

Weeding out the Roots? Migrant Identity in A.M. Bakalar's Polish-British Fiction¹

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Abstract. Poles are one of the largest non-UK born ethnic groups in all countries and most regions of the United Kingdom. Since Poland's accession to the European Union in May 2004, thousands of Poles have migrated to the UK, hoping for better professional opportunities and higher standards of living. It was thus only a matter of time before Poles started to put their experience of migration on paper. One example is A.M. Bakalar, whose literary debut, *Madame Mephisto* (2012), was promoted as the voice of the new wave of Polish migration and the first novel to be written in English by a Polish female author since Poland joined the EU in 2004. This article centres on Bakalar's protagonist, a thirty-year-old Pole in London, with the aim of revealing how cultural myths and beliefs feed into the process of identity formation and what it takes for the experience of migration to go awry. By exploring Magda's problematic relationship with her home country, represented as oppressive and insular, this article inquires into the nature of contemporary migrant experience and the role which national identity plays in the process of cultural adjustment.

Keywords: Poles in the UK, migrant identity, otherness, Matka Polka, Polish mother.

[es] ¿Se pueden arrancar las raíces? La construcción de la identidad migrante en la obra polaco-británica de A.M. Bakalar

Resumen. Los polacos son una de las minorías más numerosas dentro del Reino Unido. Desde la adhesión de Polonia a la Unión Europea en mayo de 2004, miles de polacos han emigrado al Reino Unido con la esperanza de mejorar sus oportunidades profesionales y su nivel de vida. Así pues, era sólo cuestión de tiempo que empezaran a plasmar en papel su experiencia sobre la migración. Un ejemplo de ello es A.M. Bakalar, cuyo debut, *Madame Mephisto* (2012), fue promocionado como la voz de la nueva ola de la migración polaca y la primera novela escrita en inglés por una autora polaca desde que Polonia se unió a la UE en 2004. Este artículo se centra en la protagonista de la novela, una polaca de treinta años en Londres, con el objetivo de revelar cómo los mitos y creencias culturales influyen en el proceso de formación de la identidad migrante y en cómo inciden en que la experiencia de migración sea problemática. Al explorar la dificultosa relación entre Magda y su país de origen, representado como opresivo e intransigente, este artículo indaga en la naturaleza de la experiencia migratoria contemporánea y el papel que juega la identidad nacional en el proceso de ajuste cultural.

Palabras claves: polacos en el Reino Unido, identidad migrante, alteridad, Matka Polka, madre polaca.

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1. Introduction

Although Polish migration to the UK has a long history, dating back to as early as the 16th century (Gałka 2016: 38),³ the 2004 Treaty of Accession by which Poland joined the European Union "precipitated an unanticipated and unprecedented influx of immigrants to Britain" (Kershen 2009: xviii). As Kathy Burrell points out, "it is difficult to think of another migrant group which has established itself so quickly, and so widely, in British history" (2009: 7). It was only a matter of time before Poles started to translate their experience in the UK into fiction. Whereas initially Polish

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³ For a brief overview of Polish migration to the UK, see, for instance, Egbert (2010).

post-accession influx to the UK was analysed mainly from the perspective of social sciences: economy, sociology and psychology, the growing body of migrant literature written by Poles is now the object of study of literary critics and scholars,⁴ and a tangible (trans)cultural testimony to the phenomenon. Joanna Kosmalska, co-leader of a research project on Polish migrant literature produced in Britain and Ireland after 2004, points to more than eighty works of fiction, poetry and drama written by Poles who live or used to live on the British Isles. According to the scholar, since these works were born out of the confrontation between the authors' national context and the multicultural context of the host country, they vividly illustrate the process of creating contemporary transnational literature (Kosmalska 2018).

While all of these works are transnational in Kosmalska's sense of the word in that they move beyond national experience to bring together two cultural contexts, only some of them have actually entered the transnational marketplace through the author's conscious decision to write in English. Among them, there are two novels written by A.M. Bakalar: *Madame Mephisto* (2012) and *Children of Our Age* (2017).⁵ Like thousands of other Poles, Bakalar, who was born and raised in Wrocław, moved to London in 2004, a watershed year in the history of Polish migration to the UK. Despite being part of this largely economically-driven migration wave, the author has been careful to disassociate herself from the dominant image of Polish economic migrant. In an interview with a Polish feminist weekly *Wysokie Obcasy*, she qualifies herself as an "intellectual migrant," who settled for Britain because she had fallen in love with a London-based drum-and-base musician (Raczyńska 2012: n.p., my translation). She also draws a sharp line between Poland and herself, stating that while she has warm feelings for her Polish friends and family, as well as for Polish literature, she has none for Poland itself and what she refers to as Polish mentality: an amalgam of unrelenting Polish Catholicism, narrow-minded nationalism and deep-rooted patriarchy.

Bakalar's private vision of Poland and her experience of migration to the UK has fuelled her fiction, which explores Polish national myths and discourses, as well as the auto- and hetero-images of Poland, that is Poles' perceptions of themselves and their images in the eyes of others, respectively. Bakalar's debut novel *Madame Mephisto* dramatizes the construction of female migrant identity at the threshold of several worlds: the home and the host country, the East and the West, but also the corporate world and the underworld of drug dealing. Whereas Bakalar's literary debut centres more on the formation of migrant identity, her most recent work, *Children of Our Age*, takes a closer look at a dark facet of Central and Eastern-European migration to the UK: human trafficking and slave-like work conditions of migrant workers. Although both works depict Polish migrants in the UK, they are very different in scope and in focus, attesting not only to the diversity of Polish experience across the country, but also Bakalar's capacity to capture something of the post-2004 zeitgeist of European transnational spaces.

