

# Breaking the Gendered Pattern: Multivocal Reflections by Polish Women Over the Age of 50 on the Embodied Experience of Migration to the UK Post-2004

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## ABSTRACT

*Since the Accession 8 (A8) of the European Union in 2004 the United Kingdom has experienced a significant influx of European Union Member State migrants. Although the A8 migration has been studied widely, gender and gender roles are still in need of further research in particular in relation to older Polish women migrants. The focus of this paper is to provide an insight into the experiences of mobility as reflected by older women migrants from Poland. The findings are crafted into a multivocal account composed around the theme of ‘the embodied experience of migration – age, invisibility, social and economic exclusion’ by drawing on reflections from a life-story interview as well as literary accounts interwoven with ‘authorial stiches’ and connected to the wider migration discourse. The different women’s voices presented in this article point to the fact that the experience of migration can have an empowering and emancipatory effect in relation to gender subjectivity. In contrast to previous studies on female migration with a focus on economic factors, this paper demonstrates that the experience of mobility could be understood as an opportunity to redefine gender subjectivity and offer a route to escape undesirable gender ideology in Poland.*

**Keywords:** Migration and Gender subjectivity, Older polish women migrants in the UK, Emancipatory potential of migration, Embodied experiences of migration, Autoethnography, Feminist qualitative inquiry

## BACKGROUND

The backdrop for this study is the significant influx of Polish migrants to the UK since 2004, as post-EU accession, the UK was the most popular destination for Polish migrants (CBOS, 2006; Trevena, 2009). Thus, the migration of Polish nationals to the UK post-2004 Enlargement has been said to be “one of the largest and most intensive migration flows in contemporary European history” (Trevena, 2009). Nowadays the Polish community is recognised as one of

the biggest and most dynamic communities in the UK (Isański & Luczys, 2011), it is the single largest foreign-born group of residents in the UK (Trevena, 2009) with Polish after English being the largest spoken language in the UK (ONS, 2011).

Although the A8 migration has been studied widely, with a growing body of research on the large-scale migration of Polish citizens to Britain post-2004 accession (Datta, 2006; Gilpin, 2006; Janta, 2007; Anderson *et al.*, 2006; Drinkwater *et al.*, 2008; Grabowska-Lusińska, 2008; Burrell, 2011; Pemberton & Scullion, 2013; White, 2011a; White & Ryan, 2008; Lopez Rodriguez, 2010), and although within the EU context women migrants outnumber their male counterparts, the experience of Polish women migrants particularly is still in need of further research. The focus and contribution of this paper is to provide an insight into the experiences of mobility as reflected by older women migrants from Poland.

With regards to Polish women migrants to the UK, there is no one reliable source of data (Trevena, 2009). However, according to the Migration Observatory report (Vargas-Silva, 2014) overall, there were just over 4 million women migrants in comparison to well under 3 million male migrants in the UK. Migration data available claims that the majority of A8 Polish female migrants were young women aged between 20 and 35 (ONS, 2006), many of whom have also been classified as educated and unmarried (ONS, 2006) In contrast this paper looks at a different age cohort of women, some of whom, not only due to their age (50+) but also marital status do not meet these categorizations. Former research has mainly concentrated on women with families, or single young females, this article extends the field by looking at the 50+ age cohort Polish women migrants.

## **Women in Poland**

Although feminist criticism of traditional female roles and duties (such as related to marriage, family and the tyranny of beauty) might seem a well-worn gesture in Europe these issues are still very relevant when considered within the Polish context. If one considers the socio-political developments in Poland following on from the transition post-1989 and takes into account the current situation of women in Poland, these ‘women issues’ are still very present day. In the wake of post-socialist Poland discourse on natural differences between women and men has been taken for granted, and, more, over it has been used as a starting point for many political debates which have shaped Polish politics since early 1990s. Paradoxically, Poland during the transition from socialism to a democracy was built on traditional, Roman Catholic and nationalistic role models, not on international and European laws. Post-communist Poland experienced an intensification in nationalism and religious fundamentalism (Grabowska, 2012), and is often referred to as a ‘democracy with a male face’ (LaFont, 2001, p. 213). As such, new family and gender policies have been based on the ideal of a patriarchal family.

