the author turns with her questions to her closest person – Pola's father who already has had two children. "Every pregnancy is different," the experienced father refutes accusations of not having realized earlier that Manuela was pregnant. The future mother keeps on searching. She buys appropriate literature: French magazines devoted to pregnancy and two books, a Swedish one entitled *Jag är gravid (I'm pregnant)* and a Polish manual *Pregnancy: 40 Subsequent Weeks*. What could one learn from them? French magazines tell women to eat seven vegetables per day and claim that "pregnant women attract mosquitoes with their higher body temperature." Apart from that, they maintain that allegedly, "specific substances" were found in the air exhaled by pregnant women. Gretkowska comments on it, "I thought so: psychosis, schizophrenia. Voila, in schizophrenic patients' breath they detected butane" (P 70).

These are examples that may even make a young mother laugh, but when a woman confronts with ill omens during the prenatal examination, she might not be able to handle it:

I check my clever book *Pregnancy: 40 Subsequent Weeks*. What next? The child is healthy... not at all. Good results of prenatal examination do not guarantee good health of the mother and the child. Week by week, the book enlists all possible issues before we past the ninth month: lyme disease, vein thrombosis, (green) meconium, fibronectin, thalassaemia. The selection is wider than the choice of names in a calendar...I throw the scary guide into the fridge where I store my old unread books. (P 122).

The image of pregnancy emerging from the handbooks read by the author is terrifying. The notion of normality is a combination of the pathology of pregnancy and the pre-pregnancy state. All that is between these two extremes should be called normal but, as Manuela Gretkowska notices, is not considered so. Hence, if the child does not kick twenty times per day (and if it did kick that often, we also should consult a doctor), it is necessary to visit a specialist. Moreover, enlightening books contain a lot of superstitions women decide not to fight with. Fear related with the child's health seems too much to overcome. Absurd beliefs make a pregnant woman feel that she's under constant surveillance, mainly imposed by handbooks clearly enforcing objectivization of both pregnancy and the mother. Gretkowska will see herself as normal only when she puts on two kilograms and the child, who has not been kicking yet (because, as Pietucha asserts, it simply likes Manuela), and finally replies with a kick in her stomach.

Bogusława Budrowska writes that such manuals promote the persuasive strategy: "Advice, recommendations, permissions and bans which fill up the text...require that the addressee subordinates and confides her behaviour to a better-informed

authority.”<sup>18</sup> These expressions are the reason why mothers feel increasingly incompetent and ignorant. Their knowledge is depreciated. Handbooks scare women with consequences if they do not absorb provided information. A future mother is treated like a child, purposefully embarrassed by means of writing about “obvious things.” In Anna Nasiłowska’s *Domino*, we may observe the following situation: “A young mother reads an American breast-feeding manual. She finds out that pleasure of breast-feeding may lead to an orgasm and the success solely depends on her motivation” (D 105).<sup>19</sup> Having read the advice, she:

spends hours pulling out concave and already chapped nipples, even at night she massages her lumpy breasts. She has fever, milk stagnation starts. The child turns its head away from the breast. She is in despair: But I want it so much! she repeats. So she blames her subconscious for a silent revolt against her own will and persistently looks for the gates to the underground. She would move hell but she doesn’t know where to find its doors. (D 105-6)

In her description of the above incident, Nasiłowska avoids using first-person narration, as if she was afraid of being condemned or accused of not being strong-willed or not making enough effort. At the same time, she is distanced from the activities of which she became a participant. The author unveils the process of objectivization of a mother who subordinates to all kinds of recommendations. In attempt to follow – at any price – commandments of the guides that know better, a woman not only loses contact with her baby but, above all, such “good” mother abuses herself: physically and mentally. Not only the recommended activities are a source of pain, but she also has an impression that she is a bad mother who cannot take care of her offspring. The author of *Cities* suggests that a woman can be rescued from such lynch if she is aware of this manipulation:

I do the same thing, but I know what to think about it. This persuasion is directed to people who believe in success and unshaken happiness... They consider nature a good mother keenly fulfilling their every wish. It seems better than civilization whose faults concern them on a daily basis. This is yet another act of idealization in history. (D 106)

The last sentence – “This is yet another act of idealization in history” – is developed in Anna Nasiłowska’s text: “The ideal is hard to stand.” Therefore, *Domino* looks like a work that will decipher “natural” maternity and related stereotypes.

The author of *Polka* reacts in a similar way. Acquainted with numerous superstitions, she loses patience and – following the example of the learnt “prescriptions for pregnant women” – constructs her own list of pregnancy words of wisdom:

- 1 A pregnant woman is successful in everything (but first of all, in giving birth).
- 2 A person who refuses to help a pregnant woman or lies to her, will have bad luck. In a more accurate version: the plague of mice. (My mum says this is 100% true).

<sup>18</sup> B. Budrowska, *Maternity...* 251-252.

<sup>19</sup> All quotations come from *Domino: Treatise on Birth and A Book of the Beginning* in one edition: A. Nasiłowska *A Book of the Beginning*, Warsaw 2002. (page number are indicated in brackets).