Accordingly, this article seeks to analyse Bakalar's fiction, focusing particularly on *Madame Mephisto*, with the aim of revealing how cultural myths and beliefs feed into the process of forming (female) migrant identity and, in a broader perspective, what it takes for the experience of migration to go awry. As I hope to show, by problematizing and confounding the categories of selfhood and otherness, understood here mainly from the imagological point of view and informed by the scholarship concerned with the construction of Polishness within and without Poland, Bakalar seemingly liberates her character Magda from the restrictive rubric of Polishness, allowing her to move towards a more nebulous, post-national realm where self-definition away from national identity seems possible. However, the more Magda tries to leave Poland behind, the more it seems to haunt her. Therefore, while being transnational in Kosmalska's sense of the word, the novel ultimately calls into question the feasibility of (re)constructing selfhood beyond nationality, which seems to be the protagonist's ultimate desire and simultaneously the source of her inner turmoil. As Magda struggles to define herself on her own terms, she is repeatedly tied down by her deterministic beliefs about the self's dependence on national identity, which in Bakalar's novel is a concept worth unpacking. In other words, Magda's relationship to Poland seems to embody what may be termed as the ambivalent dynamics of (non) belonging, that is an ambiguous relationship to the homeland which, despite being perceived as an adversary or the other, remains nevertheless at the centre of the migrant's emotional world and the author's main reference point.

2. Nation, religion, gender: Representing Polishness through the paradigm of *Matka Polka*

Migration has not only enabled Bakalar to move away from Poland, perceived by the author as a locus of mental and social restrictions, but it has also awarded her an opportunity to develop her voice as a writer in English, and thus enter the Anglophone book market. Her debut novel, published by Stork Press, the publishing house which Bakal-

⁴ Several scholars have addressed the question of terminology in the context of literature written beyond Poland's borders and/or concerned with the experience of migration, see for instance Chowanec (2015) and Nasilowska (2018). Dorota Kołodziejczyk's article (2018) provides an interesting reflection on contemporary migrant literature, offering new critical paradigms for accounting for the nature, or "cosmopolitics," as the scholar terms it, of the 20th and 21st century mass migrations. The term emigration and émigré literature tend to connote works produced by authors whose decision to leave their country of origin was motivated by external circumstances, usually of political nature, or who were forced to leave. Accordingly, in this article, I opt for the term 'migrant' and 'migrant literature' to encompass the totality of experience of migration, regardless of the subject's motivation, or the so-called 'push and pull factors,' including voluntary, individualistic decisions, like that of Magda, but also displacement for strictly economic reasons.

⁵ In addition to these two novels, Bakalar has written short stories, book reviews, and numerous opinion pieces for the British press, which can be accessed through the author's website: <http://ambakalar.com/>.

ar co-founded, was promoted in the UK as the voice of the new wave of Polish migration and the first novel to be written in English by a Polish female author since Poland had joined the EU. The author has candidly admitted that her decision to write under a gender-neutral pen name, rather than her Polish name, Joanna Zgadzaj, has been driven by pragmatic reasons.⁶ As for choosing English over Polish as the vehicle for her works, she frames her decision in terms of personal and artistic freedom: “[By writing in English] I wished to move away from Polishness. A writer who migrates must forget about their commitments towards their nation. You can’t worry about being hated in your country” (Raczyńska 2012: n.p., my translation).

Bakalar has projected her attitude to Polishness, understood as an oppressive mental rubric, onto Magda, the protagonist of *Madame Mephisto*, whose decision to leave Poland is largely motivated by her disillusionment with Polish politics and her incessant conflicts with her mother. The novel makes an explicit reference to Poland’s socio-political situation between 2005 and 2010 and particularly the joint leadership of the Kaczyński brothers. The two most important positions in the country are occupied by the twin brothers Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, serving as president and prime minister, respectively. The brothers share a vision of Poland which, in the ideological sphere, celebrates nationalistic ideals combined with a strict adherence to the mandates of the Catholic Church. Economically, Poland is suffering from high rates of unemployment, which is one of the main reasons for massive migration to the UK. However, Magda’s determination to construct her life outside of her homeland is not driven by economic motivation, but stems from her rejection of the conception of Poland and Polishness that the Kaczyński brothers foster, and which has been internalised by Magda’s mother. Magda’s personal vision of Poland is thus largely synonymous with the scathingly negative hetero-image of the country that sets the tone of the novel: “**URBAN DICTIONARY ON POLAND:** A nation that is unaware of its own collective backwardness, to its utter tragedy. It works efficiently only under occupation and dictatorship. Xenophobic and nationalistic” (Bakalar 2012: 1). This overlap between the auto- and the hetero-image of Poland and thus between the categories of selfhood and otherness merits closer attention.

In the imagological sense, selfhood refers to the collective identity of a given nation or a community, expressed through auto-images, whereas otherness is synonymous with the ‘not-me’ quality embodied by a people who are geographically, socio-politically and culturally different from the self. In this light, Polishness would fit the slot designated for the self, whereas Britishness would stand for the other. Accordingly, the formation of migrant identity would involve, to recall Werner Sollors’s (1986) terminology,⁷ a series of negotiations between *descent* and *consent*: one’s roots and cultural values of the host, or following postcolonial criticism, “the intertwining of identity and otherness [...] under the appellation of ‘hybridity’” (Leerssen 2007: 341).⁸ According to this understanding of migrant self, the notions of identity and belonging emerge as processes and negotiations rather than solid ‘chunks,’ and, as such, are not cast in stone but undergo changes through both external circumstances and personal choices (Bauman 2004: 11).

