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In the Shadow of Masks. Identity Problems in Crime Novels by Gaja Grzegorzewska

W cieniu masek. O problemach tożsamościowych w kryminałach Gai Grzegorzewskiej

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Abstract

The article focuses on presenting identity problems of the main protagonists in Gaja Grzegorzewska's crime novels. The problems concern personal, gender, and sexual identity. The characters wear various masks, hiding their true "selves". The paper presents homosexuality, bisexuality, androgyny and the deconstruction of stereotypical female and male characteristics. Finally, the article raises the problem of creating different masks and the constant identity changing among characters.

Identity

The theme of identity in the personal, sexual, and gender dimensions is a staple of the Polish prose¹, including the crime genre. It also comes under

¹ Suffice it to evoke *Rok królika* [*Year of the Rabbit*] (2016) by Joanna Bator – the protagonist decides to turn her life around by escaping from Warsaw to Ząbkowice Śląskie and assuming a new appearance and personality, all in an attempt to cut her ties with the past. Bator explores the problem also in other novels such as *Ciemno, prawie noc* [*Dark, Almost Night*] (2012) and *Purezento* [*Gift*] (2018). The theme of identity is also discussed by Katarzyna Bonda in *Czerwony Pająk* [*The Red*

scrutiny in the novels of Gaja Grzegorzewska². The protagonists created by the author have identity problems, some of which pertain to the sexual sphere. Julia Poświatowska writes: “every character in the novels of the Cracovian author is functioning in a state of split sexuality” (Poświatowska 2015: 69). An irrefutable observation, as Grzegorzewska does not seem to be concerned with the sexual orientation of her characters (see: Łysek online). Even the most professed heterosexuals such as Julia or the Professor are presented in unequivocally homoerotic contexts. The characters of the novels penned by the author of *Topielica* [*The Floater*] have “flexible” identities – any of them could turn out to be gay or lesbian.

Furthermore, the prosaist deconstructs the stereotypical perception of men and women (see: Poświatowska 2016b: 196) in the silhouettes of the protagonists (Julia Dobrowolska, Aaron Goldenthal, Wiktor Bergen, and to some extent Łukasz *vel* Professor³) but also supporting characters such as Tomek or Lola. Poświatowska asserts: “on the one hand, Grzegorzewska constructs characters based on the binary opposition of the sexes; on the other, she ostensibly tries to challenge that opposition with an air of ambiguity” (Poświatowska 2015: 63). As a result of this ambiguity, every character puts on several masks.

The mask is not an unambiguous term and, as such, enjoys many definitions (see: Tylikowska 2000: 72). Indisputably, every person wears a mask consistent with their current social situation or the people present⁴. Carl Gustav Jung coined the term of persona in the meaning of a mask between the self and the outside world. The mask is conferred upon the individual by society to conceal the true self (see: Ombach 1969: 161–162). Therefore, the term gains significance in the context of the broadly understood identity, as the society never ceases to push people to assume specific roles. This phenomenon involves gender roles as well, with a set of definite, stereotypical characteristics imposed on men and women alike. Claude Lévi-Strauss observed:

Spider] (2018), Ignacy Karpowicz in *Sońka* [*Sońka*] (2014) and *Miłość* [*Love*] (2017), Szczepan Twardoch in *Drach* [*Kite*] (2014), or Michał Witkowski in *Lubiewo* [published in English as “*Love-town*”] (2005) and *Barbara Radziwiłłówna z Jaworzna-Szczakowej* (2009).

² Grzegorzewska is the author of a crime series featuring detective Julia Dobrowolska as the protagonist. Other important characters include Wiktor Bergen, the journalist, Aaron Goldenthal, the policeman, and Łukasz *vel* Professor – an intellectual and a bandit, Julia’s stepbrother and her lover.

³ The brutal, vulgar and violent Professor is also a sensitive intellectual, who sometimes seems more emotional than Julia herself (see: Czechowicz online).

⁴ Anna Tylikowska observes: “A person puts on a mask in an attempt to hide some of their characteristics from the world, either because they consider these characteristics precious or because they fear the exposure” (Tylikowska 2000: 80).

[A] mask does not exist in isolation; it supposes other real or potential masks always by its side, masks that might have been chosen in its stead and substituted for it. [...] [A] mask is not primarily what it represents but what it transforms, that is to say, what it chooses not to represent. Like a myth, a mask denies as much as it affirms. It is not made solely of what it says or thinks it is saying, but of what it excludes (Lévi-Strauss 1986: 72).

