

Who's Afraid of Baba Yaga? A Reading of Ageing From the Gender Perspective

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Despite the fact that an increase in the old-age population is noticeable in most contemporary societies, the issues of growing old and personal experience of the old-age population, old women in particular, remain unnoticed. In a culture fascinated by youth, old age is perceived in stereotypical ways, with a lot of prejudice, taboos and fears that produce many negative perceptions and discriminatory practices. The paper is based on the analysis of ageing issues and life narratives of elderly women presented in the novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2009) by Dubravka Ugrešić. Baba Yaga, the ambivalent mythological heroine, has been shown as a greatly provocative character who – reinterpreted in the feminist key – creates new meanings and an emancipatory potential for women of all ages.

Key words: ageing, culture of youthfulness, ageism, feminist gerontology, Baba Yaga, Dubravka Ugrešić

INTRODUCTION: GROWING OLD – AN UNDESIRABLE CONDITION?

The attitude towards old age is largely determined by the culture we live in. Thus in a culture which creates and promotes the illusion of continuous advance, progress and endless possibilities, “society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention” (de Beauvoir 1996: 1). In spite of the fact that both Europe and the USA are faced with the phenomenon of “*the greying*”, “as a culture we don’t know very much about the subjective, existential, or moral experience of older people” (Kerner Furman 1997: 2). This is even more true when it comes to the subjective experience of older women.

As perceived by the younger generations old age is not only “a foreign country with an unknown language to the young” (Sarton, quoted in Kerner Furman 1997: 2), but it is also a phase in the human life characterised by

hard-core stereotypes and prejudice that show old people as unreasonable, weak and extremely demanding, “difficult” persons of delicate health. In the vast amount of information communicated to us through all the present-day media and means of communication one can also clearly discern “heightening anxiety and ambivalence about the physical realities of growing older” (Hurd Clarke 2011: 1).

Pushed down to the margin of social life, in Western societies old age appears as “an example of deviance from normalcy” (Arber and Ginn, quoted in Hurd Clarke 2011: 29) and *eo ipso* as an “undesirable condition”, with older generations thus unavoidably becoming second-rate social actors, “a social category, a social problem” (Hurd Clarke 2011: 29). In a nutshell, “the basic assumption underlying ageism [...] (is) that youth is good, desirable and beautiful; old age is bad, repulsive and ugly” (Healey, quoted in Hurd Larke 2011: 29). Such a Manichaeian picture, strictly taken, does not recognize gradation and nuances – youth is “in”, old is undeniably “out”. If ageing and old age are seen from a *gender* perspective, we have to agree with Frida Kerner Furman’s observation that “in a society that privileges youth, material productivity, and physical attractiveness, to become old, but especially to become an old woman, is to enter difficult terrain” (Kerner Furman 1997: 94).

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the status of old age and ageing, particularly of old women, in the present-day culture. This survey will focus on the analyses of life narratives of elderly women presented in Dubravka Ugrešić’s novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* [originally: *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* (2008)]. In this context Baba Yaga, the ambivalent and greatly provocative mythological heroine – reinterpreted and (re)coded in the feminist key – assumes new meanings and emancipatory potential for women of all ages.

“WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GROW OLD?” – CRITICAL (AND) HUMANISTIC GERONTOLOGY

Critical gerontology has been developing since the late 1970s, successfully incorporating into its theoretical-research horizon perspectives created and developed within the context of political, humanistic and social sciences. The basic conception that brings together all the versions of critical gerontology can be summed up in the thesis that the *mainstream* gerontology ignores power, class, ethnicity and gender issues in its interpretations, thus overlooking precisely those institutions that produce and sustain asymmetrical structures of power and disparity in the society (Cruikshank 2009: 191). Moreover, the critical gerontological approach brings about significant

methodological changes, since incorporation of historical and philosophical perspectives stands in the way of any preferences over quantitative analyses, with “cultural perceptions of ageing” and “spiritual and moral dimensions of ageing” finally getting into focus (Cruikshank 2009: 191, 195).

A remarkable contribution to the development of critical gerontology and to the development of new perspectives in studying the phenomenon of ageing in general was made by humanistic gerontology. The basic question raised by humanistic gerontology¹ is *what it means to grow old* (Cole et al. 2010: 1). This approach does not ignore the voices of those we are talking about, on the contrary, it insists on the “interpretation and self-actualisation” (Moody, quoted in Cruikshank 2009: 196). Therefore it is necessary to see how older people feel, what part they play in shaping their own life story, what views they have “on the nature of a ‘good old age’” (Cole et al. 2010: 15).

This opens complementary, precious perspectives of understanding old age: “Aging is a journey (Cole), an ‘abundance of life’ (Moody), or a time of ripening. Aging is a kaleidoscope, its shifting images neither good nor bad” (Cruikshank 2009: 196). Furthermore, studies have shown that old people should not be treated as a unified category since a wide range of social, cultural, class, gender, ethnical, temporal and spatial differences “create a patchwork of snapshots that defy generalizations” (Cole et al. 2010: 16). Patchwork, kaleidoscope, mosaic... – these are the “formats” that enable a more integral and more authentic picture of ageing and old age, a picture which will encompass all the relevant perspectives.

An invaluable contribution to the analyses of old age from a more integral, in-depth perspective has come out of historical research, literature, religious studies, philosophy and, especially, bioethical discourse (Cole et al. 2010: 15-18). During the 1990s an exceptionally important topic – “the connection between aging and identity” – also came into focus of the studies of ageing, turning up from the humanistic optics, the topic itself complying with “concepts from the humanities such as image and metaphor” (Cole et al. 2010: 3). It is exactly this thematic problem-oriented enrichment on the one hand, and the methodological “playing off” on the other, that make it possible for us to deal with the enigma of ageing and old age in a more far-reaching and constructive way.

¹ German authors have been developing “cultural gerontology” in this direction (Cole et al. 2010: 3).

