

WRITING MOTHERS:  
SPATIAL-TEXTUAL FORMATIONS IN NIGERIAN BUCHI  
EMECHETA'S *SECOND-CLASS CITIZEN*, AND POLE ANNA  
JANKO'S *THE GIRL WITH MATCHES*<sup>1</sup>

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The space of the literary text becomes a site of critical rethinking and often of female rebirth. The textual space allows women writers to create new psychological shapes that displace the hierarchical patriarchal structures in favour of relationship, communality, and interiority. This new literary space author/izes women to throw a few new curves into contemporary culture.

— Komar (1994, 105)

And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, and you are for you; your body is yours, take it.

— Cixous (1996, 321)

Kathleen L. Komar in her article "Feminist Curves in Contemporary Literary Space" (1994) explores the works of contemporary women authors from various cultural backgrounds: Germany, France, Africa, Japan and the United States. In the current scholarship on women writers such diverse juxtapositions are still scarce. Whilst Polish women writers tend to receive critical attention, although still limited, in Polish academic criticism or in comparison to the other Slavic or Western European literatures, the field of comparative research which would bring together writers of African origin and the representatives of Slavic literatures is still undeveloped. One of the reasons for this lack of scholarship, which might bring together writers of such diversified spaces, African and Central Eastern European, can be attributed, aside

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Terri Mullholland and Nancy Roberts for their generous help and comments on an earlier draft.

from the obvious cultural and linguistic boundaries, to the fear of not finding a common ground for the texts to work together. Although a comparative approach is often adopted when analyzing works by authors of African origin, it remains primarily within the boundaries of specific cultural and language frameworks, such as Caribbean, African-American or Asian.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, feminist approaches to African women authors have to be carefully adapted due to the fact that Western feminist theories are not entirely representative of African women's experience. Consequently, the Western assumption of the universality of female experience globally<sup>3</sup> must be carefully approached and take into account cultural specificity when it is read alongside texts by African and Central-Eastern European women authors.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, the application of feminist theories to academic scholarship on Polish women writers still awaits proper treatment. As noted by the editors of *Masquerade and Femininity: Essays on Russian and Polish Women Writers* (2008), Urszula Chowaniec, Ursula Phillips and Marja Rytönen:

In considering the critical work produced so far on Polish women writers and feminist approaches, the fact has to be acknowledged that with a few major exceptions, this field is still relatively undeveloped—in both Polish (“home-grown”) and in “foreign” studies (by which we mean English-language or European, including Russian) (16-17).

Recently published research into the representation of the “witch” in selected American, Canadian, German and Polish women authors by Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (2008), which

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<sup>2</sup> Recent studies into African women writers, which have often adopted a comparative framework are: Davies, Carole Boyce and Anne Adams Graves, eds. (1986); Nasta, Susheila, ed. (1991); Nnaemeka, Obioma, ed. (1997); Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, Juliana (1997); Boehmer, Elleke (2005).

<sup>3</sup> I specifically refer here to Robin Morgan's interpretation in her anthology of texts from the early women's liberation movement *Sisterhood is Global* (1985), where women are treated as a homogenous group because of the experience of patriarchal oppression. Such a stand has been widely criticized by Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *Feminism Without Borders, Decolonizing Theory, Practising Solidarity* (2004).

<sup>4</sup> By this I mean that readings of women's texts should not be based solely on the fact that authors are of the same gender, but should rather approach texts on a thematic and contextual level.

examines the texts against Western feminist theories,<sup>5</sup> is another welcome addition to the scholarship on reading Polish women writers outside the widely defined Slavic literatures.

The aim of this essay is to override inherent cultural and linguistic boundaries and to show how women authors exploit the textual space in a comparable way. Whilst the figure of the mother as a creative agent is the entry point for my cross-cultural and textual investigation, I focus on exploring the ways in which both writers re-write the maternal spaces that *over*-determine their identities. The text becomes the site of definition of the female subject against the common patriarchal discourse of domination; thus I am interested in showing the way in which authors / mothers find their voices in the act of creating, in two works of fiction that have not been previously discussed alongside each other.

In order to facilitate my discussion on *Second-Class Citizen* (1974)<sup>6</sup> and *The Girl with Matches* (*Dziewczyna z zapalkami*, 2007)<sup>7</sup> I follow here the definition of the concept “comparative specificity” introduced by Susan Sniader Lanser (1994):

a position [which] opens infinitely more complicated ways to understand textual relations as racial, sexual, regional, or colonial and to recognize that a considerable share of the world's literature is “borderwork” [...] *comparative specificity* which would embrace both difference and similarity but would never simply dissolve a text, idea, writer, group or movement into a safe and homogenous whole (1994, 297, emphasis in the text).

