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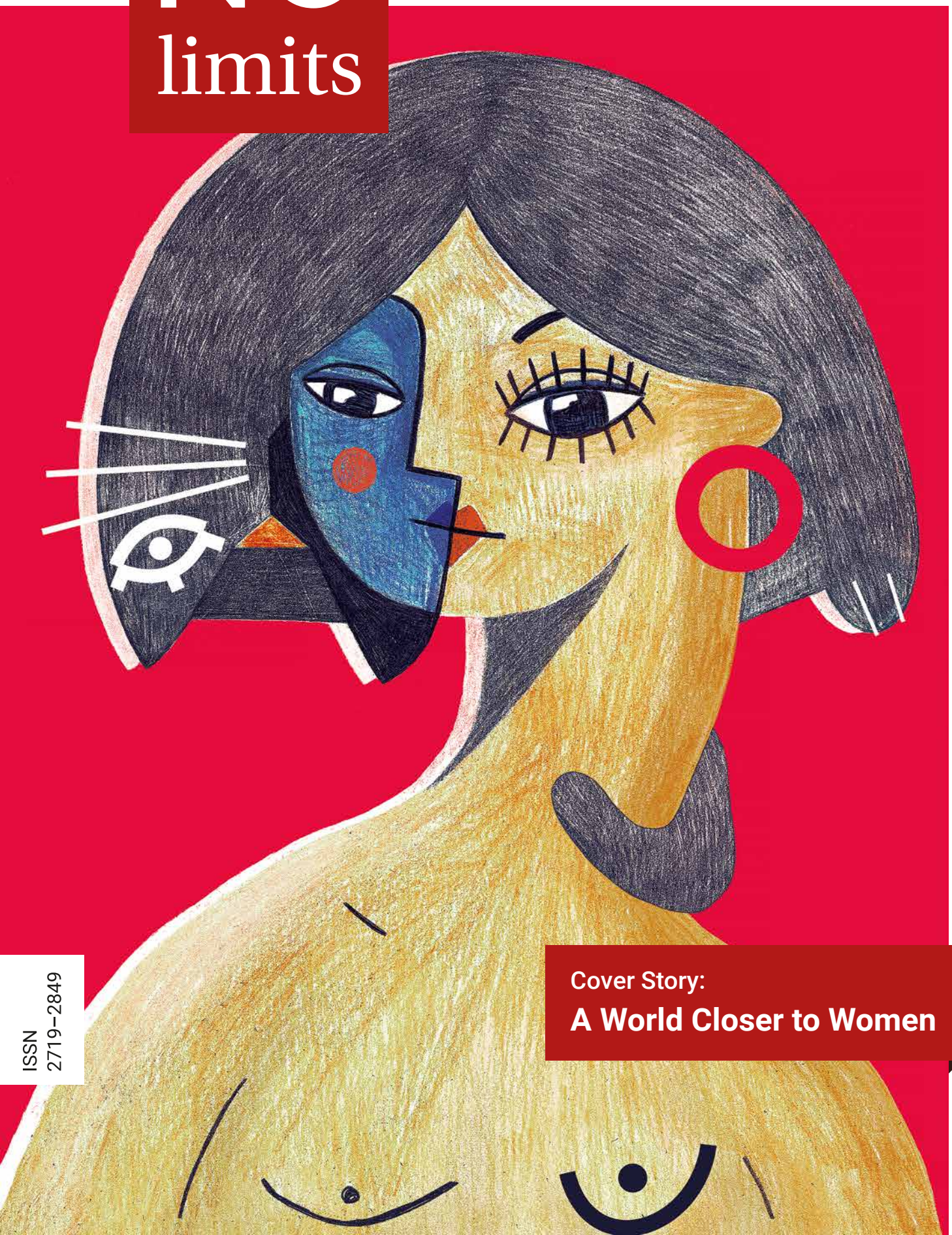

Cover Story:
A World Closer to Women

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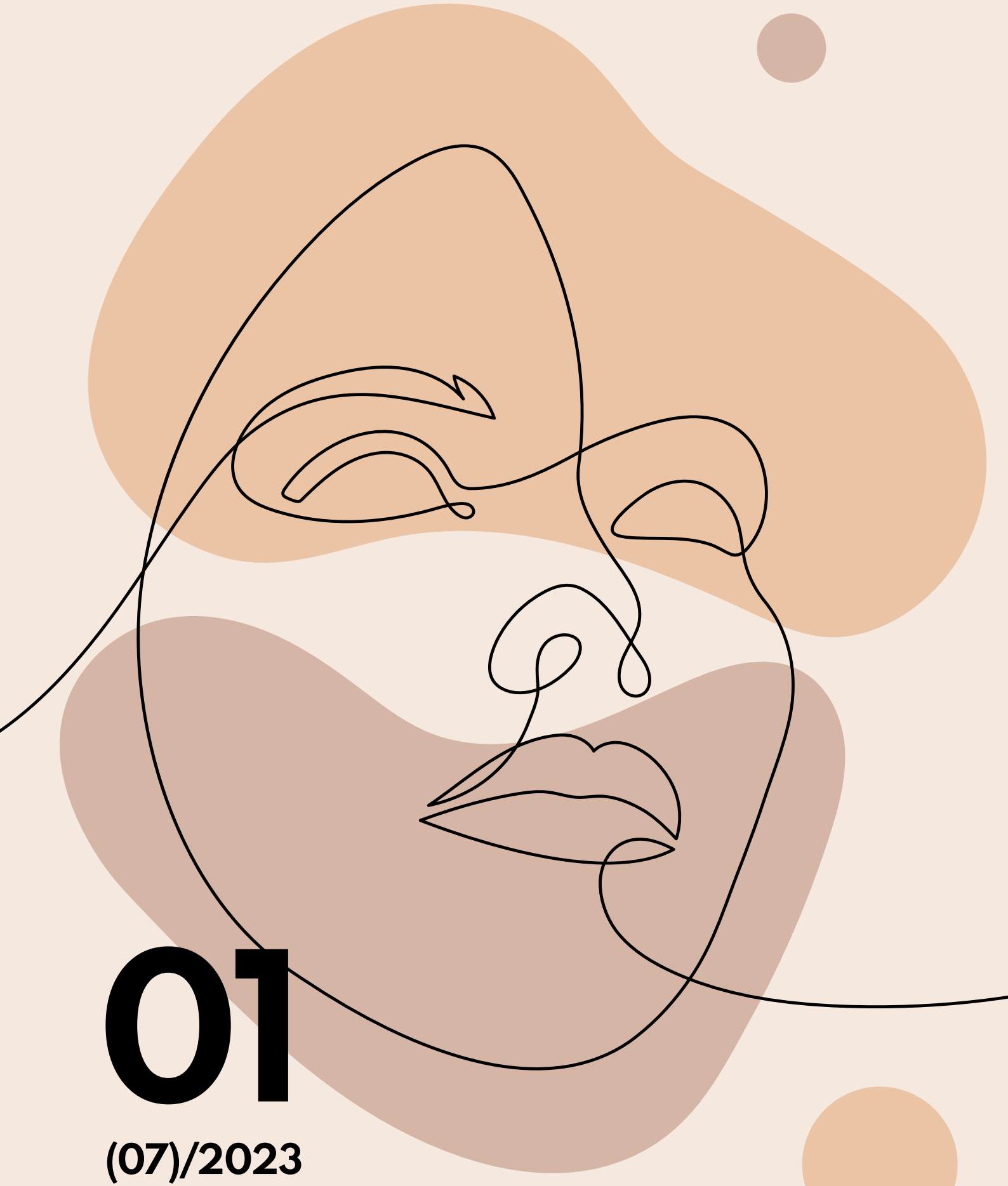

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PREHISTORIC MOTHERS, WIVES, AND LOVERS

Prehistoric human, a Neanderthal — usually when we hear these words, what springs to mind is an individual wearing some sort of a pelt, with dirt all over, mangled hair and a dull expression on their face. The stereotypical brute pulling his love interest by the hair into a cave has very little in common with the portrayal of ancient people offered by modern science.

Weronika Cygan

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Neanderthal skull discovered in La Chapelle-aux-Saints | Photo: Andrzej Boczarowski

A STEREOTYPE IS BORN

Admittedly, the first palaeoanthropologists and archaeologists did not have it easy. Sometimes they were able to recover only a tooth or a few bones from the sites they investigated, but even the more complete skeletons of extinct prehumans jealously guarded their secrets from the prying eyes of the researchers. What did our prehistoric ancestors look like, who were they, and what did they do? These questions have remained in the realm of more or less accurate conjecture for decades. Modern science seems to have turned many of our beliefs completely on their head.

'Archaeology and palaeoanthropology were born in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and therefore were the domain of men. This means that prehistoric women were relegated to the fringes of scientific interest', says Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD, from the Faculty of Natural Sciences of the University of Silesia. The scientist reminds us that only recently have we started to take a closer look at the role women played in our history, which was by no means inferior or less important than that of men.

Nowadays, the stereotype of the Neanderthal man with a face showing no signs of intelligence, more akin to an ape than a human, still persists. His slouched posture bears a strong resemblance to a chimpanzee holding firmly onto a club with one hand. This was the first reconstruction of the complete skeleton of our extinct cousin, found in a cave near the French village of La Chapelle-aux Saints and presented to the world by palaeontologist Marcellin Boule in 1908. Although we now know that this caricature does not represent a real Neanderthal at all, this representation has permeated the culture and the term Neanderthal is still used as an insult for the uncultured and less clever.

POP CULTURE PATCHES

Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD, lists three films that depict prehistoric women (not just Neanderthal women) in various ways, but each of them is damaging and far from the truth. The 1923 comedy Three Ages presents a frail woman with excessive make-up (!), dressed in badly stitched animal hides, who lets a man drag her around by the hair. This deliberate over-exaggeration permeated the public consciousness and was further perpetuated in later years.

One Million Years B.C. (1966) went a step further by casting Raquel Welch, a sex symbol of the time, in the role of a prehistoric woman. The eroticisation of our female ancestor, who was reduced to an object of man's sexual desire, is evident.