## Slaby Stereotypes of Maternity in Prose Works ...

- 3 Standing on tiptoes and lifting hands over the head by women in late pregnancy may stifle the child with the umbilical cord (I don't believe it, but I don't do it due to the superstition no 4, which seems even more absurd, but...)
- 5 In China, it is not allowed to sweep under a pregnant woman's bed. (P 285)

In the above example, it is possible to see the difference between the two authors, one that could be replaced by the opposition: irony/pathos. Gretkowska deliberately provokes tension between literal meanings of words and meanings expressed indirectly. Peculiar, semantic-logical constructions reveal her desire to keep the distance toward the situation she has found herself in. Turning her fear of losing the baby after the prenatal test into a joke is a method to survive difficult moments awaiting the test's results.

Pathetic expressions in *Domino* serve as a means of building a distance toward intimate experiences that entirely engage the young mother and her family. The writer, however, is conscious of the fact that she notes down flashes of experiences hitherto rarely found in literature. She constantly underlines their significance and power. The picture of breastfeeding shows that it is the most important activity in a given moment – nothing else counts.

“Hell,” “despair,” “revolt,” “gates to the underground” – these words describe feelings of the mother who tries to move the reader by emphasizing that ordinary breastfeeding may evoke a lot of emotions. Further in this article, we will see that the woman in Nasiłowska's prose also uses cultural images of maternity to obtain support in the field which for years has been inaccessible to a mother and a child.

The stereotype of pregnancy as a natural process is developed by the incessantly maintained conviction that a woman – due to major involvement of her body and physiology in “continuing the human race” – will immediately recognize this experience and, what is more, she will always know how to feel and what to do. Gretkowska does not agree with such interpretation of sexual and social roles. She also escapes the unambiguous classification of herself as a woman who knows:

I stand in front of the mirror: shinbones, ribs, a bulb. Pregnancy as a crowning achievement of womanhood (an abdomen?). I don't feel more womanly at all. A man: someone I'm not, for sure. A woman: someone whom I will not be, for sure. Despite ripping breasts with purple nipples, stretch marks which will certainly emerge like ritual scars resulting from the femininity initiation. One day after the birthday. (P 96)

The author confesses that there is “an obvious mystery” in the experience of maternity which is not revealed to her just because of her sex. In *Polka* she quotes her conversation with a Hungarian publisher of *Tarot*. János asks Manuela:

– How does it feel to carry another person in you. This must be amazing, I wouldn't be able to get used to it...

– Do you think I can? I don't understand it either. I sometimes feel it, but I don't understand it. It doesn't matter that I'm a woman and this should be natural, padded with hormones. You could just as well be pregnant and I would ask you how it is.

– The obviousness of the mystery is terrifying.

– Scary it is.



“The obviousness of the mystery” is a key notion for “the normality” of pregnancy. Facing this obviousness, Manuela Gretkowska tries to rely on the others’ experiences (not only women). She also discovers that pregnancy is a phenomenon going far beyond sex and social roles. It is mystical and illuminating. Bringing it down to earth and calling it “normal” is appropriate as far as it is also multiplied by experiences of all women who already gave birth and their partners. Obviously, pregnancy is not exclusive to the women in *Polka*, it is neither coincidental. It is a “destined” activity which, paradoxically, cannot be depicted in a manual like *40 Days: Pregnancy Week by Week*:

The ordinary nature of a miracle (of conception) is the cunning of the supernatural. It functions in such a way that a spectacle of a protruding belly is not sensational at all. A child growing under one’s heart, kicking the liver – nothing more banal, everyday pregnancy. But indescribable. An almost invisible cell, turning into an embryo, and now eight-month-old Polka. I sometimes catch hold of the ankle of her ejected leg. Relic. What does it matter that you can touch it if you can’t comprehend it. It’s impossible to understand. *Noli me tangere* after the miracle of the Resurrection and *noli me tangere* with a thought only, the miracle of a child creation. (P 289)

And again, paradoxically, it is Manuela Gretkowska’s pregnancy diary that was perceived by critics as an example of a book showing “normality” of pregnancy: “There is putting on weight, pissing, puking, pregnant sex, but also love, counting centimetres of the foetus, listening, waiting for the child’s kicks and the mystery of a new life. Everything in consent with feelings and experiences of an average woman in this state.”<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, the notion of “normality” replaced by the notion of “being average” indicates that within the experience of pregnancy – between pathology and the state of not being pregnant – there is something else that can also be “normal.” In her review of *Polka*, Kinga Dunin is surprised why this ordinarily described normality is so shocking?

In *Domino*, the experience of pregnancy as a physiological process which engages a woman’s body, is perceived in a fairly stereotypical manner. However, the main character of the novel speaks about the difficulties on the way to such subordination for the sake of the baby. A pregnant woman, says Nasiłowska, has to unite with everyday life which goes around the nine-month circle.<sup>21</sup> And subordination and totality of the experience of maternity is not a question of a woman’s choice:

When I hear about the right of free choice, I’m a bit embarrassed. Yes, the choice, this little field, a fragment where truth on short legs stamps and minces. Three steps right, three steps left. Obviously, I prefer the choice...out of helplessness....The choice? It’s laughable. It’s as if one wanted to fence a cloud gliding in the sky. Or to tie water with a string. I haven’t chosen her to be my daughter. Fine. These things are too serious to let them depend on good will. The one who says yes, will also say no. I have not been asked for an opinion – whether I want it. It was me who asked: can I? Am I allowed? Is it her? Is it so? (D 92)

<sup>20</sup> K. Dunin. “Pretty Polka,” *Res Publica Nowa* 2001 no 8. 103.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. K. Budrowska. “Treatise on Maternity,” *Przebieg Artystyczny-Literacki* 2001 no 4. 83.

