

How to Talk about the Loss of Maternal Love: The Case of Tereza Boučková's Novel *The Year of the Rooster*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore the way in which the literary voice expressing the experience of the loss of maternal love can be constructed. In the Western cultural mainstream, the notion of the sanctity of the mother-child bond strongly prevails, which results in the normative expectation of mothers to identify entirely with the maternal role. Deliberations are based on the analysis of the autobiographical novel *Rok kohouta* by Czech writer Tereza Boučková. The article tries to answer the question whether providing testimony about such a painful experience is more difficult, or perhaps easier, in the case of adoptive mothers.

Introduction

Literary portrayals of mothers abound, but there is still much to uncover about the literary representations of all aspects of mothering and motherhood focalized through maternal perspectives. The aim of this article is to explore the way in which the literary voice expressing the experience of the loss of maternal love has been constructed, which in Western culture, up until now, has been subject to strong limitations. Therefore, we do not encounter many cultural artefacts that refer to this painful experience. In the Western cultural mainstream, the notion of the sanctity of the mother-child bond strongly prevails, which results in the normative expectation of mothers to identify entirely with the maternal role (Faulkner, 2014, p. 138; Freud, 2011, p. 28).

Even Elain Tuttle Hansen in *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and Crisis of Motherhood*, one of the crucial studies deconstructing idealized portrayals of mothers in literature, does not focus on this particular issue. Hansen's work considers a number of twentieth-century literary works about women to whom motherhood does not come easily, or in easily recognizable way – if indeed it comes at all. The relational aspects of motherhood in these stories are disrupted or thwarted, and thus thrown into relief. The mothers in these narratives murder their children, send them away temporarily, or give them up for adoption. Hansen claims that all of these women arguably act out of fierce maternal love, although in some cases their intentions are unclear or unspoken (Hansen, 1997, pp. 15–16). However, she does not mention anything about the loss of maternal love. Therefore, in my analysis, I would like to use the autobiographical testimony of an adoptive mother, which may serve as the stimulus for asking universal questions. At the same time, I would like to consider the following question: for whom is it potentially easier to confess the loss of maternal love – biological mothers or adoptive mothers?

The key concept in this context is literary representation, which captures the dialogic nature of the relationship between literature and the nontextual world. I understand representation to be not a passive replication of nontextual reality in texts but a performative act, which creates appearances in literary texts that subsequently enter into dialogue with reality and become part of the normative climate, thus influencing individuals' actions (Iser, 1993, pp. 1–21, 281–304). Therefore, a remaining question concerns the potential impact of literary fiction on the collective structures of thought, which form the normative climate. Naturally, no empirical evidence is available in this case, since literature is characterized, as Roger Sell argues, by the lack of an obvious feedback channel from readers to writers (Sell, 2012, p. 203). We can only assume theoretically that literature acts as a mediator between readers and the real world. It adopts certain elements from the real world and uses them to create its own world, which exceeds the limits of the everyday experience of individual readers (Iser, 1993, p. 18). This is how literature fulfils one of its fundamental roles,

namely, interpreting the real world. Literary fiction serves not to provide readers with real knowledge but to convey what Terry Eagleton refers to as the 'moral truth'; moral truth should help us to answer the question of how we can interpret the world and ourselves (Eagleton, 2003, p. 91). Moreover, the need for research into the ways of expressing the loss of maternal love in literature derives from the requirement of contemporary literary theory, which interacts intensively with cultural studies, to expand literary study to real life or current cultural practices (Payne and Schad, 2003). In the case of the novel to be examined below, the question is whether literature creates a cultural space for openly confessing, "Either I don't love my child any more, or I no longer want to be a mother."

Tereza Boučková's Case

I would like to base my deliberations on the autobiographical novel *Rok kohouta* (*The Year of the Rooster*) by Czech writer Tereza Boučková, whose novel was considered book of the year in 2008 by readers of the very popular newspaper *Lidové noviny*. Born in 1957, Boučková is the daughter of well-known Czech dissident and writer Pavel Kohout, a fact which largely determined her life in Communist Czechoslovakia and indirectly translated into her later adoption experience. At the end of the 1980s, after several unsuccessful attempts to become pregnant, Boučková and her husband applied to adopt. Due to the fact that she opposed the Communist regime, she was assigned two boys of Roma origin who were heavily traumatized in the early years of their lives. At that time, there was no preparatory training and support system for parents who decided on transethnic adoption of special-needs children; therefore, Boučková and her husband had to deal with the upbringing of both boys all by themselves (Uhlová, 2014). After the adoption, an unexpected biological son was born to the couple.

Rok kohouta takes the form of autobiographical notes that show a gradual disintegration of the narrator's adoptive family over the period of one year. The plot of the book follows an assortment of problems with the adopted sons, who, upon entering puberty, choose a life-

style that differs completely from their adoptive parents' system of values: for instance, running away from home, parenting centres, thefts, drugs, reluctance to do anything, and eventually the younger adopted son fathering a child with a minor girl – a whole set of difficulties that can lead to adoption breakdowns (Palacios et al., 2019, p. 134).