AGEING FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Issues related to the gender aspects of ageing were not tackled as a topic within the context of the first two feminist waves. One exception is the impressive work by Simone de Beauvoir *The Coming of Age* (originally published under the title *La Vieillesse* in 1970 in Paris) in which the author stated that the questions on ageing and old age were “carefully passed over in silence” and that “this silence has to be shattered” (de Beauvoir 1996: 7). Why have the old age and old women been made invisible and pushed to the margin in the feminist and gender analyses? According to some authors, older women have not found their place in the feminist analyses because “the energies of younger feminists have been directed to issues that affect their own lives” (Kerner Furman 1997: 3) (for instance, workplace inequality, reproductive issues, violence against women etc.). Another important reason for passing the subject over, according to Margaret Cruikshank, lies in the fact that academic gerontology – if compared to sociology, psychology, history and other socio-humanistic disciplines influenced by feminism – is a relatively small, poorly recognized field that couldn’t succeed to incorporate the feminist dimension into it (Cruikshank 2009: 180).

Nevertheless, during the 1990s, problem-oriented thematic contexts relating to old age and ageing finally entered feminist debates. That step forward was the logical outcome of the theoretical developments in the feminist theory that occurred in the 1980s, which were characterised by a sensibilization and a better perception of diversities and differentiations of female experiences, as it became obvious that there is “no single or universal category of ‘woman’” and “oppression is not the same for all women” (Bernard et al. 2000: 11).

Feminist women theoreticians take a critical stance towards gerontological studies judging them not only as reductionist, but also as too simplifying on account of androcentrism, biological determinism and dualism (Gannon, quoted in Cruikshank 2009: 187). If for nothing else, the very name of the discipline, gerontology, suggests the idea of androcentrism: the Greek word it was derived from, *geron*, means an oldster, an old man, so that gerontology is literally “the study of old men” (Cruikshank 2009: 182). In order to avoid the obvious deficiency of the term “feminist gerontology” Cruikshank suggests *gerastology* instead – the expression to combine gerontology with disciplines like sociology, literature, nursing, cultural studies and anthropology (Cruikshank 2009: 182).

Feminist perspectives highlight and convincingly prove “that questions about the meaning of aging are inseparable from race, gender, and class, as well as from the cultural, historical and personal circumstances in which they arise” (Urban Walker, quoted in Cole et al. 2010: 17), and the goal thereof –

like in critical gerontology – leaves behind the context of strictly scholarly practice. Its ultimate goal is “freeing old persons from political, economic, and social domination” (Cruikshank 2009: 195).

The most important issues dealt with by feminist studies of old age and ageing are the issues of identity that can all be reduced to a single crucial question: What does it mean to be a woman? Or, to put it more precisely: What does it mean to be a woman growing old, an old woman? This crucial concern, as looked upon by Bernard and associates, can be analytically separated into a set of unavoidable thematic-problem-oriented contexts relating to the ageing of women: *social justice*; making *women's experience* visible through their own words; understanding *oppression* (in its multiplicity and diversity); addressing the relationship and tension between the *structural* and the *personal* and between the *public* and the *private* lives of women; articulating the impact of economic and political *power*, institutions and knowledge on women; exploring what it means to be a “woman” (considering both the commonalities and diversity, the differences within and between); examining *identity* (its fluidity and changeability, its acquisition and development); expanding understanding to include perspectives addressing race and ethnicity, age, sexuality etc.; and, last but not least, “developing a critically reflexive, and self-reflexive, approach to both our own ageing and that of those around us” (Bernard et al. 2000: 17).

However, even feminism has not been bypassed by some kind of age segregation. Thus Betty Friedan in her book *The Fountain of Age* (originally published in 1993) describes the experience of a feminist theologian who celebrated her seventieth birthday during a large conference of women ministers where she had been invited to speak: “Suddenly I realized that I was segregated at the beginning of the conference with two other older women and labelled ‘Our Foremothers’” (Friedan 2006: 63). As the conference proceeded she realised that she was not considered to be in the mainstream of the conference thought although her theses were far more radical than the ideas of any other colleagues on the program. She concluded that she never felt “the real pinch of ageism until, in the feminist movement (which is now my life), my own sisters began to call me mother” (Friedan 2006: 63).

LITERAL INSIGHTS INTO DIVERSITY OF WOMEN EXPERIENCING OLD AGE AND AGEING

“The great traditions of sociology are humanistic”, and “the calling of sociology is to contribute to the self-interpretation of man” (Coser 1972: xvi). This is why, as Coser points out, nothing relating to humans should remain

unknown to a social scientist. In other words, if a novel, a poem, a theatrical piece or a film function as “a personal and direct impression of social life” (Cosser 1972: xvi), a sociologist should approach them with exactly the same openness and seriousness as when s/he interviews a person, observes a community or a social group, or, else, classifies and analyses data in his/her research. We should, therefore, not be surprised at the fact that in Western sociology there has been, for many decades, a kind of a tradition, so to speak, to use fictional works “to illustrate some of our discipline’s most essential truths” (Dowd 1999: 324). Back in 1963, Lewis Cosser, as mentioned above, published his book entitled *Sociology Through Literature: An Introductory Reader*, in which he brings social science and literature into a constructive dialogue, identifying “sociological thought within literary works”, analysing in this connection “how classic works of literature expressed various classical preoccupations of sociologists”² (Sutherland and Feltey 2010: 7).

Narratives (whether fictional or autobiographical or in the form of oral histories) are “the heart of feminist gerontology and should count as gerontological knowledge” because they provide “the nuance, complexity, contradiction and incongruities of old women’s lives that social science research often misses” (Cruikshank 2009: 190). Reading from the feminist position is particularly useful because, as Myra Jehlen says, “feminist thinking is really rethinking, an examination of the way certain assumptions about women and the female character enter into the fundamental assumptions that organize all our thinking [...] Such radical scepticism is an ideal intellectual stance that can generate genuinely new understandings” (Jehlen, quoted in Frey Waxman 2010: 87).

