

On the Margins of Religion/On the Forefront of Culture

The Image of the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) in Contemporary Poland

As Jane Bayes and Nayareh Tobidi point out in their introduction to Globalization, Gender, and Religion, one of the main issues that came up at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the conflict between women's rights and gender norms based on myths present in their religions, nations, and cultures. While these myths are constructs of patriarchal society, feminists argue that women often fall victim to "false consciousness" resulting from their hegemonic nature. Moreover, women raised in ethnic communities struggle with an even more difficult task—bridging their personal needs with their desire for community affiliation – religious or cultural. Within the Polish culture, the image of the traditional Polish mother, otherwise known as the Matka Polka, has shaped what it means to be a woman in Poland in terms of her duty toward family and country. Dating back to the Renaissance and the Holy Mother, who was supposed to watch over Poland and not let it fall in the hands of partitioning nations, the Polish Mother functions on the margins of the intersecting fields of religion, nation, and gender. This paper will attempt to analyze how the Matka Polka is defined in these terms and her impact on Polish women in relation to the roles ascribed to them by their ethnicity and culture.

One of the main issues discussed at the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was the conflict between women's rights and a variety of intersecting personal and political spheres, amongst them religiosity, nationalism, and gender. The opinions of many women who believe in equal rights are not in agreement with societal views. The equity versus equality debate is one of those that exacerbate the discussion pertaining to women's roles, both public and private. All of the above-referenced terms are inscribed on the margins of socio-cultural lives, from which they delineate groups and define

power. Attempts to silence or suppress them fail to lead to their eradication (de Pina-Cabral and Pine 3). Therefore, in order to understand the effects of religion and culture on gender relations, one needs to be cognizant of the fact that the latter are negotiated on the margins of religion and culture, amongst the “fuzziness of categorical distinctions” (de Pina-Cabral and Pine 3), or as Third World Feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue, amidst the intersection of personal, material, political, and theoretical spheres. The notion of the *Matka Polka* (Polish Mother) is one of those identities created on the margins—neither fully religious nor fully secular.

The myth of the *Matka Polka* can be traced back to Renaissance representations of the Virgin Mary. Mary became the protector of Poland in 1656 when King Jan Kazimierz crowned her the Queen of Poland following The Deluge, a Swedish Invasion on the fortified monastery of Jasna Góra near the town of Częstochowa (Porter 154). In the nineteenth century, the myth of the Polish Mother emerged as a model of female identity leading the fight for Polish values. Heralded as a feminine ideal in the aftermath of the 1863 uprising against the Russian Empire, she “served the nation by educating the young in a patriotic spirit, and by sustaining home and hearth for the partisan fighters” (Porter 160). Coined by Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz in his poem, “Do Matki-Polki” (“To the Polish Mother”),¹ the Polish Mother served as a staunch supporter of the cause during the partitions. As Bogusława Budrowska explains, women at the time were faced with many different tasks (193), in many ways typical of the wartime effort. When men were in the trenches, it was the woman’s job to raise the children—preferably a patriotic son with a “light of genius” in his eyes—and mind the house, while at the same time finding the means to provide for her family. The burden of managing all of the above led to the creation of the myth of the heroic *Matka Polka*: a devoted mother who symbolized the strength of the nation.

Since Poland is no longer going through systematic periods of political unrest, the patriotic appeal of the *Matka Polka* has lost some of its prominence in the Polish cultural imaginary, with the crux of the myth shifting to emphasize other areas of which she was previously on the margins. This paper will attempt to provide an overview of the Polish Mother in order to determine where this myth lies on the spectrum of the intersecting fields of religion, nation, and gender. Is she a symbol of nationalism and patriarchy, motherhood, or faith? I undertake this discussion of the *Matka Polka* through a global feminist lens due to her position as a product of patriarchal oppression.

Matka Polka as Myth

As a symbol of the Polish nation, the *Matka Polka* serves as a means of un-

derstanding Roland Barthes' *mythologies*. Barthes claimed that certain artifacts of everyday life, e.g. toys, books, movies, and newspapers to name a few, tend to be perceived as "natural" (Emad). As an icon of Polish culture, the Polish Mother embodies the Barthesian notion of myth, because she has taken on both historical and cultural meanings. Within popular culture the *Matka Polka* is used to create an image of perfect motherhood: in commercials the Polish Mother knows which laundry detergent will work best to fight that ugly stain while in movies she is portrayed as the woman suffering due to the loss of her husband/son. The *Matka Polka*, therefore, is the mother of the "imagined community" of the Polish "nation" (Anderson). This puts her on the margin of the traditionally masculine cultural sphere of nationalism and the private realm of female gender identity.