On the other hand, the author defends the experience of maternity from being accused of depriving the mother of her subjectivity – this is simply how it has to be. Unchangeably and unceasingly – women will bear children, whether they want it or not. This is why this fragment corresponds with the view of Manuela Gretkowska's who is at first scared with the “mystery,” but after a short while she starts to understand its essence:

In most cases, fucking doesn't lead to pregnancy. There must be a mysterious consent of the universe to emergence of anything new...Cosmic landing in my uterus could take place much earlier or never. It has been calculated by the universe, the stars that circulate and arrange in horoscopes. What coincidence, necessity and free will have to do with it? (P 48)

It is visible that both mothers interpret the state of being pregnant as an act which happened somewhat beyond their consciousness and without their consent. It was decided by something (fate, destiny, the universe) or someone else (the Absolute Being, God). Something else wished a new human being to come to the world. In this view, a woman treats herself as a medium, not a driving force. Consequently, to decipher the stereotype which maintains subjectivity of a woman's consent to maternity means to simply notice this fact. Everything else seems to be a coincidence. Perhaps, this results from astonishment with the news about pregnancy. Both women did not try to have a baby. They only accepted what had already happened.

### Stereotype II:

#### Maternity as reproduction of a matrix

The previously discussed idea of pregnancy as a normal process is developed by a stereotype treating maternity as “reproduction of a matrix.” Here, the meaning of “normality” gets expanded. It is normal that every woman should give birth to a child (every “normal” woman) and, additionally, she has to be aware of the relationship between her sex, generation she belongs to and her state as well as a characteristic feature of pregnancy, namely the replication of a certain pattern. This means that a pregnant woman should get rid of her individuality for the sake of the “common good”: the child.

For maternity is a phenomenon which involves the entire society. This stereotype reminds a woman that getting pregnant and giving birth to a child does not make her the first or the last one who could do that. Such classification of the future mother and inscription of her experience into the range of other women's experiences demonstrates the maternal community.

“Reproduction of a matrix” scared Manuela Gretkowska, the writer who tries to avoid categorizations, the most. “I will give birth to a child just like so many women and females before me” (P 35), says the future mother. There is no contentment in this sentence. At least for now. There is ambivalence. Gretkowska simply doesn't know, what it means to give birth, just like so many women and “females” before her.

A similar sentence, although in a different tone, will be uttered by the author of *Polka* during delivery. At that very moment, the words spoken out in the context of pain have a different meaning: “The miracle of birth, an ordinary replication of the matrix.

A new life comes easily and it's easy to destroy it" (P 338). The author experiences the omnipresent nature "capable of tormenting someone to death." She is struck with fear of her own death which could happen in the moment of giving life.

Anna Nasiłowska understands "replication of a matrix" in a different manner. The birth of the *Domino* narrator's daughter make her notice women – by now, silent heroes of civilization: "Today, I went into the crowd, between people. It's unbelievable, there were so many of them and each of them had a mother. These numerous mothers gave birth, fed and taught those helpless creatures the human speech" (D 94). Every mother, also the author of these words, becomes a figure blessed through the act of childbirth. And a simple stroll in the city becomes an illumination.

Anna Nasiłowska notices yet another sense of "civilization of mothers."<sup>22</sup> She is more and more certain that this unceasing unity with the child and with other mothers indirectly serves as a means of alienating women from the social life. The writer made an observation that the stories about matriarchal countries where women's well being was the greatest value, are often evoked in order to isolate mothers, create a cosy corner where they could enjoy their intimacy and not bore others with their stories about children. Surprisingly, this is the place Manuela Gretkowska dreams about:

A room of scents, good food (for a child), a room with ultrasonography where you could see the baby... Meetings with a psychologist, doctor, conversations with other club members.... Who will understand and support (push, push harder!) a pregnant woman better than another lady in this crazy state. (P 74-5)

The main character in *Domino* knows that the very fact of being a mother is alienating for a woman. A mother and her child become members of another tribe "which secretly, behind the properly locked doors, performs its bodily rituals" (D 94). These rituals are not dangerous. Sucking, rattling and swinging experienced by every human being, in this case work against the mother and the newborn child. Both of them are banished from culture also by means of language as their community cannot be described by any convenient grammatical form. This is because "nature cannot be closed in words."<sup>23</sup> However, as Bogusława Kaniewska adds, "There is a difference between experiencing and attesting nature."<sup>24</sup>

Nasiłowska's character continuously fights with imprecision of words – this is why, among others, her daughters don't have names ("My daughter doesn't have a name. She doesn't need it, she is called mine. I want it to remain this way" (D 104)). In *Domino*, the baby girl is called "New-born." What becomes important is to evoke a question of capability or inability to utter and feel "inflexibility" of the language inscribed in the narrative: "When I try to talk about it, I keep stumbling. I can express it only in my thoughts. What? This. That It. There. In thoughts which in writing look like helpless, mumbling speech of a child who doesn't know pronouns and points with its finger" (D 96).

