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## The Culture-Forming Potential of Family Narratives

### Abstract

This editorial outlines the current state of familological studies in Poland, with particular focus on cultural, literary and gender studies. Being a complex research subject, the need for an interdisciplinary approach to the family in its many forms and models needs emphasising. The ongoing debate on the family model in Poland, including political discourse, builds the context for scientific familological studies across all disciplines. The changes proposed by the Polish Ministry of Education and Science, i.e., establishing a new field of study called ‘family studies’ is testament to the significance of the subject. However, it also forces one to reflect upon the temptation to politicise familological discourse in Poland. The editorial also reviews certain texts included in this issue of “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich” [“The Problems of Literary Genres”], which is devoted to family literature and includes articles on family-themed novels (sagas), (auto)biographical works, reportage, pathography, family relationships and their artistic representations. When analysing the submitted articles and overall contribution of this issue, this editorial also considers both the reasons behind the predominance of women in familological studies and the issues that have been overlooked or insufficiently researched. The analysis implies that more attention should be devoted to the problems of non-heteronormative families and those that escape conventional definitions based on non-biological or interspecies relationships.

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### **What is familiology?**

In the introduction to *Family in Crisis?*, Eva-Sabine Zehelein states:

Families are in all their rainbow-colored appearances and life forms — mono- or pluripaternal, with, e.g., hetero-, homosexual, or transgender adults/parents — fundamental and reliable core elements of social existence and action. [...] Thus, families are an ideal prism through which central contemporary national as well as transnational and international, yes, also global, phenomena, interconnections and crises can be highlighted and debated. We believe that to examine families requires interdisciplinary and intersectional perspectives. Such an endeavor may bear potential for controversy, yet it is of fundamental importance in order to shape the futures of our societies. (Zehelein 2020: 9)

The importance of familological discourse is emphasised most in times of crises — armed conflicts, profound social and political transformations, demographic decline, inflation, etc. Today, Poland is facing a similar crisis: the family — defined in the mainstream political narrative primarily as the union of a man and a woman whose main mission is to conceive and raise children — is supposed to be a remedy for the current social crisis, which has been additionally fuelled by the economic difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This crisis also has a deeper — political, religious and moral — dimension in Poland. The narrative of the ruling political party today leaves no room for diversity, or recognition of alternative family models, where 'alternative' means 'non-nuclear'. This applies not only to non-heteronormative families, but also to childless and single-parent homes, and families where children are raised by guardians who are not their biological parents. Regardless of the lifestyle and family models propagated by conservative politicians, there are many other alternative forms of the family which are gaining popularity in Poland, as confirmed by scientific research (cf. Jawor 2018; *Family in Crisis?* 2020; Gawrońska, Sikorska 2022; Mizielińska 2022, etc.).

Familiological discourse is interdisciplinary — as it has evolved within sociology, psychology, cultural and religious studies, pedagogy, anthropology and gender studies. This issue of "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich" ["The Problems of Literary Genres"] focuses on the subject of family in culture, coinciding with a debate on the status of family studies

as a research field/discipline which took place in the Polish Ministry of Education and Science (MEiN). On 22 October 2022, at a conference under the telling title ‘We Cherish Family Life’, minister Przemysław Czarnek again stressed the role of the family as the fundamental social unit, while on the ministry’s official webpage there was already the following announcement confirming that a new scientific field had been established:

The introduction of a new branch of family studies including the discipline of family science is a response to the postulates of the scientific community, who reported:

- ambiguous affiliation of family-orientated research to different fields of science (theological sciences, humanities and social sciences);
- fragmentation of the community of scholars engaged in family studies;
- and imposition of a discipline-specific dominant (psychology, sociology, pedagogy and theology) in family-orientated research.

The discipline of ‘family science’ was absent from any previous classification.

