

The Unspoken Zeitgeist: A Cultural Materialist Exploration of Structures of Feeling in Olga Tokarczuk's Fictional World

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ABSTRACT

Olga tokarczuk, the nobel laureate in literature, has captivated readers with her intricate narratives that delve into the depths of human experiences. She captures the complex and nuanced experiences that often elude easy articulation. The fragmented structure of her novels mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary experience, reflecting the disorienting effects of globalization and rapid technological change. Her characters are constantly on the move, traversing physical and psychological boundaries, and their identities in flux. The article demonstrates how tokarczuk masterfully portrays the complexities of identity, power, and social change, inviting readers to critically engage with the forces that shape our understanding of the world. It further highlights tokarczuk's contribution to contemporary fiction by capturing the zeitgeist of our era, marked by displacement, fragmented identities, and ecological concerns.

Keywords: olga tokarczuk, structures of feeling, cultural materialism, identity, power dynamics, historical trauma, ecological consciousness, contemporary fiction

INTRODUCTION

Olga Tokarczuk, the Nobel laureate in Literature, has emerged as a prominent figure in contemporary fiction, captivating readers with her intricate narratives that delve into the depths of human experience. Her novels, such as **House of Day, House of Night, Primeval and Other Times, Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead, Flights**, and **The Books of Jacob**, offer a rich mosaic of stories that explore themes of memory, identity, displacement, environmental consciousness, and the complex interplay of history, myth, and personal experience. Tokarczuk's works serve as multifaceted cultural artifacts, reflecting both the specific historical context of Poland and the broader human experience.

This research article aims to examine the intricate relationship between individual and collective experiences in Tokarczuk's novels through the lens of cultural materialism, particularly Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling." Williams defines "structures of feeling" as the shared values, emotions, and experiences that shape a particular historical and cultural moment (Williams, 1977). These structures are not static or abstract; they are embodied in the characters' senses, emotions, spirituality, and interactions with the world around them. By applying Williams' theoretical framework to Tokarczuk's narratives, we can gain a deeper understanding of the subtle shifts in consciousness, anxieties, and aspirations that characterize the human condition within her literary universe.

Tokarczuk's Challenge to Notions of Fixed Identity

A key focus of this analysis lies in Tokarczuk's challenge to notions of fixed identity. Her characters' sense of self, subjectivity, and interiority are portrayed as shaped by shifting social and cultural landscapes, revealing the fluidity of identity within the framework of structures of feeling. In **Flights**, the nameless protagonist's constant movement and shifting identities reflect a contemporary structure of feeling marked by rootlessness and a search for meaning in an ever-changing world (Tokarczuk, 2017). Similarly, in **The Books of Jacob**, the protagonist's fluid identity reflects the complexities of cultural and religious exchange in 18th-century Poland (Tokarczuk, 2021). This fluidity of identity can also be observed in **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead**, where Janina Duszejko's eccentricity and defiance of societal norms challenge traditional notions of selfhood and gender roles.

The Intersection of the Ordinary and the Extraordinary

Another prominent theme in Tokarczuk's work is the intersection of the ordinary and the extraordinary. By masterfully blending the mundane and the fantastic, she uncovers the affective dimensions of ordinary life within the structures of feeling. In **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead**, the protagonist's eccentric passion for astrology can be seen as a manifestation of a broader cultural turn towards alternative belief systems and a disillusionment with established institutions (Tokarczuk, 2018). In **House of Day, House of Night**, the fragmented narratives and dreamlike sequences blur the boundaries between the real and the imagined, revealing the hidden connections between individuals and the collective memory of a place (Tokarczuk, 2003). This blending of the ordinary and the extraordinary allows Tokarczuk to explore the liminal spaces where reality and imagination intersect, creating a sense of wonder and possibility within the confines of everyday life.

Confronting Historical Trauma

Tokarczuk's novels also confront individual and collective historical traumas, exploring how structures of feeling manifest in the characters' attempts to grapple with the legacies of violence, displacement, and loss. This engagement with memory, trauma, and history provides a poignant exploration of the human condition within specific cultural and historical contexts. In **Primeval and Other Times**, the characters' lives are deeply intertwined with the turbulent history of their village, revealing how historical events shape personal narratives and collective memory (Tokarczuk, 2010). In **The Books of Jacob**, Tokarczuk's sensitive depiction of the Jewish community in 18th-century Poland and the challenges they faced reveals the enduring impact of historical events on collective memory and identity. The novel also explores the complexities of faith and religious persecution, highlighting the ways in which historical trauma can shape individual and collective beliefs.

Gender, Power Dynamics, and Ecological Consciousness

Tokarczuk's portrayals of gender roles, power dynamics, and female subjectivity offer a critical perspective on prevailing social structures, highlighting the nuanced ways in which these structures shape individual experiences and societal norms. In **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead**, the protagonist's defiance of patriarchal norms and her empathy for animals challenge traditional power structures and offer an alternative model of resistance. Her unique perspective, informed by her deep connection to the natural world and her rejection of societal norms, allows her to see the inherent violence in the hunting culture and the patriarchal structures that uphold it.