Bakalar problematizes this inclusive pattern by creating a character whose experience of migration and the ensuing sense of self is hampered by her alienation from Poland, exacerbated by her national determinism, on the one hand, and her unwillingness to *consent* to the host country, on the other. In order to better understand this ambivalent dynamics of (non) belonging, it is necessary to qualify the imagological understanding of the *other* by introducing a gender-sensitive reading of the relationship between national identity and femininity.

Urszula Chowaniec, the author of *Melancholic Migrating Bodies in Contemporary Polish Women’s Writing* (2015) draws on Julia Kristeva’s notion of the foreigner as oneself and Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of woman as the other, among others, to discuss Polish post-1989 women’s writing and the role of the woman writer and protagonist. Chowaniec employs the term “*cudzoziemki*” [alien women/foreign women], “with which literary critics have often described women writers in Poland” (2015: 38), to conceptualize the position of Polish women writers as not being as ‘at home,’ in de Beauvoir’s sense of the word, in Polish literary spaces as male writers, but also as producing works which are perceived as deviating from normality by portraying aspects of human experience that may, if not threaten the status quo, then at least force the reader to face uncomfortable and disturbing realities. In this sense, woman, both woman writer and woman protagonist, is considered as the other in that she destabilizes the discourse of socio-cultural mainstream by displaying thoughts and behaviour that sit uneasily with the status quo. The label *cudzoziemka*, a stranger in her own land, may thus be associated with subversiveness but also with the quality of marginality.

Chowaniec’s object of study is post-1989 Polish literature written by women whereby Kristeva and de Beauvoir’s understandings of otherness overlap in the figure of a nomadic female subject going through, what the scholar terms, “melancholic moments such as the feeling of exclusion from national belonging or the desperation resulting from refused rights to decide about one’s own body, work or home” (2015: 2). Although I do not frame Magda’s state of

⁶ Bakalar argues that her surname is too difficult for English-speaking readers to pronounce. She also points out that, according to market studies, customers only look at books whose authors’ surnames fall within the “A” to “M” range. Finally, quoting the example of J.K. Rowling, Bakalar admits that the initials ‘A. M.’ grant her anonymity and gender neutrality: “Women are still associated with chick-lit, which men do not buy. When you sell a book, you only have a few seconds to make the first impression” (Raczyńska 2012: n.p., my translation).

⁷ Although Sollors employs these terms to theorize the construction of American identity in literature, I find them pertinent also to the present discussion of identity in the European context in the twenty-first century, where the social and cultural landscape of countries like Britain is actively transformed as a result of large-scale human inflows, which in turn generates literature that manifests the re-construction of identity by negotiating the ‘before’ and the ‘after’ of migration.

⁸ It is noteworthy that the notion of hybridity, which has been famously theorized by such postcolonial scholars as Homi Bhabha or Stuart Hall, has become something of a catch-all term whenever migrant identity is discussed, oftentimes overlooking unequal power relations that the concept originally references.

mind in terms of melancholy, the amalgamation of nationality and femininity and the resulting sense of displacement, exclusion and, in a broader perspective, a split within the self lie at the heart of Bakalar's novel. Bakalar subjects her characters, most importantly Magda and Poland, which in the novel is in multiple ways synonymous with Magda's mother, to the processes of othering, but also turns them into the agents of excluding and labelling those that do not fit their vision. In other words, in the novel we are dealing with a bidirectional process of othering: as Magda feels othered because she deviates from the norm, represented here by the national-Catholic discourse and internalized by her mother, she also perceives Poland, and thus her mother and by extension Polish diaspora in London, as the ultimate other—the place which, while familiar, is hostile and unhomely.⁹ In consequence, Magda emerges as a *cudzoziemka* par excellence: a stranger not just in the host country but most of all in her own land, at once subversive and marginal. In what follows, I will attempt to unpack Bakalar's construction of Polishness in which nationality, femininity and religion are brought together.

Despite having being brought up in a Catholic household, Magda rejects what she considers to be a toxic intertwining of Church and State, and, especially, its urge to control citizens' life, particularly that of women. In the course of the novel, it is revealed that Magda had undergone an illegal abortion as a teenage girl. Ironically, the abortion was sought and paid for by her staunchly Catholic mother who in the novel embodies the narrow-minded patriarchal attitude that Magda so soundly renounces. In hindsight, Magda condemns the lack of sexual education at school and her mother's prudery which prevented her from frankly discussing the consequences of unsafe sex with her teenage daughter. Most of all, however, she blames Poland itself: "I blame this country, which failed me, installing backward religious teachings instead of helping me, terrorizing women and doctors into submission" (Bakalar 2012: 76).

Magda's ideological stance defies the insular conception of femininity framed by the discourse of the State and Church. More precisely, she seeks to expose the oppressiveness of one of Poland's deeply-rooted national myths and cultural discourses: that of *Matka Polka* (Mother-Pole). Indeed, Bakalar admitted that in *Madame Mephisto* she wished to "have a go at the stereotype of *Matka Polka*" (Raczyńska 2012: n.p, my translation). According to Renata E. Hryciuk and Elżbieta Korolczuk (2012: 11), *Matka Polka* forms part of Polish national identity and the country's cultural capital. It is present in different language registers, from scientific to colloquial, and commonly recognised and understood by all Poles. The conception, which goes back to the time when Poland's territory was partitioned among three foreign empires, originally connoted an idealized figure of a Polish noble woman capable of standing up to the obligations imposed on her by the socio-historical circumstances. The nineteenth-century *Matka Polka* was expected to willingly sacrifice herself for the sake of the Nation and the Family. She was thus responsible for preserving Polishness in the times when Poland did not exist on the political map of Europe, which involved assuring the continuity of Polish language, culture and Catholic faith (Titkow 2012: 30). In time, this conception would undergo modifications, but it remains, in its essence, an idealized model of an exemplary wife, mother and a professional who is capable of juggling numerous responsibilities in the name of the well-being of the family.