According to the above, women's narratives can be approached in a comparative discourse beyond their national and cultural boundaries and by doing so, literary critics can also override their own cultural spaces. Comparative specificity allows them to establish a cross-cultural and cross-literary interrelatedness when analyzing

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<sup>5</sup> Here it is worth mentioning the latest publications devoted to the geographical region of Central and Eastern Europe that have appeared in the *Comparative Literature Series* launched by the International Comparative Language Association (ICLA) in 1967, namely: Vols 1, 2 and 3 of *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, all three volumes edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, published in 2004, 2006 and 2007, respectively. For a full list of all publications in this series follow the link: <http://icla.byu.edu/www/association/publications.html> (Accessed: 28 October, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Page references will henceforth be cited as *SCC*.

<sup>7</sup> Page references will henceforth be cited as *GM*. All quotations translated by the author of this essay.

narratives by women writers, without privileging texts<sup>8</sup> but through careful thematic, structural, contextual or language analysis. I therefore turn to Lanser's concept of comparative specificity as a key notion for my thematic and structural argument. Such an approach can enrich the textual comparative analysis in a substantial way and prove that the texts do not have to exist in their isolated cultural spaces but can rewrite the boundaries of female experience in a wider global comparative context.

Born on two different continents, Nigerian Buchi Emecheta and Pole Anna Janko, both chose to turn their personal experience as mothers into fictional stories which form a female testimony of survival in the confined spaces of their marriages. Their novels, *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Girl with Matches*, although substantially different because of their cultural background, thematic concerns and dates of publication, both reconfigure the theme of mothers as artists. Thus, Emecheta and Janko share not only commitment to motherhood but also vocation as creative writers.

Buchi Emecheta, born in 1944 to Igbo parents in Lagos, Nigeria, joined her Nigerian husband in London in 1962. She had five children before, at the age of twenty-two, she left her abusive husband who had burnt the manuscript of her first novel *The Bride Price*, which was eventually published in 1976. Emecheta is the author of more than twenty books, novels and fiction for children and young adults as well as numerous articles. In contrast to Emecheta, Anna Janko is predominantly a poet, and *The Girl with Matches*, published in 2007, is her first novel. Born in 1957 in Rybnik, Poland, Janko made her debut with a collection of poems *A Letter to a Laboratory Rabbit* (*List do królika doświadczalnego*, 1977). She has subsequently published five collections of poems including in 2001 her poetry collection *The Luminous Foreigner* (*Świetlisty cudzoziemiec*, 2000). She was married for seventeen

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<sup>8</sup> The longstanding Eurocentric approach in comparative studies has often privileged texts on the basis of their geographical origin; thus, the canon of comparative literature often revolves around white male writers predominantly from the Western European literatures. Here I wish to move away from such hierarchy and treat Nigerian and Polish texts as equally worthy of literary analysis.

years and had three children before she left her husband to become a full-time writer and poet.

In her autobiography *Head Above Water*, Emecheta described the process of writing *Second-Class Citizen* as “therapeutic” (178), whereas Janko, in an interview, referred to the process of writing *The Girl with Matches* as “the deepest need.”<sup>9</sup> Much of the material for both narratives is taken from Emecheta and Janko’s personal lives. Emecheta chose to write *Second-Class Citizen* as a direct response to the critics of her earlier novel, *In the Ditch*, which was criticized for not portraying women’s lives accurately.<sup>10</sup> She later admitted that: “I found myself writing more and more about my life, my bitter experience in England and my desperate attempt to be a good wife and mother. The more I wrote, the more I felt like strangling myself. How could I have put up with life?” (Emecheta 1986, 105).<sup>11</sup> Whilst Janko admitted that Hanka is “a version of myself. She has my soul, my views, my sense of humour, she reads the same books, she dreams the same dreams. She even has my children” (Janko 2009).

Both narratives, *Second-Class Citizen* and *The Girl with Matches*, contain autobiographical elements fictionalized in the lives of two women, Adah, in the case of Emecheta, and Hanka, often referred to in Janko’s narrative as Ha. “Hanka” is diminutive of the name “Hanna” which is also a variation on the name “Anna,” the author’s first name. Although the connection between the names of the author and the main female character can be traced in the case of Janko and her female protagonist, such comparison is not applicable to Buchi and Adah. In Igbo, the name “Adah” usually denotes a daughter with the following variations: Adaeze, the king’s

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<sup>9</sup> See the author’s website, “Od Autorki”. <http://www.annajanko.pl/autor.php> (Accessed: 24 May, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> See Emecheta’s full comment in her autobiography *Head Above Water: An Autobiography* (1986, 104).