Bearing all this in mind, the question *How can the analysis of a literary work contribute to a deeper understanding of the experience of women ageing?* becomes a rhetorical one. An excellent substantiation of the thesis on the cognitive abundance of the feminist imposed narratives can be found in the already mentioned novel by Dubravka Ugrešić *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*. It is a post-modern, explicitly feminist triptych which speaks profoundly of the world of old women, their life narratives, bodies, faces, the experience of old age and ageing, everyday life etc. The first part of the novel is dedicated to the author’s relationship towards the world of her aged and ill eighty-year old mother, while the second part of the novel deals with three aged women friends – eighty-eight-year old Pupa, seventy-year old Beba and eighty-year old Kukla. After being urged by the oldest among them, Pupa, to go to a Czech spa, a *wellness* centre, they do so, where, on the one hand, their life destinies

² Cosser knows that “literary insight cannot replace scientific and analytical knowledge, but it can profit from them immensely” (Cosser 1972: xvii).

dramatically interweave with the recent historical and sociopolitical situation of the ex-Yugoslavian regions (and, the post-transitional countries in general), and, on the other, with a thick mythological web woven around the central heroine, Baba Yaga. The third part of the novel is, actually, a decoding of the contents of the first two parts “through the prism of Baba Yaga” (Ugrešić 2009: 315). Therefore the content of the novel can be interpreted in at least two ways – through the prism of ageing issues and through the prism of the myths on Baba Yaga. This dual interpretation and articulation brings to light a rich fictional world of personal first-hand experiences and cultural analyses that can be connected with the findings of empirical research of old age from a gender perspective (Kerner Furman 1997; Hurd Clarke 2011).

One of the most significant characteristics of the novel – the presentation of old people’s feelings, their life narratives and personal interpretations (self-understanding) – perfectly illustrates the approach and the leading ideas of humanistic and feminist gerontology. The main heroines in the novel are old women with the same educational background (they all have university degrees, except for the author’s mother, about whose education we do not learn anything) – Pupa is a gynaecologist, Kukla is an English language and literature teacher, and also a gifted but unrealized writer, and Beba is a formally trained painter who spent all her life drawing anatomical drawings at the Medical Faculty. Yet, these women differ according to the degree of their professional achievements and in their economic standing. Their life narratives are, therefore, different, but they generally overlap in one exceptionally important point – problematic transgenerational relationships (with either children or deceased parents). It is precisely because of their unrealized and/or problematic motherhood that all three heroines deviate from the traditionally adopted norms of femininity so that, in a way, they enter the territory of the “dissident” Baba Yaga. They all have complex relations with their families, partners and mothers, permeated by guilt, anger and misunderstandings. Everyday life of these women, as well as the problems they are faced with, raise a lot of questions:

1) *Bioethical questions* such as euthanasia, i.e. the right of an individual to bring his/her independent, autonomous decision on ending his/her own life once it becomes unbearable – in Pupa’s case it is the question of health and illness:

She who had helped so many babies into the world, cut who knows how many umbilical cords [...] she at least deserved to have someone sensible extinguish her [...] That is what she kept trying to explain to Zorana, but Zorana had resolved to respect medical rules rather than show any empathy. (Ugrešić 2009: 116)

2) *Philosophical questions* on the capacities and limitations of advanced age, questioning the significance and purpose of old age from the ethical point of view, reflecting on “good” old age and the nature of time, on problems of identity and the self, on wisdom, longevity, mortality etc. (cf. Cole et al. 2010: 17–18).

The problem was her death: it simply wouldn't come [...] Death doesn't smell. It is life that stinks. Life is shit! (Ugrešić 2009: 20)

3) *Sociological questions* on the perception of old age in modern society, transgenerational relationships, the role of old people in a family, the evaluation of age, gender identities, answers to the question what it means to grow old in a consumerist society, the economic status of old women...

She despaired, often her life seemed a living hell to her, but she didn't know how to help herself. She blamed us for a long time, her children: we had pulled away from her, we had left home, we no longer cared about her the way we used to, we had alienated ourselves (her phrase). (Ugrešić 2009: 29)

Beba was forcefully struck by a sudden awareness of how ugly her life was [...] Her pension was barely enough to cover her basic outgoings and food, while her meagre savings had vanished with the Ljubljana Bank [...] Beba was weeping because she could not remember when she had last had a holiday [...] She was used to poverty [...] (Ugrešić 2009: 88, 89)

4) *Feminist questions* on women caring and being responsible for others, cultural ideals of femininity that are primarily oriented towards youth and physical beauty.

Among all these diverse, intricate and provocative topics, on this occasion we are going to analytically identify the issues of ageing and the aged woman's body in the consumerist and oppressive *anti-age* culture.

WOMEN'S BODY IN THE HYPER-CONSUMERIST ("ANTI-BABA YAGA") CULTURE

Mythology of beauty, along with the cult of youth, are deeply embedded in the Western culture that sets up “powerful, ubiquitous, and invasive [...] demands [...] on our bodies and souls” (Bordo 2003: xix). The body, and particularly the woman's body, is the battle-field of culture, economy and politics. Generations of women have been growing up in “the empire of images” (Bordo), which left a deep mark on their perception and intimate

experience of their own bodies. While talking about the relation between women and their bodies, the famous feminist Adrienne Rich pointed out: “I know no woman [...] for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire [...] its changes and mutilations” (Rich, quoted in Howson 2011: 55–56). That is why it is not unexpected that the woman’s body has become the subject of intensive feminist evaluations, but a deeper and more complex insight into the problems of transformation of the woman’s body as defined by culture can be obtained only after the component of age is taken into account. On account of the fact that the present-day culture is contaminated with a consumerist ideology to its core, an unavoidable question comes up: How does a woman’s body grow old in the “hyper-consumerist culture”?