It is interesting to note that in the *Kamienna noc* [*The Night of Stone*] series, the author broaches on the topic of the multiple personality disorder, or a dissociative identity disorder also referred to as split personality⁵. DID afflicts one of the characters called Maria Karo, also known as Marcelina Bednarczyk, who becomes Julia's doppelganger.

Homosexuality

The world of homosexual literature in Poland experienced a watershed moment with the publication of Michał Witkowski's *Lubiewo* ["*Lovetown*"] (2005), a novel which utterly redefined the perception of this type of prose (see: Warkocki 2009: 289). The introduction of a homosexual as one of the main characters of a crime novel is an innovation when compared to classics of the genre, as observed by Mariusz Czubaj:

Until the 1970s, gays had but a single function – that of victims or perpetrators, typically hysterical, grotesque, and – importantly – always placed in the background. In a crime novel, a gay person instantly raises suspicion, just like a butler does (Czubaj 2010: 101; see: Poświatowska 2015: 72).

The most popular gay crime story in Polish prose is the *Śmierć w darkroomie* [*Death in a Darkroom*] (2007) penned by Edward Pasewicz. In her novels, Grzegorzewska has created many characters with a homosexual orientation as well⁶. Even the Professor lives through a homoerotic episode, and so does Julia.

Dariusz Nowacki defines the gay stereotype in the following terms: "[...] over-the-top, ostentatious, narcissistic, vulgar, a sexoholic. To crown it all, he is

⁵ The topic of multiple personality disorder was explored in books such as *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk, *Ja [Me]* (1984) by Anna Bojarska and in the story *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson.

⁶ Suffice it to mention Wiktor Bergen, Tomek, Edward, or Kojak.

fashion-conscious and fancies a career in the media” (Nowacki 2010: 9)⁷. The palette of characters created by Grzegorzewska includes Wiktor, who perfectly fits the gay stereotype⁸. Bergen is a metrosexual man⁹. He has a narcissistic personality, pursues a career in television, shows an interest in fashion¹⁰, is always well-dressed, and readily submits to aesthetic procedures. Goldenthal describes Wiktor in the following vein: “I knew from the start he was gay. It’s weird that nobody sees that. The way he behaves, he could as well carry a card saying ‘gay’ around his neck” (Grzegorzewska 2016e: 253). The journalist falls in love with his collaborator, Aaron. However, the affair is short-lived as the policeman views it only as a source of sexual entertainment. After the break-up, Wiktor starts to blackmail Goldenthal and succumbs to depression, becoming a schemer and a jealous lover, in the likeness of the later behaviour of Julia.

Bergen’s homoerotism is not as unequivocal as it may seem since the journalist gets embroiled in a peculiar sexual relationship with Dobrowolska, a beautiful detective. “To Wiktor, she was a toy, a pretty and trendy accessory, an add-on to his expensive glasses and brand footwear” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 272). However, Wiktor gets over his fascination with Julia rather soon:

Some time ago, Wiktor stopped persuading Julia to continue their failed affair. More than that – he concluded that women are too complicated, unpredictable, and hysterical. Even Julia. Even she was too girly. Sure, he liked looking at women, particularly her. He liked how pretty she was, how deft and neat. He admired her fashionable clothes and shiny blonde hair, and the scar. Julia was a perfect product, and Wiktor enjoyed pretty things. He liked to surround himself with pretty stuff and seeing the looks of people where they went out together. Appreciation, envy, interest. Julia was close to him. Maybe he even loved her. But he loved himself more. And a life with Julia, in the long run, would be unsupportable. A life with a woman. Not for him (ibid.: 14).

⁷ In turn, Stanisław Dulko and Kazimierz Imieliński point out that “the traits often observed in homosexuals include a special sensitivity to art and artistic talents” (Dulko, Imieliński 1988: 83). In Grzegorzewska’s novels, Edward provides an example of an artist, as he runs a theatre and plays the piano.

⁸ Virtually every character was created in consistence with the gay stereotype. The only exception is Kojak.

⁹ The term “metrosexual” was used for the first time by Mark Simpson in 1994. He listed the following traits of a metrosexual man: care for the outward appearance (including clothing and cosmetic procedures), narcissism, wealth an urban life, and hetero-, bi-, or homosexuality (see: Minkiewicz 2006: 205).

¹⁰ *Grób [The Tomb]* features the character of Wiesław Landryn, a fashion designer and – obviously – a gay man.

By allowing sexual relations with a woman, Wiktor provides an example of fluid sexuality (see: Poświatowska 2015: 68).