<sup>11</sup> In this context, I wish to mention Philomena E. Okeke’s study on gender relations of power in the university and educated Igbo women in Nigeria, as a background to Emecheta’s situation as a mother and a writer in Igbo society. Although living in England, where Emecheta is physically removed from the immediate influences of her Igbo family, she nevertheless battles with traditional views on Igbo women (Okeke 2001).

daughter, Adaora, daughter of all, Adaku, daughter of riches, Adanma, daughter of daughter, and Adeago, daughter of wealth. In comparison, the name "Buchi" comes from *Onye / bu / Chi*, who is God? or *Madu / abuu / Chi*, man is not God.<sup>12</sup>

It can be argued that the autobiographical elements used by Emecheta and Janko serve as a certain appropriation in their fictional and actual identity formation,<sup>13</sup> while, at the same time, they validate their story in the eyes of the reader. Certainly autobiographical writing necessitates the process of self expression and validates women's (mothers') experiences, especially against the discourse of patriarchal domination. This point can be further accentuated using the analysis of the Polish autobiographical novel by Polish scholar Ewa Kraskowska, who emphasizes the significance of adding autobiographical elements, which give a better approximation between the author, character and reader. Kraskowska refers to this process as "maximal minimization," a defining factor in the genre of the autobiographical novel (2000, 206). Conceptualizing motherhood as a space where writing originates was discussed by Hélène Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman* (1996, first published 1975, trans. 1986) and in her seminal work "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1996, first published 1975, trans. 1976), where she coined the phrase *écriture féminine* closely related to the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, as noted by Susan Sellers and Ian Blyth, Cixous "puts forward a strong argument for the potential of pregnancy to inspire a radical reappraisal of one's relations with the other, the 'feminine' body and writing" (2004, 31). Toril Moi further emphasizes this point of Cixous's criticism: "The mother's voice, her breasts, milk, honey and female waters

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<sup>12</sup> I am especially indebted to Onyenkuzi Godson Echebima for kindly explaining the differences between the Igbo names to me. I also would like to thank Dr Adrian Wisnicki who first alerted me to the variations on the name "Adah."

<sup>13</sup> I follow Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2001) formulation of the term of collective identities as scripts, which become "narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories" (326). Appiah's argument about there being a certain coherence between a story and a person in a society telling his / her story, relates to personal experience within a specific community and social framework but it also gives a way to a larger, global female narrative that allows Emecheta and Janko's texts to be juxtaposed (327).

are all invoked as part of an eternal present space surrounding her and her readers” (1995, 117).

Notwithstanding the fact that both novels include autobiographical elements, they also contain the same theme of a mother who struggles to establish herself as a writer at the same time. It is not my intention here to trace all autobiographical links between the novels and authors' lives, but to analyze the way in which the female identity of mother and artist is constructed.<sup>14</sup> Both Adah and Hanka secretly pursue their urge to express themselves in writing, which creates their private space of identity as an artist. Both choose an alternative to their identities as mothers. They do not reject motherhood as such, but redefine it so that it gives a way to a new self, rather than the established social concept of mother and as the only acceptable model of identity for women. This kind of breakdown in their self-enclosed identity as mothers constitutes a space of splitting, a conscious intervention in identity formation. Adrienne Rich in “‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’ On Lies, Secrets, and Silence” further accentuates this point of splitting while reminiscing about her experience of writing poems between “the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself in writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men” (1996, 85, first published 1972). Writing is *the other* space for both Adah and Hanna, a certain *in-between* space where the idea of social identity, of mother and wife, is contested. The process of creating a narrative in their marriages forms a negotiating space between their identity as mothers fulfilling their responsibilities towards their husbands and children, and the responsibility towards themselves as individuals.

The conceptualization of the space, whether understood as home, marriage, or creative space, features on multiple levels in both texts. Adah relocates to London to join her husband only to find herself circumscribed to live in a predominantly white

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<sup>14</sup> For further discussion on female autobiography voiced by some feminists see: Smith, Sidonie (1987); Benstock, Shari (1988); Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson, eds. (1992 and 1998); Perreault, Jeanne (1995); Lionnet, Françoise (1989).

