

# Is a Person Defending Nature Against Other Humans a *Nestbeschmutzer*? On Olga Tokarczuk's Novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*

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A *Nestbeschmutzer* is a figure marked by an internal contradiction, suspended between the fear of social ostracism and the internal need to transgress a tribal taboo. As Karol Franczak notes, someone “fouling their own nest” is traditionally characterized as an individual “resigning

from the imperative of group loyalty and criticizing dominant ideas, the commonly binding order of things and the basis of fixed self-definitions” [9]. On the one hand, “the vision of rejection by a group is one of the strongest fears that has always been part of human life”; on the other hand, “opposition to the general public, stepping out of the shadow of conformism and doing what is publicly unacceptable, seems [...] one of the greatest human temptations” [9]. Ambiguity is, therefore, inherent in the nature of a *Nestbeschmutzer*. According to the classic maxim, “it is an ill bird that fouls its own nest” – the very term “fouls” evokes extremely negative connotations, so whoever perpetrates it deserves to be called a traitor. Nevertheless, *Nestbeschmutzung* is a necessary condition for the emergence of a deeper social awareness of issues that are difficult and painful for a given environment. Reckoning with the past of one’s own community is associated not only with opposition to the representatives of that group who directly committed evil, but also with criticism of passive, silent observers, who are equally responsible for this evil.

Fouling one’s nest is a term that appears in literature, scientific publications or the media, usually in a historical, political, or legal dimension. These areas, however, do not seem to exhaust all research possibilities related to the multidimensional nature of the *Nestbeschmutzung* phenomenon. It would be useful, for example, to consider this issue in the context of human relations with the rest of the natural world. The novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk [*Drive*] will serve here as a pretext

for these considerations. The lively discussion that arose around this book, and later also around its film adaptation entitled *Pokot* directed by Agnieszka Holland, prompts us to pose some important questions: does a person breaking an alliance with their own species in the name of defending the interests of the rest of the natural world deserve the name *Nestbeschmutzer*? Why does questioning God-given right to subdue the earth still arouse such profound emotions in our society, and – often – violent opposition? And what forms of exclusion are applied to individuals who disrupt the anthropocentric world order?

The protagonist of Tokarczuk's novel is Janina Duszejko, an extremely complex character: a retired engineer, English teacher, astrologer, vegetarian, activist, and eccentric who lives with her two dogs in a village on the edge of the Kłodzko region. Duszejko leads a lonely crusade against poachers and hunters. She reports to the police about snares, off-season shootings, and other illegal hunting activities. After a series of murders of poachers and hunters, Duszejko begins a private investigation to find an answer to the question of whether nature itself is exacting justice on the humans who abuse it. As Oksana Weretiuk notices, through the figure of Duszejko, there is a "shift of meaning and attention from human to what is non-human at the place where humans touched the top layer of the earth's crust," as this "strange heroine tries to solve the uncanny mystery by examining the footprints, paw prints, and wheel tracks – traces of someone's activity on Earth: finding the greatest cognitive power in *our socket plugs*, that is, human feet" [198].

Due to her involvement in the pursuit of poachers and the ideals she professes – so contrary to the generally accepted rules – Duszejko is considered almost crazy in her town, while arousing both fear and respect in her neighbors. It is hard to resist the impression that this ambiguous attitude towards the protagonist largely comes from the fact that in the presented world, she performs the function of a *Nestbeschmutzer* – in a way, she consciously chooses this role herself and wants to be considered a *Nestbeschmutzer*.

Her attitude toward life fits perfectly into the definition of fouling one's own nest, as Karol Franczak observes: "Public disrupting of the order imposed by the majority is a case [...] reserved for the most persistent individuals, who often create a 'profession' out of social rejection. It is for people immune to the majority's practices of marginalization, pathologization, and attempts to cast them outside of what is socially valid" [9]. Moreover, a *Nestbeschmutzer* – just like Tokarczuk's protagonist – often realizes that: "Each of [...] the expressive forms of influencing the public sphere is associated with focusing on an external audience, among which you can seek acceptance for your views, but you can also be in constant confrontation with it, irritate it with unacceptable behavior, or stand up for 'lost causes' knowing that the efforts made cannot lead to success" [136].