Conversely, the 2004 film with a telling title of *RRRRRRRRR!!!* shows a strong but dim-witted giantess, who beats on everyone around her. In contrast, she was assigned a rather unassuming man as her partner. Thus, a caricature was created.

Someone could rightly point out that these productions are just comedies and no one should treat them as sources of reliable knowledge about the past. And while it is true, we do it anyway, although not entirely consciously. After all, constantly reproduced pop-cultural sources of stereotypes eventually seep into our consciousness, distancing us from the real image of our ancestors.

THE IMAGE OF PREHISTORIC WOMEN

Thanks to the development of science and modern technology, we are now uncovering an increasingly large amount of secrets kept hidden by our ancestors. We can already create their portraits and attempt to reconstruct their way of life. It usually turns out that the contemporary images of ancient people are significantly different from those conceived of in the not-so-distant past, stretching back no more than a few decades.

It is well known that *Homo sapiens* came to Europe from Africa some 40,000–45,000 years ago. Presumably, they had black or brown hair and were dark-skinned up until 6,000 BC. This is when we started to adopt a Neolithic diet, which was poorer in certain substances than the hunter-gatherer one.

'Until then, people ate a lot of meat and fish, which contains vitamin D, so the body had no need to lighten the skin. In the Neolithic, we started growing crops and raising animals, so we didn't eat as much game anymore', explains Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD.

As a result of genetic mutation, blue eyes quickly became widespread among *Homo sapiens*, and as this trait has no practical justification, it must have been valued for its sexual attractiveness. The skeletons and bones of ancient European women preserved to this day testify to the fact that they must have had a much more delicate physique than males, but at the same time they were quite muscular (they did not, however, resemble the famous Paleolithic Venus). Aside from caring for children, they shared many

Paleolithic Venus of Hohle Fels figurine | Photo: Andrzej Boczarowski

responsibilities with their partners and participated in hunting activities. The same was true for our Neanderthal relatives, as indicated by the preserved skeletons. We find the same number of injuries among Neanderthal women as we do among men. They probably occurred during encounters with wild animals, which means that women must have taken part in hunting as well.

CAREGIVERS AND WARRIORS

Today, the arsenal of tools at the disposal of an archaeologist trying to understand prehistoric humans has expanded to include some that were beyond the capabilities of science just a few decades ago. Understanding the fate of our ancestors is made possible through genetics, paleobotany, chemistry, and many other disciplines. State-of-the-art research methods, which include isotopic dating of samples and advanced equipment significantly reducing the invasiveness of research underpin scientist's work. For example, scanning certain remains with a CT scanner prevents them from having to compromise the often delicate structure of an object when attempting to obtain valuable information about it.

Tartar found in deceased individuals allows a glimpse into their diet, whereas marks on the bones provide evidence of past traumas and diseases. The characteristic abrasions on the incisors of Neanderthal females lead researchers to believe that they may have used their teeth when making clothes.

'They would put a piece of animal skin in their mouths, stretch it with one hand and tan it with the other. Back then, the production of clothes must have been arduous and physically demanding', explains the palaeontologist.

A number of findings lead us to believe that prehistoric humans extended loving care to sick and elderly members of the group. Again, the remains of a Neanderthal man from 45,000 years ago discovered in the Shanidar cave in Iraq serve as the evidence.

'The old man whose remains were found there underwent successful medical treatment. He suffered from a withered arm, was most likely blind, and could not hear in one ear. He certainly could not walk. Despite this, he was in excellent biological condition and was buried with a great deal of care', says Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD.

PREHISTORIC BEAUTIES

The aforementioned 'Venus' figurines have long perplexed archaeologists. They have been found at a variety of sites constituting the remains of the oldest *Homo sapiens* habitats in Europe. Some of the most famous sculptures come from the Austrian town of Willendorf or the German Hohle Fels. They all have strongly emphasised female sexual features – prominent breasts, buttocks, and genitalia. Meanwhile, the arms, legs, and often the head are either disproportionately small in relation to the rest of the body or even nearly completely absent. We know that women of that time did not look like that at all. Genetic studies of Palaeolithic people clearly show that they did not starve. They were well nourished, but not obese. The 'Venus' figurines were most likely mere ornaments expressing certain dreams and ideas of those living at the time.

We are familiar with burials of people, both men and women, decorated with intricate jewellery. The rings, bracelets made from mammoth bones, earrings made from bear teeth, and necklaces made from rows of shells found in many graves are a testimony to the extraordinary aesthetic sense and craftsmanship of our ancestors. There is also much circumstantial evidence to suggest that they were quite attentive to hygiene. We do not find fungal diseases around their fingers, nor traces of tooth decay, despite their teeth being heavily worn down from tanning the skins! The various delicate, incredibly sharp, and narrow tools discovered suggest that perhaps people were already shaving tens of thousands of years ago. It is certain that these tools could not have been used to cut meat.

'Prehistoric women were therefore not dishevelled, dirty, or smelly. We have only recently discovered how dark their skin, eyes, and hair colour were; this knowledge was inaccessible to us until 10-15 years ago. Modern science not only has provided us with such information, but also shattered the previously known image of our ancestors', says Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD.

And while today we may look back on the caricatures of ancient people introduced by researchers 50 or 100 years ago with pity, there remains the optimistic reflection that thanks to modern technology and ever-expanding knowledge, we are able to uncover more and more secrets hidden by the remains of people who died millennia ago. We can certainly look forward to lots of outstanding discoveries in the future.

Facial reconstruction of a Neanderthal whose skull can be seen in the photograph on page 5, done by Andrzej Boczarowski, PhD | Photo: Andrzej Boczarowski

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THE MYSTERY OF GRAVE 16

The hilly region of eastern Slovenia, with its wide river valleys and narrow tributaries, was the area where the cemeteries of the Urnfield culture such as Ruše and Pobrežje were discovered. They have shaped our understanding of the material culture and chronology of the Late Bronze Age.

Since their discovery, the cemeteries in eastern Slovenia have been included in major discussions about the cultural characteristics of the phenomenon that encompassed large parts of Europe at the end of the second millennium BCE. A phenomenon that, due to the almost universal burial rite and nearly total absence of wealthy burials, triggered numerous assumptions about the society structure and the religious foundations of observable practices.

More than a decade ago, a cemetery of the Urnfield Culture was discovered in Zavrč, near the border crossing between Slovenia and Croatia. A preliminary analysis of over 60 graves revealed that burials began there in the late 15th century BCE and continued until the 8th century BCE, bridging cultural changes at the end of the Late Bronze Age and the beginning of the Early Iron Age. What was extraordinary was not only the longevity of the custom, but also the exceptional quality and quantity of grave goods in several graves – males with weapons and females with jewellery and attire.

Perhaps most fascinating was the discovery of grave 16 – surprising was the quantity and quality of the grave goods, as well as the complexity of the manipulation with them, suggesting that it was the burial of a special person. A member of the social elite, as archaeologists like to assume. And, according to the jewellery found, a woman of a very high status.

At the time of discovery, the deposition appeared to be deviant – the grave goods, the jewellery, and attire as well as large fragments of cremated bones, were positioned in the central part of the grave. Piled up, with the jewellery stuck between the folded belt, they were covered and surrounded by the rest of the funeral pyre with charcoal, ashes, smaller fragments of cremated bones and some fragments of burnt jewellery.

The most important and unique object was the decorated bronze belt, made of a long and wide band of a thin bronze sheet, decorated with rows of dots and bulges. Also noteworthy was the selective fragmentation and burning of her jewellery – only smaller pieces of the necklace and ankle-rings were broken off and burned with the body, and the major parts were subsequently placed undamaged in the grave. Her bracelets and a small spectacle-shaped pendant were also intact. The large bronze spectacle brooch was deliberately broken into two halves, one of which remained undamaged and was added to the grave as such, while the other half was violently crushed and subsequently cremated. In essence, most of the jewellery was added to the grave intact, while a smaller portion underwent a profound and violent transformation.

Zavrč, grave 16, partially reconstructed decorated bronze belt | Photo and reconstruction: Martina Blecic Kavur

Zavrč, Late Bronze Age objects found in grave 16
Photo: Danilo Cvetko

The cremated bones discovered in the central part of the burial, together with the bronze grave goods, were burnt at a very high and constant temperature, indicating that the corpse was placed on a well-prepared funeral pyre. Moreover, it can be assumed that the cremated bones were intentionally crushed, but given the quantity obtained, only a part was deposited in the grave. However, it was not the complexity of the ritual transformation of the body and the grave goods that were so surprising, but the age of the deceased: it was a young girl who died aged between 8 and 12.

Consideration of the burial ground at Zavrč provides a great deal of new information about deviant social practices in the Late Bronze Age – because of the longevity of the burial site, the locality must have been considered special. Today, it seems too simplistic to assume that this was due to its location at the crossroads between the Alpine and Pannonian worlds, at the entrance to the Drava river valley. The small number of burials spread over a long period of time, as well as the burial of numerous specially treated persons, which deviated from the wider regional archaeological tradition, demonstrate that this was no ordinary cemetery. We have reasons to believe that this is not a reflection of the mortality of a regional community, but a society of the dead that was deliberately created as such. Each burial was the materialization of a consciously created identity, inserted into a place that was not only a spatial attractor but also a place of memory for numerous generations in the wider region.

When we look at the grave goods and the complexity of the burial rites, it is astonishing that almost all people buried there were either children or young people. A generation into which the hopes and dreams of their communities were projected, by communities that in their periods of mourning created an imagined society of the dead which was different. A society in which the future possibilities, the successes that could have been achieved, and the social status that could have been attained, were projected onto the dead youth. Recognising their burial rites, analysing their grave goods, and interpreting their social status is an examination of the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of societies long past. It is all about what could have become of these children. Most likely, the girl from grave 16 in Zavrč was not yet a woman, but in her afterlife she became one of the most prominent women of the European Late Bronze Age.

Katarzyna Stołpiec

Women

IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

One of the stories presented in the Bible concerns the first human beings — a man and a woman. He was created from the dust of the earth and she was made from his rib. In the Garden of Eden, they enjoyed undisturbed equality, but the original sin they committed brought with it irreversible changes. The equality we know today is far removed from the original state of affairs. What then are the differences between a man and a woman, and where is the woman's place in light of male domination?