<sup>22</sup> K. Ruta-Rutkowska. "Questions about *Conditio Feminae*," *Fraza* 1999 no 4. 137.

<sup>23</sup> B. Kaniewska. "Not Only a Yellow Shirt," *Czas Kultury* 1996 no 1. 88.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

The mother in *A Book of the Beginning* reports on her dream about the flood of words. Her husband sees the narrator's symbolic distrust toward words. He claims that one Word created the world – other words are not able to do that. An incidentally mentioned name would not make a human being. This is why *A Book of the Beginning* seems, on the one hand, a continuum of the “distrust” toward words that we face in *Domino*. On the other hand, the narrator allows a difference between words and the Word. Only this difference seems true. Paradoxically, the encounter with the experience of maternity becomes a challenge for a mother who professionally deals with the interpretation of cultural phenomena.

The inability to express these emotions contributes to the question: why is it so? It is not enough to say that “nature is inexpressible, like nothing else.” It is necessary to discover mechanisms causing this state of affairs. And mechanisms are rooted in the language identified with violence. There is a way for a mother and a child to find themselves in the world that is unprepared for their arrival. The world needs to be created from scratch.

This is why the characters of books about the birth of the author's daughters are called Adam and Eve, while one of the sentences from *Domino* says: “In the beginning was the Child. Naked” (D 115). Realizing the need to “de-define” the world brings consolation, gives strength to start all over again, without unnecessary falsehood and illusions. It makes one realize the life force and consent to its mysteriousness and inexplicability. “Well, I had to be as little as my daughter once. Here, oceans of oblivion – returned to me – are lying in front of me, the oceans I have sailed and I'm still sailing. She is a letter about my past. I'm reading it with certain difficulty because it is written with a raw alphabet” (D 123-124).

Krystyna Ruta-Rutkowska claims that the paradise is where the New-born is. Each of us experienced it in the act of birth. Such interpretation of the maternal community is not disheartening to women. Instead, it presents a fresh outlook on the natural life cycle with consideration of the subjectivity of the maternal experience.

### Stereotype III:

#### Maternity is public

A view that maternity is a public experience stems from the conviction that the child everyone's good, whereas the mother is an institution which serves to sustain the good in the best possible state. The pattern of such approach to a pregnant woman is illustrated by an incident in a swimming-pool in which Manuela Gretkowska participated.

I walk out of the cabin in my one-piece swimsuit with almost knee-long legs, the style of Francis Joseph. The bath-keeper knowingly taps me on my belly:

– Baby?

... You don't tap strange people, you don't caress other people's children. The few centimeters of my protruding belly became public. (P 151)

In her article published in *Res Publica Nova*, Justyna Bednarek includes the following story: one day, having noticed the visible pregnancy of the author, a caretaker in

the kindergarten seized her belly and said, "Someone has put on weight!"<sup>25</sup> Bednarek explains that a woman with a belly stops being an individual Gretkowska-the-writer or Bednarek-the-ublicist, but she becomes a public good – a pregnant woman. The bath-keeper described by Gretkowska and the caretaker quoted in the above fragment are women who probably are mothers themselves. This fact gives them permission to touch other women's bellies. It is related with pregnancy as a different state also in the perspective of one's sexual identity. A woman/-other loses an aspect of her identity which usually makes her a sexual being in the eyes of others, "When someone says the word 'regnant' every second man and every third woman thinks: she slept with a man. Some might even add: with another man."<sup>26</sup>

A future mother carries the clear evidence of having had a sexual intercourse and, as we know, sex is a cultural taboo. Adrienne Rich noticed that all over the world both pregnancy and childbirth evoke intense emotions, and consequently, a woman is never looked at with indifference, "She may be considered a proof of her husband's activeness, a threat to embryos and men, and particularly exposed to impure powers or other damaging influences; she is received with embarrassment; she is respected as blessed with healing powers."<sup>27</sup>

Every increasingly sustained superstition evokes an unnecessary fright. The main character in *A Book of the Beginning* is forced to stay longer in the hospital due to the complicated delivery and *vacuum*.<sup>28</sup> She meets mothers who already gave birth and others who are experiencing it for the first time. One of these women lost a baby, another dreamed of having a daughter but has just had the fourth son. The mothers' hospital ward is also frequently visited by "girls from the pathology." The author of *Cities* comes across various women, but there is no artificial hierarchy between them. They are united in the experience rather than take opposite stances. Only once a nurse turned to Nasiłowska saying, "So skinny but she would feed triplets," but she relieved the writer's body by helping her learn how to pump milk.

To Anna Nasiłowska, breastfeeding is a situation that she almost requests to make public. According to her, it's a phenomenon which goes beyond simply appeasing hunger. Both in *Domino* and *A Book of the Beginning*, breastfeeding becomes a form of the deepest intimacy between the mother and the child. By asking about the sense of food-sharing, the author tries to locate it in culture, in the public sphere as she under-

---

<sup>25</sup> J. Bednarek "To Be a Pregnant Woman," *Res Publica Nowa* 1997 no 9. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> A. Rich. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, London, 1976.