The heroine's "fouling of her nest" takes place on several levels. First of all, by defending the natural world and non-human species against other people, Duszejko openly breaks the alliance with the human tribe. It is precisely in

the hunting myth that the human right to subjugate and exploit the natural world seems to find its fullest potential – universally recognized as fundamental and inalienable, because it was given to people by God himself at the dawn of history. Duszejko strikes at what the local population treats as sanctity, a ritual connecting all the most influential men: the director, priest, fox farm owner, veterinarian, and police chief. By declaring war on hunting, the heroine begins the fight against the patriarchal world – hunting is here, after all, a metaphor for power, the key to understanding the mechanisms that invariably rule the world, and the ritual of killing animals together strengthens the arbitrary, violence-based rule of a group of men: over nature, the economically weaker, and women [Steciak].

It should be emphasized that “Janina Duszejko is far from political and ideological grapples. The meaning of her life focuses on getting to know and defending this vast and vivacious world that goes beyond the human borders” [Wertiuk 204]. However, the hostility of the local community is aroused by the fact that Duszejko, by questioning the myth of hunting, also touches on the taboo and breaks the silence around the fact that, regardless of the tradition of presenting hunting as a noble and sophisticated pastime, it essentially boils down to enjoying inflicting pain on other living creatures. As Olga Tokarczuk notes in the introduction to the book *Farba znaczy krew* [Paint means blood] by Zenon Kruczyński, killing animals is “something we would prefer not to know, what we brush aside, what we ridicule and downplay when others talk about it; what seems ‘loo-

ney,' flippant, substitutive, and marginal" [5]. In the presented world, Janina Duszejko performs the function of an individual exposing the truth about this world and its inhabitants, and like Kruczyński, who, after many years of hunting, became a defender of nature and animal rights, "she seems to be one of the people who have caught a clear sight of the basic, terrifying nature of the world, its hellishness. The fact that we do not notice it every day, that it slips out our attention, that we do not freeze in terror is amazing. Are defense mechanisms so strong? Or is it a mere human fear of shock, a habit of perceptual laziness, a lack of reflection, a comfort of ignorance? It is enough for us that this is the world we live in and it is what it is. But our perceptual passivity has moral significance because it perpetuates evil. Not wanting to see it, we participate in evil and are complicit. Thus, the moral effort is essentially a cognitive effort – we must see in a new, painful way" ["Przedmowa" 5–6].

For the local community, making people aware that they have grown accustomed to evil and cruelty is not the only sin committed by the heroine. Duszejko also in no way fits in with the traditional paradigm of femininity, and, therefore, in a way, she betrays not only the human species, but also the female gender. She is completely independent, lives alone except for her two dogs (which are – importantly – also female), has no husband or children, but freely chooses and changes life partners, and is not afraid to declare war on the patriarchy. This is what arouses the distrust of her neighbors – it seems that in the society, a woman is not recognized as a free person; publicly acceptable femininity

must be safely labeled, and transgressing this taboo will be ostracized by men who are afraid of women's power, as well as women, who begin to notice, thanks to her, the absurdity of the system in which they exist.

For this reason, in the figure of Duszejko, one can find a sublimation of both ecological and feminist postulates, and she herself becomes the embodiment of ecofeminism. Her story clearly suggests that the same oppressive conceptual structure based on the dualism of values underlying the logic of domination is responsible for the two forms of oppression – the marginalization of women in a patriarchal society and the destruction of nonhuman nature [Fiedorczuk 155]. Ecofeminism “highlight[s] the multiple ways in which human beings oppress each other, but these theorists also focus on human beings’ domination of the non-human world, or nature” and since “women are culturally tied to nature, ecofeminists argue that there are conceptual, symbolic, and linguistic connections between feminist and ecological issues” [Rosemarie Tong 237]. This leads us to the conclusion that “because women have been ‘naturalized’ and nature has been ‘feminized,’ it is difficult to know where the oppression of one ends and that of the other begins. [...] If man is the lord of nature, if he has been given dominion over it, then he has control not only over nature but also over nature’s human analog, woman. Whatever man may do to nature, he may also do to woman” [238].