The fact that the *Matka Polka* was born into a time of political unrest underscores her direct link to the Polish nation-state and her emergence as a product of the patriarchal imaginary. Anna Titkow details this intersection of gender and nation in the following:

Losing independence and statehood created the cultural ideal of the Polish woman as *hero*, capable of dealing with any pressures... On her shoulders rested the responsibility of maintaining national heritage: language, culture, faith. It is this difficult time of loss of independence which created the social genotype of the ideal woman, who is capable of taking on the most difficult of circumstances which exist to this day (quoted in Budrowska 193, translation and emphasis mine).

Hence, the Polish Mother is mythologized as this "hero," adept at taking on any task no matter how big or how small.

The *Matka Polka* as the Ideal Polish Woman

The question arises as to what constitutes this "social genotype" of the ideal female that Anna Titkow writes about. It is within this distinction that the notion of "gender" becomes a more clearly pronounced element of the myth of the *Matka Polka* than "nation." Joanna Bator refers to the Polish Mother in her essay, "Wizerunek Kobiety w Reklamie Telewizyjnej" ("The Image of Women in Television Commercials", translation mine), as an example of a "traditional woman." Her role within society is clearly defined; the *Matka Polka* does the "laundry, cleans, bleaches, nurtures, and cooks" (Bator 27). The portrayal of the "traditional woman," argues Bator, contains motifs, which refer back to national heritage. Her look is constructed in the public in such a way as to not hint at any profession in particular. The only attributes she is pictured with are

those typical for the “traditional woman”: cleaning and cooking supplies, plus children. Noteworthy is also the fact that the *Matka Polka* rarely appears in public media in the presence of a man, which symbolizes her duty to the home, above all others (Bator 29), and upholds the myth of the ideal Polish woman.

The Role of Religion and Communism

As mentioned above, after the Swedish Invasion the Virgin Mary was crowned Queen of Poland. As the protector of the nation, Mary was otherwise known as the *Hetmanka*, the feminized form of *hetman*—the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Despite her rank, the *Hetmanka*'s status, thus, is obtained by and through another patriarchal ideology - organized religion. In the Polish language, the Virgin Mary is referred to as the *Matka Boska*, which means “Mother of God.” The obvious analogy can be drawn that if *Matka Boska* is the Mother of God, the *Matka Polka* is the Mother of Poland, created in the Holy Mother's vein.² Like Mary, the Polish Mother is the ideal of self-sacrifice; she is not perceived as a woman, but as a martyr.

In Poland, a country where women have historically been tasked with a variety of roles due to its tumultuous past, one way of “reigning in” female power has been through religion. Mitra Emad in her essay, “Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation,” wonders: “What happens when nationalism is depicted as feminine? How is female power reigned in, even as it resists a politics of ‘separate spheres’ in which femininity and physical/national power cannot exist?” (4). In Poland, the Roman Catholic³ tradition has played an integral role in shaping and theorizing the *Matka Polka*, imposing on her character. This connection between religion and the myth is critical due to the part that Mary plays within Polish culture. While the church calendar has twelve days worshipping the Mother of God, Poland has an additional two. Moreover, Polish Marianism has intensified over the last two centuries; thus, Mary serves as a strong predecessor of the *Matka Polka* because she is a model for conceptualizing feminism. As Brian Porter writes in “*Hetmanka* and Mother: Representing the Virgin Mary in Modern Poland,” “one the one hand, Mary is a powerful, sometimes militant protector of Poland; on the other hand, she is an exemplar of feminine domesticity. She guides the nation to victory even as she demonstrates how to sustain the national hearth and home” (153). As such, she converges two very distinct strains of thought: maintaining conservative gender relations and attaining victory in the international arena.

The Catholic Church, however, is not a monolith. It is important in the discussion of the Polish Mother, therefore, to mention that its two philosophical stances became quite visible after the end of the socialist regime. The Catholic intelligentsia accepted more progressive ideology, whereas it is the fundamen-

talist far right whose aim is to protect Poland from the secular influences of the West that have successively been gaining social support since 1989. It is also this radical political right that would like to keep the traditional image of the *Matka Polka* alive.