The changes introduced will, inter alia:

- increase the research affiliation to the field of family studies;
- create more favourable conditions for research development;
- specify new scientific disciplines in the future. (MEiN 2022: page n/a)

What new scientific disciplines will emerge within the field of family studies, and which existing disciplines will constitute its core? Does the announcement on the new discipline during the conference at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow and the Polish Familological Society (a review of the publications seems telling<sup>1</sup>) imply the direction in which familological discourse in Poland is to develop? In the present political climate, one might think that this is what the patrons of this initiative expect. This is also indicated by how family science has been organised to date. Prior to the official ministerial announcement, courses in family studies were already offered at the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Cracow, and in other state universities that boasted theological faculties. As of this academic year, the University of Szczecin introduces a major called Familiology, promoted as ‘a course that will help to discover the worth of family and to see it through the lens of Christian values.’<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the academic world will not necessarily toe the official line and the fate of the new discipline may take an alternative view to the intentions of ministerial officials. In fact, this is already happening. In October 2022, an interdisciplinary conference on ‘Genealogies in the LGBT+ Movement’ was held at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan. After having been postponed due to the pandemic, this highly anticipated conference brought together representatives from literary studies, legal sciences, psychology, sexology, pedagogy, sociology, history and theology. During the event, participants heard (and responded to) lectures on the legal situation of non-heteronormative families in Poland, factors influencing parents’ reactions to their children coming out, literary images of non-heteronorma-

<sup>1</sup> [familiolodzy.pl/publikacje](http://familiolodzy.pl/publikacje).

<sup>2</sup> [kandydaci.usz.edu.pl/familiologia](http://kandydaci.usz.edu.pl/familiologia).

tive families, the social functioning of children raised in single-sex families, and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals and families in the Catholic Church in Germany, amongst others. Both sanctioned debates in the conference rooms and behind-the-scenes meetings led to the general conclusion that it is imperative to take advantage of the circumstances, i.e., the aforementioned announcement by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (symbolically in force since 11 November 2022, which is the Poland's National Independence Day), and to respond to it by creating modern majors in family studies and founding new scientific institutions that specialise in this field.

### **The culture-forming potential of family narratives**

Quoting Zofia Mitosek, one could state that:

[...] family topology as a research subject often determines the language of the research itself. The concepts of fatherhood, motherhood, brotherhood, legacy, and kinship change their literal meaning within the discourse of human sciences and begin to symbolise contexts that go far beyond blood ties. [...] The family in the narrative never appears coincidentally, as just another motif — alongside love, crime, art, science, etc. Arguably, it is quite the opposite: it is the family that gives birth to the narrative, becoming its driving force, its underlying structure, without which the practice of storytelling would be an arrangement of unrelated and meaningless pieces. (Mitosek 2021: 179–182)

This issue of “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich” focuses on both the relationship between the research object and analytic tools, methodology, as well as on new approaches to defining the family and the roles played by individual members and the representatives of the different genders, which lead to new ways of discussing the family in the field of culture. Criticism of the traditional family paradigm and the emergence of alternative family models — including non-heteronormative variants — are issues frequently debated in modern humanities, as they still need more profound clarification and nuancing. However, it is literature and how contemporary authors approach family narratives in fiction and non-fiction that remains the core of our interest as editors of this volume.

Undoubtedly, a striking feature of this edition is that all articles therein are by women. Naturally, this does not stem from editorial intent, but from the fact that over 90 percent of the submitted papers were actually penned by female authors. Following verification and external reviews, the only texts accepted were those by women, which, in addition, focused on female rather than male literature. The only exception was the editorial contribution by Marcin Filipowicz, who was the consultant for the entry ‘family saga’. However, this only confirms the rule, since Filipowicz has been working on the subject of family narratives (and also on female writers, types of femininity and masculinity in culture, etc.) for many years, especially in relation to Czech literature, as evidenced by his latest publication, *Configuring Memory in Czech Family Sagas* (2022), which was reviewed for the journal by Joanna Czaplińska. How can this gender-oriented ‘predominance’ in the Polish literary studies of familiology be explained? It would be easiest to claim that women are traditionally more interested in family issues than men, but, with regard to literature, this would be blatantly untrue. After all, it was Leo Tolstoy who — a century and a half ago in *Anna Karenina* — expressed the timeless diagnosis: ‘Happy families are all alike; every unhappy