<sup>28</sup> In her private correspondence, Anna Nasiłowska writes, "My daughter was tied with her umbilical cord, suddenly her pulse got weaker. The midwife realized that, she said nothing and called doctor. There was a change of shift, other doctors came, with no gowns on yet. In the corner of my eye, I saw my blood spurt on a tie and a ironed shift of an elegant young doctor. Vacuum looked a bit like this rubber tool to unclog basins. It is sucked on the baby's head and pulled. Whatever, it was dangerous, but ended up well." Mails written on May 12, 2004 to the author of this article, Jeannette Słaby.

stands its importance for future interpersonal relations.<sup>29</sup> This unusual process marks the mother and the child with their own attachment to each other, “My breasts belong to her. She also owned my belly” (D 92). The described situation does not subjectivize the woman but rather indicates that lending her body to the child can be understood the other way around – as consciously challenging the stereotype of the unconditional subordination to physiology.

Breastfeeding, learning how to pump milk and dealing with one’s own unpredictable impulses constitute a large part of *Domino*. An increasing number of publications touching on this experience adds to deciphering yet another thinking pattern. Kamila Budrowska thinks that this is why the mother’s body is limited to breasts: in order to overcome embarrassment and inhibitions, which are the reasons why literature had not known such descriptions before.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, the presentation of removing the excess of milk from a woman’s breast is representational:

At home, I still couldn’t pump all the excessive milk on time, I worked with a special breast pump, a towel, in the warm shower, with my hand, with my both hands, increasingly tired, eventually I sat on the bath tub. To avoid soaking a still fresh wound, I put an improvised, silly throne made of a bucket placed upside down, I also sat on it provisionally, on one, healthier side of my body and pressed both breasts simultaneously, through the first pain up to the boundary when you say: stop! (D 110)

The above scene vividly shows how breasts – considered to be an important erotic symbol in culture – become more and more desexualized. Their sexuality is described by Desmond Morris who claims that the shape of breasts imitates circularity of buttocks.<sup>31</sup> It is the other way around in Anna Nasiłowska’s works. The author rejects the stereotyping of breastfeeding and women’s breasts as sexually stigmatized. Desexualization does not mean that breastfeeding should be qualified as an asexual activity. Women’s breasts are given back their basic function – without any sexual connotations, shame, or embarrassment. However, the author is not satisfied with only flagging the need to reject a cultural ballast which restrains the woman by not allowing her to feed her baby in public.

Anna Nasiłowska summons well-known images of breastfeeding which seem false to her. She desires to lay bare and ridicule them. Among others, she goes back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century work by Jean Foquet presenting Madonna with a perfectly semi-circular naked breast. The woman recalls her perception of the painting – the ideal contour of the breast associated with an almost hairless head of Madonna. This view had a different meaning to her. It’s unnatural and untrue, “A semicircle is too hard. A child would not be able to seize the tightened nipple with its mouth” (D 107).

The narrator in *Domino* also recalls a fountain in Bologne depicting Neptune’s female companions whose breasts spout water. Comprehending the milk-to-water (also

---

<sup>29</sup> It is D.W. Winnicott’s theory claiming that the relation between a mother and a child during breastfeeding translates further onto the relation of the child with other people. After: K. Budrowska *Treatise...* 89.

<sup>30</sup> K. Budrowska *Treatise...* 89.

<sup>31</sup> D. Morris. *Intimate Behavior*. trans. P. Pretkiel, Warsaw 1998. 53.

symbolic) transformation, Nasiłowska wonders whether this sculpture could be placed in one of the Polish cities? She answers this question herself, first evoking the image of the Polish Mother.

Our siren has never fed anybody, she's holding a shield and an ominous sword in her hands... Our Madonnas, buttoned up to their necks, in a few layers of heavy dresses, are holding calmly a well fed and well-dressed baby in their hands. They must have fed them earlier, before entering the stage. If they had showed a naked breast, the faithful would have got inappropriate thoughts during prayers. (D 111)

The above situation proves that there are two kinds of breasts in the unconscious of culture – immaculate lactiferous glands which provoke “bad thoughts”<sup>32</sup> and objects of sexual fascination. The former can be openly observed everywhere.

In her article written for “Cosmopolitan,” Manuela Gretkowska formulates yet another definition of “public” maternity. The concept is based on women – actors, writers, rock singers, and now also mothers – appearing in lifestyle magazines; on revealing their private lives to readers and selling their intimate experiences to the media and the masses. By giving the article the following title: “Public Phantom Pregnancy,” Gretkowska protested against such activities, “There is something dishonest in this reciprocal game. On the one hand, seeking sensation, on the other hand, exhibitionism saying: watch out, I'm reproducing!”<sup>33</sup> Perhaps, the writer purposefully did not mention profits from publication of photos or news, while a magazine and curious readers benefit from it, and future mothers also benefit from it (financially). The media demand for controversial women with “a human face” is as high as the range of experiences they sell. Let us take a photo session featuring Justyna Steczkowska at her father's grave (who, *nota bene*, had been dead for a few years already) or similar events that are far from being tasteful.