The Socialist Polish Mother (*Matka Polka PRL'u*) / Female Comrade

Communism heightened the religiosity of the image of the Polish Mother. With Poland being predominantly a Catholic country, the Church played an important role in the years leading up to post-Wall Europe. It provided a place for people to seek solitude from the regime and freely exchange their thoughts. Moreover, the Church supported the famous anti-communist movement initiated by Lech Wałęsa, *Solidarność*, which drew heavily on religious and nationalist symbols (Koscianska 169). Not surprisingly, therefore, the Church supported the new governing elite after 1989 and managed to gain substantial social support.⁴

As a result of the Church's role in combating the regime, communism was fodder for a historical phase in the evolution of the nationalist identity of the myth, which Izabela Kowalczyk identifies as the Socialist *Matka Polka* (referred to as *Matka Polka PRL'u*) (15). She describes the socialist Polish Mother's duties as follows:

Although as a result of socialist state policy most women were employed in various sectors of economy, their labor was seen as a part of their maternal obligations. At the same time women were committed to household duties such as feeding the family, which during the years of shortage required an inordinate amount of time as well as quick-wittedness and shrewdness. Women's *double-burden* is a part of the Polish Mother's self-sacrifice. (170, emphasis mine)

I would argue that instead of the "double-burden" mentioned by Koscianska, women were in fact subjected to a *triple-burden*: work, home, and the regime. In order to be able to perform their role as mothers, they would need to navigate the system, which sometimes meant standing in kilometer-long lines in order to get their ration of toilet paper and meat. Whereas in the XIX century, the Polish Mother was expected to teach her sons how to be patriotic citizens of their Homeland, in communist times, *the Matka Polka* was also supposed to teach her children to be good citizens, willing to sacrifice in the name of the common good (Kowalczyk 15).

Ironically, Poland after World War II was considered to be, as Zaborowska and Pas call it, a "socialist gender utopia" (28). Communist ideology perceived

all individuals as equals, regardless of ethnicity, class, or gender—“comrades” who worked for a supposed universal good. As such, feminism had no right to exist in Poland under communism, where excessive introspection was considered “bourgeois.” Women were expected to pursue an education and obtain jobs like their male counterparts; therefore, gender equality was very much a part of the national imaginary and public discourse of the time (Zaborowska and Pas 28). Moreover, what aids this theoretical sense of equality is that unlike the United States, Poland never experienced the cult of domesticity that American women did after World War II. Women were simply unable to afford being homemakers in a country so ravaged by war, in such need of rebuilding. Despite women’s subordinate positions in both the Communist Party and anti-Communist fractions, their situation was decisively better in the years between 1946 and 1989 than in many Western Democratic countries:

... women enjoyed benefits which have since disappeared from Poland’s social map: free childcare, long paid maternity leaves (up to three years), and paid time off to care for sick children, not to mention state-sanctioned vacations, subsidized winter and summer camps for children, as well as workers’ health resorts. (Zaborowska and Pas 31)

However, “in higher echelons of the government women were objects of discussion and background images rather than active participants” (Zaborowska and Pas 29). This paradox points to the way in which the image of the Female Comrade attempted to shroud the reality of women’s lives during the Cold War.

The Meaning of Motherhood in Polish Feminism

After looking at how the myth of the Polish Mother originated and how it functions on the margins of the social and cultural imaginary, it is necessary to understand how the myth is impacted by gender norms, specifically women’s roles as mothers. Bogusława Budrowska, in *Maternity as a Turning Point in the Woman’s Life*,⁵ describes two approaches to motherhood. The first perspective results from the process of socialization, which girls are prepared for starting at an early age. According to this approach, women are supposed to fulfill their given culture’s patterns and expectations associated with being a mother. Oftentimes the predominant ideology within a culture is that of intensive mothering, in which women are expected to be completely resigned to their maternal roles, giving up everything unrelated in order to serve the needs of their children. It assumes that “the umbilical cord in some sense goes un-severed: . . . the mother is ideally best suited to comprehend her child’s needs and can interpret and respond to those needs intuitively” (Macdonald 30).