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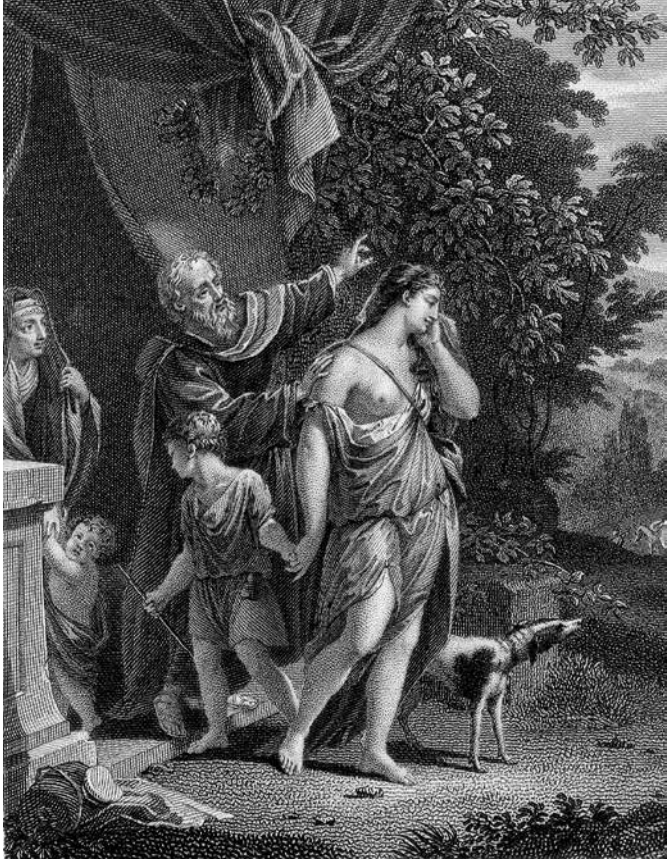
Adam and Eve by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Work from the collection of the Courtauld Institute of Art, London | Photo: public domain

The Death of Jezebel by Gustave Doré | Photo: public domain



Expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael by Abraham by Sir Anthony van Dyck
Photo: public domain

'And he shall rule over you' — these are the words of *Genesis* directed towards the woman (Eve) just after she had broken God's command (Genesis 3:16c). This directive has become so embedded in the socio-cultural canons of many, if not all, countries of the world that throughout thousands of years women were relegated to the roles of obedient servants. Although the image of women has changed considerably over the centuries, the status of the fair sex is nowadays still (sub)consciously devalued by many.

Rev. Maciej Basiuk, PhD, a biblical scholar from the Faculty of Theology of the University of Silesia in Katowice, explains the events taking place in the first chapters of Genesis in order to explore the original sin of women and their actual status in ancient Israel.

'The fact that God utters such strong words of punishment for women (subordination to the man, the hardships of pregnancy, and the pains of childbirth) does not mean that he deprives them of their own voice or dignity. On the contrary, the Old Testament uses many examples to demonstrate that women can play an important role in society, including descriptions of influential queens, brave widows, pious prophetesses, and devoted wives and mothers. Men, although depicted in the Bible as patriarchs, rarely treat their female companions as mere slaves; instead, they respect them and often follow their advice'.

'The events that took place in the Garden of Eden caused a flaw in the female nature', explains the biblical scholar. 'After he tasted the forbidden fruit, the man denied any wrongdoing, passed it on to God, and changed his perception of Eve from his faithful companion to the cause of the incident: 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate' (Genesis 3:12). This indicates that Eve and God are to blame, but not Adam. This was the first manifestation of pride and rebellion against the Creator that occurred after the transgression committed by both people. This is precisely what is important: it was the fault of both people, not just the woman. However, time and interpretations of the story of original sin have solidified the belief that the fault lies on the side of women.

Let us now depart slightly from the topic of the original sin. What kind of women do we encounter when reading the Bible? Strong and courageous, faithful and loving but also cunning and ruthless. Miriam, the prophetess, Moses' sister, played an important role in saving her infant brother when he was placed in a basket in the bulrushes of the river Nile, while she herself was only a few years old. What is more, when Pharaoh's daughter pulled him out of the Nile's waters, Miriam approached her with an idea to bring him a wet nurse, who was in fact his real mother.

Ancient writers also evoke the figure of Deborah, a judge and prophetess in *The Book of Judges*, as well as Huldah, whom King Josiah asked for an authoritative opinion on the book of the law found in Solomon's temple. Although in the ancient Judaic tradition a woman was supposed to be subordinate to a man and thus dependent on him (in terms of social esteem as well as financially — a woman without a man was bound to suffer from poverty or even destitution), we are presented with evidence that the law of the time, strict as it was, did not amplify the hardships of women. *The Book of Judges* refers to twelve judges, one of whom is Deborah. These facts prove that women were allowed a voice and much hinged on their authority, despite the common stereotype of being dependent on men.

An example that is also worth mentioning is Sarah, the wife of Abraham. As the partner of the first patriarch of Israel, she is responsible for the household and the duties that constitute the role of the lady of the house. On one occasion Sarah, as per the text of *Genesis*, firmly requested her husband to cast out the slave girl Hagar from their family along with her son Ishmael. Although this seemed ruthless from Abraham's point of view, the matriarch was motivated, firstly, by her own reasons (there were growing misunderstandings between her and Hagar, as well as Ishmael's hostile behaviour towards the recently born Isaac) and, secondly, by a greater sense of faith — she understood better than her husband the path that God intended her family to follow. Thus, while Abraham objected to casting out the slave girl and their son Ishmael, God interceded for Sarah, commanding him to do as his wife had said (Gen 21:12).

And it was from Abraham and Sarah that the lineage of Jesus began and the plan of salvation was accomplished. To bury Sarah with dignity, Abraham bought the first piece of land in Canaan (the Cave of Machpelah in Hebron), which became his first property in the Promised Land (Gen 23:17-18). She contributed to many achievements of the first patriarch and she is a symbol of faithfulness for many believers.

The female characters found in the Bible also include queens and widows. Judith and Esther are the people who instantly spring to mind as embodiments of cleverness, intelligence, and composure. Both were tasked with saving many human lives: Judith, the widow of Manasseh, saved the city of Bethulia that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to conquer, whereas Esther, the wife of King Ahasuerus, intervened on behalf of Israel. Both women executed their well-thought-out plans, which they had diligently prepared beforehand, displaying their courage and calculating spirit. Neither of them acted hastily, but gradually gained the trust of their opponents, captivating (or even enamouring) them, thus shaking off any possible suspicion and finally achieving the desired result: Judith beheaded Holofernes, the leader of Nebuchadnezzar's army, while Esther exposed the Haman's intention to murder all the Israelites.

Among the women who appeared in the Bible, there were also scandalists such as Jezebel and Athaliah, who displayed exceptional brutality. Jezebel was the wife of Ahab, king of Israel reigning from 872 to 851 BC. Named after a Phoenician pagan deity (Baal Melkart or Beelzebub), the woman manifested equally devilish qualities. Although her husband, whose story is told in the books of Kings, was not considered a good or pious man, he still respected the property of others and the right to inherit. His wife did not. She unscrupulously caused the wrongful stoning of Naboth, the owner of a vineyard adjacent to her husband's field, so that he could seamlessly take it over. Her punishment was severe, as she was pushed out of the window of her own palace, '...some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, which trampled on her' (2 Kings 9:33). As her lifeless body lay in the street, it was devoured by wild dogs, and when she was to be buried, only her skull, legs, and hands were found.

Athaliah, on the other hand, was a self-proclaimed queen and the only woman to ever rule in Judah. She was the wife of Joram, son of Jezebel and Ahab (also his biological sister). To maintain power after her late husband, she had all her sons put to death. Only one of them, Ahaziah, survived this brutal onslaught. He was saved by his older sister while he was still an infant. Athaliah was a devoted worshipper of Baal. She promoted this spiritual trend among the public by converting temples dedicated to God to those worshipping the pagan deity. Years later, as an adult and the legitimate king, Ahaziah revealed his true identity to his mother, thus removing her from the throne. Athaliah was then slain with a sword.

More than 800 women appear in the Bible: 205 of them are mentioned by name. They did not always play a central role; they were often supporting characters. We should also bear in mind that they were portrayed from a male perspective, as the biblical texts were written by men. It is important to note that the Old Testament was written over a period of approximately thousand years, so we cannot point out the single idea of a woman and judge their behaviour on this basis. The times in which they lived often required them to behave in certain ways. Some of them were warriors, while others were quiet housewives living alongside their husbands. Their image is very complex. What they have in common is the fact that, despite appearances, they were not weak. They had dignity and shared a special feature — it is through a woman that belonging to the Chosen People is passed on.

Ruth in Boaz's Field by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. Work from the collection of the National Gallery, London
Photo: public domain

Judith and her maidservant with the head of Holofernes by Orazio Gentlileschi. Work from the collection of the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo
Photo: public domain

Maria Sztuka

19th Century Europe Was Not a Woman

The groundbreaking 19th century set civilisation on a new track, known as the age of steam and electricity, and imposed a pace of development never before experienced by humankind. An avalanche of discoveries and inventions resulted in rapid industrial and economic growth. The history of the transition was shaped by people such as Pierre-Émile Martin, Werner von Siemens, Thomas Edison, Michael Faraday, Rudolf Diesel, Gottlieb Daimler, Louis Pasteur, Wilhelm Röntgen, the Lumiere brothers, Samuel Morse, Alexander Bell, Ignacy Łukasiewicz, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, and Piotr Curie. These are just a few of the hundreds of people whose work helped put humans on the Moon in the 20th century.

Highly industrialised countries experienced a population explosion. Cities began to grow in size, giving rise to such great metropolises as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, London, Paris, Berlin, Osaka, Moscow, and Saint Petersburg. The social hierarchy also underwent changes. The increasingly powerful bourgeoisie, led by entrepreneurs and financiers, established itself at a record pace somewhere between the aristocracy and the landed gentry and peasantry. The gigantic new labour market attracted large numbers of working-class people.