British society. The more she wants to write, the more she experiences a psychological dislocation from her husband, who openly and violently discourages her creative attempts, similarly to Hanka's dislocation. Conceptualization of the space is also visible on a different level associated with their husbands. They also find themselves dislocated from their safe space of home where the woman is supposed to occupy a certain position, namely that of a dutiful wife and a caring mother to their children. Through writing both women change the power of the space, the inherent meaning allocated to home in patriarchal discourse.

As Carol Boyce Davies argues in relation to black women, autobiographical texts, and the context of "home" as a space from where the process of self expression originates:

Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in autobiographical writing. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women. The mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways (1994, 36).

It is not so much the family, however, that is understood as a site of oppression, as Davies argues, because both Adah and Hanna cherish their children; it is rather that they are circumscribed by the role of mother without the freedom to pursue their own intellectual development and self-expression, as this is not acceptable or deemed valuable by their husbands. Writing becomes their own personal space outside motherhood and wifehood, which they can fully control. Jane Bryce-Okunlola, writing about motherhood as creativity in the African context, states that:

For a writer, who by the very act of writing challenges the patriarchal appropriation of power over the Word, motherhood becomes a site of struggle. Its literary representation is, explicitly or implicitly, an exploration by women of the last uncolonised territory, an integral part of a woman's identity as writer (1992, 201).

In the view of the above, the process of creation is substantially limited and influenced by their responsibilities as mothers and wives, which leaves them with

little time to think and work creatively. They both receive little support or encouragement from their husbands when the latter find out they have been writing. Adah and Hanka's urge for creativity threatens the institution of motherhood as well as the patriarchal order their husbands fight to preserve in their marriages. Their husbands impose and claim control over the women's female bodies while the tangible aspect of their creations are "silenced before she even finds the words to name it" (as Trinh T. Minh-ha puts it, 1989, 27); yet, the husbands are eventually unable to stop their wives' creative self-expression. Both women define themselves as writers against what Luce Irigaray calls "repression, censorship, nonrecognition" (1996, 318, first published 1977). For Adah's husband Francis, her attempt to write a novel is clearly not acceptable: "He was not going to read Adah's rubbish and that was that" (SCC 178). Adah is deeply hurt by Francis's refusal to read the book. It is not so much the fact that he calls it rubbish, but the fact that he is unable to accept the concept of a black woman writing: "that he had said that she would never be a writer because she was black and because she was a woman was like killing her spirit" (SCC 178).

Perhaps the most telling and climatic event in Emecheta's novel, as it opens a way for Adah to reassess her position in the marriage, comes when Francis decides to burn her manuscript. In Adah's eyes, burning the manuscript is a symbolic death of one of her children and she begins to be seriously concerned about the safety of her children in real life, rather than the book itself which she can write again. This event becomes the beginning of the end of their marriage and Adah now takes steps to leave Francis. As Emecheta recalls the event of the burning her novel by her husband in her autobiography, she affirms that: "the burning of my *Bride Price* decided me" (HAW 32). Although Francis forces Adah back to her enclosed space of motherhood, which is in line with the cultural expectations towards women, Adah's act of writing enables her to establish her female voice outside motherhood and cultural conditioning in the male-dominated society.

The difference between Hanka and Adah is that Hanka began to write before she married Paweł, yet with the ever-growing responsibilities as a mother and wife she has little time to read or write. To her mother-in-law, being a poet is comparable to being a prostitute; according to the mother-in-law, Hanka has used her abilities as a poet to skilfully manipulate the mother's gullible only child to marry Hanka, thus creating a threat to the loving relationship she had had with her son.

Like Adah, Hanka receives no support from her husband who often ridicules her when he sees Hanka writing or reading: "If you read Heidegger then you cannot be an idiot," Paweł says to her before he goes to work (*GM* 175). Paweł's ironic reference to Heidegger and his assumption that only intelligent people can read Heidegger's works illustrates the way he demarcates Hanka in her role as a mother; in other words, because she is a mother and spends most of her time washing, cleaning and cooking, she is in his eyes most probably too stupid to understand philosophy. This inner displacement between fulfilling maternal responsibilities and creative expression recalls Adrienne Rich's description of the woman / mother as a thinker who coexists in two worlds, the real and the imaginary (1996, 88, first published 1972). When Paweł sees Hanka writing her diary he ironically comments: "I admire you my dear, I could only write my last will in such circumstances" (*GM* 76). Paradoxically, Paweł reveals his dissatisfaction with their life as parents and the ever growing number of responsibilities towards their children. He often stays longer at work to avoid having to go back home and help Hanka with parental duties. Even though Paweł escapes from the house away from the children, he sees no reason to support Hanka when she tries to find a creative space at home, which is equally constricting for both of them.