Alternatively, maternity can be looked at from each woman's individual perspective. What is crucial for this viewpoint is that every mother looks upon her role as primary caregiver differently. Budrowska points out that there is no doubt that bearing offspring:

...is perceived as a turning point in a very specific [way]: women experience limitation of their subjectivity and autonomy to a high degree, at heart are not active participants of the event and only seem to inactively, passively adjust to the socially created role of a "good mother." (415)

Consequently, the *Matka Polka* occupies a very ambivalent position. Although she may want to experience her role individually, within the private sphere, society expects her to be a public example of the "perfect mother," protector of the nation.

The intersection of women's roles as mothers and nation-builders came to head in Russian Poland between 1900-1914. The crisis of the noble landowning Polish gentry (*szlachta*), along with the failure of the January Uprising led to women needing to be more reliant on themselves and forming the first wave of Polish feminists. Comprised of women from elite backgrounds,⁶ the *emancypantki* (emancipationists) championed for the right to work as well as for the access to education leading to professional careers (Blobaum 805). Many prominent female liberals, however, such as Izabela Moszczenska, who had made a name for themselves in the public sphere as advocates of women's equal participation in work and politics, criticized the feminist movement. Moszczenska's view was that "the social role of free and independent women was to raise the dignity of motherhood and to strengthen the family for the benefit of the Polish nation and its 'progress'" (Blobaum 807). The *Matka Polka* came to be viewed as the seemingly ideal compromise for liberals. As Robert Blobaum writes, she was

...the Catholic Polish Mother, who conscious of her ethnically and religiously defined national identity and nursing it into her children simultaneously resists the intrusion of alien and anti-Polish influences into the larger society, thus fulfilling her major obligation of citizenship (815).

The above-cited research supports my claim that the Polish Mother has been shaped by deeply engrained patriarchal attitudes in Polish culture. While the most prominent feminist activists before World War I opposed this distinction between male and female citizenship, the myth of the *Matka Polka* would not

be truly challenged again until the 1980s as it was considered obvious that women's priorities should pertain to their roles as wives and mothers.

Intersections of Gender and Nation

As a secular representation of the Holy Mother, the *Matka Polka* embodies both religious and patriotic ideals. Since Mary is considered to be the Queen of Poland, apart from being a good Polish woman the *Matka Polka* has the additional role of being a fierce patriot. Similarly to how one gets to know Mary in reference to her being the mother of God, the Polish Mother is defined through her connection to the nation. The dyad Mary-baby is described as an ideal figure: the masculinity of the baby is counteracted by the virginal subtlety of the Holy Mother (Budrowska 191). When God is removed from this dyad and replaced with the nation, than a new, unbreakable pair is created: *Matka Polka*—nation as a secular version of Mary (*Matka Boska*)—nation.

Anthropomorphized representations of the nation as Polish Mother are omnipresent in Polish culture. In Mickiewicz's poem, *Matka Polka* is portrayed as Poland weeping over the grave of her fallen son:

And to the vanquished shall remain the dry
wood of the gallows for his tombstone, for all his
glory the short weeping of a woman, and the long
night talks of his compatriots. (Gardner 59)

She is expected to take pride in the fact that he sacrificed his life for the greater good of country, and turn to *Matka Boska* for spiritual guidance. Along with the poet Adam Mickiewicz, many Romantic artists attempted to depict the suffering that the *Matka Polka* had to endure. Artur Grottger, one of the most famous Polish painters and graphic artists of the mid nineteenth century, drew a series of eight panels entitled *Polonia* in response to the failed January Uprising of 1863. His drawing *Branka (Taking)*, the most famous of the *Polonia* series reprinted here, portrays a mother being distraught after her son is taken in the middle of the night as part of a draft organized by the Russian Army. The mother, symbolic of the nation whose young men are taken away to die in battle, has to come to terms with the loss of her child. But that is not all the Polish Mother must go through. Izabela Kowalczyk adds that apart from emotions, the *Matka Polka* is considered devoid of any bodily functions: “such issues as menstruation, painful childbirth and menopause [which] must seem petty and not worth a second thought when compared to those of the Homeland (*Ojczyzny*)” (17, translation mine). As the embodiment of total self-sacrifice, the *Matka Polka's* own needs are



Fig. 1. Artur Grottger, *Polonia-Branka*, 1863.

perceived as frivolous and pale in comparison to the needs of the nation, resembling thus the intensive mothering approach.