The novel provoked extreme reactions within Czech society. On the one hand, the author was praised by literary critics (Janoušek 2008, p. 3) for undertaking undoubtedly daunting problems and for the aesthetic values of the text. She also encountered many positive reactions from readers who had found themselves in similar situations and assured her of the therapeutic function of her work. On the other hand, Boučková was criticized by people who accused her of overgeneralizing and a lack of awareness of the effects that the novel might cause among people who were considering adopting children from other ethnic backgrounds (Šanderová, 2011, p. 9). In 2014, Martina Vančáková, a psychologist and employee of J&T, a foundation that facilitates and supports transethnic adoptions in the Czech Republic, noted that in the two-year period after *The Year of the Rooster* was published, there was actually a temporary decline in interest in adoptions and even in foster care for children of Roma origin (Uhlová, 2014). However, according to Petra Šanderová Boučková's personal experience of trauma related to the breakdown of her ties with her adopted sons was not a significant factor and could not have had a particularly destructive impact on the entire sphere of adoption practices; for this was a general and deeply rooted view of transethnic adoption within the whole of society (Šanderová, 2011, p. 11), which happened to find vent through Boučková's literary work.

Maternal Love in the Context of Adoption

In the postmodern world, the bond between a child and a parent still seems to be the last more or less indissoluble and nonchangeable social relationship, although, as Judith Butler shows, even this kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive in modern times (Butler,

2002, pp. 22, 66). The relationship celebrates the anachronistic experience of the original and indissoluble tie that, as a result of progressing individualization, is becoming more and more difficult to achieve (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, p. 181). This is quite a significant shift because, as the history of childhood in Western culture demonstrates, boundless love towards children is a relatively new development, no more than three hundred years old. This significant change also prompted a correction in terms of the perception of femininity, which from the eighteenth century identified more strongly with motherhood (Badinter, 1981; Freud, 2011, pp. 39–43). Motherhood began, to a large extent, to acquire the attributes of sanctity, derived from the supposedly natural predispositions of mothers and the absolute needs of children, a sanctity that could be traced back to the Christian tradition of the Virgin Mary. Culturally, sanctified maternal love implies that the mother should be ready to sacrifice her life for her child. She should be ready to follow their development and be able to fully adapt to their needs and desires. In today's Western societies, this model, built over several centuries, took the form of so-called intense mothering (Hays 1998, pp. 7–8), which has not been tarnished even by feminism, which points out its ideological and constructivist character (Hansen, 1997, pp. 3–11). As Hendrika C. Freud noted, since the prosperity of welfare states in the second half of the twentieth century created sufficient room for maternal love, this ideal has become a moral requirement. Since mothers have become more aware of the child's need for their love, any ambivalence and hostility towards the child has to be pushed aside (Freud, 2011, p. 45). Such an attitude results in the persistence of cultural limitations when talking about the loss of such love.

Is providing testimony about such a painful experience more difficult, or perhaps easier, in the case of adoptive mothers? What type of network of cultural expectations and requirements do we have to deal with in such cases? With the full respect to the individual experiences of adoptive parents, it is generally accepted within Western societies that adoptive motherhood, when socially constructed, is less valuable and constitutes only a substitute for biological motherhood (MacDon-

ald and McSherry, 2011, p. 5; Weistra and Luke, 2017, p. 229). Charlene E. Miall, who interviewed American adoptive mothers in 1988, identified that two-thirds of them were negatively affected by the dominant belief in society that adoptive motherhood is inferior (Miall, 2000, p. 364). The biological relationship system is perceived as the only possible reality that is not called into question. Unfortunately, it is often forgotten that our way of thinking about this relationship is culturally conditioned (Šanderová, 2011, pp. 34–35). The status of an adopted person, as well as of adoptive parents, is often stigmatized as a result of the above. Because of the lack of blood ties, people tend to regard relationships in the adoptive family as weaker than relationships in biological families (Šanderová, 2011, pp. 36–40). In the case of motherhood, such social pressures are strengthened by additional arguments of a biological nature, referring to the mother's functions in the production of oestrogen and milk. And although women do indeed get pregnant, lactate, and often experience a specific animal instinct to protect their offspring, it is, however, a small part of what, in today's world, we understand as proper motherhood (Hays, 1998, p. 13).

Literature provides many descriptions of maternal suffering associated with the loss of children, but very rare are literary works that record the reduction of maternal love in order to save one's own psyche. If we take into account the cultural conditions described above, the following questions will certainly arise. Is it easier or harder for adoptive mothers to cope with the deterioration in relations with an adopted child? Is it easier to rationalize failure in the face of a subliminal belief, that the relationship with an adopted child is not fully valuable in terms of social aspects? Or maybe it is just the opposite? Is it perhaps much more difficult to admit to losing one's feelings for an adopted child? Is the fear of even greater stigmatization perhaps more paralysing in this case?

In any case, social attitudes towards adoption have a significant impact on the self-perception of adoptive parents. They are exposed to unprecedented levels of stress because of the desire to be an ideal parent while simultaneously being exposed to social stigmatization – sometimes connected to the status of being infertile (Wegar, 1997, pp.