Since Magda holds a deterministic view of national identity—"the essence of my being was formed where I came from" (Bakalar 2012: 5)—we should trace the *Matka Polka* myth to the protagonist's 'formative years': the late stage of communism in Poland and the subsequent post-1989 transformation. As for the former period, it is Magda's mother that evokes the contemporary incarnation of the myth, which Anna Titkow (2012: 33) situates within a specific version of 'matriarchy' characteristic of communist and post-communist East-Central Europe. Polish mothers under communism would sacrifice themselves for the sake of the family, juggling professional work with household obligations in a society where access to food and other consumer objects was strictly regulated by the state and where running a household often amounted to an extraordinary feat. Despite being permanently tired and often mentally exhausted, Polish mothers would hold a "justified sense of being irreplaceable managers of family life [...] These managerial successes [...] were often sufficient to grant the women a dominant position in the family (Titkow 2012: 33, my translation). Indeed, Magda's mother, whose name is never revealed and who is always depicted in a domestic environment, which I interpret as an implicit reference to her status as a model *Matka Polka*, is a dominant figure in the family, overshadowing a taciturn father who is relegated to the position of irrelevance, both spatially and metaphorically: as he hovers somewhere in the background, Magda's mother organizes the household and family life, pronouncing judgements on the family members' lifestyles and behaviour. Her position of dominance seems to be strictly related to her role as the ultimate manager of the family life, which translates into her reluctance to delegate domestic duties. When her thirty-year-old twin daughters offer to help prepare some of the traditional Christmas dishes, she asserts her ability to singlehandedly deal with the copious amount of work: "I'm perfectly capable of doing everything myself" (Baklar 2012: 100). When she eventually delegates one of the chores to Magda and Alicja, she quickly regrets her decision, pointing out Magda's incapacity to stand up to the task. Interestingly enough, she approves of Alicja's performance in the kitchen, though her approval has less to do with Alicja's domestic prowess than with the fact the she, unlike her sister, conforms to the deep-set paradigm of *Matka Polka*. At that time, Alicja is pregnant with her first child, which positions her far above Magda in the mother's patriarchal hierarchy of values.

As Agnieszka Kościańska points out (2012: 147), in Poland motherhood has been traditionally intertwined with religion, and the figure of Virgin Mary, mother of God (*Matka Boska*), forms part of the paradigm of *Matka Polka*. In

⁹ Although it falls beyond the scope of this article, the relationship between Magda and her mother(land) offers possibilities for a psychoanalytically-inflected reading along the lines of such critics as Julia Kristeva.

the aftermath of the collapse of communism, national-Catholic parties eagerly reached for this cultural construct to justify politics with a strong patriarchal slant (Titkow 2012: 36). The populist discourse preached by the Kaczyński brothers reiterated the entanglement between patriotism, religion and the utmost commitment to the family. Motherhood and ensuing family values became interlinked with national identity, to the point that being a mother and a wife was inscribed into the category of Polishness, which at the same time implied being Catholic.

Magda's rebellion against this socio-religious triumvirate, in which womanhood is intertwined with motherhood, religion and nationhood, is also a form of rejecting a specific cultural construction of Polishness, fostered by the State and Church, where the nation and the mother figure are totalized and conflated into oppressive *motherland* whose boundaries are charted along patriarchal lines. Importantly, Bakalar positions her character as a 'lone wolf' whose nonconformist attitude is misunderstood by the indoctrinated mass. Even Magda's twin sister, a successful, intelligent and not particularly religious lawyer living in Warsaw, becomes subsumed under the category of *Matka Polka* when she gives birth to her daughter and her independent and glamorous self transforms into that of a sloppy mother whose life energies are focused exclusively on her newborn. Magda's arbitrary rejection of the notion of Mother-Pole, understood as a contagious mindset which will eventually be adopted by most Polish women but herself, prevents her from empathizing with her twin sister, resulting in an even deeper sense of estrangement and, in a broader perspective, a symbolic 'demolition' of *home* in homeland.

3. Those 'typical Poles:' Mapping Polishness in the UK

Ironically, Magda's host country of choice, the UK, is at the same time home to an extensive Polish diaspora, known as *Polonia*, which is characterized by a systematic effort to replicate homeland, which to Magda seems so unhomey, in a foreign setting. According to Michał P. Garapich, the notion of *Polonia* "defines spatial and temporal dimensions of migration in Polish culture through its symbolic power and associated meanings. [...] What makes the concept of *Polonia* particular is not only its state-centric and nationalistic assumptions but also its strong temporal and spatial meanings" (2016: 275). The concept, which should be traced back to Polish communities of rural and working-class people who settled in the US at the turn of the nineteenth century, "was developed to not only help people find their natural home and a sense of belonging abroad but also maintain a culturally meaningful grip on social identities" (Garapich 2016: 275, 278). *Polonia* thus emerged as "a sort of second Poland, a recreation of home," enabling migrants "to return to the body of the nation without physically moving" (Garapich 2016: 278). In his discussion of the contemporary understanding of *Polonia*, Garapich distinguishes between a popular usage of the term to denote Polish communities abroad, and a more specific one referring to *Polonia* as a reproduction of Poland abroad through formal institutions with their internal structures and hierarchies.