Although the explosion of knowledge and progress took over the globe, half of the population, i.e. women, invariably remained under the special protection of men, resembling children with special needs under the laws of the time.

It might seem as though the pillars of patriarchy would be shattered when women (first in America and later in Europe) began university studies and the struggle for suffrage. Unfortunately, women's struggle for equality continued throughout the 19th century, and before legal equality could be achieved, the legislation treating women as inferior beings had to be scrapped, e.g. the Napoleonic Code (effective from 1804 in France, 1808 in the Duchy of Warsaw, and 1815 in the Congress Kingdom of Poland). *Code civil* became the foundation of civil law in most countries of the Old Continent. By adopting a patriarchal conception of the family, the code subordinated the wife and children to the authority of the husband or father, which extended to all spheres of life, even personal ones. Women were deprived of the ability to buy, sell, and pawn property, and were barred from education. According to Magdalena Piekara, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor, a literature historian from the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia specialising in the Polish Positivism, a woman was considered a permanent minor by the legislation in force at the time. The education received by well-born women did not withstand confrontation with the reality outside the classroom, exposing the superficiality of education and the lack of basic skills. Music, painting, foreign language, and social skills lessons were only useful at afternoon tea parties, but did not offer a chance to take up any occupation, making independent living impossible. It was only the lowest social classes — unmarried women living in the countryside or factory workers — who took up employment. Education for girls and women preparing them for household work, childcare, or at most teaching, did not begin to develop until the second half of the 19th century. European women gained access to higher education (only in a few degree programmes) at the end of the 19th century.

How was a woman to fare in an era of the primacy of education, when until she got married she was under the absolute guardianship of her father or a male relative, and after getting married she was not even allowed to have an identity document, leave the place of residence designated by her husband, or keep the income she earned? Men raised what they regarded as canonical arguments against the women's right to acquire knowledge. Prof. Magdalena Piekara summarises them briefly: a woman's place is in the home, her duty is to care for her husband and children, and any pursuit of knowledge may cause her to neglect these sacred duties, while her mind is simply incapable of solving complex mathematical problems.

Eliza Orzeszkowa, to whose works Prof. Piekara devoted many academic publications, repeatedly took up the issue of women's emancipation, exposing their lack of preparation for an independent life and economic self-reliance. Through the history of Marta, the titular character of one of her novels, the writer exposed the absurdities of the patriarchal family model and discrimination against women in access to education.

As an impoverished noblewoman educated only to the extent necessary to run a household and discuss art or culture, she led a carefree life at her husband's side. His untimely death, however, shattered the peace, prosperity, and security she once had. Left on her own, Marta is unable to support herself and her young daughter. Her substandard education makes it impossible to take up any professional work. She cannot be a governess, as she is not qualified; her poor knowledge of French prevents her from tutoring; although she has studied drawing, she has not mastered the basic techniques, which prevents her from entering art studios; she is not qualified to be an illustrator; she is not even suitable to be a maid. So how can she save herself and her daughter from starvation? Marta finds the only solution — suicide at the wheels of a speeding omnibus. Orzeszkowa captures the tragedy of women in the 19th century in the plight of an impoverished noblewoman — as remarks the protagonist, 'The world demands of them the skills it has not provided them with'.

Although half of humanity was allowed to attend lectures and even study at university, in the age boasting the development of all sciences no permission was given to practise their profession. Prof. Piekara recalls the first Polish female medical doctor, Anna Tomaszewicz-Dobrska, who completed her medical studies in Zurich and successfully defended her doctoral thesis, but upon her return to Warsaw, the Medical Association refused to recognise her diploma due to her gender. She got it recognised in Saint Petersburg with the support of the local sheikh whose harem she was looking after.

'The end of the 19th century was marked by a tumultuous struggle of women, not only for the right to vote, but also for decent working conditions and pay, and the abolition of all discrimination. A surge of strikes, protests, and demonstrations erupted. The road to equality was paved by suffragettes, suffragists, and feminists. The well-laid foundations delivered results several decades later. Polish women gained the right to vote in 1918, and a year later there were eight female MPs in the Polish parliament. The equal rights for women in social and political life were confirmed in the Polish March Constitution of 1921. However, we must not forget that women's rights were not gifted to them. As history shows, women successfully fought for these rights', emphasises Prof. Magdalena Piekara.

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Textile workers at the factory in Łódź | Photo: public domain

WOMEN
OF VOLCANIC ORIGIN

Ananda Devi is the most important contemporary Mauritian writer, author of more than a dozen novels, and several collections of short stories and poetry, currently living in France and writing in French. Recently, her works have become available in Poland thanks to successive translations by Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz from the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Silesia.

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Ananda Devi considers herself first and foremost a humanist writer. Since women are more likely to be victims of violence, many of her works feature protagonists who are rejected and wounded and have little chance of escaping their suffering. After all, where should those living in Mauritius — a small island of volcanic origin surrounded by an endless ocean — escape to?

Ananda Devi's writing draws inspiration from both Eastern and Western influences — her mother represented a more Eastern perspective in her family, while her father raised her on Grimms' fairy tales. Now living in France, Ananda Devi continues to navigate this tangled cultural landscape. The title *Indian Tango* refers to *The Last Tango in Paris*, while Saad, the protagonist of *Eve Out of Her Ruins*, is fascinated by Rimbaud's poetry. The latter novel is set in Mauritius, as is the case with many of Devi's works, where the woman has to conform to expectations and often falls victim to violence. Typical protagonists of Ananda Devi's books are Mauritian women stuck in family and social structures that have remained intact for generations.

'Western researchers believe that what occurs in countries like Mauritius is the result of colonial rule', comments Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz. 'However, the role of women in Eastern societies is strongly conditioned by tradition, as Ananda Devi demonstrates in her books. Perhaps this special and unique character of the local culture is her greatest contribution to feminist literature'.

The writer used to distance herself from feminism. Nowadays, she believes that women's rights are something we should always strive for. After all, Mauritius is where the father of the main character of *Moi, L'Interdite* proclaims that 'daughters are a curse'. In *Pagli*, on the other hand, a host of *mofines*, guardians of the traditional patriarchy, follow young Daya's every step and warn her of the consequences of adultery: 'Don't go where you are trying to go. Don't even look in that direction'. The romantic relationship between Daya, who comes from an Indo-Mauritian family, and the Creole fisherman Zil is a transgression of racial norms. The seemingly multicultural island turns out to be full of divisions and prejudices. Although Eve and Savita from *Eve Out of Her Ruins* share a very close friendship, out in public Savita's parents avert their eyes from Eve's family as if they were a bunch of 'copulating dogs'.

In Mauritius, if a woman does not neatly fit into the commonly accepted framework, she is ostracised. The protagonist of the novel *Moi, L'Interdite* gets rejected by her own family because she was born with a cleft lip. The self-aware Eve knows that she does not fit into any category: she is neither ready to be married, nor one to be used and abandoned. Daya from Pagli makes her family furious when she takes in a homeless female beggar. Daya's maladjustment is rooted in a traumatic event: when she was 13 years old, she was raped by her cousin, whom she will be forced to marry. 'Why do women end up paying for the wrongs done to them by men?', asks Ananda Devi in an interview. Savita was murdered by her teacher after she saw him sexually abusing Eve, but the public begins to wonder: 'What did she do to provoke such a thing?'.

Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz points out that Ananda Devi's sensitivity to violence against women is rooted in a family story she heard at a young age, which would later become the plot of *Le sari vert*. In the novel's pivotal scene, Dokter pours a hot pot of rice on his wife's head, causing her death.