Grzegorzewska shows how homosexuals struggle to find a partner. The men she portrays engage only in passing affairs rather than remain in a stable relationship. Both Wiktor and Tomek, Julia's cousin, get involved in rather unsuccessful relationships with strangers met at a club. The author of *Grób* [*The Tomb*] does not explore the theme of homophobia, but her novels often feature the motif of concealing a non-heterosexual identity and starting a traditional family for fear of stigma in the heteronormative society. Tomek "fancied himself a freethinking young man unafraid to stand among a large assembly of people and say loud and clear the truth that he was gay. Certainly, under the condition that the assembly would not include his mother" (Grzegorzewska 2016a: 19). The fear of exclusion from the family seems to take precedence over the need to come out. Wiktor also hides his true orientation and even used to have a wife.

Bisexuality

Aaron is the first bisexual policeman in Polish prose (see: Kurkiewicz online). Goldenthal represents the traditional ideal of man: dominating, unruly, having a manly job, tall, well-built, with a defined jawline, powerful arms and big hands. At the same time, he has homoerotic tendencies, which adds ambiguity to his character. Aaron is popular among women and men alike¹¹. He seems to have joined the police force on a whim, possibly to prove his true masculinity.

Aaron's problems with identity manifest in his name change¹². The man changes his surname (Złotnicki) to cut ties with his father who was involved in a scandal. He professes: "I took this new name [Duraj – author's note], because it was somehow crass and fitted the man I wanted to pose as when starting to work in the force. And the first name, Dawid, was an aesthetic compromise for the sake of my mother, who was very disappointed with my life choices" (Grzegorzewska 2016e: 282). In a way, by changing his name, the character assumes a new identity as well¹³. He pretends to be crass even though in reality, he is an intelligent and educated individual (see *ibid.*: 281). In *Noc z czwartku*

¹¹ Suffice it to mention Wiktor, Tomek, Edward, and Sergeant Radecki.

¹² Julia and the Professor also change their names, though in connection with their escape.

¹³ Katarzyna Sikora points out that "Naming is a symbolical act of bestowing an identity, whereas a name change – forgoing the old and adopting the new – may be an attempt to change one's identity, renounce the old person and create a new one" (Sikora 2000: 191).

na niedzielę [*The Night Between Thursday and Sunday*], he changes his name again, this time to Aaron Goldenthal, offering the following explanation: “My father decided to come back from the States and resume his practice. He’d have a hard time opening a doctor’s office under the name of Złotnicki. You know why. So he chose to return to our family name, from before the war. I thought to myself – if he can do it, so can I” (Grzegorzewska 2016c: 38). On the surface, it seems that the name change means little to Aaron. Yet it reveals him as a man unsure of his identity, which is probably related to his bisexuality – which he is reluctant to affirm – and his Jewish descent. It could be a rebellion against his family, but also against the heteronormative society. By assuming subsequent identities, Aaron puts on a series of masks which protect him against the world. Poświatowska notices that “although he seems to accept his identity, his choices remain surprising to the reader” (Poświatowska 2015: 67). The unexpected wedding is also Goldenthal’s form of escape from his true self. Julia “noticed that since he was seduced by that dumb snotnose, he spared no effort to cut himself off from his past” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 232). Aaron himself does not know why he married Diana. He confesses to Julia:

[Diana – author’s note] was so young, pretty innocent, unspoiled, good, nice. And submissive [...]. I thought that my life could change for the better, that I could become a better person by her side and have a normal life. Like others. That there would be a house, holidays abroad, that my wife would wait for me with dinner, that we would have a dog. And I ended up with a wife I don’t love, who probably thinks I’m impotent, because sex happens seldom, if ever. I stay at work even longer than before, I don’t feel like going home, because she’s there with a horrible dinner. And that moronic dog. It’s not even a dog, it’s a stupid joke (Grzegorzewska 2016a: 161–162).

Diana is probably supposed to “cure” Goldenthal from his bisexuality. Possibly, he chooses her to exert some sort of power over a woman¹⁴, as Julia would not be controlled. However, even despite his marriage, the policeman does not give up on Dobrowolska. The detective may tempt the bisexual Aaron as she combines both male and female traits, becoming the quintessence of his desires.

Interestingly, Diana – who was supposed to be the cure for Goldenthal’s orientation – makes advances on Julia, compliments her constantly, and tries to get closer:

¹⁴ “Incredible, thought Julia. This guy got her right where he wants. Which was exactly the point – to have a Play-Doh doll to mould and shape at whim. I’m sure Diana never argues. Never insults him. And definitely never throws things at him. She’s probably never hit him” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 64–65).

