

# AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES ABOUT THE PREGNANCY EXPERIENCE: SYMBOLS, MYTHS, INTERPRETATIONS

DOI: 10.17234/SEC.32.10  
Original scientific paper  
Received:  
15th March 2020  
Accepted:  
24th October 2020

OKSANA LABASHCHUK

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National  
Pedagogical University  
Department of Theory and Methods  
of Ukrainian and World Literature  
2 Maxyma Kryvonosa str.  
46010 Ternopil, Ukraine  
lov081168@elr.tnpu.edu.ua  
 [orcid.org/0000-0001-6000-7237](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6000-7237)

TETIANA RESHETUKHA

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National  
Pedagogical University  
Department of Journalism  
2 Maxyma Kryvonosa str.  
46010 Ternopil, Ukraine  
rewetyhatv@elr.tnpu.edu.ua  
 [orcid.org/0000-0003-4515-3425](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4515-3425)

TETIANA HARASYM

Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National  
Pedagogical University  
Department of English Philology  
and Methods of EL Teaching  
2 Maxyma Kryvonosa str.  
46010 Ternopil, Ukraine  
harasym@elr.tnpu.edu.ua  
 [orcid.org/0000-0002-4971-7809](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4971-7809)

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The article examines how texts that accumulate and transmit dominant social ideas about motherhood are created through the oral tradition. This research is based on the personal stories of roughly 500 women about their personal experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, recorded using the narrative interview method. Natal narratives are viewed as a sign of culture from the semiotic perspective. The study uses a series of anthropological methods to interpret women's pregnancy experiences. It is shown that modern Ukrainian women's stories about the pregnancy experience use a number of stereotypical motifs based on the oral narrative tradition. The most common are the motif of

pregnancy as a chronotope of paradise and carnival motifs in describing the pregnant woman's bodily experience.

Keywords: *natal narrative, oral tradition, narrative interview, stories about pregnancy, chronotope of paradise, carnival motifs*

## INTRODUCTION

Stories about the birth of children have been recorded by collectors in Ukraine since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however these records are episodic, superficial, and sometimes even accidental. When collecting data on maternity rites, ethnographers did not notice that they were mostly recording not the rite itself, but rather the story of the rite. The recordings made by Marko Hrushevskiy (Hrushevskiy 2006), Raimund Friedrich Kaindl (Kaindl 2000), Oleksandra Kondratovych (Kondratovych 2004), Vasyl Kravchenko (Kravchenko 2009), and Liudmyla Shevchenko (Boriak 2001) proved the most informative for us. Of modern studies on traditional maternity rites, we must highlight Olena Boriak's monograph *The midwife in the cultural and historical tradition of Ukrainians: between the profane and sacred* (Boriak 2009) and Iryna Ihnatenko's *The female body in the traditional culture of Ukrainians* (Ihnatenko 2013), as well as research by Valentyna Borysenko (Borysenko 1997), Stefaniia Hvozdevych (Hvozdevych 1997), Roman Huzii and Lesia Horoshko (Huzii and Horoshko 2010). However, these researchers have not paid attention to the importance of women's narratives about childbirth.

The problem of motherhood as a specifically female experience has become urgent due to the appearance of modern research conducted from a feminist perspective. Margaret Mead first drew attention to the presentation of both the male and female experience in culture (Mead 1988). Contemporary Ukrainian scientist Oksana Kis also emphasises the importance of research into women's experiences (Kis 2012, 2017). The works of these researchers show a methodological basis for research into the specifically female tradition of storytelling about childbirth, which is scarcely significant in the male experience. A precise look at the woman's experience allows us to survey pregnancy for the first time from the point of view of the immediate subject of this life event – a woman who is expecting a child. Personal narratives that reflect this experience are the subject of this article.

Until recently, the main controversy in folklore has involved the concept of folklore canon – which texts can be the subject of folklore research. Folklore canon, created on the basis of genres identified by researchers in the 19th century, is still current among scholars. Moreover, before examining any cultural phenomenon, the origin of folklore

must first be proven. However, this approach more likely reflects the ideas of the folk art of contemporary folklorists rather than the authentic folk repertoire, according to leading Polish researcher D. Simonides (Simonides 2007).