Women are mothers foremost and then caretakers, as the implicit familialism (Szkira, 2010) or public maternalism (Glass & Fodor, 2007) of the Polish welfare state dictates. The vulnerability of women is increasing as the social system continuously pushes them to the domestic space, emphasizing the public/private divide (LaFont, 2001). Women in Poland are facing highly restrictive abortion laws, have limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and care, whilst only inadequate services and support in the face of violence are available. Older women in contemporary Poland often describe their experience of old age as a time marked by discrimination and marginalization. As I will discuss further in this paper older women are not only excluded on a social and economic level but also deemed invisible. In this article I will use examples from migration literature by Polish women writers as well as themes from the life-story interview with Wanda, a Polish woman migrant over the age of 55 to illustrate how migration could be understood as an emancipatory and empowering experience for older/middle-aged women, as a way to evade invisibility as well as social and economic exclusion in Poland.

## **METHODOLOGIES**

This paper draws on upon material generated from a larger PhD study which delves into reflections on the experience of migration by three generational cohorts of Polish women (between the ages 20+ to 60+). The methodological novelty of the study stems from combining life story interviews, literary works and autoethnographic reflections on mobility as well as secondary data. The application of the patchwork quilt metaphor (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p. 526) as an alternative feminist methodology offers a new perspective on the question how the experience of migration influences the development of (new) forms of gendered identity/subjectivity. In this sense I am relating the process of quilting to connecting individual stories to a larger discourse. The quilting metaphor, applied to research inquiry, but also to the experience of mobility, offers an alternative perspective in comparison to historically and commonly used metaphors of ‘voyage, conquest, exploration and discovery’ (Flannery, 2001, p. 638), as it stresses aspects of collegiality; the close relationship between the researcher and the participant, as well as the complexity of each individual piece of information/experience. The autoethnographic approach of this research calls for self-reflexivity, which is critical to the enactment and analysis since the author is a migrant herself. In my approach choice I have moved towards auto-ethnography as it is a research method that weaves a connection between “the autobiographical and the personal the cultural, social and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. 19). In that sense auto-ethnography navigates and encompasses the inward and outward gaze, whilst remaining a critical lens with the aim to understand who we are in the context of our socio-cultural communities.

The findings in this paper are crafted into a multivocal account composed around the theme of ‘the embodied experience of migration – age, invisibility, social and economic exclusion’ by drawing on reflections from a life-story interview as well as literary accounts interwoven with ‘authorial stiches’ and connected to the wider migration discourse. As such the study purposes a multi-layered and complex reflection on the experience of migration which neither mainstream scholarship, nor the affected individual can comprehend otherwise. The results offer an account which is personal, local and political therefore aware of both discourse and larger socio-cultural and geopolitical panorama, but not centered around dominant narratives of migration. As such the research moves away from quantitative investigations but instead acknowledges personal voices which might have been unheard within other empirical studies. What is more, the intent of this project is to bring to light reflections and to bridge the gap on experiences of migration which might otherwise have gone unnoticed, either due to the fact that the participants would normally not voice their reflections, or because they were not in the position to find a channel where their experiences could be shared, in particular outside of the migrant community with a shared understanding and socio-cultural context. Consequently, the study functions also as an act of empowerment, a way to give a voice to individuals who have historically not been heard.

## DISCUSSION

### **The embodied experience of migration – age, invisibility, social and economic exclusion The invisible body**

*‘Year by year, time becomes my ally, as it does to all women – I have become invisible, transparent. I can move about like a ghost, look over people’s shoulders, listen in on their arguments and watch as they sleep [...]’* (Tokarczuk, 2019, p. 25)<sup>1</sup>. Tokarczuk’s female narrator emphasizes that as a woman of a certain age, in contrast to younger women, she is invisible. Underlying the above quotation rests the notion that women become visible through external beauty. Body shaping: ‘the altering of body weight, the training of the flesh through regular exercise, the building up of muscles, diets, Botox injections, cosmetic surgery, including the