It is a well-known fact that ageing and the processes associated with it strongly (and very often dramatically) manifest themselves on the body. A person growing old, who is faced with these processes, asks questions on how to manage the ageing body, yet this management has two sides – the “internal”, intimate one, and the “external”, social one. The “external” side of ageing is closely related to the fact that our body represents us to other people, to the society and also to social expectations. In this respect “processes and experiences of ageing” also raise questions on “the significance of the physical appearance and capacities of the body for maintaining self and social identity” (Howson 2011: 4). If this is taken into account, ageing is socially constructed – we are getting old, naturally, as the result of relentless biological powers, but the meanings that are attributed to these unavoidable physical changes primarily depend on culture.

It should be emphasised here once again that we do not claim that there is no ageing “as such” because nobody can deny the irrefutable truth: “bodies matter” (Cruikshank 2009: 181). But, with ageing issues – as with gender issues – we unavoidably have to deal with a sociocultural interpretation of the “hard” physical-biological facts. Bearing in mind this cultural preparation of natural realities, post-structuralists have established the evaluation of the body as a text, which opens up the possibility and, indeed, the necessity to decode the meanings that a culture attributes to the body. Thus the body is “a product of particular historical contexts and social relations” (Laqueur, quoted in Howson 2011: 8) – in order to comprehend what really happens with the body, we are supposed to decode the signs imprinted into it by its parent culture.

It was Simone de Beauvoir who stated that the woman’s body is observed (and treated) as an object open for research, while John Berger drew the attention to genderisation of the categorical pair/dualism active–passive: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger, quoted in Howson 2011: 56). This means

that women are not only aware of the fact they are looked at, but they also internalise this male look and see themselves *the way men see them*. For instance, at a very early age girls start to observe their bodies and faces and ask themselves whether they are beautiful or cute enough and whether they are “compatible” with “a standard of desirable beauty” (Brownmiller 1984: 25). A woman’s body is continually encouraged to be displayed, and, indeed, “women are obliged to produce their bodies as adequate and acceptable spectacle, as objects external to self” (Doane, quoted in Howson 2011: 56).

In these processes a woman’s body, consequently, becomes *an object* – not only because it plays a submissive/passive role – but also because it becomes external to self. By observing her body, a woman does not perceive it as something that belongs entirely to her, since its value depends on the dictates of others – on the evaluating looks of her partner, friends, colleagues, passers-by, complete strangers, etc. Besides, many feminists point to the superficiality of criteria that are used to evaluate women in patriarchal cultures. “The value of a woman” is mainly judged by her physical appearance using idealized standards that have nothing to do with proportions defined by real life (Wolf 2008: 27–30, 32). Terrorized by the glamorous photographs of unrealistic faces and bodies, women compare their own, real and “imperfect” bodies with monocultural, unifying “norms of feminine appearance” (Bordo 2003; Mather Saul 2003; Brownmiller 1984; Wolf 2008) that affirm “young, thin, toned, healthy, White, suntanned body with flawless and wrinkle-free skin, perfectly coiffed hair, little or no body hair, artfully applied makeup, and the latest fashionable trappings” (Hurd Clarke 2011: 1) as an ideal. Out of these compulsive comparisons with unattainable ideals real women unavoidably come out traumatised.

The described processes result in multiple reductions that reduce the totality of a woman’s being and personality to fragments (a specific type of face or body, a specific age etc.), which – an illusion is being created – can guarantee satisfaction, happiness and a fulfilled life to a woman. Consequently, not only does “under cultural constraints, women’s sense of identity [move] from internal, self-directed considerations to external, other-directed preoccupations with self-presentation” (Kerner Furman 1997: 61), but those external and partial aspects of a woman’s being are further distorted and reduced, resulting in a woman’s life turning into a caricatural vision as created by the fashion and cosmetic industry. The “fashion-beauty complex”, as Sandra Lee Bartky calls it, is the cluster that stands to gain the most from the unbelievable amount of energy, money and time that women spend being pushed by the mentioned demands. We are talking about “a system of corporations which set up norms for acceptable femininity through products, services, information, images, and ideologies”, which, as already stated, pushes women towards “alienation from their bodies” (Kerner Furman 1997: 61).

By interiorizing these social norms women, in a way, become colonisers of their own bodies (which they can no longer perceive as theirs). Lee Bartky, basing her analysis on Foucault's notion of the panopticum, reveals that a woman, by internalizing those invasive norms, becomes "a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance" (Lee Bartky, quoted in Mather Saul 2003: 158). Living in a society and culture that permanently observes and evaluates them, women have lived "in a permanent posture of disapproval" (Lee Bartky, quoted in Kerner Furman 1997: 61) since their earliest childhood, trying in vain to reshape their bodies to comply with the imposed standards of "an adequate face" and "an adequate body".

This feminist thesis is excellently supported by the dialogue between Kukla and Mr Shaker from the novel. One of the important male characters is an American called Mr Shaker, a producer of fitness preparations for muscle-building, body fat reduction etc. He is, as put by Dubravka Ugrešić, "one of [...] those gurus who hoodwink us daily, those numerous prophets, swindlers and 'designers' of our lives in whose power we choose to place ourselves" (Ugrešić 2009: 91). All in line with the characteristics of the products he has been offering to the market, Mr Shaker "was preoccupied with the idea that all incompatible bodies must be transformed into compatible ones" (Ugrešić 2009: 149), the idea itself having been literally exercised by him even with his underage daughter Rosie. Specifically, because of her weight and proportions she too is shown as physically "incompatible" – relevant quantitative parameters of her body do not correspond to "norms for acceptable femininity" as imposed by corporatons.

"Rosie is, unfortunately, incompatible."

"How do you mean, incompatible?" asked Kukla.

"It is our duty to make ourselves into better and more perfect beings than God made us, is it not?" said Mr Shaker.

"I can't see what your daughter's lacking." said Kukla.