The 1990s saw fruitful discussion on the subject of this scientific discipline, the boundaries of folklore, methodological approaches in Polish folklore. This debate resulted in the creation of an interpretation of different theoretical approaches and points of view that can coexist within one discipline. It is worth noting that the basis for discussions in the field of modern Polish folklore is methodological pluralism, which allows different scientific schools to concur productively within the national scientific tradition, without remaining confined to exclusively Polish science (Labashchuk 2009).

The holding of the First All-Russian Congress of Folklorists in Moscow in 2005 can be considered a milestone in understanding the problems faced by modern Russian folklorists in the study of modern tradition. Materials from this congress testify to the existence of a wide range of approaches to understanding the very concept of folklore, as well as methodological principles in the study of cultural phenomena.

Alexander Panchenko, a consistent supporter of the functional and pragmatic approach, expressed innovative ideas during his time at the First Congress of Russian Folklorists. The most radical of these is the scholar's view of the object and subject of folklore studies. He holds that the problem lies not in the study of folklore but what methods it can use to study culture, because "it is the traditional folklore and ethnological tools (description and analysis of types and plots, the study of structure, functions, semantics, and pragmatics of text and ritual, the study of narrative practices and strategies ...) that let us explore the diversity of forms and types of culture of everyday life without reducing folk to the more rigid, homogeneous conceptual apparatus of sociology and linguistics" (Panchenko 2005:92).

The experience of foreign colleagues, in particular those from Poland, Russia, and North America, suggests that an adequate interpretation of contemporary folklore processes helps scholars recognise the diversity and versatility of approaches to the study of cultural phenomena. This leads to the anthropologisation of folklore, its use of narratological and semiotic methods. When discussing the universal functions of folklore, researchers focus foremost on a number of social and pragmatic functions: being a spokesman for the symbolic values of a particular social group; meeting the daily need for interpersonal communication; forming one's ideological and self-identification markers. This approach allows not only multivariate cliché texts to be included in folklore analysis, but also spontaneous verbal expressions that rely on everyday thinking to reflect universal cultural models. Today, Ukrainian folklore studies are only beginning to address the study of contemporary folklore (the works of O. Hinda (Hinda 2015), O. Kuzmenko (Kuzmenko 2016), N. Lysiuk (Lysiuk 2012), O. Kharchyshyn (Kharchyshyn

2011), and O. Labashchuk (Labashchuk 2004)). S. Loiter (Loiter 2001), S. Nekliudov (Nekliudov 2003), M. Cherednikova (Cherednikova 2002) are Russian folklore scholars, whereas D. Czubala (Czubala 2005), V. Krawczyk-Wasilewska (Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2008), and V. Wróblewska (Wróblewska 2005) represent the Polish field of study.

As regards contemporary folklore, it is worth focusing on narrative prose texts as described in the first-person narration. The genre peculiarities of prose give this type of folklore the greatest flexibility, dynamism, and the ability to quickly respond to the immediate needs of the present, thus serving as a form of individual expression of one's personal experiences and attitudes. We are interested in women's oral stories about their experience with pregnancy and childbirth, recorded in the form of a narrative interview. The unit of analysis is the text of the narrative interview. We call such narratives *natal narratives*.

It should be noted that autobiographical narratives reflecting social and political disasters have long attracted scholars' attention, including O. Britsyna (Britsyna 2010), Ya. Haiduk Niiakovska (Haiduk Niiakovska 2004), A. Rzepkowska (Rzepkowska 2008), O. Kis (Kis 2017), O. Kuzmenko (Kuzmenko 2019), S. Myshanych (Myshanych 1989), E. Narvselius (Narvselius 2009), E. Rozhdestvenskaya (Rozhdestvenskaya 2010), G. Rozenhal (Rozenhal 2008), and O. Kharchyshyn (Kharchyshyn 2006). However, along with these studies, the scientists focus on the individual's personal biography and daily experiences (Borysenko 2011; Orszulak-Dudkowska 2008; Razumova 2001; Simonides 1989).

Today, stories about pregnancy and childbirth are of interest to the world's scientific community. This is evidenced by a conference entitled *Retelling Famous Stories of Pregnancy and Birth in European Cultures* held at Oxford University in July 2012, as well as numerous works by European, American, and Russian researchers: K. Belousova (Belousova 1996), B. Budrowska (Budrowska 2000), E. Borozdina (Borozdina 2009), R. Davis-Floyd (Davis-Floyd 1992), L. Driga (Driga 2009), G. Wall (Wall 2001), T. Kruglyakova (Kruglyakova 2001), T. Miller (Miller 2005), I. Pleše (Pleše 2019), O. Senina (Senina 2009), A. Srdić Srebro (Srdić Srebro 2014), T. Shchepanskaya (Shchepanskaya 1994).