Bakalar's take on *Polonia*, which encompasses both meanings of the concept, strongly alludes to the values which Garapich sees as central to the original notion: preservation of Polishness, sense of belonging and recreation of home. At the same time, it lacks the positive connotations usually attributed to the concept in the official discourse: "[t]he adjective *Polonian* is always used with reference to responsible and respectful roles and class-related notions" (Garapich 2016: 279), implying stability, permanence and thus a positive role model worthy of emulation by other minorities. In *Madame Mephisto*, Polish community in London, portrayed as garish and parochial, seems to be a sick extension of an already diseased nation Magda has run away from. In fact, the protagonist deliberately keeps her distance from her fellow Poles, choosing to spend her time either on her own or in the company of a few non-Polish co-workers.

It is Magda's mother that acts as a (unsolicited) nexus between the protagonist and London Poles. On arriving in London to pay a visit to her daughter, she immediately starts implementing a plan which she has devised back in Poland. As it turns out, she has got in touch with one of *Polonia*'s institutions in London. Only a couple of days into the visit, Magda's mother drags her daughter to a *Polonia* meeting and then to a Polish wedding in an attempt to return her to the body of the *motherland*, circumscribed, very narrowly, by a series of stereotypes which conflate Polishness with patriarchy and parochialism. Thus, what Magda's mother truly wants for her daughter is to meet an eligible Polish bachelor who would help her fulfill her ultimate destiny as a (Polish) woman. As could be expected, this part of the motherly plan fails miserably. Magda projects her aversion to Polishness onto Polish people abroad, and particularly Polish men who embody the gender-biased life she is determined to escape: "I did not leave Poland to end up imprisoned with a Polish husband, preferably a Catholic, with me staying at home, cooking and breeding in a frenzy to please my mother with grandchildren, preferably boys. I am sick of Polish men" (Bakalar 2012: 26).

The patriarchal model of society is epitomized by a Polish wedding which Magda attends with her parents. By choosing to portray Polishness abroad through the symbol of a wedding reception, Bakalar seems to be alluding to the most important Polish symbolist drama, *Wesele* [*The Wedding*] (1901) by Stanisław Wyspiański, where a traditional wedding celebration becomes a departure point for exploring Polish myths and dreams, with the aim of uncovering the reasons behind national weaknesses, helplessness and immaturity (Majmurek 2017: n.p.). Simultaneously, Bakalar's garish, heavily stereotyped depiction of the celebration, with tables buckling under the weight of vodka and guests engaging in sexist wedding games, brings to mind more recent takes on the theme of Polish wedding. A case in point is Wojciech Smarzowski's 2004 *Wesele*, a cinematographic exploration of Polish national identity, in which the

camera lens acts as a distorted mirror which, through the accumulation of stereotypes and hyperbolic imagery, brings out Polish phobias and vices (Radomski 2015). Bakalar too reaches for the motif of a wedding to pass a commentary on Polishness. However, her lens is zoomed in on *Polonia* as the stereotyped embodiment of Poland, or an imagined community glued together by Polish symbols and traditions, which are boiled down to vulgar, alcohol-drenched festivities, with 'typical Poles' perpetuating the stereotypes established on the very first page of the novel: parochialism and patriarchy.

Equally important for the construction of Polishness in the novel is Polish food. When Magda enters the wedding hall, her attention is immediately drawn to the tables filled to the brim with traditional Polish dishes which she describes in terms of unappetizing excess: "[p]iles and piles of vegetable salads drowning in mayonnaise [...]. And gherkins, jars and jars of gherkins" (Bakalar 2012: 28). In the novel, preparing and consuming traditional food forms part of the mental rubric of Polishness and is thus related to the above-mentioned national clichés. Polishness, seen as excessive and choking, materializes also in the dishes concocted by Magda's mother in her London flat. Blatantly uninterested either in London's tourist attractions or what the city has to offer in terms of culinary experience, Magda's mother stays at home, cooking traditional Polish dishes based on Polish products purchased in Polish grocery stores in London. By filling Magda's London flat with the smell and taste of Polish food, Magda's mother tries to replicate Polishness and instill a sense of nostalgia for home in her uprooted daughter.¹⁰ As Marta Rabikowska points out in her discussion of the ritualization of national identity through food,

Food in its very sensual dimension serves as vehicle for the recreation of the abstract meaning of home through materially involved activities which alleviate the sense of fragmentation and discontinuity caused by displacement. National identity from that perspective comes with an idealised concept of "home" which has been lost and becomes fragmentarily reconstituted through different practices, including daily rituals of consumption. (2010: 378)

The matriarch's insistence on preparing Polish food from exclusively Polish ingredients points to an insular conception of national identity as organic unity whose sameness is enacted in opposition to otherness, represented here through foreign culture and food which she refuses to consume. In this narrative of nation, home *is* Poland and the only way to replicate it abroad, and thus inoculate identity against otherness, is through the contact with the Polish diaspora and the preparation and consumption of Polish food. However, given the nature of Magda's relationship to *motherland*, food smells and actual food, canned and jarred for the future use, are mapped as strikingly unhomey, contributing to the sense of alienation rather than alleviating it:

I felt surrounded by silent witnesses from my past. I do not know when exactly I began to feel threatened by what I continued to find in my fridge long after they were gone. I felt guilty that with every passing day the food was going bad, yet I could not bring myself to touch it. (Bakalar 2012: 21)

In a sense, Magda's ambivalent relationship to Polishness resembles her attitude to Polish food which she refuses to consume, but does not want to throw out either. Magda never quite leaves Poland behind, choosing to remain in a situation of voluntary entrapment which she detests yet seems to derive a sense of self from.