Suddenly, she felt Diana's lips on her shoulder, burning, soft, and wet. [...] – You're so beautiful, Julia. So brave, so perfectly shapely [...]. May I kiss you? – No! – Julia shrieked, struck with some sort of panic, soon replaced by an overpowering desire to flee. – You have a fiancé! Get it together. Anyway, I'm not even a lesbian. I like guys. – Me too. [...] But I like you. Can't take my eyes off your breasts. They're so firm. I'd like to hold them in my hands (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 121).

It is hard to make an unequivocal determination whether Diana is truly bisexual or only infatuated with Julia. In all probability, her identity is sexually fluid, just like Wiktor's (see: Postoła 2008: 34)¹⁵.

Androgyny

In the mind of Joanna Chłosta-Zielonka (2014), Julia represents an example of an androgynous person who combines male and female traits (see: Gładzewska 2001: 17). Carl Gustaw Jung believed that every person was comprised of two elements: female (*anima*) and male (*animus*) (see: Gładzewska 2001: 18). In 1971, Sandra Lipsitz Bem created a list of traits exhibited by androgynous people (Bem Sex Role Inventory – BSRI) (see *ibid.*: 22). The researcher into gender identity writes: “androgynous individual is someone who is both independent and tender, both aggressive and gentle, both assertive and yielding, both masculine and feminine, depending on the situational appropriateness of these various behaviours” (Bem 1988: 435)¹⁶. This description clearly fits Julia, who represents a blend of both genders.

The detective challenges the typical determinants of femininity such as beauty, marriage, and maternity (see: Korzińska: 2003)¹⁷. “She could beat up a police officer and take a thug apart by bringing him to tears, but in other

¹⁵ Lisa Diamond defines sexual fluidity as the ability to change the object of sexual desire depending on the situation or the environment (Mrozowska online).

¹⁶ According to Sylwia Kluczyńska “[...] androgynous persons show a high flexibility of reactions and a broader repertoire of behaviours” (Kluczyńska 2001: 7).

¹⁷ Julia is an attractive woman with a scarred face (although she removes the scar in *Kamienna noc* [*The Night of Stone*]). Some people say she is too muscular and athletic, which makes her look like a man. Initially, neither marriage or maternity are on her mind. She marries Aaron, but hardly for love – rather for the money. Besides, she wants Goldenthal to “cure” her from loving her brother. The marriage lasts only a few months before Julia escapes abroad with the Professor. The issue of maternity evolves in *Kamienna noc* [*The Night of Stone*], when Dobrowolska gives birth to a daughter and decides to raise her. Yet she still does not fit into the stereotypical model of a woman as the child is born from an incestuous relationship.

territories, she was as feeble and fragile as the characters of Jane Austen” (Grzegorzewska 2016a, 109). Dobrowolska enjoys shopping for clothes, looking good, and feeling attractive. At times, she gets emotional and indecisive. She has a feminine style and frequently wears dresses and high heels. Simultaneously, she is independent and makes her own decisions in life. She also smokes and drinks heavily. She swears, resorts to violence, refrains from deeper relationships and romance, has an instrumental approach to sex, dislikes children, is athletic, and above all – has a job which is typically considered manly. In all that, she resembles a male character from a *noir* novel (see: Sobolewska 2012: 80). Poświatowska writes that the detective: “[...] represents emancipated femininity on one hand, and an amalgamate of the cultural stereotypes of femininity of the other, in a blend that refers the reader to camp aesthetics” (Poświatowska 2016a: 272). An important, if not the most important element of Julia’s identity is her sexuality (see *ibid.*), undeniably affected to a large extent by an incestuous relationship with her brother.

Lola, Julia’s sister, calls her “Juliusz” [masculine counterpart of the name “Julia” – translator’s note], “a troglodyte” and “a robocop”, bringing to the fore her masculine traits, with a focus on emotionlessness and an athletic figure. Tomek declares: “You’re not a woman but some monster” (Grzegorzewska 2016a: 18). The Professor shares this view, adding that Julia “[...] has always suffered from the syndrome of a knight in shining armour, which inspires a constant need of saving men no matter the risk” (Grzegorzewska 2014: 413). Another character describes her in the following vein: “You’re a badass chick. Booze, fags, and hands like the Terminator. And you can rough a guy up, I heard” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 69). Wiktor and Aaron also take note of her masculine traits¹⁸, which may inspire the desire they both feel for the woman.