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study of the semantics of women's stories about the experience of pregnancy and childbirth has revealed the need to apply anthropological tools alongside folkloristic analysis. It should be noted that, in recent decades, folklore studies have been 'anthropologised', in a certain sense (Adneva 2004; Bogdanov 2001; Burszta 2002; Gancarz 2007; Gutowska 2007; Kolbuszewski 1989; Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2000;

Kuharenko 2010; Orszulak-Dudkowska 2008; Simonides 1995; Sulima 1995; Veselova 2001). Polish folklorist R. Sulima calls such changes an “anthropological turn” in folklore (Sulima 1995). The anthropological approach to the study of folklore can reveal the cultural, social, ethical, and psychological background. This approach aims research at the “burning issues” of human existence: the individual’s existential anxieties, fears, passions, joys, and hopes (Szewczenko 2018).

Our approach differs from others in that we focus on pregnant women, not doctors, midwives, husbands, or any other person. We see the situation unfold from the pregnant woman’s perspective as she describes it in her stories. This is what we call the anthropological approach. We did not use prepared questionnaires when collecting our material, as this often results in the collector eliciting the answers he or she wants to hear. Instead, we used the principles of open narrative interviewing, wherein the collector/interviewer only asks a general question, such as: “Tell us about your pregnancy, everything that happened to you during that period, everything that you thought was important”. After this, the interview is not interrupted and only remarks from the listener, who shows interest in the conversation, are possible. Narrative analysis of this kind of interview makes it possible to identify fragments that the respondent herself considers important and significant. These fragments are subject to semantic analysis in our study. We call this the anthropological means of semantic analysis of women’s narratives.

As we consider any cultural text a sign, the given research is based on the ideas of Charles W. Morris, American philosopher and one of the founders of semiotics, who first regarded signs as a combination of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics. He defines the semantics of the sign as the relationship between a sign and its object, i.e. the relationship of a sign to the real phenomenon it denotes (Morris 2001). Discussing the semantics of the natal narrative, we consider how the symbols typical of a specific culture are reflected in the narratives. Nevertheless, the natal narrative is a text of culture, carrying deeply rooted cultural meanings that can be the subject of research interpretations.

The methodological approach we use to analyse the semantics of the natal narrative is partly founded on the concept analysis of cultural phenomena proposed by American anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He considers Max Weber’s well-known statement that “man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun” the key to understanding such phenomena. The specificity of our approach to the analysis of the semantics of the natal narrative is based on identifying meanings in the oral text. According to Geertz, human thinking operates using “meaningful symbols”, which can be any artefact that is used to provide meaning to our experiences. As people must semiotise phenomena occurring to them, women must interpret and master the experience of pregnancy and childbirth – which are physiological processes – through the use of certain cultural mechanisms. Geertz proposes exploring cultural experiences

as social phenomena and individual behaviour. This scientific approach has been termed “thick description” (Geertz 1973).

Working with the women’s stories, we rely on the contextual approach proposed in the writings of E. Fine and O. Britsyna (Britsyna 2006; Fine 1994). The most fruitful method for our study was the narrative interview method. Some researchers emphasise the importance of using the autobiographical interview method in folklore (Kuharenko 2010) and demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach using their own material (Orszulak-Dudkowska 2010; Simonides 1973).

The collector’s conversation with the respondent was recorded on digital media and later transcribed in accordance with current requirements to preserve the lexical, grammatical, and syntactic features of the narrator’s speech. Our material is mainly written in an induced context. The narrative interview method involves the following sequence of actions by the collector: the putting of an open question, careful listening to the narrative, non-interference in the conversation with meaningful replies (only phrases that confirm the listener’s active interest in the conversation are allowed). At the end of the interview, open questions are first allowed, followed by closed questions. Texts received by means of the narrative interview should be recorded on digital media and then transcribed (decoded). The technique for the analysis of the collected material – the division of the stories into segments, thus facilitating further research interpretation – also proved useful in our research (Hrinchenko 2006).