Interestingly, Magda's totalizing representation of Polishness as excessive and threatening but at the same time useful, brings to mind British post-2004 media discourse on Polish migrants, which depicted them, in Saidian terms, as "an intrusive 'other' in British society which helps to construct, and subsequently threaten (thus reinforcing) a national British identity" (Spigelman 2013: 99). Seen from this perspective, the auto-image and the hetero-image of Poland become conflated, since Magda's perception of Polishness inscribes itself into the one-dimensional, stereotyped narrative fostered by the popular press. Furthermore, Bakalar exploits the familiar East vs. West dichotomy to draw a distinction between Poland and Britain. More than two decades following the collapse of communism in East-Central Europe, Magda's British co-workers have a vague notion of Poland as located on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain; "part of Soviet bloc" (Bakalar 2012: 10). Accordingly, as an Eastern European, Magda is patronized by her co-workers as somebody who is "so lucky to be in London" (Bakalar 2012: 10).¹¹ Although their condescension irritates Magda, for she realizes that her presence in the company only reinforces their self-gratifying conviction that "they were doing the right thing, giving me a chance to experience what I lacked back home" (Bakalar 2012: 10), she

¹⁰ Similar function of food and food making as an affective bridge between the homeland and the host country can be observed in Bakalar's second book, *Children of Our Age*. Angelika, a *Matka Polka* who moved to London together with her husband Mateusz and their two children, uses food as a nexus between Poland and the UK and an emotional binder amongst the members of her family. By preparing traditional, usually painstaking dishes, Angelika not only expresses her affection for her family, but also preserves her ideal of a happy Polish family in "this Western world [...] she could not truly comprehend" (Bakalar 2017: 73). Homemaking thus becomes a way to counterbalance the incomprehensibility of the outer world and a sense of displacement that comes with the experience of migration, with Polish food and rituals providing Angelika with a sense of belonging and unity. Importantly, Angelika's devotion to homemaking is closely linked with other attributes of Polishness mentioned in this article: religion and traditional gender roles.

¹¹ For the scholarship concerned with literary representations of London, see for instance Plesske and Rostek (2013). For articles on the post-2004 Polish migrant literature, see the English-language special issue of *Teksty Drugie* (2018), entitled *Migrant Literature* and edited by Jerzy Jarniewicz and Joanna Kosmalka, which can be accessed at: <http://tekstydrugie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Teksty-Drugie-en-12018.pdf>.

does not attempt to problematize their blanket narrative. Rather, she repeatedly draws from the familiar repository of stereotypes, mapping the relationship between Poland and Britain in binary terms and exploiting her Polishness as she sees fit. Thus, even though she does not want to be perceived as a “typical Pole,” she blames her inability to fit in the London corporate environment on her unsmiling “Polish disposition,” formed as a result of “the turbulent history of our country, feeding fears and expectations directly to the heart of each Pole” (Bakalar 2012: 5). Simultaneously, she profits from her provenance, turning her Polishness into a commodity and something of a sexual fetish. Thus, she orientalizes herself for the sake of her lover by reciting the great Polish poets during sex. She also takes advantage of her Polish background to build her secret drug business, which, paradoxically, ties her to Poland as much as it does to the UK: she sells Polish-grown marijuana to British clients.

Magda’s ambivalent perception of both Poland and Britain, which resembles a kaleidoscope in which the categories of selfhood and otherness, superiority and inferiority are continuously reconfigured, may be read in terms of *post-dependent* mindset, characteristic of societies which, like Poland, have long existed in an unresolved state of geopolitical, cultural and imagological liminality; east of the West and west of the East (Janion 2003). Briefly speaking, Polish-born post-dependence studies, which take origin in a productive critical dialogue with, among others, postcolonial theory, seek to re-conceptualize post-communist Poland’s, and in a broader perspective, also East-Central Europe’s, place in the globalized world.¹² As one of its theoreticians points out, in the context of literature the situation of post-dependence, where a country or an area is almost but never quite *European* or *Western*, may generate a desperate desire to exist in the West’s consciousness but also to re-assert itself in opposition to it (Kołodziejczyk 2014: 9-10). Bakalar’s narrative inscribes itself into the post-dependent mindset in that it introduces a character whose (self) orientaling narrative at once conforms to and challenges the West’s (here the UK’s) vision of the Polish other: she believes herself to be shaped by her provenance but dissociates herself from her fellow Poles in Britain; she cherishes British heterogeneity and multiculturalism, as opposed to Polish homogeneity, but rebels against what she perceives as British classism and patronizing superiority. She is at once inferior and superior, Eastern and Western, depending on the vantage point.

Magda’s entanglement in a web of national and cultural dependencies, which manifests itself in her (selective) exploitation of national stereotypes, ultimately leads to identity diffusion. In fact, her sense of non-belonging either to Poland or to Britain is represented by the metaphor of a chameleon “displaying a combination of accents and faces, depending on what suited me” (Bakalar 2012: 165). Pragmatic as it may be, this camouflage emerges less as a sign of resistance (Bhabha 2005: 172) than a symbol of a fragmented self, characterized by feelings of emptiness and volatility:

I was too British for the Poles, and too Polish for the British. [...] Who are you really, they kept asking me, here and there. I was whoever they wanted me to be, a kaleidoscopic image with multiple colour combinations, a creature who was accustomed to the environment, until my own self adapted so that I was not there anymore. (Bakalar 2012: 165-166)