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<sup>1</sup>In *Flights*, (2019) Tokarczuk presents the reader with a study of the psychology of travel, the novel ventures into remote geographical as well as psychological spaces. The human body, becomes an integral part of the novel as sections in the novel are based on the inspection and description of human organs exsposed in preserving glasses. As such Tokarczuk offers an opportunity to reconsider the idea of material matter of the flesh that in some ways unified the experience of the mind and body. These ‘intermezzos’ illustrate that the experience of movement is not merely limited to rational consciousness but also deeply entwined within embodied experiences. Equally it is not only bodies that move but also the self, the subject with its emotional, cultural, social and political luggage. The organs exsposed in the preserving glasses, as exhibits for a scientific scrutiny, fixed in time and space, static signposts of human momentariness, are held against the dynamic of the travelling idea.

correction of inherent “flaws” (Chowaniec, 2015, p. 84); is one of the most startling documentations of cultural power manifestations and violence enacted through models of physical attractiveness. Bordo (1993) provides one of the most powerful cultural readings of how domination is enacted upon and through women’s bodies. Gendered codes are inscribed and enacted onto the body. Women are compelled to adapt to these gendered body codes and to meet desirable expectations. Gimlin (2002) defines the process as follows: ‘[...] the body is a medium of culture. It is the surface on which prevailing rules of culture are written. The shared attitudes and practices of social groups are played out at the level of the body, revealing cultural notions of distinction based on age, sexual orientation, social class, gender and ethnicity. But cultural rules are not only revealed through the body; they also shape the ways in which the body performs and appears. (p.3)’. Tokarczuk’s narrator inserts that she (we know that she is a woman writer) is invisible due to the intersection of gender and age. Therefore, her protagonist appears exempt from the gendered dichotomy, ‘invisible, transparent’ due to her age. The fact that she is a middle-aged woman seems to exclude her from the gendered performance. The mechanism of equating age and gender with invisibility, is liberating for the protagonist of *Flights*, she is free to keep moving on the margins, she is what could be described following on?? according to Braidotti (1994, p. 5), as a ‘nomadic subject’ an alternative figuration for contemporary subjectivity.

The ‘exclusion’ or ‘invisibility’ experience of women over a certain age resonates also in Wanda’s life story interview; however, her story offers a different perspective on the understanding of the embodied experience of middle-aged women in Poland. For Wanda in contrast to the protagonist of *Flights* the mechanism is disempowering as it marginalises her and confines her to a role she does not want to play. *“In Poland a woman over the age of 40 is deemed as old, all that she is made to think about is her retirement. In her mind she wants to retire, she can’t wait until she retires. The majority of Poles pictures a woman over 40 in the church and in her home.”*, Wanda exhales deeply. I sense that this is not a place where she sees herself, and frankly looking at her neither can I picture her confined in this way. Wanda is wearing strong make up, her hair is done up and dyed with a hint of purple, her nails are vanished, her outfit is trendy, ‘these clothes could be equally worn by a 20-year-old’, I judge. I realise that the expectation to conform to external pressures from society in Poland about appearances seems to stir up feelings of invisibility and irrelevance in Wanda.

Instead, Wanda seems to enjoy that in the UK she does not need to conform to gendered age norms as experienced in Poland, and takes pleasure in the fact that her appearance is being noticed: *“I remember that the fashion in Poland for over 40yr olds was making the women look even older than they are! Here [in the UK] there is no difference between a woman that is almost 60 or a 20-year-old, both are free to wear jeans and trainers when it suits them, and that’s okay. Even if they dye their hair in a bright colour. My manager says that he liked me in the pink hair, I told him it was purple not pink. I am too old now so need to*