The prominent ecological themes in Tokarczuk's work, particularly in **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead**, invite an exploration of how structures of feeling might encompass a changing awareness of the natural world, anxieties about environmental degradation, and alternative ways of understanding the interconnectedness of human and non-human life. The novel's exploration of anthropocentrism and animal agency challenges the human-centric worldview and offers a glimpse into a potential future where respect for all living beings is paramount.

Structures of Feeling in Tokarczuk's Novels

House of Day, House of Night

In this novel, Tokarczuk masterfully explores the complex interplay between memory, history, and the material world. The novel's fragmented structure, reminiscent of a palimpsest, layers narratives and perspectives, blurring the boundaries between past and present. The characters' encounters with the remnants of the past, such as abandoned homes and forgotten settlements, create a sense of historical haunting, where the past is not relegated to dusty archives but pulses through the present. Tokarczuk's animation of objects, imbuing them with an affective power, further underscores the enduring presence of the past in the material world.

The novel also delves into the gendered aspects of these structures of feeling, particularly within the domestic sphere. Tokarczuk meticulously portrays the repetitive acts of cooking, cleaning, and caretaking, traditionally associated with women's roles, imbuing them with a deeper significance. These seemingly mundane activities become imbued with a deeper significance, reflecting a structure of feeling that values the tangible, the everyday, and the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world. However, Tokarczuk also acknowledges the limitations and constraints imposed on women within these domestic spaces, revealing the complex power dynamics at play.

Furthermore, the novel explores the clash between traditional, myth-based worldviews and the encroaching forces of modernity and capitalism. The arrival of new technologies and the commodification of the landscape create a tension between older ways of knowing and the relentless tempo of progress. Tokarczuk does not present the triumph of modernity as inevitable; instead, she suggests that myth and folklore persist, offering alternative modes of understanding the world and resisting the homogenizing forces of globalization.

Primeval and Other Times

The novel offers a profound exploration of shared experiences, emotions, and social connections within a fictional Polish village. Tokarczuk delves into the spiritual dimensions of the villagers' lives, examining their beliefs, rituals, and connections to the natural world. Her portrayal of the characters' interactions with nature and their exploration of folklore and tradition reveals the deep-seated spiritual underpinnings that shape their understanding of the world and their place within it. The novel challenges conventional boundaries between the sacred and the mundane, presenting a deeply personal and embodied spirituality that exists outside of institutionalized faith.

The novel also examines gender dynamics and the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through the experiences of female characters like Genia and Ruta, Tokarczuk highlights the resilience and agency of women in navigating societal constraints and pursuing lives beyond traditional expectations. Their defiance of societal expectations and pursuit of independence challenge traditional gender roles and offer alternative models of female empowerment.

Memory serves as a crucial thread connecting the past with the present in **Primeval and Other Times**. The characters grapple with personal and collective memories, which shape their identities and understanding of their history. Tokarczuk's fragmented narrative style mirrors the fragmented nature of memory, highlighting the subjective and often incomplete nature of recollection. The interplay between nature and human life is another recurring motif, emphasizing the interconnectedness between the villagers and their environment. The novel portrays a sentient nature, where rivers, forests, and even mushrooms possess a vibrant agency, blurring the lines between the human and non-human world. This interconnectedness is further amplified through the characters' experiences within the natural world, where they find solace, healing, and a sense of belonging.

Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead

In the novel, Tokarczuk presents a nuanced critique of anthropocentrism and patriarchal power dynamics through the unconventional perspective of Janina Duszejko. Janina's outsider status, shaped by her age, gender, vegetarianism, and astrological interests, allows her to perceive and critique the community's ingrained structures of feeling. Her rejection of norms like meat consumption and hunting becomes a form of resistance against the dominant social order, challenging the deeply entrenched anthropocentric mindset that permeates her community.

The novel subverts traditional narratives by reframing Janina's eccentricity as a source of counter-hegemonic knowledge. Her deep empathy for animals and her belief in cosmic interconnectedness challenge the community's anthropocentric assumptions. Tokarczuk's portrayal of animal perspectives further disrupts the logic that justifies their exploitation and abuse, offering a glimpse into a potential future where respect for all living beings is paramount.

The novel also delves into the patriarchal power dynamics that shape the characters' emotional landscapes and social interactions. Janina's encounters with male authority figures reveal the ingrained misogyny that underpins the social order. Her concerns are met with dismissal, her age and gender weaponized to undermine her credibility. This resonates with Williams' concept of structures of feeling, highlighting how societal norms and power structures shape individual emotions and experiences.

Flights

Flights is a novel that defies conventional narrative structures, presenting a constellation of vignettes, reflections, and stories centered on travel, movement, and the human body. Through fragmented and evocative prose, Tokarczuk captures the complex and nuanced experiences that often elude easy articulation. The novel's fragmented structure mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary experience, reflecting the disorienting effects of globalization and rapid technological change. Characters are constantly on the move, traversing physical and psychological boundaries, their identities in flux. The human body, a recurring motif, is presented as both a site of vulnerability and a source of agency. Tokarczuk's evocative descriptions of bodily experiences – pain, pleasure, decay – underscore the interconnectedness of the physical and the emotional.