Although both women arrive at the end of the novels as writers, their self perception at the beginning in both narratives differs substantially. From the very beginning of Hanka's marriage and the first pages of the novel, she questions her identity. Janko skilfully shifts the first person narration to the third person narration creating an identity split, a certain in-betweenness in the self-perception. Hanka, the

first person narrator, is writing the novel of her life entitled *The Girl with Matches*, but at the same time she consciously escapes into the third person narration, thus removing herself from the text because the fact that she is mother and wife is an unsettling experience to her:

In the meantime, "she" fills my head with thick narration from which I am trying to distance myself grammatically, but underneath the surface of this organized paradigm, I toss in chaos and I am unable to separate myself off, to crystallize myself.

She, that is me. [...]

Who is inside, who is this person inside me who frightens me? (*GM* 17-18).

Arguably, the biggest threat to Hanka is her non-identity, or in other words, being circumscribed by the only identity available to her as wife and mother. It is made clear, at the beginning of the novel, that the reasoning behind her getting married to Paweł is her search for her own identity, "in search of a name" as Hanka puts it (*GM* 10). Hanka clings to the idea of being a mother when she finds out she is pregnant. She is, in a way, searching for an identity marker and motherhood and wifeness initially create that space for her identity formation: "How about a child? Yes, a child. I must have a child. In this nauseating chaos a child will separate light from darkness, water from land, it will bring order to our lives [...]" (*GM* 55). With her first child, Hanka seeks to define her identity in order to appropriate her decision about getting married. However, with time and piling responsibilities at home, her anxieties about self-definition intensify. There is a growing ambivalence in Hanka's perception of her identity and perception of herself as the other. It is while she is visiting her husband in the USA that she finally has the time for herself, establishing her new self by devouring books and continually visiting libraries and bookstores. "I am strengthening my identity," she asserts (*GM* 90).

In analyzing these two novels, the cultural specificity of where these texts are located must be taken into account. Marriage becomes an identity marker, a space where Hanka tries to find her real self, to define herself. Although for Hanka it is a metaphorical escape from the feeling of non-identity into the state of control through

the eyes of the other, her husband, for Adah, marriage is predominantly the means to further her education. Adah has no choice but to marry if she wants to pursue her dreams of studying at the university and after graduation to become a teacher, because Adah's life is inextricably bound up with her existence in Igbo society and traditional views on girls: "In Lagos, at that time, teenagers were not allowed to live by themselves, and if the teenager happened to be a girl as well, living alone would be asking for trouble. In short, Adah had to marry" (SCC 19).<sup>15</sup> Although initially Adah does not love her husband, she slowly begins to care for him and with the arrival of their baby girl, she feels happy. However, when Francis decides to go to London to study, she sees no other option but to join him. Her main concern now is to provide an English education for her children.

Characteristically in both narratives, it is the encircling presence of books, in both Hanka and Adah's lives, which brings them closer to the dream of becoming a writer. Hanka, a housewife, does not work, and spends every free minute trying to read books, to write poetry or short fiction forms, whereas Adah works in a library surrounded by books all day long. The process of self-expression as a writer for Adah is marked by two events. First, it is the discovery of her fourth pregnancy which she tries to terminate in secrecy from Francis and second, the decision to leave her job at the library. Adah's decision to use birth control brings her closer metaphorically to reclaiming control and giving herself time for self-definition. For Adah, it is the physicality of childbearing and lack of support from her husband that prompts her to decide to abort the pregnancy: "another child, another traumatic birth, another mouth to feed; and she was still not getting anywhere with her studies. [...] She was not going to allow herself to get pregnant again. Never" (SCC 150). Yet, the pills prescribed by her doctor, which were supposed to terminate the pregnancy, do

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<sup>15</sup> See Anita Pandey's paper on linguistic gendering in Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* where she argues that: "Emecheta's words and sentences, particularly the ones italicized above, as well as her discourse content and structure aptly convey the dominant, sexist, male-centered ideology" (Pandey 2004a, 119). For further commentary on linguistic gendering in Emecheta's novels and other West African writers see also Pandey (2004b).