Mona Domosh and Joni Seager attempt to deconstruct the meaning behind women as symbols of the nation. She starts by arguing that there is a distinction between what political scientists refer to as “nation” and “state.” The latter refers to an economic system contained by political borders, which can be fluid and change over time. The term “nation,” however, is more in line with the Polish Mother being a mythological construct of cultural practice, anthropomorphized in popular culture as a revolutionary female leader (Zaborowska and Pas 16). Domosh writes: “The term ‘nation’ refers to people bound together by common culture: history, religion, language and so on. The sense of nation is often linked with community and homeland and is typically seen as enduring and unchanging” (161). Since the preservation of culture has traditionally been considered the woman’s role, the nation is gendered female while the state is gendered male (Domosh 161).

Conclusion

The intersection of the myth of the *Matka Polka* with a variety of both public (upstanding citizen and worker) and private (mother and caregiver) spheres illustrates, thus, the existence of this term as a social construct present in Polish culture. The Polish Mother is not a clearly defined entity within the

borders of one particular theory or field of study; she is an umbrella term, which embraces numerous elements of Polish culture. Modeled off of the Virgin Mary, the Polish Mother serves as the protector of Poland and the mother of the nation. As an ideal “comrade,” the *Matka Polka* bridges the personal with the political, national ideals with prescribed gender roles. She is expected to perform the private feminine task of mothering under the watchful eye of the masculine public sphere.

With the decline of political instability in Poland, the Polish Mother became more of a cultural icon present in popular culture than the traditional nationalistic symbol of patriotism. However, due to the lingering myth of the Holy Mother as *Hetmanka* of Poland, Polish women are constantly being reminded of the power of patriarchy and religion, which is perceived from the Western point of view to be harsher in countries belonging to the former Communist block, where religion served as a means of organizing against the oppressor. Polish women, therefore, are stigmatized by society for getting divorced or for choosing to be single mothers, because by doing so they do not fulfill the *Matka Polka* myth and threaten the ideological unity of the nation, whether they live in the homeland or abroad.

Although some female liberals at the beginning of the twentieth century criticized women’s emancipation from this myth, contemporary Feminist organizations in Poland strictly combat the idea of the Polish Mother being an “ideal woman,” and make every effort to distance themselves from any governmental or religious connotations by seeking funding through local initiatives. The Beijing convention, therefore, also intensified the rift between Polish women’s organizations themselves, separating those who relied on “Christian values” from the “feminists,” who denounced the notion of ideal womanhood promoted by religious groups and the radical right. This separation, however, is absolutely necessary in order for Polish women to fully delineate their own identities and outline their own roles within the public sphere, which would subsequently allow them to move from the margins of religion and nationalistic ideology to the forefront of culture.

¹⁷The full text translation of the poem below is obtained from Monica Gardner’s, *Poland: A Study in National Idealism*. Mickiewicz wrote the poem in response to the November Uprising of 1830. Gardner writes: “It is said that from the hour the news reached him, he never again knew what it is to feel lightness of heart” (57).

Oh, Polish Mother! when from thy son’s
eyes the light of genius shines; when from his

childish brow the noble pride of the Poles of old
looks forth

When, spurning his little band of playmates,
He runs to the aged man who will sing to him his
Nation's songs; when with bowed head he listen
to the history of his sires.

Oh, Polish mother, ill are these pastimes for
thy son. Kneel thou before the image of the
Mother of Dolours, and gaze upon the sword
that has transfixed her bleeding heart. With a
like blow the foe shall pierce thy bosom. (Gardner 57)

²Agnieszka Koscianska clarifies that “within Polish folk and popular religiosity Mary is venerated as a mother rather than as a virgin” (173); therefore, the Polish Mother is not expected to be celibate. In fact, although *Matka Polka* is not explicitly sexualized, especially during communist times, she is expected to be a good wife and fulfill the needs of her husband.

³Ninety-five percent of Poles have been baptized Catholic, however, opinions vary as to actually how many actually practice the religion.

⁴This was very visible, among others, through the passing of an act supporting religious education in school and a strict anti-abortion law (Koscianska 169).

⁵Original title: *Macierzystwo Jako Punkt Zwrotny w Zyciu Kobiety*, translated by author.

⁶In the Polish context, the elites were defined more in terms of education than wealth. As Robert Blobaum explains, the feminist movement in Poland did not require the presence of middle-class reformers as it did in Great Britain and the United States. *Emancypantki* looked toward the developments in Western Europe, which made the future tangible and “rendered the actual level of socioeconomic development irrelevant” (801).

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