We interviewed roughly 500 women who had personal experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Some interviewees were re-recorded. The recordings were made between 2006 and 2016.<sup>1</sup> Our respondents are women who live mainly in the western regions of Ukraine. For ethical reasons, when we published the list of respondents, we encrypted their surnames, first names, and patronymics. In our source reference system, the collector’s name and recording year are indicated, the following three letters stand for the narrator’s personal data, followed by their age at the time of recording and their number of childbirths. This principle of links allows us to maintain privacy and not disclose the narrator’s personal data.

The purpose of this article is thus to identify stereotypical motifs in women’s stories about the experience of pregnancy, to discover mythological and folklore ideas that relate to this experience and prevail in modern Ukrainian society.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the students of Ternopil Volodymyr Hnatiuk National Pedagogical University for their help in gathering and decoding the material.

## PRESENTATION OF MATERIAL

The first episode which women tell in their stories is concerns a prophecy about the pregnancy. Such prophecy is often revealed in a symbolic dream or indirect message.

The beginning of a woman's pregnancy is predicted by higher forces, who warn about the event in a symbolic way. This semantic model makes it possible to compare the natal narrative with the motif of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, which obviously had an impact on the formation of the interviewed women's stories about their personal pregnancy experience. The semantics of the Annunciation, immaculate conception, is connected with pregnancy. A Ukrainian woman says:

"If a dove flies and knocks on the window on the Annunciation, then the woman will become pregnant" [Kalinovska: 2009, MSZ, 33 years old, two children].<sup>2</sup>

According to the most common assertion among Ukrainian women, a harbinger or an early sign of pregnancy is a dream of a living fish:

"... And I have a dream of a beautiful, clean river, and the fish are swimming in that river; All at once, I stretched out my hands and caught a large fish. In the morning, I woke up and said to my husband: 'Yura, you know, I caught a fish at night, so big, such a big fish!' – And he says: 'It's clear, everything is clear'. And I say myself without much attention that 'everything is clear'. But really, some time passes and I go to the doctor, and the doctor says: 'You know, you are pregnant'" [Vyshynska: 2012, MTS, 52 years old, two children].

The prevalence of such stories among modern women attracts our attention. Taking into account the Christian and mythological symbol of the fish (Kereni 1996), let us recall the traditional Ukrainian explanation of how babies are born. "You were caught in the water", "the water brought you" are common answers given to children when they ask how they were born (Havryliuk 1998:180). Researchers consider water in this context as an analogue for blood and sperm (Ihnatenko 2008:11; Mazalova 2001:89). Accordingly, the most common inhabitants of water are fish, which are thus considered symbolic in women's dreams. We must also note that women dream not only about fish, but also of catching them, often in clean and clear water.

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<sup>2</sup> Kalinovska (the collector's surname): 2009 (recording year), MSZ (the narrator's personal data), 33 (the narrator's age at the time of recording), 2 children (the number of childbirths).

“I had a dream that I was standing with a fishing rod near the river, and I caught a huge fish. In a little while, I gave birth to my daughter” [Bodenchuk: 2008, KNL, 56 years old, three children].

Dreams in which a woman collects or buys something also predicts benefit for the family:

“I dreamt that I was collecting mushrooms. As it turned out, Mom had had such a dream before she became pregnant. For me, it was a prophetic dream” [Kabanova: 2009, DOA, 42 years old, one child].

“I did not know that I was pregnant, but I had a dream, I was in a big shop <...> I went to the pram department, and I chose a red pram with a doll” [Boitsun: 2010, BHS, 44 years, two children].

“The women in my family dreamt that they were gathering crops – pears, mushrooms, cherries – in a large basket” [Kabanova: 2009, LHV, 49 years old, one child].

The symbolic character of fruit in folklore is considered in detail by Iwona Rzepnikowska, who investigates marriage and family semantics of apples in fairy tales (Rzepnikowska 2018).

Other dreams considered signs of future pregnancy are dreams of dolls, or in Polish traditional culture, dreams of a stork, meaning it will bring a child (Bartmiński 1988:149). Some women have dreams of the moon which signify pregnancy (ibid.:158); other women tell about fish in pure water which symbolizes health (ibid.:164).

“Ah ... I dreamt of a doll. I do not know, maybe it means something. I remember the doll. That dream was in the morning, it was very memorable” [Serhan: 2008, RLB, 34 years old, two children].

Many stories about dreams predicting the onset of pregnancy have common plots in which either the Virgin, a dead relative, or a future child comes to the woman.