"There's nothing lacking, unfortunately; on the contrary, there's altogether too much of her."

"That's just a bit of puppy fat, youthful sturdiness."

"Sturdiness could be the source of her future unhappiness. Unfortunately, we live in a time when even a little excess weight determines our life's course." (Ugrešić 2009: 148)

The driving force that is behind "restless search for new markets, new ways to generate and feed desire" is defined by Susan Bordo as "the amorality of consumer capitalism" (Bordo 2003: xxxi). Both old age and ageing have come under powerful attack from this consumerist torrent. They have become a profitable niche and a very rewarding business, organised around the quest for "a holy grail" – the formula for eternal youth. In the very foundation of the

so-called *anti-age* industry one can find a completely pretentious lie about “eternal youth”, on account of which hard-fought battles against old age and ageing have been waged, while both old age and ageing are reinterpreted and perceived as perfidious enemies that should in the end be stopped and defied.³ The complex and aggressive anti-age machinery is trying to find ways for ageing to be avoided in some way; various means being at its disposal: special eating regimens (reduction and other diets), physical training, cosmetics, plastic surgery [...] and – “outright denial” (Friedan 2006: 35). This is why it is at a rather early age that one internalises cultural stereotypes that youth is power and old age “a dirty little secret” (Kerner Furman 1997: 116) which should be deceived and/or somehow tricked at any cost. Bearing in mind this relentless war against old age and ageing, Ugrešić moves the story of the second part of the novel to a Czech spa, a wellness centre, led by Dr Topolanek, a transitional profiteer obsessed both by longevity and by profit. Dr Topolanek’s “mission” is brilliantly depicted in the following sections:

Topolanek called his new spa “Granny Agneza”. It sounded local, but still a little mysterious, because people would wonder who Agneza was, why Agneza, which Agneza...? (Ugrešić 2009: 218)

Topolanek felt magnificent, like a great reformer, like a scientist after a revolutionary discovery. If he had not actually discovered the formula of longevity, then with “Granny Agneza” he had at least composed an ode in praise of vitamin B, and discovered yet another of the ways life could be merrier and more relaxed, and that, in our anxious and dismal age, could be regarded as a capital contribution [...]. (Ugrešić 2009: 220)

We would not exaggerate if we insist on saying that the present-day society is “age segregated” (Kerner Furman 1997: 2), with ageing and old age having become a kind of a taboo – something one should preferably be silent about, as it seems. Susan Bordo has also described this *age segregation* from her personal perspective: “I’m fifty-six. The magazines tell me that at this age, a woman can still be beautiful. But they don’t mean me. They mean Cher, Goldie, Faye, Candace. Women whose jowls have disappeared as they’ve aged, whose eyes have become less droopy, lips grown plumper, foreheads smoother with the passing years [...] ‘Aging beautifully’ [...] today [...] means not appearing to age at all” (Bordo 2003: xxiv). Consequently, old age has been denied the right to be shown openly and unambiguously, it can “apologize” and enter mass-media only to disguise itself by mimicry into the illusion of its own negation – youth.

³ “Defy your age!” – an advertising slogan in the Revlon campaign with Melanie Griffith (Bordo 2003: xxvi).

This “state of ‘youthful ageing’” (Wolf 2008: 322) – which is in no way typical for “ordinary” women – has also been written about by Naomi Wolf in her analysis of the contemporary beauty myths. She explains that it all revolves around the invention that arises primarily from the need to launch “fashion-beauty complex” products on the market. Being well aware of the purchasing power of their target group, elderly women, the advertisers have found that “there is a great number of fantastically charismatic women above 40-ties that they can present glamorously” (Wolf 2008: 15) (for instance, Sharon Stone, Madonna, Jane Fonda etc.). The effects of such a promotional strategy are ambivalent, at best. On the one hand, these youthful-looking ageing women shown by way of example comfort the widespread uneasiness caused by ageing to a certain degree, but this relief, on the other hand, is being bought in a way that does not resolve the problem itself. The marketing of glamorous, fake images of old age only postpones confrontation with the unavoidable ageing processes, making it more distressing in the long run. And there is no need to specify that even the beauty of these youthful-looking aged faces is unrealistic, being the product of the joint action of pharmaceutical and cosmetic industry, on the one hand, and image digital processing technology, on the other.

“I HAVE CHANGED SO MUCH” – IMAGES OF (ONE’S OWN) BODY AND EXPERIENCES OF AGEING

Ageing is a complex phenomenon, or, a variety of processes that encompass not only the biological-physiological aspects but also social, cultural, identity-related, psychological and other components. But in perceiving and experiencing ageing it is precisely the perceptions associated with the body that have a substantial role (Howson 2011: 148–155), which is a result of the fact that the body has the central place in human existence. According to William F. May, body has a threefold significance for a human being. It is, in the first place, an instrument for controlling the world, secondly, a means of savouring the world (via our five senses), and, thirdly, a means of revealing ourselves to others, and what the body in general implies for human existence can be outlined in the statement: “We not only *have* bodies, we are *our bodies*” (Kerner Furman 1997: 95).

In order to describe feelings and perceptions of one’s own body the multi-layered concept of *body image* is generally used, which can be defined as “a multidimensional self-attitude toward one’s body, particularly its size, shape, and aesthetics” (Cash et al., quoted in Hurd Clarke 2011: 20). Hurd Clarke extends this definition by stating that body image includes perception of the body, thoughts and feelings about it, as well as investment into

it – “rather than being fixed, body image is elastic, situational, and the negotiated product of the individual’s perceptions and the internalization of the cultural beauty ideal, individual body ideal, current body image, actual body shape, and social positioning” (Hurd Clarke 2011: 20). Hence, body image is something that one needs to work on permanently, something that always remains unfinished. As is the case in many other similar situations, negotiating the body is not devoid of considerable, often dramatic tensions between different parties.