family is unhappy in its own way.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the vast majority of the celebrated and widely read family sagas of the last century were written by men. At the same time, however, the contribution of feminist criticism and the female-dominated gender studies, were and still are central to the development of contemporary familological discourse. Even though the family and its effect on the patterns of masculinity is becoming an increasingly frequent research subject, especially in masculinity studies, it is little reflected in this edition.

Given this fact, what can one gather from this issue of “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”? Among other things, about the aforesaid family saga, to which an entry in *Dictionary of Literary Genres and Types* (Anna Zatora) is devoted, and whose transformations in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries are truly fascinating. The question of whether the saga has a gender was addressed several years ago by Inga Iwasiów when discussing the change in focalization and feminist attempts to appropriate the genre (cf. Iwasiów 2008). When writing about Beata Chomałowska’s *Andreowia*, Iwasiów also states that:

It has long puzzled me how to define the noticeable, enduring tendency to narrate the world through sagas — with all its novelistic, cinematic, serialised variants. The intensified, conservative and emancipatory, ponderous and sentimental storytelling of the family deserves more than just the clichés that literary critics apply to define and describe it, marvelling at the potential of previously absent or marginalised variations. (Iwasiów 2021: page n/a)

The scholar coins a pseudo-term, ‘sagism’. Does that mean that one could speak of ‘sagicism’ in a variety of genres, beyond literary and those with the family or intergenerational relationships at the centre of the plot? The fact that the family saga is enjoying a renaissance is often manifested as a sentimental return to the Grand Narratives, possibly arising from the need for stability in the (post-)modern world, but has also stimulated authors to write family stories and the history of nations anew. The monumental family sagas — whose rebirth has been witnessed in the last decade or more, from Kristina Sabaliauskaitė’s *Silva rerum* (2008 — new parts still being published) and Karl Ove Knausgård’s *My Struggle* (2009–2011) — prove to be research material of a revisionist nature. The novelty of the traditional family saga (cf. anti-saga; Zatora 2022) lies in the adoption of micro-narratives, giving a voice to women, demystifying the toxic model of masculinity, demythologising the figures of Mother and Father and, finally, in plain valorising the subject. Women in family narratives are guardians of remembrance, but also ‘dissenters of the rules governing the community’ (Mrozik 2014: 499–500). This image of female authors, narrators, and researchers also seems to emerge from this issue of “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”.

The need for a female-authored saga is explicitly addressed in two articles — Joanna Szeczyk’s text on the novels by Joanna Bator (*Gorzko, gorzko*), Martyna Bundy (*Nieczułość*), Anna Dziewit-Meller (*Od jednego Lucypera*) and their ‘tender narrators’, and Anna Pełkaniec’s essay on grandmothers in post-2010 Polish literature. Both scholars concentrate on the female line, emphasising the matrilinearity of relationships, which constitutes a counterpoint to the traditional, patrilineal family saga. The notable absence of fathers and grandfathers in the analysed novels accentuates the role of women as custodians of family remembrance.

<sup>3</sup> Translated by Constance Garnett.

However, genealogical stories are a broad category that encompasses more than just family sagas/family novels. Thus, Angelika Malinar defines genealogy as follows:

As a generic term, ‘genealogy’ comprises ideas about origins, descent and provenance as well as different techniques and metaphors for locating individuals in certain social contexts (kinship relations, generational sequence etc.) the interpretation of which varies according to the given historical periods and cultural framework. Recording genealogy can be seen as a literary convention followed or reflected upon in many autobiographical texts when the author/narrator chooses to begin the story of his or her own life with events, protagonists and circumstances before or at the time of birth. As a literary device it has the function of introducing important protagonists to the unfolding autobiographical narrative, and to suggest or reject possible explanations of certain traits and characteristic features of the autobiographical self. (*Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction* 2019: 293)