“Before I found out I was pregnant with my fourth child, I dreamt of my grandfather holding a little boy’s hand. I remember asking him something, but he did not tell me anything. And in some two or three weeks, I do not remember exactly, I found out I was pregnant” [Pitula: 2009, ONI, 40 years old, four children].

As we can see, the majority of the texts concerning women foreseeing their own

pregnancy take the form of stories about a dream. The natal narrative is realized in the form of a story about a harbinger dream when the women speak about either their dreams before childbirth, warnings of accidents, or the Epiphany dreams which promise recovery. In general, women's stories confirm the following rule: a pregnant woman sees prophetic dreams and must be able to interpret them.

The significance of including stories about dreams in our study is supported by the research of the Polish scholar J. Bartminsky, who advocates the idea of unity of the symbolic language of dreams and folklore (Bartmiński 1988:147). Numerous scientists have recognised the importance of studying dreams and their role in modern culture (Bogatyirev 2006; Lotman 2001; Niebrzegowska 1990; Panchenko 2001). Polish researcher S. Niebrzegowska notes that, other than the interpretation of dreams there are also narratives about dreams. The dreams that are most often preserved in human memory are connected with extremely important moments of life: death, illness, and childbirth. The scholar gives an example of a narrative about a harbinger dream and of the woman's future pregnancy:

"I had only one such dream, but it was a long time ago. <...> And so I had a dream that I found a child at the door. [...] And it soon turned out that I was expecting (a baby)" (Niebrzegowska 1990).

Yuri Lotman draws attention to the nature of the semiotic transformations that occur in the process of transcribing visual images into verbal text, which leads to the formation of more complex structures: "... transforming what we see into words inevitably increases the degree of organization. The text is created in this way" (Lotman 2001:39). However, the creation of a story about a dream involves not only an increase in the complexity of the text's semiotic organization, but also semantic recoding: "The process of narration displaces real memories of dreams from our memory, and a person is convinced that she really saw what she describes. In the future, this verbally translated text is stuck in our memory" (ibid.:39).

One of the leading motifs in the natal narrative portraying the woman's pregnancy experience can be described by the statement: "Pregnancy is the best time in a woman's life".

"During pregnancy, women should be kind, calm, balanced, see beauty in their surroundings, avoid stress, alcohol, not eat fat, avoid unpleasant people, communicate with those who love them" [Pitula: 2009, PHM, 58 years old, two children].

"It would be very pleasant for me to share my own impressions and feelings, because it is really the best of the best moment in my life. I always recollect

my pregnancy with joy ..." [Vovk: 2011, SYuB, 26 years old, one child].

The motif of a "happy pregnancy" presented in the narrators' stories is reflected in the claims "Pregnancy is the happiest period in a woman's life", "I miss my belly", which we understand as the common modern representation of pregnancy conceptions. Polish ethnologist E. Nowin-Sroczyńska clarifies the semantics of this kind of representation, interpreting the realisation of the paradise chronotope in the motif of the "happy pregnancy": "A pregnant woman should live in a situation close to that of heaven. Therefore, one cannot deny her anything, she must observe beautiful things, eat the best food, and behave in a decent and pious way" (Nowina-Sroczyńska 1997:30). We find similar observations in works by Ukrainian researchers of traditional culture (Huzii and Horoshko 2010).

Obviously, the inclusion of numerous memories about joy from a pregnant woman's communication with nature in the natal narrative can be explained through the mythologeme of the Garden of Eden.

"... And my husband and I <...> always walked in the fresh air, went to parks, looked at the stars, at nature in the evening ..." [Blashkiv: 2011, BVO, 50 years old, two children].

"... I remember it myself – the dew on the roses, I admired this so much, and for me it was very ... well, very nice" [Vovk: 2011, M-SYuB, 26 years old, one child].

Aesthetics, harmony, and the beauty of the environment that should surround a pregnant woman are all manifestations of the prevailing societal concepts about the golden age of pregnancy that influence the formation of the natal narrative:

"But with the second <child> I already had more emotions, more aesthetics, it seems, that I wanted to observe many things, beautiful flowers, listen to some kind of music" [Fedirko: 2011, HNM, 56 years old, two children].

"... Once I was pregnant with her, I tried to look at things that were beautiful or pleasant, to be always in a good mood, I had such aesthetic feelings." [Boiko: 2011, ZOV, 43 years old, two children].

The understanding of the baby's life beginning as a golden age is important to modern ethnology. Croatian researcher Iva Pleše (Pleše 2019) views the contemporary

mothers' narratives about the care for the new-born baby as a golden age.