*tone it down, the hair is purple!*” Wanda laughs heartily. I am not surprised that she is being complimented on her appearance but I can also see that it is not the fact that she impersonates a ‘beauty myth’ (Wolf, 1991) but that it might be the joyful, playful aspect of her appearance that might attract comments. Wanda indicates that in the UK she is free to dye her hair pink and that it is being validated, approved of by man, her manager who makes, even if underhand but still, a compliment. The validation seems important to her as it implies that her appearance is still being noticed, while in Poland she might have become invisible, at least on the level of body image over 40. Of course, there is a second layer to the above statement, although Wanda experiences living in the UK at one level as liberating on another level, it could be argued that she is entangled in ‘self-objectification’ (Young, 2005) and the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1975). The term ‘male gaze’ is frequently used by feminists to argue that the role of a woman’s body is often the objectification of a male spectator (Szymanski *et al.*, 2011). Feminist researchers suggest that looking plays a critical role in the formation of female subjectivity, as being looked at constructs a ‘heightened sense of self-awareness’ that is contextualised within gender relations in which the looking exists (Riley *et al.*, 2015). Still, Wanda’s case illustrates that some women regardless of their age, might still be very much interested in clothing and cosmetic purchases (see also Twigg & Majima, 2014). As Twigg (2013) suggests the relationship between old age and fashion is complex, and as much as clothes could be viewed as ways of controlling aging bodies, they may also become a source of fun. To Wanda, the latter appears to be her motivation. She clearly enjoys her colourful outfits and looks, to her these are means to break one of the main fears of becoming an older woman: invisibility. Through her appearance and her playful looks, she is making herself visible and is opening the eyes of others to notice and acknowledge her presence.

### **Social and Economic Exclusion**

Wanda’s narrative also uncovers a further level of interplay between body gender and age in Poland. She portrays women in middle age as confined to their homes with their only social outlet becoming the Church. Later in the conversation Wanda very vehemently explains that she is no longer a Catholic and that she opposes the strong influence of the Catholic Church in Poland. Certain socially constructed gendered age norms appear closely connected with other identifications especially religion as well as political views (Novikova, 2017), therefore the ‘inscriptions’ or markings of this mechanism are then reflected on the body of the women. Novikova’s (2017) study of gender and age aestheticization stereotypes in Poland demonstrates that the intersection of gender, age, religion and politics are incorporated in certain pieces of clothing worn by older women i.e., the mohair beret. The aesthetic dimension of the mohair beret, which is a wool cap, denotes: that it is cheap, fashion independent (or rather old-fashioned, not vintage), asexual and therefore a characteristic of old age (Ibid. p. 213). Reflecting back on Wanda’s narrative it could be asserted that she is referring to this type of clothing, which makes

Polish women on one level invisible, whilst at the same time denoting a symbol of right-wing religious devotion. However, Wanda with her fashionable outfit, her bright coloured hair and extrovert personality does not want to be marginalised to a religious devotee in a mohair beret.

When Wanda's story unravels a further aspect, economic exclusion of middle-aged women, becomes apparent: *"For a woman over the age of 40 in Poland, particularly in small towns - it might be different in big cities - there is not much chance for a professional career over the age of 40. Unless you have worked in a company all your life, then you can climb up the ladder but otherwise there is not much chance on the job market for a woman over 40."*, says Wanda with a saddened voice. It strikes me that when both her children migrated to the UK, Wanda as a single woman over 45 did not see an alternative future for herself but to follow her children to the UK as well. It needs to be mentioned that the unemployment rate in the over 50 group in Poland is decreasing, but nonetheless the employment rates for workers 50+ are still one of the lowest in the EU and the numbers among women are significantly lower than among men. What is more, although the overall number of women in employment is increasing, the situation presents itself differently when the age factor of women in employment is considered. On account of age 50% of women in employment in Poland are of the millennium generation with an average age of 38 years (Zolnierczyk-Zreda, 2015). Despite the economic exclusion and negative attitudes towards women over 40, Wanda moves to the UK and manages to learn English, finds work and becomes an activity coordinator in a care home.