When discussing family narratives, one must not ignore autobiographical and biographical texts. As Anna Pekaniec notes about family novels in Poland after 1989: ‘Letting readers inside the private, and often tabooed, family circle is of no small importance, as it is equivalent to repeated attempts to dispel the myth of the family as a bastion of tradition and ageless values, which were to smoothly bridge the public dimension of the smallest social unit with the sphere of private, intimate or just day-to-day — and thus, disregarded — rituals’ (Pekaniec 2014: 9). Her words can easily be applied to (auto)biographical texts produced in recent years. Since 2019, a number of major (auto)biographical works with significant themes of the I-versus-family relationship have been published in Poland. One such publication is Ludwika Włodek’s *Pra. Iwaskiewiczowie. Opowieść o rodzinie* (2021), discussed by Magdalena Krzyżanowska in this issue of our magazine. However, other notable works include Agnieszka Dauksza’s *Jaremianka* (2019), Sylwia Chwedorczyk’s *Kowalska. Ta od Dąbrowskiej* (2020), Anna Dżabagina’s *Kalkowska. Biogeografia* (2020), Małgorzata Czyńska’s *Kobro. Skok w przestrzeni* (2021), and Ewa Kraskowska’s *Książka Kaingba, mój dziadek* (2021). Once this collection is expanded with (auto)biographical reportages (cf. Żyrek-Horodyska 2019), it becomes apparent that exploring one’s own family identity and affiliation and those of others is a matter that deserves thousands of pages more. The readers love such stories, because the storytelling is akin to both the Old Norse and contemporary family saga (cf. Ween 1996: 112; Zatora 2022), yet equally close to reportage and biography.

The theme of female archivists is explored by Magdalena Krzyżanowska in her article about the autobiographical works of Ludwika Włodek and Katarzyna Surmiak-Domańska. Genealogy, archives, reconstructing and constructing one’s own family narrative are topics found in both non-fiction prose and novels that are either non-autobiographical or implicitly autobiographical. Monika Wiszniowska’s text focuses on the Polish school of reportage (Ryszard Kapuściński, Małgorzata Szejnert, Hanna Krall, Wojciech Tochman, Mariusz Szczygieł, etc.), analysing the autobiographical reportage investigations by Maciej Zaremba Bielawski, Małgorzata Surmiak-Domańska and Zbigniew Rokita.

An important aspect of the female contributors’ literature and the issues discussed is the motif of inherited trauma — frequently addressed in scientific research today. As remarked by Wojciech Łukasz Dragan, studies on epigenetic inheritance are mainly conducted using samples taken from animals, and it is not yet possible to firmly state whether anxieties,

traumas and mental disorders can be hereditary: ‘The field of intergenerational transmission of trauma and its epigenetic correlates is relatively new’ (cf. Dragan 2021: 106; Wolynn 2017: 59–60).<sup>4</sup> The inheritance of (not always positive) experiences and the impact of family relationships on a given individual’s mental state are probed by Katarzyna Szmigiero when delving into the genre of pathography, mainly in Anglo-Saxon literature with its well-known instances of pathographic narratives, i.e., the works of Sylvia Plath and Sybil Flora Rheta Schreiber. Importantly, the focus is again on women and the relationships they build, primarily the mother-daughter relation. In yet another article, Agnieszka Czyżak exploits the motif of initiation into adulthood, analysing Polish rustic prose from this perspective, from the debuts of Mirosław Nahacz and Dorota Masłowska to the most recent works by Andrzej Muszyński, Ignacy Karpowicz, Wioletta Grzegorzewska, Weronika Gogola, Maciej Płaza and Anna Ciarkowska.