In order to convey their feelings, the narrators use images related to the celestial sphere which can be considered as the paradise chronotope, since heaven is thought to be the dwelling place of God. Supporting this idea is the following statement of a woman who compared her pregnant self to an angel:

"... With the second <child>, I knew that I was not just happy, I knew that I would bring great happiness to my family, because the child was very desirable in this family, and I knew that I was almost an angel ..."  
[Kostyshyna: 2009, MLP, 43 years old, two children].

Consequently, we can agree with Polish scholar Ewa Nowina-Sroczyńska, who believes that "people's beliefs and popular images about pregnancy are undoubtedly determined by two great myths: the myth of Eden and the Golden Age myth" (Nowina-Sroczyńska 1997:64).

Another option for the realisation of the "ideal" pregnancy motif is the belief that a pregnant woman should look only at good people (physically and spiritually beautiful) so that these traits might then be passed on to her child. Accordingly, negative features in the child's behaviour are explained by the fact that there were people with similar traits in the pregnant mother's surroundings.

"It is said that your child's behaviour will develop depending on whom you look at. I tried to look at beautiful children who were very obedient"  
[Mostova: 2011, TsIM, 24 years old, one child].

In contrast to texts about the "ideal" pregnancy, there are stories in the natal narrative in which a pregnant woman is confronted by various fears and experiences. Thus, the motif of pregnancy as a test is also present in the natal narrative.

"I felt very bad with my second child. When I learned that I was pregnant, I dreamt about my grandfather, who died in November, that I talked to him, and I would like to come to him, and also that I would like to take my child with me. But grandpa Ivan said I didn't need to go to him. And during my entire pregnancy, I was afraid I or the child might die" [Sukmanovska: 2012, SOS, 32 years old, one child].

"I could not carry children to term. Three months before giving birth, I was in hospital for support on an IV. I could not go to the toilet, I had been bedridden for three months, I had bedsores. I was lying there on an IV all day" [Babiak: 2011, BHP, 48 years old, three children].

As is well-known, pregnant women in traditional culture have always been perceived as liminal beings that come close to the eternal threshold between life and death (Slavyanskije drevnosti 1999:160). Recalling the pregnancy experience, our respondents often describe phobias that haunted them during this period. They often describe the fear of having a disabled child, fear of giving birth, or fear of death.

“You are worried during pregnancy, well ... some thoughts, fears that the child ... when it is born ... should be born with all its fingers, all its toes ... So I had such fears ...” [Soliak: 2011, ShNL 32 years old, one child].

Every pregnant woman has to perform a heroic act – to give birth to a child, and this is her purpose. This is why, during her pregnancy, she must show the features characteristic of epic heroes. Such qualities of heroic behaviour are the motifs of “heroic sleep” and “heroic food”, which means that the hero has to sleep and eat a lot. Women often recall that they were extremely eager to sleep during pregnancy.

“But <when I was pregnant> I slept so much, well, I came and went to sleep” [Labashchuk: 2009, SSH, 36 years old, two children].

“... As the second child developed, I had such symptoms that I was constantly sleeping.... then drowsiness, I was sleepy, I was sleeping in the day. I ate at work at the table and I slept, I ate and I slept” [Lysa: 2011, HHM, 49 years old, two children].

However, the most widespread stories are that of women’s tastes changing and their consuming a huge amount of food during pregnancy:

“I ate everything I was given, and everything I made myself <...> it just began ... some kind of period in life in which the most important thing was to eat, only to eat. I had been at work by the time of maternity leave, I was constantly thinking about food, thinking what to cook, what to eat, there were moments when I wanted something at night, then it had to be served, because I didn’t know, what would happen with me” [Kryshchuk: 2011, SNV, 25 years old, two children].

Changes in women’s taste have always been associated with pregnancy, both in traditional and modern culture. In particular, information on the irresistible desire of pregnant women to eat something special is found in the records of M. Hrushevskiy (Hrushevskiy 2006:13). H. Kabakova notes that the tendency to eat something salty or sour is always considered a sign of pregnancy in traditional culture (Kabakova 2001). Our material clearly demonstrates the productivity of similar representations in our times:

“Yes, she really ate lemons ... In short, once she was sent lemons. Grandpa sent her a package of lemons. She was pregnant. <...> In short, she ate and ate and ate those lemons. Daddy did not allow her. She closed the door in the bathroom. In short, she ate too many lemons. She then felt bad. Well, she really wanted lemons so much” [Labashchuk: 2009, BOP, 38 years old, two children].