What interests Gretkowska in the artificial evocation of public emotions is not the salary for revealing one's secrets or the reasons why an artist or a public figure takes the above mentioned actions. The author of *Tarot* perceives making privacy public as an identity problem of an artist and a woman who treats pregnancy as one of her masks, “She runs the stage half-naked, with strong make-up. She pretends to be an angel, an alien or a punk bitch. She makes up nicknames, identity.”<sup>34</sup>

The quoted article was written in 1999 and it begins with the writer's indication of her considerable astonishment at the news in the press that she would give birth to triplets. Admitting to be a media “mas(s)-cot,” Gretkowska did not realize how binding her words would be. Two years later, her real pregnancy becomes an event equally important as pregnancy of Demi Moore or the earlier mentioned Justyna Steczkowska. And what does Gretkowska do? When she is asked for an interview, the main topic of which would probably be her pregnancy, she gets offended by the interviewer's statement, “What do

<sup>32</sup> See I. Iwasiów. “Language of Birth,” *Arkusz* 1996 no 7. 7.

<sup>33</sup> The article has been reprinted in *Silikon*. See M. Gretkowska *Silikon*, Warsaw 2002. 100.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

you mean: about what? So independent and scandalizing...and now the baby...that's a life breakthrough" (P 235), calling the above actions "pregnant pornography." On the other hand, in *Polka* the readers follow Gretkowska's preparations for the photo session in "Viva" magazine, during which the writer tells *visagistes* about her pregnancy, while asking them for discretion. In this context, her pregnancy is also public due to her own popularity and definitely turns public once the author selling the rights to publish *Polka*:

I'm selling the book and the baby, beginning with the first letter, the embryo. What will she think one day, reading all these prenatal memories? I haggle about the royalty rate. Silver coins got green, they are convertible to dollars. The publisher is strangely concessive. After I leave, I check the royalty rate for the last book – the same as for *Polka*, and I thought I had demanded an enormous amount of money. (P 201)

Dariusz Nowacki noticed that, despite her stable private life, Manuela Gretkowska is attractive to the media as the Gretkowska, formerly a scandalizing figure, whose new book *Polka* – being the expression of the "little stabilization and familiarity" – would be a bestseller. It is thus an example of "transformation of a famous troublemaker into a housewife."<sup>35</sup> At the same time, the "FA-art" critic is curious whether the author will find herself in this new public space with a new "mug." She points to this transformation herself, when she writes, "New life, new apartment, new mug."

## Stereotype IV:

### Asexual mother

Another template of thinking about maternity is a theory of asexual processes, which capture a woman's body and by the act of appropriating it, destroy its attributes. Therefore, a pregnant woman should consent to subordination of her body to a child. This means she is excluded yet again, or even deprived of her right to derive sexual satisfaction during pregnancy and continue to feel desired. Corinne Chaponnière signals a difference between an "empty" body and a "full" body:

A maternal body agglomerates the horror of fullness which is an obstacle for desire. On the other hand, a young girl's body remains "empty," "meaningless," disposed of, to be fulfilled with a man's glances. "Meaningless" bodies, a body without marks conditions desire.<sup>36</sup>

The stereotype of an asexual mother evokes a conviction that a woman's body is vertically divided into the saint upper body and the material and physical bottom. The character of Wanda Melcer's *Swastika and Child*, terrified by her "crazy different" state, recalled that a pregnant woman should not be seen in the streets to avoid people's opinion that

<sup>35</sup> D. Nowacki. "New Building, Old Foundations," *Twórczości* 2001 no 12. 116.

<sup>36</sup> K. Kłosińska. "Female signature," [in:] *Literature of Young Poland: Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, eds. E. Paczoska, J. Sztachelska, Białystok 1998. 150-190. After: K. Budrowska *Woman and Stereotypes: Image of the Woman in the Polish Prose after 1989*, Białystok 2000. 69.



she performs “such vulgar activities”<sup>37</sup>. Similar words can be found in *A Book of the Beginning*. The author mentions that, right before the birth of her third daughter, she kept hiding her state under a black coat as “she was afraid that they would discover my pagan ritual and shout: she spreads scandal with her body!” (KP 55). Embarrassment and shame are triggered by pregnancy’s sexual connotations. It is a sign of a still valid taboo concerning the act of making one’s intimate experiences public.<sup>38</sup>

An asexual mother is also a woman who – as a “full” body – does not indulge in physical love. Sex only serves procreation. Therefore, a woman/mother has to be sexually passive and consciously avoid bodily pleasures “for the sake of the baby.”

This rule is not respected in the pregnancy diary. At the very beginning of *Polka* we may observe breaking the stereotype of sexual abstinence during pregnancy and refuting the myth of an asexual mother who, additionally, is a shameless person, “Sex during pregnancy! It’s getting more comfortable in the standing position, from behind. Should I buy fucking crazy high heels? Pietuszka wouldn’t have to get down to my level. Climbing a stool is too disarmingly childish. Definitely high heels, *sursum corda* and protruding buttocks” (P 134-135).