Although the articles in this issue of “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich” devoted to family relationships and the relations of ‘I versus family’ and ‘I versus family-space’ in literature present only a fraction of the familological discourse, they still illustrate how culture-related texts on family issues are analysed by using interdisciplinary tools and methods, from sociology and psychology to genetics and cultural studies, and all spearheaded by feminism and gender studies.

What does this edition of the journal fail to fully address from the editorial perspective? Regrettably, it is the issue of non-heteronormative family and the so-called family of choice (as opposed to family of origin), being probably the most sensitive topic in public discourse today. The outcome of the quantitative and qualitative research on the family life and parenthood of non-heterosexual people, conducted in the previous decade by Joanna Mizielińska, Marta Abramowicz and Agata Stasińska, was a report (cf. Mizielińska, Abramowicz, Stasińska 2014) that brings a wealth of data on the presence and existence of these families in Poland. The results are even more important, since their number has increased significantly, while their social standing has undergone further changes. Does our national fiction and non-fiction literature adequately address these changes? Perhaps the most up-to-date depictions and interpretations of these processes ought to be sought in spheres that are still of little interest to academic literary studies, e.g., in youth literature (e.g., novels by Natalia Osińska, Marek Szydlak and Weronika Łodyga), fan fiction, writings published and discussed on social media (e.g., on Wattpad; [wattpad.com](http://wattpad.com)). These are teeming with creative endeavours and the reading preferences of individuals on the brink of adulthood.

<sup>4</sup> In 2014, an interesting patient case study was described, in line with the theme of inherited trauma, which allows for a conclusion to be drawn on the importance of uncovering family stories during therapy to address emotional disorders:

Psychotherapy assessment in the course of long-term treatment augmented by the genogram technique of a female patient presenting various psychopathological symptoms, initially linked to sexual trauma, enabled the discovery of transgenerational messages conditioning the patient’s behaviour and how she built interpersonal relationships. By uncovering previously buried family stories, the patient was able to begin a genuine healing process, which enabled her not only to work through her personal traumatic experiences but also to rediscover herself as a granddaughter, a daughter and a woman. Additionally, it allowed her to re-establish her place in the family, where she had previously felt like a ‘rootless’ individual, a stranger unable to fit in and become part of the family system. The taboo that had perpetuated the intergenerational transfer of trauma was gone, and the time came to heal and rebuild a life guided by the independent choices of a person liberated from the hurtful ancestral burden. (Lucka, Nowak 2014: 94; cf. Wolynn 2017)

Memoirs of non-heteronormative individuals also provide invaluable information for familological research. As many as 184 authors (the vast majority aged between 21 and 30) submitted their memoirs to a contest organised by the Research Centre for LGBT+ History and Identities in 2020, at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw. The preface to the selection of these texts, published upon the completion of the project, states as follows:

Family life oftentimes proves to be [...] a battlefield for the self. Despite a few touching accounts of unconditional support, the majority are bitter narratives, which reveal a disturbing picture of the dominant model of upbringing in Poland: one based on demands and orders. [...] Sadly, sometimes breaking away from parents is the only way to save oneself. (Bednarek, Laskowski et al. 2021: 14)

These ‘touching accounts of unconditional support’ include Patryk Pufelski’s extensive 2013–2020 memoir, published in a separate volume (*Pawilon małych ssaków*, 2022), which has all the makings of becoming a bestseller. Born in 1990, the author is briefly described as ‘Gay, Polish, Jewish, Kashubian and zoo worker in one’ by a reviewer from the monthly *Książki. Magazyn do czytania* (Dłużewska 2022: page n/a), and also as an ‘inexpert’ expert (ex-student, no-degree) on both Hungary and culture studies. Pufelski portrays his vast, divergent human family, all the way back his great-great-grandparents, including aunts, uncles, and countless cousins, following his own claim that ‘although very distant, they are still family’.<sup>5</sup> He also provides an equally comprehensive portrayal of his animal family, demonstrating particular fondness for penguins. His book brings hope that literature written in the spirit of the new familological discourse will soon display all its culture-forming power.

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