Moreover, women writers point to the fact that middle-aged Polish women not only experience exclusion from the job market, but also from social circles: *"to start everything all over in Poland at the age of 49? Embarrassing! Who'll employ me? How will I show my face to Robert? No one here bats an eyelid ... I am a fully-fledged member of society here, and not some old hag whose pension must be paid for by the hard-working young. And in Poland? ... it's not the done thing to even wear a shortish skirt. All you have waiting for you is a rocking chair and the chore of looking after your grandchildren. But me, I still want to live a little."* (Nowak, 2010, p. 56). In Nowak's novel the woman compares her situation in the UK to what her situation would be if she had stayed in Poland, she stresses that she has gained a level of freedom which she would not be able to attain in Poland, where she would be reduced to the role of a grandmother, instead Clara's aunt still wants to "live a little". Bielawska (2018) asserts that living outside of Poland gives migrants personal freedom that they would not exercise in their place of origin, particularly women who might have felt oppressed in Poland due to their age and gender. As such they perceive the UK as tolerant and liberating and suggest that the migration experience offers them chances that would be unavailable in Poland. The sense of freedom and a feeling of liberation also resonates in Wanda's story. She indicates that in the UK she is free to make choices about her appearance which would not have been tolerated in Poland (i.e., hair style, garments), and she had a chance to pursue a second career later in her life,

which seemed unobtainable in Poland. It appears that to some degree Wanda's mobility experience has allowed her to negotiate negative societal stereotypes (Furman, 2013) associated with age and the unwelcomed changes in physical appearance (Nettleton & Watson, 1998).

It also prevails that the expectations that Wanda is faced with, also demonstrated by Klara's aunt in Nowak's novel, are reducing them to a certain role (i.e. grandmother, Catholic devotee), confining their social interactions (i.e. to church and family) and, as explained in the earlier section, imposing pressures about what spaces their bodies occupy and how they appear, and therefore are a manifestation of the fact that women are aged by cultural concepts rather than aging itself (Gullette, 1997) (this fact is very clear in Wanda's statement that 'the majority of Poles pictures women of her age', here the societal pressure is evident). Wilińska & Cedersund (2010) observe that the position and role of older women in Poland is also often marked by familization, they are often pushed into the family sphere and expected to take on the role of the caring grandmother, which particularly within the Polish context is an extension of family caring responsibilities that women are burdened with in the face of a lack of institutionalized child care provision (Twigg & Majima, 2014).

Hofmeier *et al.* (2017) in their study on aging, body and identity found that women have depicted a "decline in their perceived societal value", which many found challenging and "longed to be noticed [...] and respected" (ibid p.10). It can be assumed that Wanda, similarly to the woman portrayed in Novak's novel (2010) still longs to be more than just a 'grandmother' locked in the home and Church. It therefore appears that mobility has offered empowering possibilities for these women in terms of their gender identity. Being in a new cultural environment has allowed them to renegotiate gender regulating roles and body images which have defined a socially and economically limiting experiences in Poland.

## CONCLUSION

This paper explores whether different women's reflections on the embodied experience of migration point to the fact that mobility can have an empowering and emancipatory effect in relation to gender and age. The final question remaining is then: does the experience of migration offers a possibility for the women to 'break' a gendered pattern. Ahmed (2006) implies that the action by which different bodies take up spaces they are not supposed to, opens up moments that can break the chain of mere reproduction of facts and lead to the surfacing of new qualities. Although bodies of older women are often relegated to the space of invisible; they are consistently removed from the public sphere; examples presented in this paper reveal the active role of women who decided to create new spaces for themselves. The experience of mobility has opened up alternative routes for these women, as spaces of positivity where older women can discover an alternative 'I' as in Wanda's case, or to escape social and economic exclusion, or as



a route to escape undesirable gender ideology in Poland, or be it in form of a ‘nomadic subject’ (Braidotti, 1994) as presented in by the narrator of *Flights*. Finally, this paper expands the field of Polish migration research by including older women’s narratives and what is more, connecting different aspects of mobility such as economic gain with gendered opportunities. The presented narratives demonstrate that the mobility experience offers women new spaces and new gendered patterns by escaping marginalized positions in Poland, gaining a sense of individual achievement, and creating a new and exciting life away from the limitations of Poland and the watchful eyes of a society who want these women to be invisible.

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