Love between two people, which results in giving life to a baby in a few months, is not sinful. There is nothing wrong with the future parents still wanting to enjoy the intimacy between them. In view of the upcoming changes in their lives, this might be the only asylum of safety for them.

The stereotype of the asexual mother is inevitably linked with the category of beauty which needs to be redefined in the context of pregnant women. Following the ideal of a slim and perfectly shaped body, future mothers treat maternity as necessary evil, because pregnancy is perceived as destruction of the body and annihilation of the woman’s former “I.” Perhaps, it is the fear of change that is the reason why a mirror is often an element of a future mother’s house:

I peeped in the mirror, not just “looked in it” – the one in the bathroom is too small – but I peeped at my belly. I got ashamed: here is my face, normal, and below, cut with the mirror, there is my second half. As if patched with a picture from pregnancy magazines, photos of models and actresses posing naked with their maternal bellies. (P 181)

and further,

I can’t believe what I see in the mirror: puffy eyes and bulbous cheeks, changed into a fairly normal face with the help of make-up... Out of the swollen puffball there emerges a Woman. Not out of grey clay but out of kaolin clay of ground face powder and rouge. (P 253)

Changes that Manuela’s body undergoes exceed her expectations. Pregnancy becomes punishment, a woman is guilty of her own suffering. In the course of time, the artist starts to be disturbed by her own looks of a mother in late pregnancy, “I take off my clothes before going to bed. I’ve taken off everything. But there is something left, a bit heavy,

<sup>37</sup> W. Melcer, *Swastika and Child*, Warsaw 1934. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. A. Rich, *Of Woman Born*. <http://rcin.org.pl>

not mine. I would be glad to take off the belly too" (P 112). The following sentence most explicitly describes the woman's opinion on physical changes accompanying pregnancy, "I don't have a physiological talent to be pregnant. This is too much, this 'bellied' half-a-metre belly. I wish I could lay down with an inscription 'I'm in late pregnancy: I'm getting floppy.'" (P 271)

Expressions used by the author such as "this is too much," "unshapely gut," "curvature of the stomach went past the critical level" or "potbelly" assign a negative value to this experience. The comparison of pregnancy to an illness presented in *Polka* classifies maternity in an unequivocal manner, "Pregnancy is not an illness, pregnancy is not an illness, I keep repeating it to myself. I have problems standing (my legs hurt), sitting (ribs rub against the stomach), lying (the stomach moves to the throat). What is left is walking" (P 323).

The woman also experiences deformation of her body and identity during delivery. She literally and metaphorically "falls into pieces." Right after the delivery, Nasiłowska's character asks, "And me, am I beautiful now, among the bloody shreds, in shambles?" The cultural understanding of attractiveness must be redefined so that a woman at the childbirth could be perceived as beautiful. It is difficult as there have always been certain aesthetic patterns inculcated in the mother and her relatives.

Anna Nasiłowska's *Domino* is an example of stereotypical separation of attractiveness and maternity which reveals negation of the mother's own body marked with pregnancy and the birth of her daughter. Monika Bekke has an interesting view on attractiveness as she notices that splitting beauty from the maternal body is a kind of escape from nature associated with excess, abundance, physiology, "We exchanged the nose of an animal to a human eye which is selective; it sees one thing and omits another...It most eagerly omits the horror of nature, namely the dangerous woman-nature. Whereas beauty gives an eye a pleasurable illusion of the intellectual control over nature."<sup>39</sup>

The author of *Cities* draws a clear line for beauty in her life – what she calls beautiful is everything that was before:

What happened? Before there was vanity and coquetry, only now I experience exile and I need clothes to cover nakedness. It's me, this loose bag, painful breasts and soft, shapeless belly, like the first mother on earth freshly formed out of clay...This is only a body transformed into idle, charmless, fragmented meat. (D 98-99)

The author of *Women and Stereotypes* talks about the fear of castration presented in *Domino*.<sup>40</sup> Nasiłowska says, "I have been devastated. I'm paying for life with my body" (Ks 26). The mother agrees with the separation of the sexual and maternal body and notices, "A film on TV. A woman is taking a shower. A man is looking lustily. I turn back and leave. My breast hurts. Exhaustion, astonishment. Distaste. Rubbish" (D 116).

<sup>39</sup> M. Bakke. *Open Body: Philosophical Reinterpretations of Cultural Visions of Physicality*, Poznań 2000, 108.

<sup>40</sup> K. Budrowska. *Treatise*... 84. <http://rcin.org.pl>

## Texts and the Body

It is hard for the character to consent to sexual nature of the act of maternity, because she is an attentive observer of culture, while her distrust does not help regard maternity as *sacrum* at all. The body turns out to be an obstacle. Yes, the mother speaks about desire aroused by her breasts full of milk, but this is a hungry baby's craving.