One of the biggest challenges presented by living in our body is, obviously, the experience of ageing. Often characterised by the loss of physical health, and always characterised by unavoidable physical-physiological changes, ageing brings about considerable changes on all levels, affecting the quality of life, changing self-presentation and participation in social life. In the novel, such profound psychological and social changes are perfectly illustrated in the character of the author’s mother:

For the last three years her life story had been scaled back to a handful of hospital release forms, doctors’ reports, radiological charts and her pile of the MRIs and CAT scans of her brain. (Ugrešić 2009: 9–10)

She refused to wear the incontinence pads with the same obstinacy that she refused to wear flat-heeled orthopaedic shoes for the elderly [...] The incontinence was the worst insult her body had come up with for her. And she was irked by her forgetfulness [...] and finally she made her peace with it. (Ugrešić 2009: 71)

Incontinence, forgetfulness – these are not the only problems that the author’s mother is faced with in the novel, but they, obviously, belong to the most serious ones, as they imply the loss of control over the body and its physical functions, which are taken for granted in youth. On the other hand, the experience with medical monitoring of health problems creates the illusion that body control has been at least partly restored.

Self-perception and feelings of the fictitious heroines towards their bodies overlap with the narratives of women that participated in the research carried out by Frida Kerner Furman fifteen years ago. The author found that a personal interpretation of typical physical changes associated with ageing (with health problems excluded) – wrinkles, hair turning grey and thinning out, gaining weight – have been strongly affected by the values affirmed (and mystified) within the wider sociocultural context, such as, in the first place, physical beauty and attractiveness as important components of a woman’s identity. Many other researches also confirm that elderly women perceive and experience their own bodies “in constant tension with images of youth

– their own [...] or those of friends [...] or public figures like actresses or models” (Kerner Furman 1997: 104). If the material for such masochistic comparisons runs low, there is always the universal cult of youth that the mass media have been permanently (and relentlessly) reminding us of.

Such a situation is marvellously illustrated by the dialogue between the author and her mother, in which her mother complains about changes in her body, comparing her own body with its younger version and her own age with the age of the actresses from the golden age of Hollywood (Ava Gardner, Audrey Hepburn, Ingrid Bergman, Bette Davis):

“I have changed so much. I barely recognise myself.”

“What are you saying? You haven’t a single wrinkle on your forehead.”

“Maybe so, but the skin sags on my neck.”

“The wrinkles on your face are so fine they are barely visible.”

“Maybe, but my back is so hunched.”

“You’ve kept your slender figure.”

“My belly sticks out.” she complained.

“Sure, a little, but nobody notices,” I consoled her.

“I have changed. I barely recognise myself.”

“Can you think of anyone your age who hasn’t changed?”

“Well, now that you ask,” she’d relent. (Ugrešić 2009: 72–73)

Ugrešić gave an excellent description of an old woman’s attitude towards body image (which, as we already said, implies perception of the body, thoughts and feelings about it and investment into the body) through the characterisation of Beba:

Beba and her body lived in a state of mutual intolerance. She could not remember exactly when the first hostile incident had occurred. When she put on the first ten pounds? [...] Or was it when she came face to face with her image in a mirror and discovered to her great surprise that she was in a body that was not her own, and that it was a body that she would have to continue to bear as a punishment? [...] Yes, her body was exacting cruel revenge, nothing belonged to her any longer [...] (Ugrešić 2009: 117, 118, 119)

“An adequate body” and “an adequate face” could certainly not guarantee happiness, as Ugrešić showed through the character of Kukla who – because of her physical attributes and body posture – fits well into the desirable femininity standards (she’s tall, slim, she holds herself upright, she’s elegant, her face with strong cheekbones and slanting eyes etc.) which, well, did not make her happy. And indeed, her creativity had been impeded for a long time, while all her energy was wasted on caring for her physically weak partners. When it comes to the physical aspect, Kukla is a woman who could

be called “a feminine woman” (Marny, quoted in Kerner Furman 1997: 62). And yet, there is a detail which disqualifies her from the culturally “desirable adequacy” of a physical appearance – her big feet that draw her closer to the dissident area of Baba Yaga (who is out of the mainstream, both because of her looks and her character).

“THE MASK OF AGEING” – IDENTITY STRATEGY?

While the author’s mother wears a wig and dentures, and puts on lipstick, Beba is much more engaged in hiding the signs of ageing, so that her camouflage is much more complex – by dyeing her hair she covers her grey hair, by wearing scarves, corsets and eye-catching jewellery she distracts attention from her wrinkles and big breasts etc. These are excellent examples that show the practices of beautifying, or in other words, of camouflaging the traces of ageing on either one’s body or one’s face – “the mask of ageing”, as called by some authors (Biggs, Hepworth, quoted in Howson 2011: 153). In doing so, one comes across different tools and/or techniques: cosmetic products, selection of clothes, physical training etc. In connection with this, Featherstone and Hepworth have noticed that “many people make sense of the experience of ageing and its attendant changes in appearance and capacity by holding on to a sense of self that is separate from and concealed by these changes” (Featherstone and Hepworth, quoted in Howson 2011: 153). In other words, “the mask of ageing” identifies a specific feeling of alienation in older people when others perceive them as older persons – the practices to cover up the signs of ageing expand the distance towards one’s own physical being. However, building and expanding of this internal gap is not affected only by the pressure of other people’s gazes, it is also supported by the fact that a number of old persons intimately, “internally”, feel younger than their chronological age. The concept of the “mask of ageing” thus suggests the duality of the external and the internal; “the duality between what is displayed by the external surfaces and competencies of the body and the sense of self experienced by the individual” (Howson 2011: 153). Hence, one should make efforts to work on the external in order to hide the internal by simultaneously refining the multi-layered relation towards the inner self. For the thing inside, the inner sense of self, should be both affirmed and denied at the same time, preserved on the one hand, and “lost”, through masking, on the other.