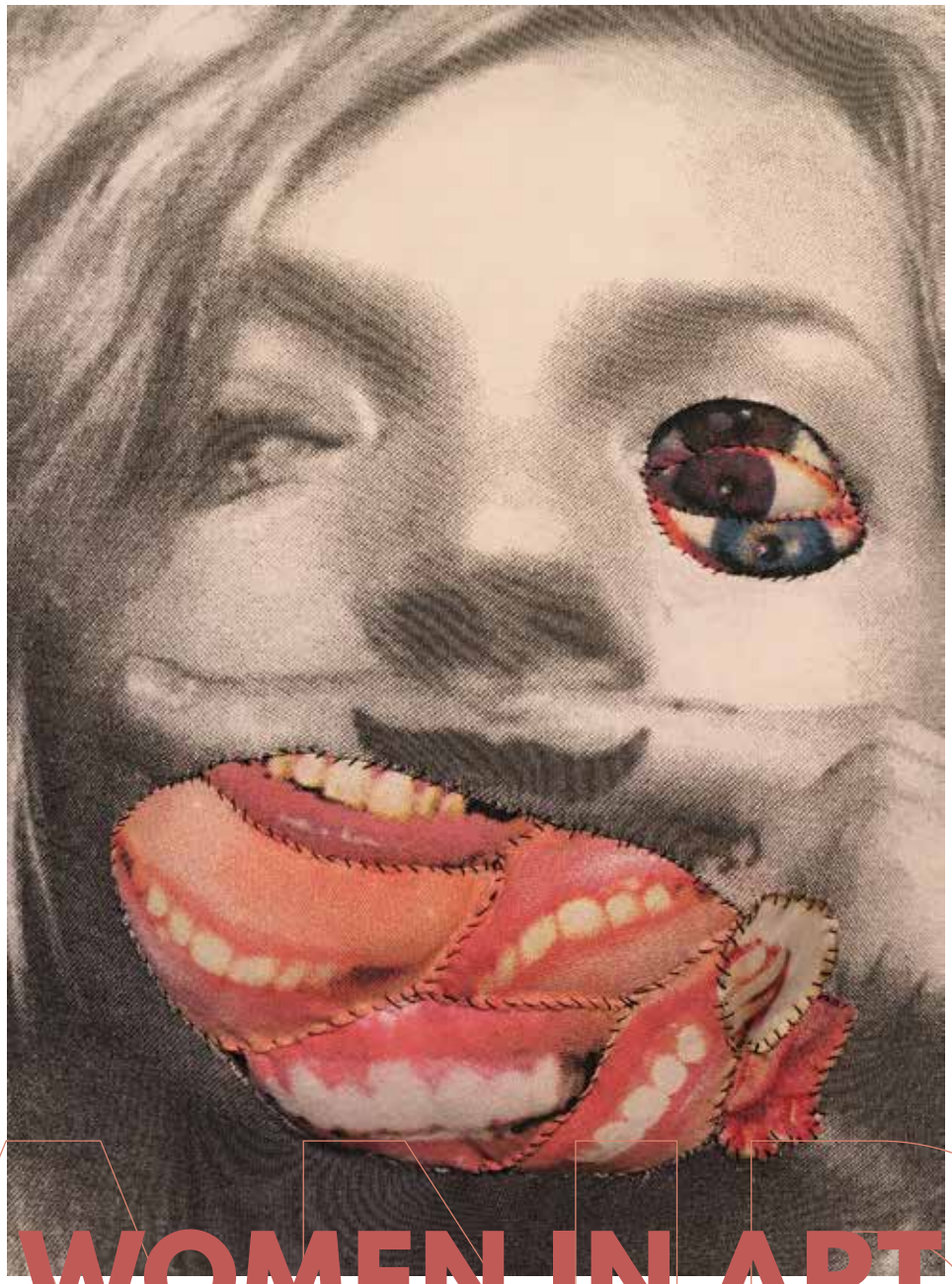
Devi's female characters often find themselves isolated from the rest of the community. Daya is declared a crazy person and locked in a henhouse, whereas the protagonist of the novel *Moi, L'Interdite* gets hidden away in a lime kiln by her own family. Rejected by humans, she becomes feral and joins a pack of wild dogs. If anyone comes to the rescue, it is always another woman. The little girl with a cleft lip rejected by her parents is looked after by her grandmother, while Daya finds support in her friend Mitsy. The close friendship between Eve and Savita allows the girls to get out from under male domination and create what Eve describes as the 'poetry of women': an understanding beyond words, a synchronisation of gestures. After Savita's death, it comes as no surprise that Eve confesses: 'I am essentially dead'. Her 'death' does not last long: Eve cuts her hair, thus acquiring the appearance of 'a lioness whom no one dares to look in the eye and whom no one dares to touch'. After this symbolic transformation, she takes revenge and shoots Savita's killer. Ananda's protagonists do not want to be stuck in victimhood: beneath the surface of the patriarchal order of Mauritius there is a lava of rebellion boiling.

Given this context, the references to the volcanic origin of the island take on an interesting character. Prof. Krzysztof Jarosz writes that *Eve Out of Her Ruins* is, in a sense, 'a story of the announced and achieved eruption of a volcano of anger: an eruption focused on avenging the oppressed women in an act of violence carried out by the titular character portrayed as a volcano'. Daya, too, feels the boiling magma inside, waiting to erupt. Before being confined to the henhouse, she exacts revenge on her husband. By undressing during their wedding night, she disarms the rapist, who was only capable of sex born of violence, dependent on the submissiveness of his victim. Daya is aware of her power over the predator. The women in Devi's books do not remain passive: they cross boundaries, break ties, and escape.

The writer's strength is her ability to adopt the Eastern perspective to look beyond the West and vice versa. She criticises Western feminists who see the world only from their own point of view, which is incompatible with the situation of Mauritian women. She is equipped with a keen critical mind that enables her to understand both the East and the West.

Ananda Devi | Photo: Harrikrisna Anenden

A piece from the *Matronki (2)* series



WOMEN IN ART YESTERDAY AND WOMEN'S ART TODAY

Art used to be a tool to flaunt power, an ornament in the hands of wealthy elites, a synonym for luxury, and a show of social status. When you entered a museum, a church, a palace, or a house and looked at the artworks on display, you knew immediately who you were dealing with. Similarly, women in old art had a clearly defined role — they were a motif, an iconographic reference to the idea of beauty or function (a mother, a saint, or a lover).

In earlier eras, only male members of society were allowed to engage in education and creative endeavours. Women were not allowed to study at the academies of fine arts in Poland nearly until the end of World War I, as their ability to take on the great tasks of high art was questioned. Women could only study at drawing and painting schools specifically intended for the representatives of their gender. At the beginning of the 20th century, crafts and drawing teachers were among the very few socially accepted professions for women.

SHE'S NOT A WOMAN, SHE'S A HUMAN BEING!

A hundred years ago, when the classmates of Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska, the first female student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, wanted to compliment her, they would say: 'Baltarowicz is not a woman! Baltarowicz is a human being'. Through her belief in the power of women and the tremendous amount of work and dedication, Iwona Demko, PhD, DLitt, artist and researcher at the Academy, recovers these and other interesting stories. That is why this short piece on women in art does not take into account cheap sensationalism about how those unyielding women disguised themselves as men or assumed pseudonyms in order to pursue an education or practise their learned professions.

'It is better to mention the attitude of herstorical empathy, of which the aforementioned Demko is a prime example. When a few years ago I invited her to the Institute of Fine Arts of the University of Silesia to present to my students some of the different practices of artistic creation, rumours started to circulate that I had invited a 'demon' (from her surname), a feminist, dressed all in pink, on top of that', recalls Paulina Poczęta, PhD, DLitt, Associate Professor.

A MODEL OF THE OBEDIENT AND PATIENT WOMAN

Due to the difficult access to education in fine arts and the stereotypical division into feminine and masculine roles, it was craftsmanship, with all its different techniques and designs typical of a given region, that became a strong field among women. Differences in socialisation had a significant impact on the settlement of women in private spaces and men in public spaces. The Marian devotion, particularly strong in Poland, shaped the model of an obedient, patient, modest, and quiet woman. On the other hand, the idea of the Polish mother as the protector of the domestic hearth stifled the creative imperative of women, such that only those exceptionally strong became artists, because they had to be strong — especially to choose a space considered foreign to themselves, contrary to the existing social model of a woman, the good wife and mother.

IN THE SHADOW OF THEIR ARTIST HUSBANDS

The lack of the same benefits in terms of access to knowledge and vocational opportunities diminished the creative potential of women. It took a great deal of determination and a little bit of goodwill, even on the part of their fathers, for this state of affairs to start changing. Thanks to the workshops and studios owned by their fathers, women were sometimes allowed to become artists; some of them also had the opportunity to do so alongside their (good-hearted) husbands who were well-known artists. In many cases, although the women were as talented as their husbands, and often even surpassed them, they would not develop their full artistic potential and aspirations. This was because it was customary for them to take care of the practical side of their spouse's artistic life. Moreover, they went down in history mainly as the wives of famous artists (e.g. Władysław Strzemiński and his wife Katarzyna Kobro burning her sculptures in the oven during particularly cold winters). After all, being an artist is not compatible with the mundane. The quiet co-creator of her artist husband's success will often stay invisible. The female artists who made a name for themselves in the art world are those who had consciously given up having a family, including the most famous, like Anna Bilińska and Olga Boznańska.

REVOLUTION IN THE PHILHARMONIC

Restoring knowledge about notable and overlooked female artists is an arduous and still ongoing process. What would help promote and increase the visibility of women's work today? More gender quotas in oversight bodies or those selecting a range of works for art reviews and thematic exhibitions in secret modes. This perhaps seems controversial, as there will certainly be those who believe that the gender of the artist should not be a criterion in selecting artistic works and that the selection should only be made on the basis of their quality. But if it really did not matter, then perhaps the New York Philharmonic would still have only male members. Turnover in orchestras is low, the ensemble line-up of about a hundred musicians is rather static, and the people involved often work until they retire. It is rare for a musician to be fired from such a job. For most of the 20th century, there were no women in the New York Philharmonic, until suddenly something happened that caused the percentage of women in the orchestra to spike from 0% to 10% in a single decade. The reason for the change was the introduction of blind auditions in the 1980s, following a lawsuit. In such an audition, the performer is behind a screen and therefore not visible to the recruiters. Thanks to this revolution, already in the 1980s women accounted for almost half of the new recruits (Caroline Criado Perez brought up this interesting example in her book *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Abrams Press, New York, 2019).

THE CATEGORY OF GENDER STILL EVOKES MIXED FEELINGS

In 2012, the Silesian Museum in Katowice hosted the exhibition 'Art of Women — Women in Art. Silesian Female Artists 1880–2000'. Paulina Poczęta, PhD, DLitt, Assoc. Prof. was invited to participate in it.

'I accepted the invitation, as I had no objection to being called a female artist living, working, or coming from Silesia. However, the list of participating female artists did not include a sculptor from my alma mater, whom I hold in high regard. She argued that something either is or isn't art, so there is no point in dividing it into art made by women and art made by men. I get it, after all, because we are all entitled to our own, distinct opinion on one subject or another'.

Although categorising the choice of artists by nationality or the regularity of their work is not controversial, the category of gender still evokes mixed feelings. The presence of men in all decision-making sectors of social and scientific life and, unfortunately, the still thriving misogyny within the artistic community itself, make it difficult for women to break through in the arts even today. Meanwhile, they make up the majority of students at art academies, but not a majority of staff in these institutions.

Biogram by Paulina Poczęta

Sweetdelights (8) by Paulina Poczęta

Zofia Baltarowicz-Dzielińska in her studio in Lviv
Photo: public domain

Maria Niedzielska School of Fine Arts for Women in Kraków | Photo: public domain

THE MILK OF DREAMS

The supposedly feminine traits of resilience and patience seem to be slowly losing their appeal, which is why the art community waited with bated breath for the one-year-delayed 59th Venice Art Biennale, curated by Cecilia Alemani. A lot has happened since 2019, from the pandemic to climate and refugee crises — to the war in Europe. In view of these cataclysms, the slogan of the previous 58th edition resounded like an ominous prophecy: 'May you live in interesting times'.

'Cecilia Alemani's curatorial proposal is a dream come true, in which female artists are given a voice because unlike in all previous biennales, this time they are the overwhelming majority of the authors whose works are presented. She has thus reversed the long-standing proportions. Yes, men are also present, but they are in a clear minority, which is a true rarity as far as the history of art is concerned', says the artist from the University of Silesia.