For this reason, as Julia Fiedorczuk points out, an alliance between feminism and ecology seems inevitable,

because it is a logical consequence of the assumptions of both these movements: “Ecofeminism also assumes that various forms of oppression intensify each other, leading to the consolidation of relations based on violence. Most ecofeminists believe that philosophical reflection must go hand in hand with political activism resulting from an ethical attitude that valorizes empathy and cooperation, and rejects competition and all forms of aggression” [156].

Although the pattern of connecting women to nature and men to culture,<sup>1</sup> which is deeply rooted in our culture, is a procedure aimed at depreciating women, Janina Duszejko is rather an example of affirming the relationship between woman and nature and creating a coalition in defense against the destructive influence of patriarchal domination.

Julia Hoczyk states that the multidimensionality of women’s relationships with nature has a clear feminist overtone and emphasizes female emancipation and the ability to create relationships that break with patriarchal patterns. Ecocriticism, and in particular, animal studies, are also connected with feminist studies by numerous dilemmas concerning the issue of communication: in which language can we speak on behalf of the “other”, and how, so that it retains its subjectivity and agency, and can we avoid condescension [143–144]? As Paweł Majewski observes: “within animal studies, we usually deal with a much higher degree of self-awareness of the practices and language rhetorics, their opacity and hidden cog-

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1 See [Ortner] for a broader discussion of that issue.



nitive functions, and this dissimilarity undoubtedly results from the different provenance of this field, which is a product of critical and poststructural theories, in relation to sociobiology – derived from positivist natural sciences that assume the transparency of the scientific discourse and its strict adherence to reality” [100].

Majewski also adds that within animal studies, it has been postulated in recent years to distinguish animality studies, the aim of which would be to deal with the “animal point of view” without the obligatory humanization of nonhumans with one’s own rhetoric by describing the condition of animals not necessarily dependent on people or not even co-existing with them [102]. On the other hand, Marta Bucholc, drawing attention to the difficulties of speaking up on behalf of animals, points to a significant difference between anthropocentrism and sexism as forms of discrimination: “Animal, as a potentially emancipated other, presents us with a fundamental problem: if the emancipation of the animal and its empowerment in the study of the social world is to go beyond simply perceiving the social significance of the relationship between humans and animals, it must use humans as an intermediary” [179].

Using language, Janina Duszejko wants to represent non-human nature, lending it her voice and, thus, building a bridge between the two worlds, because nature’s muteness automatically condemns it to subjugation to man. Referring to the categories discussed by Dominique Lestel, it can be stated that Duszejko, when speaking about animals

or to animals, does not use a distanced, objective third-person point of view, in which the animal “always comes down to a series of more or less complex mechanisms. It is a complicated machine [...] but ultimately, it is possible to create an effective manual to operate it” [20-21]. Instead, she chooses a second-person perspective, where “the subject is established through his relationship with other partners in the dialogue, who, in turn, consider him to be a partner in the conversation” [24]. In the second-person perspective, the animal is presented in confrontation – individual, collective, intellectual, or affective: “As a human being, I constitute myself through an animal structure – and if I want to know who I am, I must find out who the animal is; and to know who or what an animal is, I must know who or what I am. This situation is neither paradoxical nor dialectical: I create myself as ‘I’ along with the other, above all, in confrontation (positive and negative) with the other, who is involved in similar processes – in some of them, in turn, I can play a role” [Lestel 32].

The issue of language plays a key role in Tokarczuk’s novel also in the context of inter-human communication. It would be worth taking a closer look at the rhetorical strategies of disavowing individuals who violate the anthropocentric status quo, applied by the rest of the society to punish the heroine-*Nestbeschmutzer* and exclude her from the tribal community. In his book on the rhetoric of domination, Jacek Wasilewski argues that “the fundamental communication pattern does not divide [...] humanity into two equal parts, but into those who are male positive and

those who are male negative. Ascribing masculinity is reserved for the dominant group, and detracting it relegates one to subordinate positions” [376]. Most terms referring to female biology or experience, especially in colloquial language, are marked extremely negatively, but “structurally, the function of a ‘crone’ during exclusion may be performed by other words, for instance, referring to [...] animals – they have a similar deprecative function” [379]. Femininity (both excessive and inadequate) and animality are, therefore, equally undesirable. In the eyes of the local population, Janina Duszejko fouls the nest twofold – she betrays not only the human species, but also her own sex – and it is around these issues that all the accusations made against her focus directly and indirectly.