While talking about “the mask of ageing” one should in no way ignore the gender component. Although ageing – as an unavoidable fact of life – affects both women and men, the fates of older people are different. Some aspects of

ageing are, naturally, typical of both women and men – in Western societies old age brings about a stigmatisation associated with the degradation of the social status, social invisibility etc. However, women are challenged by the requirements, the same as in their youth, which have not been imposed on men – they are expected to be fertile and physically attractive. These requirements, on the one hand, reduce a woman's body to "reproductive and sexual purposes" (Kerner Furman 1997: 107), while, on the other, impose upon a woman tasks that she is unable to fulfil infinitely (even if she would be willing to fulfil them), due to imminent biological-physiological reasons. Old age in women is, then, also shown as the period in which another unavoidable grave loss is to come about – "the loss of femininity" (Kerner Furman 1997: 107).

Old women are, thus, doubly affected – because they are women and because they are old. As already mentioned, it is very early that they start to perceive themselves through "the internalized man's gaze", thus being substantially determined by their reproductive potential and by the imperative of their physical attractiveness. Ageing does not only take away these two (socially mediated) crucial characteristics from them, it also degrades them through the "internalized gaze of youth" which dominates over the present-day culture glorifying "youth, change, the new, and the future" (Kerner Furman 1997: 109). In this respect, one could speak of a "double objectification" (Kerner Furman 1997: 109) that older women are exposed to, in that their social position is defined by *the accumulation* of the negative consequences of discrimination occurring on two levels – the asymmetric (hierarchical) male-female relationship and the social lack of balance between glorified youth and disqualified old age.

In order to cope with this double degradation some older women turn to different strategies and practices of beautifying, in an attempt to keep their options open and maintain control over their lives. Moreover, these strategies of beautifying "camouflage" sometimes also function as an interconnecting medium with once "normal" life (that old age made almost impossible). This is well illustrated by the example of the author's mother who, carrying out her customary rituals of prettifying, temporarily suspends the psychologically disastrous "state of emergency" caused by her being in the hospital:

I brought her face creams to hospital. Her lipstick was her signal that she was still among the living. (Ugrešić 2009: 28)

She went through her customary routine: she got carefully dressed, put on shoes with heels, her wig, her lipstick. (Ugrešić 2009: 28)

BABA YAGA'S MANIFESTO

Naomi Wolf stated that in a man's culture women are "mere 'beauties' [...] so that culture could continue to be male" (Wolf 2008: 76). Such culture is characterised by sexism, and by a series of stereotypes and prejudices associated with age. Consequently, for instance, somewhat older appearance is considered bad, while a youthful one is good, so that attractiveness and older women become "mutually exclusive categories" (Kerner Furman 1997: 104). This wrong, but widely spread assumption is identified with another mistaken idea – and that is that beauty is good, while ugliness is bad. Associating beauty with the good and ugliness with the bad results in mixing up aesthetic and moral-ethical categories, which permits – at least when it comes to women – associating old age with the categories of evil, manipulation, witchy business.⁴ It is precisely Baba Yaga who is a paradigmatic example in this respect!

Dubravka Ugrešić's novel is multi-layered and polysemic. By being explicitly feminist, and also extremely critical of the late-capitalist *anti-age* culture, as well as of economic and political trends in the post-socialist countries, it is in its basic, deepest layer masterly woven on the mythological loom of the East-European mythological imaginary.⁵ In the last part of this post-modernist triptych *Aba Bagay*, a young, modest and self-denying, but at the same time very unusual Bulgarian Slavacist, unveils her real identity, her gender mainstreaming aspect, emancipatory potential and her real name – Baba Yaga.

Baba Yaga is "a powerful witch figure" (Gonzaléz Celdrán et al. 2007: 128) with "shamanic features" (Johns 2004: 16). She is "the archetypal witch [...] a great magician" (von Franz 1993: 172), perfectly versed in pharmacology, she lives in a frightening rotating cottage that stands on a hen's leg, she flies in a mortar navigating it with its pestle... (Gonzaléz Celdrán et al. 2007: 128–129). Baba Yaga's physical appearance – pointed nose, eyebrows grown together, big feet, huge hanging breasts... – does not meet any corporation controlled physical-aesthetic standards imposed onto women, which categorises her beyond the present-day artificial mythology of a woman's beauty. But it is not only that she does not meet any of these criteria, she readily rejects and, what is more, does not care at all about the cultural and social

⁴ Kerner Furman points out that her students in their essays attributed the following characteristics to old women: "evil, manipulative, hag, busybody, wicked, meddling, interfering" (Kerner Furman 1997: 104).

⁵ This in-depth mythological underlying concept can be discerned in the very title of the novel and the names of the chapters: "Go There – I Know Not Where – and Bring Me Back a Thing I Lack"; "Ask Me No Questions and I'll Tell You No Lies"; "If You Know Too Much, You Grow Old Too Soon"; even so, it is clearly present during all the developments as described in the novel.

expectations that patriarchal culture imposes upon women. Baba Yaga is whimsical, insatiable, bad-tempered, without a partner, but she sometimes acts as a self-supporting mother of human little ones (and also animal young) (Ugrešić 2009: 270, 312). But then, what counts most about her is that she has never cried about her fate and that she has never held herself a victim. This mythological heroine is coded in a patriarchal traditional key as “an ugly, grumpy old woman”, thus fitting well into different ageist and sexist stereotypes – for instance, in Russian she stands for “any cantankerous old woman” (Gilchrist 2009: 98). “In modern terms, Baba Yaga is a ‘dissident’”, as Ugrešić concludes, “beyond the pale, isolated, a spinster, an old fright, a loser” (Ugrešić 2009: 313).