This year, the event's theme is 'The Milk of Dreams', taken from the title of a novel by Leonora Carrington, a forgotten (unlike her partner Max Ernst) surrealist, artist, emigrant, and scandalist. Her biography becomes a certain key to understanding selected pieces of art made by women, non-binary, or transgender people in opposition to the phallocentric system of conventional art representation in gallery circulation. The works presented at the 59th Biennale cease to seduce and flatter male audiences, and the increased visibility of art created by women illustrates the liberation of every subject entangled in one way or another in the previously leading, only legitimate ideological and identity models. The oneiric works presented during the biennale are full of ethnic diversity, evoking a desire for a reality that does not require a rigid uniformity of identity, which is often a form of repression and constraint.

TRANSFORMED INTO ART

In an interview, the artist Louise Bourgeois, who is particularly highly regarded by Prof. Poczęta, once said the words that often give her some needed reassurance: 'There are things in this world that I can't cope with, and I am fortunate that I can sublimate what is beyond me in the form of art. I'm very grateful to be able to do that'.

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WOMEN AND LABOUR LAW

When we think about how the Labour Code protects women, the first thing that comes to mind is the provisions related to maternity, i.e. the possibility to take maternity, parental, or childcare leave. And indeed, Polish legislation protects mothers to a very high degree. In addition, the code precisely specifies which jobs women absolutely cannot perform. Of course, there is also a provision in the Code on the need for equal treatment by employers irrespective of a range of characteristics, including gender, but this is a more complicated issue.

'Indeed, woman's parental functions and motherhood are treated in a special way under Polish labour law', says Urszula Torbus, PhD, from the Faculty of Law and Administration of the University of Silesia in Katowice. 'According to the ruling made by the Supreme Court, the Labour Code protects pregnant women from the moment of conception, while in other EU countries protection applies only from the moment when the employer is informed of the pregnancy'.

By law, a woman expecting a child is protected in a number of ways – the employer cannot terminate or amend the employment contract or delegate the woman outside her permanent place of work and must adjust her working conditions and working hours, which may not exceed eight hours a day, while overtime is strictly forbidden. In addition, the relevant regulation of the Council of Ministers sets out a list of the types of work that are prohibited for pregnant women and women who are breastfeeding. All for the benefit of not only the mother but also the child.

In general, the Labour Code prohibits the performance of remunerative activities of a certain specific nature out of concern for women's procreative functions. Does this mean that a woman, even if she really wanted to, gave her consent, and had the physical capabilities to do so, would never be able to work, for example, as a miner?

'This is an absolute provision, so a woman cannot work in a coal mine "at the face". There is a so-called prohibition of deviating from the law to the worker's detriment, and setting a precedent could result in the imposition of certain conditions on other women who might not want them. The principle of equal treatment between men and women cannot be fully applied if we take into consideration the biological differences between the two genders. Rather than formal equality, we are talking about substantive equality in this context', explains the labour law expert.

In which areas do women most often experience violations of their labour rights? They particularly face gender discrimination, expressed more or less explicitly. We observe, among other things, that the higher the position, the more the ratio between female and male employees skews in one direction. Having children is also becoming a reason for discrimination: mothers are denied parental rights and are overlooked for promotions on the assumption that 'they are less available'. The stereotypical division into male and female (i.e. better and less well-paid) sectors also persists.

'It is difficult to describe the scale of discriminatory phenomena, as they still constitute a small percentage of cases brought before labour courts. Cases of sexual harassment are also closely related to these issues – let us remember that harassment can also include lewd jokes or overly familiar treatment from a man, to which a woman does not agree', explains Urszula Torbus, PhD.

Discrimination can also be manifested by the disparity in wages. We can express it using several indicators, one of

The Labour Code prohibits women from performing work:

- involving strenuous physical activity and transport of heavy goods,
- requiring exposure to noise and vibration,
- involving forced body positions,
- requiring staying underground, below the ground level,
- requiring exposure to high altitudes,
- risking exposure to electromagnetic fields, ionising and ultraviolet radiation, and involving electronic visual display,
- requiring contact with harmful biological agents.

which is the so-called gender pay gap. It is the difference between the average gross hourly rates received by men and women, calculated on the basis of wages paid directly to employees before deducting income tax and social security contributions. However, only companies with at least ten employees are taken into account. If differences in employment, education level, and work experience are factored in, we arrive at the so-called adjusted wage gap.

According to the European Commission data from November 2022, it stands at 13% almost across the entire European Union (no data from Ireland and Greece are available). Luxembourg is the leader with 0.7%, and at the opposing extreme is Latvia with 22.3%. Poland is in fifth place with 4.5%, ahead of Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Finland, Germany, and Austria, among others.

'I wouldn't overestimate these statistics. Firstly, when the wage gap is calculated, small businesses, i.e. companies employing up to nine people, are not taken into consideration, and they are the foundation of the economies of many countries, including Poland. According to the October 2022 report by the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development, as many as 97% of all companies were considered small businesses', the lawyer points out. 'Secondly, women in Poland cannot afford to work part-time, unlike their counterparts in richer countries. Moreover, Polish women had to — and still have to — bring in the highest possible salary into household budgets. If we consider the percentage of women employed part-time, in Western countries it reaches 30-40%, while in Poland it does not exceed 10%.

One other indicator worth mentioning is that, according to the Statistics Poland, the average gross monthly remuneration of men is 14.7% higher than that of women.

This brings us to the question of whether wage inequality is not simply a breach of the law in light of Article 18(1) of the Labour Code. It is certainly difficult to enforce it, partly due to such nonquantifiable factors as the stereotypical understanding of men's and women's social roles. According to the lawyer, there is still a belief that the wife's salary is just a bonus on top of the salary of her husband, the main breadwinner in the family, and that a newly-employed young woman is bound to become pregnant... Another issue is the policy of exaggerated secrecy with regard to salaries, because while in the public sector, where the freedom of salaries is limited by regulations, the wage gap reaches 3.9%, in the private sector, where employers have more freedom, it is as high as 17%.

'Fortunately, due to the influence of EU legislation, the labour law is trying to equalise the rights of both working parents, e.g. the father is now also entitled to parental leave, and Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers should finally be implemented within the next six months. These are important steps towards correcting the existing stereotypes', concludes Urszula Torbus, PhD.

THUNDERBOLT OF ANGER

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Poland's abortion law is among the most restrictive in Europe. The decision to tighten it up led to the largest protests since the fall of communism in 1989. It is impossible to offer a fair explanation of the so-called 'Women's Strike' without at least a brief description of how the abortion law in Poland has changed over the years.

During the communist era and for a while after the fall of communism in Poland, abortion was legal only upon receiving a favourable opinion from a medical committee. In reality, abortion was something common, and pregnant women often used the services of doctors (or other people) performing the procedure outside of the official practice in hospitals and medical institutions. However, it should be noted that between 1980 and 1987 the registered number of performed procedures did not fall below 100,000 per year. In 1993, the so-called abortion compromise was introduced, which allowed abortion in three cases: when the health and life of the mother was endangered, when the pregnancy was the result of an illegal act (rape, incest) or when prenatal tests showed a high probability of serious and irreversible damage to the foetus. In practice, the number of officially performed abortions has fallen to such a low level that often it does not exceed 1,000 procedures per year. The topic of abortion was not frequently discussed outside a narrow circle of feminist and pro-choice activists. One exception was the case of Alicja Tysiąc, who was denied abortion, which ultimately exacerbated her visual impairment, leading to a significant decrease in her day-to-day functioning. The European Court of Human Rights issued the ruling that ordered the Polish government to pay her compensation and cover the legal costs incurred.

The topic of abortion in Poland continued to be absent in public discourse until 2016 when demonstrations organised as part of the so-called Black Protest took place. The participants showed their opposition to the 'Stop Abortion' bill, which was supposed to make the legislation even stricter. The protesters showed up in surprisingly high numbers, given the lack of me-

Women's Strike demonstration in Warsaw in 2020 | Photo: Robert Kuszyński/Oko.press

dia coverage of the topic. According to police estimates, 98,000 people took part in 143 demonstrations, an overwhelming majority of which were held in towns with a population of less than 50,000. The protest received widespread media coverage, both in Poland and abroad, and a few days later the Polish Parliament rejected the bill.

But the real storm was yet to be unleashed. In 2020, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled that the termination of pregnancy due to severe and irreversible damage to the foetus or an incurable disease threatening its life is unconstitutional. This premise is the basis for 97% of legal abortions in Poland. Several months of protests began, with more than 400,000 demonstrators involved. The statistics show that more than half of Polish citizens were sympathetic to the protesters. This time, the rhetoric used at the protests took on a completely different tone than in 2016. 'Fuck off' (Polish: *wypierdalać*) became one of the main slogans of the protests, which unequivocally communicated the anger of the Polish society. Abortion was not the only topic raised at the protests (this time demanding liberalisation of the law). The ruling party, the influence of the Catholic Church and right-wing political parties, which strongly supported the Tribunal's decision, were also criticised.

Poland, previously associated with conservative values and adherence to religious traditions, became the centre stage for large demonstrations, which explicitly attacked the stereotypical image of the Polish society. The widespread use of profanities and verbal attacks on specific politicians, pro-life activists, and clergy showed not only an opposition to their ideas and the desire to resist them, but also a lack of trust in dialogue. Physical attacks by nationalist groups did not crush the protesters' spirit either. The protests were publicised on social media by the participants themselves, and any articles present in the online space were flooded with comments from those opposed to stricter abortion laws. A red lightning bolt became the symbol of the protests and could be seen on clothing, shop windows, flat windows, and graffiti on the walls of buildings.