“... first I felt like eating something sour. So I walked through the market, and when I saw rhubarb, I wanted it so badly that I bought it for a ruble, I was walking in Ternopil, and eating that rhubarb. When I came home I also picked apples wherever I could, at the club, I really wanted to eat greenery” [Kaftan: 2008 ZhSV, 39 years, four children].

Thus, stories about the desire to eat something special – as a sign of pregnancy or an important mechanism to control pregnant women’s behaviour – are extremely common in the natal narrative. The great amount of attention paid to food in pregnancy stories requires a more detailed commentary on this motif.

Researchers of traditional culture claim that the tendency of the pregnant woman to choose food of a certain flavour serves as the basis upon which to predict the sex of the unborn child: if a woman wants something sweet, it is a girl; if she prefers salty or sour foods, she is expecting a boy (Gerlich 1998:16; Kabakova 2005:69; Marcoł 2004:46).

In some stories, we find memories of a pregnant woman’s specific actions aimed at giving birth to a child of a certain gender:

“And then I planned a girl, I planned, I intentionally ate oranges. Maybe I enjoyed them, and maybe I did not like them, but I intentionally ate them so that it would be a girl, something sweet <laughs> ...” [Balitska: 2011, BNM, 32 years old, two children].

Researchers of traditional culture have repeatedly emphasised the connection between the consumed food and procreation (Freydenberg 1997). M. Bakhtin believes that images of food, birth, human body are similar phenomena and can be regarded as an expression of the culture of folk humour (Bahtin 1990).

We point out that we can also speak of the typological parallels between the natal narrative and the traditional carnival culture. Carnival as the most complete realization of the people’s humour is a characteristic phenomenon not only for the archaic society where it was born, or the Middle Ages, when it flourished, but also in the modern culture.

Carnival motifs in pregnant women’s stories are revealed not only in the description of the excessive appetites and picky tastes of mothers-to-be. In the same perspective, it

is worth analysing the motif of the swelling body in women's recollections:

"But it was becoming harder and harder to walk. My back was aching, I felt so huge, like a tank or closet" [Babak: 2011, LVV, 25 years old, one child].

"I was somehow proud that I was pregnant. <...> The bigger the stomach, the better, the more complete" [Labashchuk: 2006, HOS, 45 years old, three children].

"... In the last months of my pregnancy, I felt like a vase full of water, I was walking as if I was afraid I would spill the water" [Kabanova: 2009, PLV, 54 years, three children].

In traditional culture, responsibility for the proper development of the foetus lies on the pregnant woman (Kis 2012:183). The stories of modern women confirm the continuity of such representations. Appearance, sex, character traits, and even the new-born child's fate are determined by the pregnant mother's behaviour (Chubinskiy 1877; Hrushevskiy 2006). The connection between the actions of a pregnant mother and the appearance, character, and fate of her child has been noted by modern researchers (Borysenko 2008:82). Similar beliefs are widespread in Polish traditional culture (Gerlich 1998). The interviewed women are also convinced that the behaviour of a pregnant woman can directly affect the appearance and features of her baby.

Special attention must be paid to the interpretation of a variety of taboos that pregnant women must avoid. Some stories describe pregnant women's violation of certain prohibitions as a manifestation of their special heroic or anti-social behaviour at a liminal stage. However, numerous other texts at our disposal emphasise the importance of complying with certain recommendations or prohibitions. This motif is especially actively developed in heterodiagnostic narratives about the pregnant women's prohibitions and the punishment for the violation of these prohibitions. The prevalence and universality of such beliefs is evidenced by the fact that ethnologists have drawn attention to numerous recommendations and prohibitions during pregnancy (Dytyna v zvychaiakh i rivuvanniakh ukrainskoho naroda 1906, 1907; Chubinskiy 1877; Kaindl 2000; Kravchenko 2009; Shekeryk-Donykiv 1918; Shukhevych 1902). E. Nowina-Sroczyńska notes that "the state of pregnancy is recognized as liminal (and wherever there is liminality, there is taboo), as well as prohibitions related to 'the time of the beginning' provide the sacral meaning of the state of pregnancy, the mystery of giving life" (Nowina-Sroczyńska 1997:30).