Drawing on Homi Bhabha’s notion of hybridity, Tomasz Dobrogoszcz (2018: 22) argues that Magda’s migrant identity is formed not through the conjunction of the two cultures but rather by exclusion from them. I would like to take this reading further by proposing that Magda constructs her sense of self from the place of self-imposed marginality. In refusing to problematize her perception of and relationship to Poland and to consent to the host society, which in practice means that she antagonizes both Poles and Brits, Magda fails to construct for herself a positive experience of migration, where affective ties to the home and the host help to alleviate the “melancholic moments” (Chowaniec 2015) of alienation, like the one described above. In a travesty of Bhabha’s liminal third space, where in the interstices between cultures a new quality is born, out of the feeling of (voluntary) non-belonging, there emerges Magda’s ‘third self’: a Machiavellian alter ego, the eponymous Madame Mephisto whose appearance is introduced with a narrative shift from the first-person story, which Magda shares with a silent interlocutor of unknown identity, to the third-person narrative. To return to the notion of *cudzoziemka* [alien/foreign woman], Magda is foreign not only to Poles and Brits, but most of all to herself. This sense of being foreign to herself is symbolically translated into the by-product of the character’s inner conflict, the transgressive persona of Madame Mephisto who gets increasingly out of control: she verbally assaults a co-worker, sleeps with her twin sister’s husband, and even contemplates killing her sister in her sleep.

Magda’s alienated self, constructed out of conflict, raises questions about the nature of contemporary (Polish) migrant experience. Magda’s migration is supposed to bring her freedom from Polish constraints. However, her obsessive, and eventually utopian, desire to weed out her roots, together with her inability/unwillingness to adjust to the host culture, preclude a positive outcome. Realizing that life in Britain can also be stifling, though for quite different reasons, she constructs her identity away from the mainstream society in the drug-dealing business. This seemingly emancipatory decision brings about further complications, as she is faced with a number of ethical issues and struggles to navigate her way through the underworld to keep her enterprise afloat. Burdened by inner conflicts,

¹² For more information about post-dependence studies and a list of publications in Polish, see the website of the Post-dependence Studies Centre. For scholarship in English, see for instance the special issue of *Teksty Drugie*, entitled *Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?* which can be accessed at http://tekstydrugie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/t2en_2014_1webCOMB.pdf.

which the experience of migration only exacerbates, Magda projects her flaws and fears onto others, always blaming somebody for her failure to belong, whether it is her mother(land) or the host country. Despite her apparent rejection of national and gender determinism, she moves through the transnational spaces she inhabits armed with a set of schematic hetero-images, employing the very categories she rejects to judge and classify others. In struggling against the nation- and gender-bound stereotypes, she turns dogmatic herself. Her attitude towards London Poles is a case in point. According to Magda, the lowly status of Polish economic migrants as one of the UK's contemporary *subaltern* (Rostek and Uffelman 2010) results from their "consciously cultivated conformity" (Bakalar 2012: 171) which consists in living among Poles, speaking Polish and not making an effort to improve one's social standing by mastering English and abandoning their ethnic circle. By reducing Polish diaspora to limited socio-cultural attributes, Magda totalizes Polish experience abroad, fixing Polish migrants in the stereotype of narrow-minded *Gastarbeiter*, who are so blind to the true nature of their homeland that they keep reproducing its constraining symbolism even in the 'free world.' In doing so, she refuses them voice, reproducing the uniform press discourse which pays no heed to individual narratives and motivations behind real people's stories.

Interestingly, Bakalar's second work, *Children of Our Age*, provides a more discerning look at the Polish diaspora in the UK, and migrant identity in general, attesting to a wider variety of migrant experience than the Magda vs. London Polonia dyad would suggest, as well as Bakalar's development as a Polish-British author. Unlike in *Madame Mephisto*, the role of Poland in shaping post-migration life is diminished. What is more, labour exploitation and trafficking which the novel dramatizes are hardly exclusive to Polonia but affect migrants from all East-Central Europe, thus bringing the problematics of ailing post-communist economies to the fore. Although the familiar stereotypes are still present, as Polishness is replicated abroad through, among others, a ritualistic approach to Polish food, adherence to Catholicism and prescribed gender roles, the totalizing national determinism from *Madame Mephisto* gives way to a more nuanced reflection on the self, which problematizes the nature vs. nurture dynamics of the human psyche in the situation of migration. In other words, it is not so much the fact of being from Poland as the characters' psychological traits and social background that shape their lives in the UK. Migration is thus linked with displacement and vulnerability for some, but it can also create a delusive sense of omnipotence that conceals complexes and, in some cases, even disorders, which, exacerbated by a sense of impermanence that migration entails, may have disastrous consequences for the migrant and those around. As the motto of the book reads: "It is always easier to change places than to change lives." Bakalar, however, is not entirely pessimistic, as it is implied that some characters may be able to change the course of events, straightening their paths and making choices that are more ethical.

4. Weeding out the roots: An impossible project?

Whereas Bakalar's fiction offers little in the way of what I have defined here as a positive experience of migration, particularly in her debut novel, the author's personal and professional trajectory points to the contrary. Although Bakalar has denied having modelled the character of Magda on herself, the author's views and life choices, which she has openly shared in several interviews with both Polish and British press, reveal nevertheless a strong connection between the creator and the protagonist. As mentioned earlier in this article, Bakalar has admitted that while she loves her Polish family and friends, as well as Polish literature, she cannot accept 'Polish mentality,' which she associates with xenophobic tendencies and a penchant for worrying and dissecting the past, among others. Moreover, Bakalar calls herself a proud atheist, who, like Magda, has committed apostasy, and admits to having had an abortion, just like her character, at the age of seventeen.