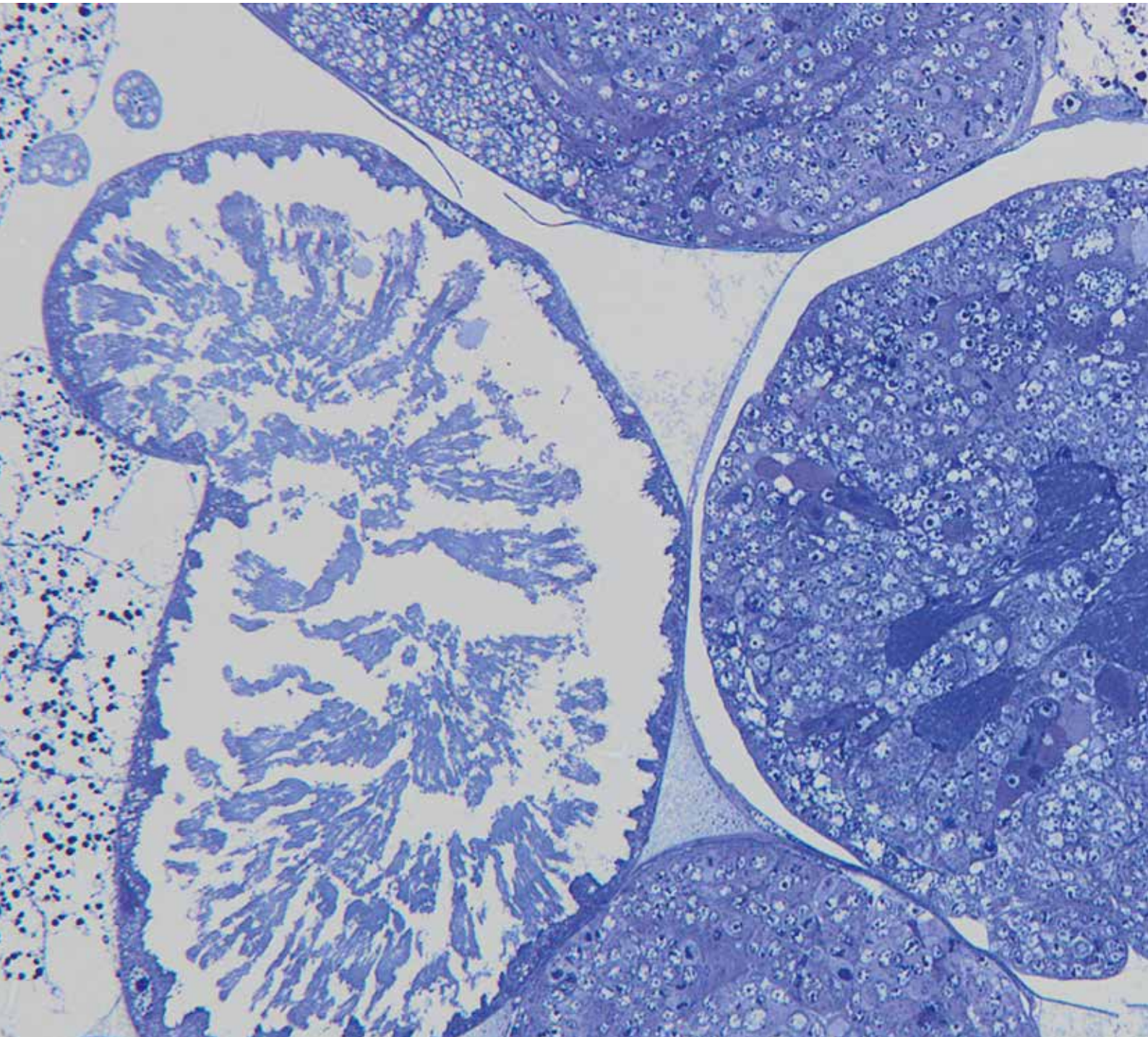
Unusual banners were common among the protesters. Cardboard boxes with rhymes, memes, and pop culture references grew in popularity. Some of the banners became extremely popular and were copied numerous times. Slogans such as 'Mephedrone has a better composition than the Polish government' or 'You shouldn't have pissed us the fuck off' became increasingly common.

The phenomenon of the Women's Strike can be observed in many aspects of the protests, such as the use of vulgar language in official statements, the funny banners, or the instant and grassroots rallying of the participants. What seems most unusual, however, is the absolute reversal of the stereotypical image of the Polish society. In a country regarded as Catholic, the largest protest since the fall of communism was anticlerical in nature. Places seen as the hotbeds of conservatism were met with vulgarities shouted by angry women. In Poland, where the right wing is the dominant political force, the slogan 'I will birth you a leftist' stands as an outright proclamation of defiance. The protests died down, and neither the government nor the Tribunal changed their stance. The protesters have dispersed, but they have not ceased to function in social life. They will continue to study here, work, and raise their children, and perhaps this fact will bring about important changes in the Polish society.

Małgorzata Kłoskowicz, PhD

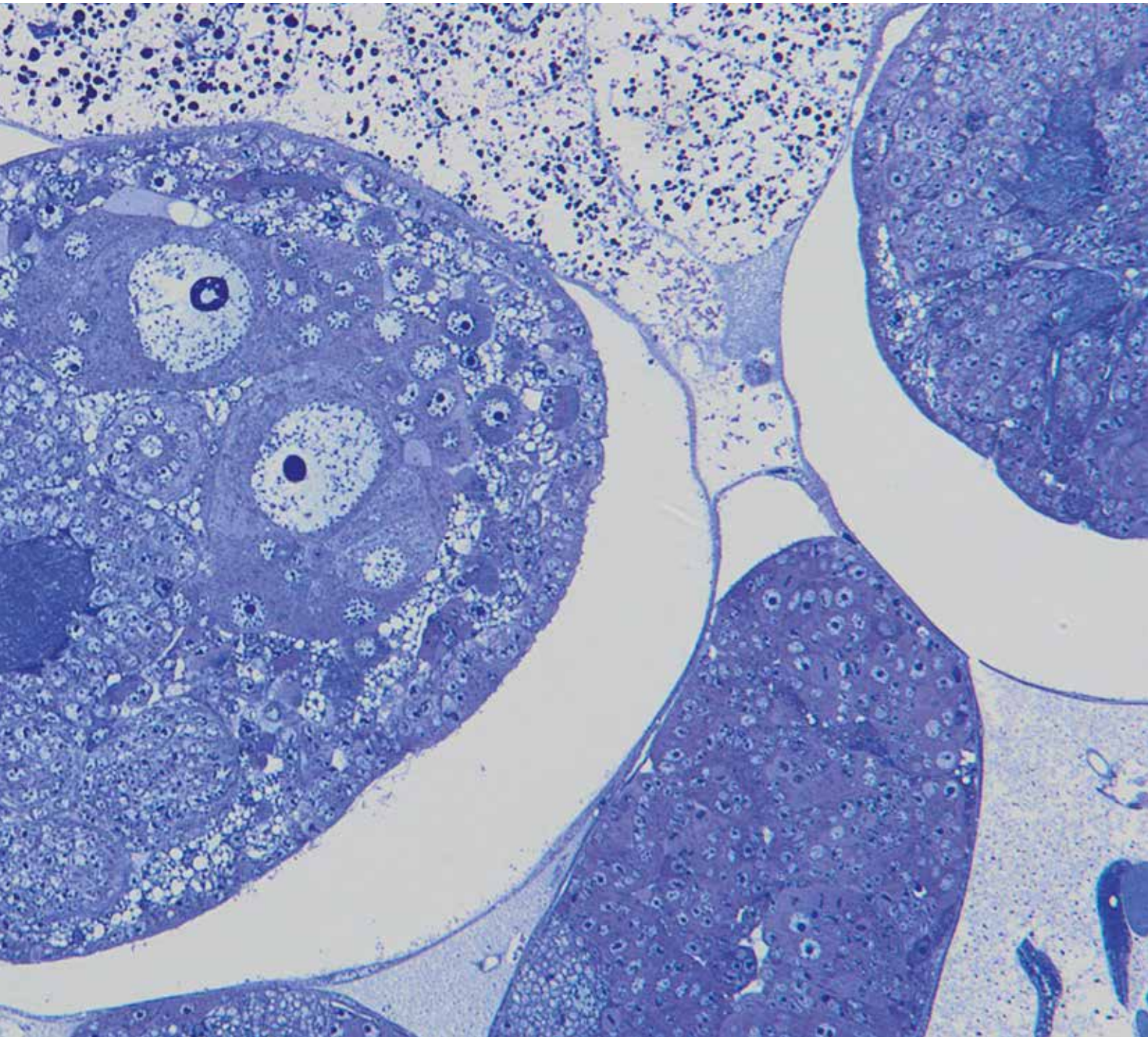
How is it possible that a virgin queen, which was unable to fly out of the hive for her first and only mating flight, laid unfertilised eggs? What's more: viable males, i.e. drones, hatched from the eggs. This was the question that Rev. Jan Dzierżon, a beekeeper living at the turn of the 20th century, an enthusiast and inventor of the prototype of the modern hive, had to ask himself when he first observed virgin birth in bees. We now know that natural parthenogenesis (virgin birth) is observed not only in insects and many other invertebrates but also in fish, amphibians, reptiles, and birds. It does not occur in mammals, although, as experiments have shown, it can be artificially induced in mice. In humans – not yet.

The insides of the parthenogenetic aphid *Cinara cupressi* larvae, with numerous embryos of the next generation of virgin females. Parthenogenetic aphids do not lay eggs, but give birth to daughters that already contain developing granddaughters | Photo: Piotr Świątek, Karina Wieczorek



DAUGHTERS BIRTH DAUGHTERS, VIRGINS BIRTH SONS

PARTHENOGENESIS IN APHIDS, BEES AND... HUMANS?



NATURE'S OUTRAGEOUS EXPERIMENT

Everything that happens in nature aims at survival. If nature experiments from time to time, it is only so that those who reproduce faster and more efficiently have better chances of surviving. When viewed through the lens of sexual processes, parthenogenesis is just such an experiment, allowing nature to optimise the costs associated with sexual reproduction under certain conditions. Cost-effectiveness comes first!

The first of considerable expenditures is the males' cost of living. From the perspective of the survival of a species, their only role is to provide half of the necessary genes. Male gametes are not only cheap but also produced in excess. Thus, a single male capable of impregnating many females should be sufficient. Meanwhile, we have equal representation of both sexes in nature, which means that only 50% of the population reproduces. Given that the primary objective is survival, this is waste in its purest form.

