

Absolute Amnesia

Absolutna amnezja

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Izabela Morska's (Filipiak's) *Absolutna amnezja* (*Absolute Amnesia*) is a novel that confronts the social and cultural situation of women, taboos around women's experience (corporeality, sexuality, pregnancy and obstetric care, motherhood, domestic violence, female writing), the oppressive structures of patriarchal culture, especially those rooted in the family, reinforced by traditional gender roles and heteronormative sexuality. The novel's historical and political backdrop is important: Morska exposes the mechanisms of late communist Poland's institutional order and, to some extent, the emerging neoliberal transformation of the early 1990s. Regarded as Poland's first feminist novel and described as a "psychoanalysis of Polish culture" (Kinga Dunin), *Absolutna amnezja* marks a turning point in post-communist literary discourse.

Morska's novel is a coming-of-age story centered on the life of Marianna, a twelve-year-old girl, whose literary and artistic sensibility help her navigate the inevitable processes of socialization. Morska's exploration of Marianna's search for identity unfolds through the experimental form. A third-person realist narration intertwines with fragments of Marianna's "diary hidden on the underside of the table", which invites the reader into the dreamlike, mythic realm of her imagination, reflecting on complex family and peer relationships. The chronology of the plot, too, resists convention – particularly in the final sections of the novel, when the narrative shifts into the future, centering on the perspective of a young woman known as the *Przędka* ("the Weaver"), a student and aspiring writer who may be read as Marianna's adult self, as well as the author's alter ego.

At the level of the plot, the novel immerses the reader in the world of growing up under the gray monotony of everyday life in communist Poland, structured by two dominant institutions: school and home. Crucial to the narrative are the fraught family relationships, particularly between Marianna and her mother, Krystyna – a doctor whom Marianna calls *Niepokalana* ("the Immaculate") and who, despite her professional independence, is trapped in a difficult marriage and remains emotionally distant from her daughter. We learn that she has "entrusted" Marianna to her husband (p. 30). Marianna's father, a local Communist Party secretary, is symptomatically referred to throughout the novel simply as *Sekretarz* ("the Secretary"). He wields absolute authority within the household ("at home he enjoyed a special immunity that allowed him to do anything"; p. 23) and simultaneously embodies political power – intolerant of any form of resistance. But it is precisely the tension between obedience and resistance – toward (private) domestic authority as well as the broader (public) demands of socialization – that becomes the central problem of the novel.

Resistance to socialization begins within the walls of the school, one of the key oppressive institutions. Marianna observes: "Sometimes they ask who I will be when I grow up. They have scripted answers for me" (p. 7). The story unfolds as she joins a school "gang" led by her classmate

Turek, with whom she forms a close bond. Like Marianna, the gang exists outside the system, resisting the social norms imposed by the school, which functions to suppress children's sense of identity – a process described as the titular “absolute amnesia” (“From first grade to last, it's a whole process of forgetting [...] By the end, you receive a diploma with your stage of amnesia written on it”; p. 59). The narrative also evokes historical memory, linking the children's underground revolt (their “base” is located in a postwar bunkers) to the resistance of the Second World War. One of the pivotal moments in the story occurs when the gang takes over the school. This act of rebellion operates on two levels: simultaneously, the Gdańsk Shipyard strike erupts in the background – the beginning of the protests that, in the context of Polish national history, lead to the formation of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union *Solidarity* (1980) and ultimately herald the collapse of communism (1989).

Resistance to gender roles (as part of socialization) emerges early in the novel, when Marianna finds no place for herself within the norms of the school (“There are male labyrinths and female labyrinths. I'd like to find one suited to my condition, but I fear they've gone deeper underground than the postwar bunkers”; p. 7). The only adult who recognizes the mechanisms of gender socialization – and the broader process of “absolute amnesia” – is Marianna's Polish language teacher, Lisiak. She writes a bold school play that, in an unprecedented way, exposes the subordinate position of women in society. After the play, Lisiak is institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. However, the issue of gender surfaces not only within the school but especially within the oppressive family home. Two episodes are particularly important. First, Marianna's father, the “Secretary,” punishes the protagonist by cutting her hair and declaring: “From now on, you will be a boy” (p. 33), later calling her “comrade” – a term Marianna refers to as “a third sex” and a gesture that exposes the alignment between (communist) political and patriarchal authority. The second occurs in one of the novel's final scenes: Marianna's first menstruation, which redefines her relationships with her parents and marks both her subjection to and liberation from patriarchal control. Morska frames this moment through the surreal appearance of the *Policja Menstrualna* (“Menstrual Police”), symbolizing the state's intrusion into female corporeality and the broader cultural mechanisms that regulate women's bodies. This theme also echoed in the childbirth scene, where Marianna's sister-in-law, Izolda, becomes subject to the hospital's depersonalizing authority (“From that moment on, the people in white coats behaved as if they knew better than she herself what was happening to her body”; p. 230).

Central to the novel – alongside the father-daughter relationship – are what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls homosocial relations, specifically female generational bonds. *Absolutna amnezja* foregrounds Marianna's relationships with her mother, her sister-in-law, her deeply religious grandmother Aldona, her teacher Lisiak, her classmate Agrypina, who is ostracized by the community after being raped, and finally *Mistrzynie* (“Mistress”), an academic figure who offers *Prządka* (the grown-up Marianna) a genuine model of intellectual kinship. Yet Morska also insists – through intertextual allusions and a poetic-dramatic narrative form – on the need to reformulate the literary canon from a female perspective. To this end, she engages both global cultural capital, the myth of Iphigenia, the archetype of female sacrifice, and national cultural capital, which she subversively reinterprets through references to Jan Kochanowski's *Laments* (*Treny*; 1580), traditionally centered on the grief of a great male creator over the loss of his daughter.

The crucial to understanding the novel's political dimension is also its reception – in particular, the controversy it provoked among male critics of the 1990s, the years immediately following Poland's political transformation. Critics who viewed with suspicion the growing visibility of female authors – dismissively labeled as the *babski przełom* (“the girly breakthrough”) – characterized *Absolutna*

amnezja as “ideological”. Especially vivid is Krzysztof Varga’s notorious review, in which he described Morska’s prose as the “menstrual literature” (*literatura menstrualna*) – a term that, for a time, entered the critical (male) vocabulary as a derogatory label for writing by women. It is important to note that, in the post-communist context, calling a novel “ideological” carried strong negative connotations: it evoked the notion of “tendentious literature,” associated with the aesthetic paradigms of the recently discredited regime. From today’s perspective, the critical debate surrounding *Absolutna amnezja* reveals how Morska’s novel – concerned as it is with memory, systemic processes of forgetting, and the private work of remembrance as an act of reclaiming history and one’s (gendered) identity – may also be read on a metaliterary level, as a commentary on transformations in Polish political and literary consciousness. The reception of the novel thus becomes symptomatic of the 1990s struggle to redefine the role of engaged literature in Poland.

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski

This title was not censored before publishing