not work and Adah finds herself giving birth to her fourth child. With the arrival of the new baby, a new birth occurs, that of her first novel, *The Bride Price*: "Then her old dream came popping up. Why not attempt writing? She had always wanted to write. Why not?" (SCC 172). These words are surprisingly similar to Cixous's call in "The Laugh of the Medusa," when she expresses her urge for women to have the courage to speak up: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, and you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (1996, 321). Upon finishing her book, Adah compares the experience to that of giving birth to a child. It can be argued that writing becomes the "'intrinsic' child/birth process" (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989, 37). Furthermore, Minh-ha observes that: "women use 'womb' to re-appropriate it and reunite (or re-differ) themselves, their bodies" (1989, 38). Yet, it is Adah's relentless devotion to the process of writing that brings her closer to fulfilling her long forgotten dream of becoming a writer: "The more she wrote, the more she knew she could write and the more she enjoyed writing. She was feeling this urge: *Write; go on and do it, you can write*" (SCC 174, emphasis in the text). Upon Adah's divorce from Francis, he bluntly rejects ever having been married to his wife and any responsibility towards his children during the divorce proceedings in court: "I don't mind their being sent for adoption" he claims. Adah asserts in response: "Don't worry, sir. The children are mine, and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I am alive" (SCC 185). One can interpret Adah's statement not only as an assertion of commitment towards her children but also towards herself as a writer. She will never let herself down as a writer and she will pursue her dream.

Unlike Adah, Hanka is a less forceful character, although she eventually also chooses to leave her husband. The less space she finds for herself to write and read in her marriage, constrained by her household responsibilities, the more she succumbs to depression and drinking in order to "numb the day" (GM 187). "I've chosen beer. It allows me to disappear for a bit, to cease my existence in a part of my soul, where fire rages without end" (GM 212). The shift in Hanka's identity perception occurs when she ceases to look at her marriage in terms of an identity marker, as argued

above, and instead sees her constrained identity as a mother and wife more as dream than reality. It is in Hanka's character where the space of splitting is most notable. The mother she has become is perceived as the other woman, not herself, not the real Hanka. Hanka-mother stands as the enemy of Hanka-writer. It is visible not only in her first person narrative where she often refers to herself in the third person (consciously displacing her own self) as I mentioned earlier, but also in her constant doubt about the meaning of her life choices. She calls herself an "automatic mother" (*GM* 238). Elsewhere she asserts: "This is my place. I am Hañcia. Little Mary, or Gretchen, it doesn't matter, the same species. Hañcia—the dishwasher. I have chosen such a life, although I could have had a different one" (*GM* 170). Although Adah also struggles in her life—she has more children than Hanka and undergoes physical abuse from her husband—Adah never allows herself to sink into alcoholism, as Hanka does. This is not only because Adah's feeling of responsibility as a mother is far greater than Hanka's but, equally important, because the cultural circumstances of Adah's worldview are different in relation to the position of woman and motherhood in Igbo society.

Certainly both Emecheta's and Janko's purpose is clearly to show the life story of a woman who tries to establish herself as more than just a mother, to challenge the experience of a woman as mother, which remains circumscribed by motherhood alone. Both novels translate real live experience into narrative form. For Janko, it is a struggle to restore her identity as a poet and writer, whereas for Emecheta, writing is the next step in her self-development, her growth outside marriage. In both works, there is a conscious choice to regain control over their lives outside the role categories of mother and wife, a certain process of self-construction in face of cultural conditioning. As authors writing about motherhood, Emecheta and Janko, provide a unique perspective on mothers as creative writers, and although they differ in important ways too, because of their cultural specificity—here I specifically refer to Emecheta's depiction of a black African woman in British society and her positioning against her African background—their narratives consist above all in an

authentic portrayal of young mothers asserting their right to create against the constraints of their domestic lives.

In my reading of women's texts, where women are circumscribed by the patriarchal interpretation of women's roles, I have tried to show that women as mothers can act as their own spokespersons and agents in reclaiming their female creative space. The voices of mothers form a formidable response to the cultural conditioning often defined by male dominance. In both texts, mothers were disempowered by their husbands who, by destroying and discouraging women's creative voices, wanted to enforce their dominance. Both Emecheta and Janko transform motherhood into self-defined powerful experiences that break the convention of stereotyping writing and motherhood as mutually exclusive, as preferred by their male partners. By juxtaposing women authors from such diverse cultural backgrounds, Nigerian and Polish respectively, I hope to show that contemporary women's writing does not have to be interpreted according to the ramifications of its own cultural specificity, but if closely analyzed, it can open a much needed cross-cultural debate on women's literature.

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