Dobrowolska seems tough, but on the inside, she has a certain sensitivity. It is Aaron who made her a “real” woman – affectionate and emotional – by setting free her pent-up feelings¹⁹. It is worth noting that the detective is the exact opposite of other female characters appearing throughout the series (see: Poświatowska 2015: 66) and representing the stereotypical model

¹⁸ Wiktor says outright: “Sometimes you remind me of a man” (Grzegorzewska 2016c: 14). Aaron says: “I like how your mind works. You have extraordinary analytical skills. For a woman” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 218).

¹⁹ “She has never been very emotional. When she was a child, her parents even suspected she had a light case of autism. Always calm, emotionless. Only when she met Aaron, everything changed. She cringed. She didn’t recognise herself and she didn’t like this new self. This new Julia was totally unreliable. And totally unpredictable. She really wanted to go back to her original state and focus on herself” (Grzegorzewska 2016d: 210).

of a woman, such as Diana – the perfect wife, mother and cook. In the eyes of men, Dobrowolska is chiefly – or even exclusively – a lover. In addition, they see her as a rival and an equal companion of their “manly” adventures, which inspires in other women an outright hatred for the detective. Julia is a new type of character in crime novels, described by Poświatowska in the following way:

Female authors equip their female characters with “masculine” attributes, such as independence, also in the financial dimension, self-confidence, physical strength, and brutality. At the same time, they deprive the characters of their “feminine” traits – empathy, indecisiveness, emotionality – in some situations, only to make femininity their asset in other contexts, turning the characters into hybrids combining masculine and feminine traits (Poświatowska 2016a: 272).

Changing masks

Kamienna noc [*The Night of Stone*] is a carnival of masks. Almost nobody is who they say they are²⁰. Grzegorzewska makes her characters put on a number of masks and incessantly change their identities so that in the end, they themselves forget who they are²¹. Julia’s conversation with her brother provides an eloquent example:

- [...] I don’t remember who I fucking am anymore. You? [...]
- I never forget. [...] We will never escape from who we are.
- Don’t start. I don’t have the strength to do this today.
- We can go to the end of the world, but it won’t change our genes (Grzegorzewska 2016b: 55).

The siblings continue to assume new names and surnames in an attempt to get away from the past they cannot really flee. Their only choice is to put on yet another mask and, again and again, pose as someone else. Julia and the Professor have become nomads who unceasingly change their place of residence for fear of punishment for their incestuous relationship²². Łukasz describes this continued flight as follows:

²⁰ For instance, Eliza Florek who does not really exist.

²¹ For more on the motif of a mask in Grzegorzewska’s novels, see: Okrajni (2019: 143–166).

²² Julia and the Professor are stepsiblings who involuntarily fall in love with each other when they are young. The knowledge of their blood ties puts a brutal end to the relationship – Łukasz beats his sister, leaving a scar on her face. The trauma of incest leaves an imprint on their life and their sense of identity. After the years, they meet again and once more cross the boundary of the social taboo, knowingly this time. Forbidden love and the fear of Art. 201 of the Polish Penal Code pushes

In some moments, when I stand in full sunlight, sweat dripping from my back and fruit flies all over my wet forehead, I feel like I'm getting to the brink of madness. That I can no longer stay in character. That I not only fail to muster enthusiasm for the stuff I don't give a shit about, but also to contain the howl of suffering surging from the depths of my heart (ibid.: 111).

Julia, on her part, observes:

– Who am I? – I said, taken aback. I thought it was obvious by now. And then I started to contemplate my own answer to the question. Who am I now? Highly interesting. My own name became alien to me. Someone else used it. Poorly. It came back to me tarnished, disgraced and it needed to stay that way so that I could live. It was blown forever (ibid.: 281).

For Julia, the loss of her own name and surname becomes, in a way, the final loss of identity. She can be reborn only after assuming a new name. The flight changed her completely: “I was so many different people that when, finally, I came back to my own self, it had already changed” (ibid.: 404). Importantly, Julia says these words after the removal of her scar, which as an important and defining element of her identity (see: Darska 2019: 47). After all, she received it in highly impactful circumstances. Therefore, probably it is the loss of not only her name and surname but also her scar that made Julia stop being herself and forget her identity.

By choosing to delve into this particular topic, Grzegorzewska attempts to reveal important identity-related matters which are the sign of changes transpiring in the modern world. The theme of sexual and gender fluidity taps into the broader “project” of the author, namely, the exploration of controversial taboo topics such as necrophilia, paedophilia and incest. Simultaneously, it is worth noting that the problems of gender and sexual identity are a trending and attractive topic for the reader, which corresponds to the entertainment function served by popular literature, including crime.

the siblings to flee. Travelling across various European countries, brother and sister incessantly change their identities. For more on the relationship between Julia and the Professor, see: Orządała (2019: 51–77).

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