The appreciation of the maternal body comes together with the birth of another, third daughter, described in *A Book of the Beginning*. At that moment, the woman starts to understand that it is necessary to change the definition of "physical attractiveness" in order to include in it the experience of her body destruction:

I have long fought with a grudge I had toward the body. Also toward my own body...my own body at the first place. Is this suspicious warmth supposed to be me? This squelch inside of me? This slush? Impossible, I thought. The body is an animal which is first cruelly trained, then slain. No other way. What is more pitiful than being weak in view of one's own (running) blood? Or this evil chill caused by the need of preparing animal meat to be used in the kitchen. Or disgust caused by smells. I wanted to reject it. The word and the light are bloodless and how powerful they are! (K 62-63)

The author underlines the importance of words that can deprive young mothers not only of their beauty but also of their right to be called human beings:

Our language is not good. It's stiff as a board. It can't achieve transparency. What is worst, it constantly separates... It calls differently the soul and the body. And I was in need of the Word coming from the body...I suspect that the most beautiful and bright sentences are in fact gibberish. Only stylized. At least at the front. So I say, "I don't know, but I am. Please, leave it without a comment." (Ks 79)

I will get back to the notion of the revolt against the language and lack of convenient forms to name the reality a pregnant woman comes across. In the meantime, what seems interesting to deciphering of the myth about the asexual mother in *A Book of the Beginning* is disagreement to inability of expressing certain experiences and the need – repeated after *Domino* – to change the language which would sound from the very depth of experiences.<sup>41</sup>

In *Domino*, the author quotes a conversation of a couple about the placenta. The man who participated in the delivery, tells his wife that the placenta is "a type of membrane, a whitish bag, huge, empty stomach interspersed with veins. There are shreds of something red" (D 99). The young dad is embarrassed neither with the view of his wife's organs nor about talking about it. On the contrary, it is the woman who wants to forget about it as soon as possible. By forgetting, she wants to be awakened from the dream, from remembering about "the baby formed out of her own entrails, out of meat." Here, the motif of the mirror comes back. However, the mother – earlier being the mirror of her man – "stopped reflecting for now," she became transparent and her own interior can be seen through her.

In *A Book of the Beginning*, the mother needs more time to get familiar with her new body. It also takes her longer to regain faith – which is the final message of

<sup>41</sup> Cf. K. Rodowska. "Wild Animal Trap," *Fruza* (1990) no 11. 174.

the book – in the possibility to be attractive again, despite the inability to go back to the body shape she had before pregnancy. The woman does not call herself attractive but she indirectly becomes so. This happens because she knows that out of her “vulgar” body her daughter was created, “Anima, as white as snow.” Although there is still anger at the words, the feeling of beauty, which is born with every new life, has been retrieved.

Hereby, my matter has been truly trans-sub-stan-tia-ted on earth. I'm afraid of these words but this is what truly had place. It didn't make me anyhow better. Maybe physically worse because devastated. This will heal with time. Most probably this way: the same, identical but different and reproduced. (K 63)

The example of the stereotype of the asexual mother shows the discrepancy between both writers. Manuela Gretkowska's diary covers almost the entire period of pregnancy and ends with the birth of Pola and the story begins earlier than in Anna Nasiłowska's works, therefore it touches on a different problem. Gretkowska explains that (luckily) pregnancy is a process that has its resolution. And the woman-mother does not always has to experience – besides the feeling of the physical destruction – a more serious trauma resulting in the loss of control over her own “I.”

Nasiłowska is also interested in analysing maternity as a process leading to the disintegration of the “I.” Ewa, the character in *Domino*, can hardly consent to the separation of the sexually desired body and the maternal one. Nevertheless, she tries to appreciate the role of a mother she plays, and acts against existing cultural patterns which impose such division. The disintegration of the mother's personality goes through her body and reaches her mind which makes her see herself as two people – the one from before pregnancy and the other after the childbirth.

The integration of the woman who is physically attractive and the asexual mother happens slowly. It accompanies the awareness of having given life to beautiful and good children. This is how Anna Nasiłowska restores the woman's peace of mind and simultaneously brings her back to culture. As a mother, she is accepted again because some other beauty canons apply to her. A still valid question is whether realizing one's own attractiveness (by means of giving birth to a beautiful daughter) is not just an indirect method of bringing a woman back to culture and whether it does not seem like another attempt to expiate “performing vulgar activities” during pregnancy and delivery.

In the above selected works, the writers' attitude toward maternity oscillates between stabilization and decipherization on the basis of almost encyclopedic examples of stereotypes present in literature. Moreover, both authors often unconsciously stabilize stereotypes instead of challenging them. Anna Nasiłowska does so, on the one hand, when she describes the need of legitimatizing public breastfeeding, on the other hand, through depicting the asexual mother who is not reconciled with the separation of the attractive body from the maternal one, and for whom the only compensation for the loss of good looks and frame of mind is supposed to be the knowledge that she gave birth to a healthy child.

## Texts and the Body

Breaking stereotypes is perhaps coincidental and unconscious, as a result of “a deep analysis of the birth phenomenon.”<sup>42</sup> We cannot deny that the authors are aware of that and consider all this a coincidence. It is important, however, to notice that the problem of maternity belongs to the sphere in which many other various discourses encounter. Attempts to speak about maternity mean the necessity to answer all questions, dispel all doubts. That is why, most probably, some of the stereotypes got confirmed by the two authors, while others, the more interesting ones, have been broken.

*Translation: Marta Skotnicka*