The novel also explores the anxieties and aspirations that shape the contemporary moment. The characters grapple with questions of identity, belonging, and purpose in a world that is increasingly interconnected yet often alienating. The novel's ecological consciousness is evident in its attention to the natural world, which is presented as both a source of wonder and a reminder of human fragility. The recurring motif of the disappearing island serves as a poignant symbol of vulnerability in the face of climate change, reflecting a growing apprehension about ecological precarity.

The Books of Jacob

The Books of Jacob, a panoramic novel set in 18th-century Europe, provides a fertile ground for examining the interplay between hegemonic forces and subtle acts of resistance. The novel explores the complexities of faith, identity, and historical trauma during a time of religious and social upheaval. Tokarczuk masterfully portrays the complexities of resistance and social change within the context of deeply entrenched power structures. While individual acts of defiance can challenge prevailing norms, they often struggle to dismantle the underlying "structures of feeling" that perpetuate these power dynamics.

The novel also delves into the power and limitations of texts in shaping and challenging dominant narratives. The fragmented and incomplete nature of some characters' writings reflects the inherent challenges of capturing the full complexity of human experience and the limitations of any single narrative in representing the totality of truth. Tokarczuk's exploration of identity further reflects Williams' concept of structures of feeling. She challenges fixed notions of selfhood, portraying it as a fluid construct shaped by various factors, including gender, class, and religion. The characters navigate a complex web of societal expectations, power dynamics, and shifting cultural norms, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual agency and societal constraints.

Emergent Structures of Feeling in Tokarczuk's Novels

Through her diverse narratives, Tokarczuk explores several historically emergent social and cultural formations, or "structures of feeling," that shape her characters' lives and societies. Three such structures are central to her literary universe: the melancholic experience of loss, the tension between dominant narratives and fragmented consciousness, and the yearning for an alternative ecological ethic.

1. The Melancholic Experience of Loss

A pervasive sense of melancholy and loss permeates Tokarczuk's narratives. In **House of Day, House of Night**, the fragmented narrative style evokes the lingering echoes of a life that cannot be entirely recalled, a melancholy arising partly from a historical consciousness of Central and Eastern European traumas and their intergenerational transmission (Cavanagh, 2017). The spectral voices in **Primeval and Other Times** further underscore the weight of history and the enduring impact of past horrors on the present. Even in **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead**, a deep melancholy emanates from the protagonist Janina's isolation, her sense of ageing, and her despair at humanity's mistreatment of animals (Szymaszek, 2019). Tokarczuk's use of melancholy ultimately gestures towards a structure of feeling marked by a sense of irresolvable loss and displacement within the complex historical landscape of Europe.

2. Tension between Dominant Narratives and Fragmented Consciousness

Tokarczuk's works also challenge the unified and rational Enlightenment subject, presenting consciousness as fragmented and dispersed. In **Flights**, the traveller-narrator's identity is in constant flux, an assemblage of experiences rather than a fixed point (Coates, 2012). Similarly, in **The Books of Jacob**, characters' identities shift depending on their social context and the narrative they choose for themselves, highlighting the constructedness of the self. The disjointed narrative in **House of Day, House of Night** further emphasizes the impossibility of fully knowing the self (Cieślak & Sokołowska, 2016). This depiction of fragmented subjectivities reflects postmodern sensibilities, undermining grand narratives and favouring partial, embodied experiences, thus critiquing the illusion of wholeness often presented in traditional literature.

3. Yearning for an Alternative Ecological Ethic

A critique of the dominant anthropocentric and hierarchical structure of feeling is another key element in Tokarczuk's work. Her narratives yearn for an alternative grounded in ecological awareness and interconnectedness. Janina's animism and astrological musings in **Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead** challenge the human/animal binary. The intertwined narratives across time in **Primeval and Other Times** subtly centre the perspective of non-human creatures. Even in historical epics like **The Books of Jacob**, observations of the natural world become moments of respite and re-enchantment, offering glimpses of an alternate way of being. This yearning aligns Tokarczuk's work with the rising calls for a radical rethink of humanity's relationship with the planet (Ghosh, 2016), creating an imaginative space to move beyond anthropocentric thinking and inviting the reader into a structure of feeling infused with ecological consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Olga Tokarczuk's novels offer a profound exploration of historically emergent social and cultural formations, or what Raymond Williams termed "structures of feeling." These ways of thinking, being, and understanding are artfully woven into her narratives, capturing the ephemeral and elusive structures that shape her characters' lives and societies. A pervasive sense of melancholy and loss, the tension between dominant narratives and fragmented consciousness, and the yearning for an alternative ecological ethic are central to Tokarczuk's literary universe.

Through her narratives, Tokarczuk challenges readers to critically examine their own structures of feeling, questioning dominant narratives and finding solace in the natural world. Her works underscore the power of shared stories in fostering connection and understanding, and invite introspection and a deeper understanding of the intricate connections between individuals, communities, and the world they inhabit. Tokarczuk's novels stand as a testament to her ability to weave together a vast tapestry of historical and cultural threads, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of identity, power, and the enduring human quest for self-definition in an ever-changing world.

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