Contemporary scholars of maternity ceremonies have also made similar observations: "According to traditional folk beliefs that are common nowadays, light birth, health, appearance and future of the child are directly dependent on the woman's physical and psychological state during her pregnancy" (Huzii and Horoshko 2010:611).

Since the world should be formed in the correct order, according to proper laws, mistakes or negligence in the pregnant woman's behaviour constitute an "error" in the process of world creation. The pregnant woman's behaviour and her occupation during pregnancy directly affect her unborn child: its physical and mental characteristics, the type of childbirth. The task of a woman is to feel and understand these rules and to intuitively choose the right behaviour during pregnancy which should contribute to the creation of a perfect new world:

"They are wearing pants now, I also wore them, but maybe up to my fifth month, and then my mother said that I should wear a skirt a little bit, if it is a girl. For example, they didn't do ultrasounds in the past, there weren't any, we weren't sent. 'Let your hair grow, wear a skirt, even an apron!'" [Vozniuk: 2009, BOS, 39, two children].

"<...> Or, for example, <the children> are said to have spots <i.e. birthmarks>. If they have spots and if you <a pregnant woman> look at them, then do not touch yourself. When they have such red spots. It's said if you by accident touch hands, or whatever <part of your body>, then sometimes there may be a spot on the child. You can't do it" [Labashchuk: 2006, HOS, 50 years old, three children].

"I always tried not to stand on the threshold, it's said to be a bad sign. I tried not to borrow anything from anyone, because they say your child will be greedy, it will always need something. Well, I tried not to touch the body when being frightened, because there were such occasions that they <pregnant women> touched their face, it was burning, and <when> the woman touched her face the child was born burnt <with red birthmarks>" [Kaftan: 2008, ZMY, 45 years old, ten children].

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of our material allows us to draw some conclusions about the typical ways in which the pregnancy experience is described in the Ukrainian oral tradition. According to modern concepts of Ukrainian women, pregnancy always comes unexpectedly. On the other hand, the non-randomness of the onset of pregnancy is also emphasized. The task of a woman during this period is to show intuition and recognize her unusual condition, to correctly understand the prophesy sent to her (usually in the form of a dream), and to "decode" what her body is telling her.

The analysis of these texts about pregnancy indicate that women perceive this period of life is perceived as both a blessed condition and simultaneously as a period of tribulation. At the beginning of her pregnancy, a woman demonstrates the features of “heroic” behavior: she eats, sleeps, works a great deal, and has time to do everything. When discussing this type of heroine, the natal narrative actively uses carnival motives: detailed and hyperbolised stories about the pregnant woman’s preferences and the pregnant woman’s perception of her own body, which has become very large.

Modern Ukrainian women’s conceptions of pregnancy are associated with the paradise chronotope. The vast majority of narratives studied include stories of walks in nature, the beauty of nature observed by the pregnant woman, the desire to look at beautiful things and beautiful people, to listen to good music, and to generally be in a state of beauty and harmony. Another important motif used by women regarding pregnancy is the motif of carnival growth, the swelling of the female body, the large amounts of food consumed by the pregnant woman, or the desire to eat something special. The perception of the possibility of a child having a birthmark if its mother is frightened during her pregnancy and touches her body with her hand is preserved in the stories of modern women. Thus, we can conclude that contemporary women’s narratives about the pregnancy experience are stereotypical, and that they are based on the oral narrative tradition and contain traditional folk and mythological motifs.

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## Autobiografski narativi o iskustvu trudnoće: simboli, mitovi, interpretacije

*Oksana Labashchuk*

*Tetiana Reshetukha*

*Tetiana Harasym*

Autorice članka istražuju kako pomoću usmene tradicije nastaju tekstovi koji akumuliraju i emitiraju prevladavajuće u društvu ideje o majčinstvu. Analiza se temelji na osobnim pričama o vlastitim iskustvima trudnoće i porođaja oko 500 žena koje su intervjuirane metodom narativnog intervjua. Natalni narativ se promatra kao znak kulture iz perspektive semiotike. Utvrđeno je da su priče suvremenih ukrajinskih žena o iskustvu trudnoće građene na više stereotipnih motiva (motiv trudnoće kao kronotop Raja, karnevalski motivi) koji se temelje na usmenoj tradiciji pripovijedanja.

Ključne riječi: *natalni narativ, usmena tradicija, narativni intervju, priče o trudnoći, kronotop Raja, karnevalski motivi*



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