I have spelt out the similarities between the creator and the protagonist not to equate the two, but rather to reflect upon Bakalar's attitude to and use of Polishness. The novelist's adamant rejection of nationality as a defining category has not prevented her from making Poland the linchpin of her fiction, which has so far centred on exploring Polishness abroad. Nevertheless, in many ways her personal critique of Polishness echoes Magda's disparaging comments, which in turn raises questions about the reasons behind Bakalar's heavily-stereotyped depiction of Poland and, given the reception of the book, the author's 'right' to do so. Bakalar has hinted at the motives which have driven her representation of Poland in *Madame Mephisto*, pointing to Polish politics at the time and Polish mentality in general as instrumental in shaping her image of her home country. The author has suggested that the writing of *Madame Mephisto* was a form of self-therapy aimed at lifting the burden of Polishness off her shoulders (Zagrodna 2012: n.p.). While the book received some largely positive reviews in Britain and was even shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award, the reaction of Polish community in the UK was, according to Bakalar, much less favourable. Says Bakalar: "I heard from the Poles that I do not have the right to write like that. Why not? It is my book. If you do not like it, write your own" (Raczyńska 2012: n.p, my translation).

In asserting her right to "write like that," Bakalar contributes to the long-standing debate regarding the limits of national/ethnic representation. Philip Roth, for instance, had an ample taste of this dispute when he first came under criticism from members of the Jewish-American community after the publication of his debut work *Goodbye Columbus* (1959). While many appreciated his "strong voice and a fresh perspective," others accused him of casting Jews in a negative light and thus perpetuating potentially detrimental national clichés; a view verbalized in one hard-hitting question: "Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany?" (Roth

Pierpont 2013: 13-14). More recently, Gary Shteyngart's autobiographical work, *Little Failure* (2014), has been criticized for universalizing Russian-Jewish experience in America and, particularly, for "hollowing out" Jewishness (Grinberg 2014: n.p.). Shteyngart himself revealed that his parents were not thrilled with the portrayal of the family in the book. Similarly, Bakalar recognised that her parents' reaction to her book was not euphoric either—her mother simply chose not to broach the subject of the novel.

The readership's cool reception of the works whose authors consciously build an equivocal, or, as in the case of *Madame Mephisto*, an openly negative image of their homeland or national/ethnic identity, prompts a reflection upon the relationship between national perceptions and the literature's role in creating or perpetuating stereotypes. While nobody likes to be presented in a bad light, denying the writer the artistic license to do so in fiction may point to fears and complexes underlying the collective auto-image of a nation or a community. In turn, the author's decision to foreground the darkest shades of the national representation is likely to bring about charges of exploiting and sustaining stereotypes as part of a deliberate strategy. In this light, Bakalar's choice of English as the vehicle for her prose together with her heavy reliance on stereotypes could be interpreted in terms of catering to the British reader, and thus reinforcing British identity through speaking their language and appealing to the existing hetero-images of Poles in the British imaginary. At the same time, the unruly and sexually liberated female character of Magda, the self-designated *cudzoziemka* who defies both the socio-cultural normativity of her homeland, but also the legal norms and implicit cultural codes of the host country, may be seen as Bakalar's way of asserting her voice as an author whose ambitions are transnational in scope, rather than just Polish or British. In this sense, Bakalar's Polish-British fiction embodies negotiations, which oftentimes assume the shape of conflict, between descent and consent, in an attempt to move beyond nationality, even if it is nationality that remains at the centre of her fiction.

While there is no denying the fact that Bakalar has a penchant for excessively broad brushstrokes when depicting nations, her fiction makes one think about how national identity is apprehended and enacted in the globalized world, including the role of cultural paradigms and national stereotypes in the perception of selfhood and otherness and thus in the construction of migrant self. Moreover, Bakalar passes some perspicacious commentary on the socio-political problems tormenting contemporary Europe. Eight years after the publication of her debut novel, the Law and Justice party under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński is in power, nationalism is on the rise, and Polish women are protesting against the government's orthodox anti-abortion law. The 'job recruitment' networks, human traffic and slave-like work conditions of illegal migrants portrayed in *Children of Our Age* are not far from reality either: the UK has been ranked as one of the main destinations of adults and children who are trafficked from Central and South-Eastern Europe (Marsh et al. 2012: 12). Although both *Madame Mephisto* and *Children of Our Age* had been written before the dreaded disruption with Europe took place, Brexit has necessarily redefined Polish-British relations, casting "the polarisation between the British and the 'others,'" which Bakalar writes about, in a new light (Bakalar and Dale).

Together with such authors as Grażyna Plebanek, Violetta Greg, Joanna Czechowicz, or Agnieszka Dale, Bakalar's provocative fiction contributes to the ongoing cultural exploration of Polish (female) migrant experience in Europe's transnational spaces. It also prompts reflection on the post-dependent Poland's place in Europe, and the limits of European integration, particularly now in the post-Brexit reality. In Bakalar's fiction, descent, mapped as an amalgamation of cultural signifiers ranging from national mythology to traditional cuisine, may be more of a baggage than aid, as it not only fails to counterbalance the sense of displacement and fragmentation that a contemporary migrant is suffering from, but may actually impede the process of cultural adjustment. Paradoxically, it turns out that migrant self cannot develop in isolation from the descent part of the equation. Magda's desire to weed out the roots proves out to be a utopian undertaking, as Poland comes to haunt her in the most unexpected way. It is only at the end of the novel that Bakalar reveals the identity of the silent interlocutor to whom Magda has confided her life story. In a narrative twist, we learn that Magda's twin sister died in a car accident leaving behind her little daughter, and it is Magda who will now take care of the child. Although Magda plans to raise her niece in opposition to her own upbringing, and thus away from Poland, the girl is not only her sister's legacy, but also the protagonist's tangible link to her home country, which she ultimately cannot forgo, since, for better or worse, it forms an inextricable part of herself. The same seems to be true for Poland's place in Bakalar's writing.

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