For the first time, this rhetoric of domination is revealed in the scene when Duszejko comes to the police station to file a complaint against a poacher called Bigfoot. The accusations she throws at Bigfoot – the fact that “he poses a threat to many Creatures, human and animal” and that he “locks his Dog in the shed all day” [*Drive* 53–55] – are shrugged off by the commandant with the statement:

*“That’s not a matter for the Police, madam. A dog is a dog. The countryside is the countryside. What do you expect? [...] There’s probably a society for the care of animals, or something of the kind somewhere. [...] We’re the Police of people” [55–56]. With satisfaction, he emphasizes the superiority of the human affairs that he deals with over the affairs of other living crea-*

*tures that Duszejko defends. The protagonist clearly feels the policeman's contemptuous attitude towards her: "I could almost hear his thoughts – to his mind I was definitely a 'little old lady' and, once my accusatory speech was gathering strength, a 'silly old bag,' 'crazy old crone' or 'madwoman'" [52].*

It is clear that in the eyes of the local community only the "looney old spinster" could worry so much about the fate of the animals. It is the terms related to the heroine's gender, age, and marital status that are most often used by people who are adverse to her. Hunters talk to her in a similar way. Her argument: "You've no right to shoot at living Creatures!" is summed up by them with a remark exchanged between each other: "Don't argue with her, she's crazy" [112]. An officer of the city guard directly formulates the biggest accusation that her neighbors make at Duszejko: "You have more compassion for animals than for people" [173]. In response to her moving lecture on how every day crimes committed by humans against animals are downplayed, he says: "You're exaggerating. [...] I find it truly puzzling. Why is it that old women...women of your age are so concerned about animals? Aren't there any people left for them to take care of? Is it because their children have grown up and they don't have anyone to look after any more, but their instincts prompt them to care for something else? Women have an instinct for caring, don't they? [...] You're approaching this too emotionally. You're more concerned about the fate of animals than people" [184–185].

It is clear that “misogyny and hard anthropocentrism have a common denominator” [Fiedorczuk 165].

Even individuals trying to be kind and polite to the local *Nestbeschmutzer* automatically slip into a condescending tone and speak to her as if she were a child. In Tokarczuk’s novel, you can find many a scene when so-called mans-plaining takes place, for example, when the forester Wolf’s Eye, after listening to Duszejko’s problem, says:

*“You’re such a good woman. You care about everything in a very personal way. [...] Don’t get so upset about things. Don’t take the whole world on your shoulders. It’ll all be fine. [...] Would you like to buy some wood for the winter? It’d be a bargain” [Drive 320–323].*

*Nestbeschmutzung* is also ostracized by the ecclesiastical authority (a bastion of anthropocentrism and androcentrism) in the person of a hunter-priest. When Duszejko confesses to him that she is crying because her bitches have died, the priest remarks: “I understand your pain. [...] But they were just animals.” Duszejko disagrees with him, saying: “They were my only loved ones. My family. My daughters.” The priest shows no understanding and immediately rebukes her:

*“Please do not blaspheme. [...] You cannot speak of dogs as your daughters. Don’t weep any more. It’s better to pray – that brings relief in suffering. [...] It’s wrong to treat animals as if they were people. It’s a sin [and] human pride. God gave animals a lower*

*rank, in the service of man. [...] Animals don't have souls, they're not immortal. They shall not know salvation. Please pray for yourself" [386–387].*

The indulgent, condescending attitude of the local community towards Janina ultimately also works to her advantage. When there is a – justifiable – suspicion that Duszejko was the perpetrator of the murders of hunters, it is considered unlikely. The young policeman notes: “We’re hardly going to need an anti-terrorist squad to find her. She’s a crazy old woman. Round the twist” [438].