Obviously, Baba Yaga represents much more than a grotesque appearance and the figure of fun. On the contrary, she is “enigmatic and ambivalent, ultimately a mysterious figure whose source is unknown” (Gilchrist 2009: 98), so that different theories turn up about her origin. Pursuant to the options supporting these theories, Ugrešić recognises Baba Yaga as a frontierswoman between the world of the living and the world of the dead, while for von Franz she embodies the Big Mother in her dual aspect – a powerful woman helper and a powerful woman demolisher (von Franz 1993: 173). In Ugrešić’s words, Baba Yaga is sometimes “the wicked stepmother, the fateful midwife and false mother”; however, both she and her sisters often transform into “lovable, generous grannies” (Ugrešić 2009: 270, 271) as well.

Through the analyses from the pen of the fictitious character Aba Bagay (in the third part of the novel), Ugrešić recognises Baba Yaga as the Golden Baba, the Great Goddess, the Earth Mother, Mokosh, who was, according to Marija Gimbutas, dethroned by the patriarchal religion of the solar and transcendent male deity (Ugrešić 2009: 250). The nature of female deities is extremely ambivalent. They have their bright, virgin, maternal, creative, generous, caring and sociable side, but also their other, destructive and stepmother facet (Ray 2004: 111). However, these aspects have been separated by the patriarchal culture, in that the sublime Virgin has been glorified, while the Old Woman has been demonized and reduced to its destructive aspects, ignoring her experience, compassion and wisdom. “The crone may be frightening, old, smelly and in some way evil”, yet she is, on the other hand, “the embodiment of wisdom” and she “may [...] be associated with cycles of the moon and of feminine sexuality” thus embodying “knowledge about female sexual cycles, about menstruation and the waxing and waning of fertility and desire” (Gilchrist 2009: 101). It is precisely on account of these traits that Baba Yaga has been recognized as a feminist icon and as an extremely stimulating mythological character for feminist interpretations and reinterpretations in particular.

Ruth E. Ray analyses feminist gerontology as a discipline which requires “critical, self-reflective methodologies that integrate cognitive, emotional, ethical, and spiritual aspects of knowledge-making” (Ray 2004: 109). Just like Barbara Walker, she knows that “the crone not only completes the cycle of life but encompasses all other phases of it” – she is “the culmination of all that has gone before, as well as the generative expression of new images and meanings that can occur only in old age” (Ray 2004: 110). Hence the conclusion by Baba Copper that “we need to reinvent the image of powerful, rebellious old women” (Copper quoted in Kerner Furman 1997: 176). In order to adequately encompass and comprehend complex semantic-temporal structures that define this task, we are to recognize both the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary aspects thereof – one should not only start from different disciplines, but also bring these differing views into a productive dialogue.

However, in the works written by the young or middle-aged feminists analysing the models and ideal perceptions of old women we often come across *romanticized* old age: on the one hand, it is the perception of an eccentric and rebellious old woman, and, on the other, of an old powerful woman (*crone*, *curanderas*) who comes out with wisdom, pride and power. Nevertheless, as pointed by Cruikshank, both these perceptions are romantic and unrealistic. Namely, one can discern two weak points in these perceptions: first, negative stereotypes associated with old women (ugly, grumbling, faded...) have simply been replaced with positive ones (powerful, wide, proud) and, second, the idea that “chronology confers fixed meanings” (Cruikshank 2009: 186) implies that all old women are supposed to be wise on account of their age, if for no other reason.

In her novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* Dubravka Ugrešić does not fall into the trap of idealising and romanticising or associating Baba Yaga only with women in their third age of life. Baba Yaga is not an old woman, Ugrešić suggests, but a significant aspect of a female at any age, regardless of ethnicity, race, nationality, appearance, occupation... Ugrešić recognises her in all the female characters in the novel – from the five-year old girl to the teenager and young woman up to old women. They all have rejected, in some aspect of their beings, the restrictive standards of femininity imposed by culture.

Clara, a participant in Frida Kerner Furman’s study, said that “there are so many ways of growing old” (Kerner Furman 1997: 99). Kerner Furman succinctly suggests: “The experience of old age is not simple [...] It is full of paradoxes” so that surrendering to ageing “is not a passive activity”, but “it requires reflection and courage” (Kerner Furman 1997: 99, 102).

In her novel *Dubravka Ugrešić* also sparked off “a powerful rebellion”, since by describing women experiences she refuted stereotypical presentations of old women as “wicked” witches or “good” victims. Through history Baba Yaga was “the object of frightful misogyny” (Ugrešić 2009: 312), while

Ugrešić coded her in a new emancipatory key. Baba Yaga “is a collective work, and a collective mirror” (Ugrešić 2009: 313), she is a rebel and a dissident *par excellence*, the main reason for her rebellion being old age – “Hers is the drama of old age, hers the story of excommunication, forced expulsion, invisibility, brutal marginalisation” (Ugrešić 2009: 314). And, indeed, this is why it is possible to find Baba Yaga in each and every female being. Because every woman is a potential (and often recognized) dissident from a system and a culture that ignore and suppress her vital needs, personality, wishes, talents, independence and freedom.

NOTES

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TKO SE BOJI BABE JAGE? ČITANJE STARENJA IZ RODNE PERSPEKTIVE

SAŽETAK

Unatoč činjenici da je porast populacije starije dobi primjetan u većini suvremenih društava, starenje i subjektivna iskustva starih ljudi, posebno starih žena, ostaju nevidljivi. U kulturi fasciniranoj mladošću, starost se promatra na stereotipne načine, uz mnoge predrasude, tabue i strahove koji rezultiraju nizom negativnih predodžbi i diskriminacijskih praksi. Rad se temelji na analizi problematike starenja i životnih naracija starijih žena prezentiranih u romanu Dubravke Ugrešić *Baba Jaga je snijela jaje* (2009). Pritom se posebno provokativnom pokazuje ambivalentna mitološka junakinja Baba Jaga, koja – reinterpretirana u feminističkom ključu – stvara nova značenja i emancipacijski potencijal za žene svih dobi.

Ključne riječi: starenje, kultura mladosti, predrasude prema osobama starije dobi, feministička gerontologija, Baba Jaga, Dubravka Ugrešić