The second expense incurred by sexual reproduction is the cost of meiosis, which necessitates sharing our genes with a sexual partner in order to have offspring. We would not be able to clone Maria Skłodowska-Curie, for example. Her children got only half of their mother's genes and half of their father's genes, so they are different from each of their parents. Sexual reproduction must therefore result in the mixing of genes in our offspring. And thus we return to the beginning. Scientists searched for an answer to the question of why good gene arrangements are broken up. They came to the conclusion that mixing them gives us an advantage by ensuring better chances of survival. In sexual reproduction, each offspring is different. The one better adjusted to the given conditions will survive and reproduce, whereas the one worse suited will not reproduce and will become extinct.

Is this a satisfactory explanation for the existence of the costs associated with sexual reproduction? It is difficult to say. In nature, things are usually much more complicated than they seem.

So let us take a look at some situations where nature departs from sexual reproduction. Another option could be parthenogenesis or hermaphroditism (common among plants).

To put it in the most general terms, parthenogenesis is reproduction without the participation of males and, consequently, without conception. However, when we look at it more closely, we find a plethora of solutions. We already know of more than a dozen recipes that nature has discovered for obtaining successive generations of daughters and sons without 'fathers'. In the case of invertebrates and certain vertebrates, it is presumably associated with higher chances of survival and optimisation of the costs associated with sexual reproduction under certain environmental conditions. Bdelloid rotifers are an evolutionary outlier in this regard, or a downright evolutionary scandal, at least according to one of the most prominent experts in evolutionary biology, Prof. John Maynard Smith. Model-based calculations suggest that after about 10,000 generations, a species reproducing in such a way should have become extinct. Meanwhile, female bdelloid rotifers never laid eyes on a male for hundreds of millions of years, yet they exist everywhere in the world and are doing just fine.

The first documented evidence of parthenogenesis appeared as early as the mid-18th century. Charles Bonnet, a Swiss philosopher and naturalist interested in aphids, observed that some females give birth to successive generations of females without copulating. Daughters give birth to daughters that give birth to daughters. This is a perfect example of the combination of rapid colonisation and survival. Anyone who has once encountered them on their plants knows how quickly they can colonise any green space.

Aphids reproduce both sexually and without the involvement of males. Their fertilised eggs are laid in the winter, which is how the species is able to survive the harshest time of the year. In the spring, females (referred to as fundatrix or foundresses) hatch from the eggs. A single female searches for a host plant. When she comes across one, she rapidly begins to colonise it, giving birth to daughters, which are her clones. There is already another embryo in the nascent larva, making the females resemble Russian dolls. Their numbers are increasing exponentially. When the autumn ends, everything changes. Aphids start laying two kinds of eggs. Females hatch from one type and males from the other. This is the generation that will reproduce sexually, the resulting eggs are prepared for overwintering, and the whole process repeats itself.

Bees have a slightly different approach to survival. The young queens fly out of the hive for a mating flight only once in their entire lives. They come into contact with at least one drone and, as a result of this encounter, they accumulate sperm in special sacs. They return to the hive and lay the eggs fertilised in this way, which then give birth only to females — up to several tens of thousands of sisters forming a single swarm. When the supply of sperm runs out, then reproduction without males takes over. Parthenogenesis in bees involves the laying of haploid unfertilised eggs, which always hatch into drones.

Oleander aphid *Aphis nerii* | Photo: Wirestock — Freepik.com

HUMANS' OUTRAGEOUS EXPERIMENT

The great conundrum of parthenogenesis was primarily about how to stimulate the egg cell. In sexual reproduction, this process is initiated by the sperm. It is not without reason that the metaphor of the kiss of the sleeping beauty is used, which in this case involves the inactive oocyte. The sperm transmits an electrical and enzymatic impulse and stimulates the egg cell. Scientists concluded that some animals must produce another stimulus triggering parthenogenetic reproduction. At the end of the 19th century, biologists performed a series of experiments to understand this phenomenon. They pricked the egg cell, rubbed it with various instruments, such as a glass pipette, and used a salt solution to see how the stimulation occurs. Interestingly, these actions resulted in embryos actually developing, although very rarely.

Scientists also wondered why natural parthenogenesis does not occur in mammals. The biologists have concluded that the so-called parental genomic stigma (genomic imprinting) may be the cause. They discovered that there is a molecular mechanism that prevents the organisms of mammals from reproducing without male participation. The DNA supplied to the offspring by the mother and father is marked differently (by the addition of methyl groups) according to a sex-specific pattern. In mice, it has been shown that an embryo develops only when one specific gene has the stigma of the mother and the other of the father. Only the interaction of the two genomes can ensure the viability of the offspring. Nature has thus protected mammals from escaping the high cost of sexual reproduction.

Despite this, intensive research using knowledge from molecular biology began in the 20th century to bring about artificial parthenogenesis in mammals. The results of successful experiments were published in 2004. Scientists from Japan found a solution to 'bypass' the protection mechanism — they reprogrammed one of the female genomes into a male one. Out of one hundred mouse embryos, created by combining the genetic material of two females, only two survived. The rest had many serious developmental defects. Just one single embryo made it to adulthood and was fertile. The mouse was given the name Kaguya.

This type of research evokes all sorts of emotions and raises many questions. Could artificial parthenogenesis also be carried out in humans? What consequences and ethical justification would there be for this type of experimentation? It would not be possible to avoid associations with factories mass-producing genetically modified humans. If we could legally edit genes in the future, we would be able to design improved clones of ourselves. We could get rid of gender, race, and perhaps our bodies. Daughters could give birth to daughters and virgins to males. But would males still be needed?

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A SIGNIFICANT ABSENCE

Since the early days of the convention, science fiction writers have been primarily interested in science and technology as well as their impact on individuals and societies in the near or distant future — that is, a world that has not yet materialised. Women have not been the main focus of their reflections. Why? Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, PhD, a literature studies expert and science fiction researcher, asserts that this literary convention is stereotypically male and that the absence of women, especially in the first stages of its development, is due to a few specific reasons.

The absence of women in science fiction literature is grounded in the origins of the convention. Some scholars argue that sci-fi dates as far back as antiquity, with certain elements appearing in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the works of Aristophanes. However, the current as we know it today developed in the early 20th century. The term science fiction itself was made popular in the 1920s by the American publisher Hugo Gernsback. The first issue of Amazing Stories, the first ever magazine dedicated to science fiction, was published in 1926. The names of the authors featured in this issue alone are notable, including Jules Verne, Herbert George Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe.

This literary convention originally began as stories about tinkering, science, and technology, and therefore touched on subjects that were generally reserved for young boys and male adolescents. In the 1920s and 1930s, popular science fiction magazines in the US focused on masculinity and featured male protagonists often exaggerating their roles in the creation of future worlds, whereas women were portrayed in ways that are now considered sexist. It was male prose from the very beginning. Interestingly, the writer Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* (1818), is considered the 'founding mother' of modern science fiction.

The first feminist writers to emerge at the turn of the 20th century focused on themes such as gender inequality, race, sexuality, and reproduction. Some of the most notable works of feminist science fiction developed these themes either through utopia, showing a society in which gender differences or gender power imbalances do not exist, or dystopia, presenting worlds in which gender inequalities are exacerbated, thus indicating the need for feminist work to continue. Science fiction has proven very useful in presenting the goals of feminism: worlds free of sexism where women's contributions (to science) are recognised and valued, worlds that explore the diversity of women's needs and desires, and worlds that transcend gender.

The 1960s and 1970s are known as the golden years of science fiction. Some of the greatest science fiction writers published their best works at that time, i.e. Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, Philip K. Dick, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, and Stanisław Lem, among others. Yet, the female characters in their novels confirm the stereotypes and reflect the patriarchal order of society, or, as in Lem's case, women are not only not the main characters, but do not appear at all, or if they do appear, they are reduced to a single function and even objectified. However, other novels begin to be published, including those by Ursula K. Le Guin, author of science fiction

and fantasy books. Many of her works are regarded as science fictions classics, such as the *Earthsea* and the *Hainish Cycle* series. In her novels, she often used the theme of extraterrestrial cultures to make statements about human culture. She also touched on the essence of gender identity, using the motif of an androgynous race in her novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Such approaches positioned her novels in the category of feminist science fiction.

There was also Joanne Russ, the author of such novels as *The Female Man* and *We Who Are About To*, who became one of the best-known feminists in the history of science fiction. She was not only a writer but also a lecturer and literary critic. In 1971, she published the article titled *The Image of the Woman in Science Fiction*, putting forward the argument that there were no women in science fiction, only their images. She pointed out that there was a lack of reflection on family, division of social roles, sexuality, and gender identity — and it was these themes that began to appear in women's science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, the emergence of feminist science fiction in the 1970s also introduced the concept of environmental awareness.

Octavia Butler and Margaret Atwood complete the list of female authors of this period. Octavia Butler is the first recognised and award-winning African-American science fiction writer, whose novels present a view of humanity as inherently flawed by its innate tendency towards hierarchical thinking, which leads to intolerance, violence, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, classism, and all the other '-isms'. Margaret Atwood's best-known work is the dystopian feminist novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, which is a psychological study of a young woman placed in an extreme life situation. The totalitarian state created in the wake of an environmental catastrophe is a symbol of patriarchal hegemony, in which women have been completely excluded from public spaces, divided into castes of wives, mothers, mistresses and servants, and subsumed by the social role they perform.

Contrary to appearances, science fiction is a conservative literary convention, and the authors are still predominantly male. Piotr Gorliński-Kucik, PhD, proposes that science fiction should be treated not only as a literary convention but also as a way of thinking — critical of the present, the technology, and the future. We should read science fiction and think in the style of science fiction because it prepares us for a better tomorrow, helps us analyse the world we live in and adjust to changes, and allows us to think about the future in an open-minded way. In this world, women, their points of view, their emotions, and their needs cannot be missing.

Everything that happens in nature aims at survival.
If nature experiments from time to time, it is only so that those who reproduce faster and more efficiently have better chances of surviving.

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