Interestingly, in a sense, the above-mentioned statements of the characters of Tokarczuk’s novel reflect the common belief, rooted in our society, that the matters of other species are immaterial in comparison with the importance of human matters. This situation can also be observed in the academic environment, where animal studies – despite the growing interest – are still not recognized as a fully-fledged field of scientific research. Although on Polish soil, several important works in this field have been created in recent years [*Zwierzęta, gender; Zwierzęta i ich ludzie; Ładyga*],<sup>2</sup> they fit into the mainstream of interests of researchers in various fields. As Monika Bakke notes, on the one hand, the expectations of researchers are very high, and they are required to abandon the established methodologies and reformulate known definitions; on the other hand, the subject of the research itself is met with open criticism and even hostility at Polish universities. Researchers are accused of chasing novelty and fads, their

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2 In 2017, Anthrozoology was founded at the Faculty of Artes Liberales, University of Warsaw.

scholarly status is also discredited due to the “tiresome” political or emotional involvement in these issues [203]:

*“In Poland, animal studies still focus primarily on people and remain on the margins of academic life, being incidental and fragmentary in nature. [...] Many – if not most – researchers dealing with the animal theme in Poland would probably be happy to distance themselves from animal studies as too ideologically involved. One can observe a great reluctance towards engagement, while the subject of animals is readily taken up as a kind of curiosity, a breather from “serious scientific topics,” and a space for a slightly looser discussion” [201–202].*

Examining the quotes from Olga Tokarczuk’s novel, it is hard not to notice the similarity between the literary reality and the current fights over the Białowieża Forest. The rhetorical strategies that depreciate the ecological ideas presented by Tokarczuk resemble the language and arguments of the party supporting logging. Emphasizing the superiority of human affairs over those of other species, questioning the mental health of ecologists, and appealing to divine authority come to the forefront in this argument. An example may be the statement of Professor Aleksander Nalaskowski, who sums up the activity of ecologists in the forest with the statement:

*“In my opinion, it all comes from godlessness, because God knows what he is doing. [...] Unfortunately, trees are defenseless against those eco-numbnuts who get chained to them. [...] They had better seek psycholog-*

*ical – or even better – psychiatric help. [...] It is out of this world, out of this culture, and civilization. We have been brought up in a civilization in which it is nature that serves man” [Nalaskowski].*

Father Tomasz Duszkiewicz, the priest of the General Directorate of State Forests and the Minister of the Environment, speaks in a similar vein: “It seems that eco-terrorists who lament the felling of, de facto, diseased trees do not care about people. [...] Scientists, speaking of ecological organizations, increasingly often emphasize that man has been pushed into the background of matters concerning the protection of nature and animals” [Duszkiewicz]. The hostility shown by the supporters of logging towards the defenders of the Forest also very often takes on sexist and homophobic forms – as masculinity is considered a cultural norm, excessive involvement in protecting nature against a specifically understood “culture” is sometimes perceived as inspired by sinister feminism or so-called gender ideology. Father Professor Tadeusz Guz from the Catholic University of Lublin claims that “environmentalism, much like genderism, fits in the trend of neo-Marxist thinking” [“Ekologism”], while the Catholic Weekly “Niedziela” proclaims: “The same ‘green people’ go to homosexual parades of equality, participate in the actions of ‘defending’ the Białowieża Forest, and support actions to legalize abortion” [Stelmasiak].

We can see, therefore, that the answer to the question contained in the title of this article – is a person defending nature against other humans a *Nestbeschmutzer*? – is unequivocal-



ly affirmative, both in the context of the world presented in the novel by Olga Tokarczuk and the real battle against the defenders of ecological ideas, which takes place every day in the right-wing media. Questioning the God-given right to subjugate the earth is very often seen as fouling the anthropocentric and androcentric nest, which poses a serious threat to the world order established for millennia and must, therefore, be punished, ridiculed, humiliated, and pushed outside the brackets of socially acceptable behavior. Nevertheless, the society's growing ecological awareness – expressed, for instance, in addressing the problem of environmental pollution, the “fashion” for vegetarianism, or boycotting natural furs – allows us to hope that soon a time will come when the stereotype of the ecologist-*Nestbeschmutzer* is dismantled.

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