77–86; Weistra and Luke, 2017, p. 229). Starting from the adoption application stage, these parents must prove that they will be good parents. At the same time, they are expected to deal with any problems resulting from the child's pre-adoption period. On the one hand, according to social perception, adoptive parents may be described as desperate. On the other hand, an idealized and romantic image of adoption exists, which renders adoptive parents as heroes who sacrifice themselves for a child who is not theirs biologically (Weistra and Luke, 2017, p. 234).

How can one speak openly about the loss of love when transethnic adoption comes into play? What about the adoption of children belonging to a negatively perceived ethnic group, when the unsuccessful upbringing of adopted children confirms all stereotypes about their maladjustment to the social mainstream? (Ali, 2014, p. 68; Barn and Kirton, 2012, pp. 25–26; Šanderová, 2011, pp. 92–94) If one is aware that a possible literary statement may contribute to a drop in the number of adoptions of children from a given ethnic group, is it better to remain silent or use the fundamental right to talk about one's life in the form of a literary text?

The articulation of the loss of maternal love may be observed in *Rok kohouta* on several levels. I would like to propose a model of analysis based on the transition from the subconscious level – that is, the way the narrator expresses herself about her sons – which undergoes a gradual transformation in the text, to the conscious record of her scale of emotions and to her fully thoughtful reflections on the nature of rearing children, being an adoptive mother, and facing the assessments flowing from the outside world.

Words

The reader of Boučková's novel will certainly notice that the way the narrator talks about her sons acts as a kind of litmus test that provides an insight into her condition and sheds light on the important turning points in the process of protecting herself against the negative aspects of being an adoptive mother. The text is dominated by the use

of their names in a neutral way (Patrik, Lukáš, and Matěj) or the general term “boys,” which includes both the adopted sons and the biological son. The only noticeable distinction when the narrator talks about all her children at once is the use of categories of illness and health. This is due to the fact that psychiatrists diagnosed personality disorders in the two older adopted sons. Throughout the text, we do not encounter one place where the narrator, when speaking of all three children, divides them into adopted sons and biological son. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of a special and strongly internalized care for the equal treatment of all three sons.

However, the manner of expressing herself differs when it concerns one boy in particular. While the open declarations of motherhood and the categorization of all of her children as “sons” appear in the opening chapters of the text, throughout the passage of time, traces of gradual detachment begin to appear, especially in the descriptions of further serious problems in raising her adopted sons. This detachment is revealed for the first time in a scene in which the narrator goes to a notary in order to disinherit the eldest boy, Patrik. The term “adoptive son” is used here:

The upbringing of the first adopted son in harmony with our characters and feelings has completely failed” (Boučková, 2007, p. 15).

The distance between them grew gradually. In the following reflections on Patrik, the narrator uses the word “man,” devoid of any emotional charge:

It took me years before I could barely realize that such a disturbed man could have no feelings (Boučková, 2007, p. 24).

When it turns out that the adoptive mother is no longer able to deal with the perceived failure in raising her son that overwhelms her and jeopardizes her existence, the distance between mother and son quickly grows. Her manner of speaking begins to emphasize the adoptive nature of the relationship, as if, in an unconscious way, escaping the full parental failure: “a child who was not born to him” (p. 93); „to donated boys” (p. 129); “our boy whom we recognized as the son in

the eleventh month of his life” (p. 161); “seventeen years with children who were taken” (p. 169). This self-defence mechanism allows the narrator to maintain her mental integrity.

The narrator’s loss of feelings, however, is not an easy and one-time experience. The text reveals the rather nonlinear nature of this process, determined in the rhythm of progress and regress. When it seems that the narrator has mastered the ability to distance herself from her adopted sons, a description of a particularly emotional situation appears, which reveals that blanking out the past is not always as possible as it seems. At the same time, the use of the term “son” returns, revealing the maternal attitude. A spectacular example of this is the situation when Patrik pretends that he does not recognize his adoptive mother on the street: „I am not used to meeting my son in such a way” (Boučková, 2007, p. 102). This sentence throws out the narrator, as if she could not come to terms, after all, with the definitive degeneration of the relationship.

Emotions

The disappearance of the bond with her adopted sons, which involves a lengthy process, consists of a series of emotions recorded in great detail in the narration. These can be unambiguous emotions, such as the shame experienced while the narrator is searching through Lukáš’s pockets, after he had robbed his parents and his brother, or condensed anger expressed in a verbal and somatic manner (jittery, tension, stuttering). However, unequivocal emotions do not appear on the pages of the novel too often. The narrator knows perfectly well that there is no black-and-white situation here, and that the only thing she can do is to talk about the endless wave of emotional ambivalence, balancing among the need for hope, gradual self-defence, and accepting the loss of love. It is said that hope dies last; it is a wish that a certain act will occur and uncertainty that this will happen. Hope can be treated as a positive emotion that reflects the extent of our humanity and faith in other human beings. One can also look at it as an emotional drug, the use of which makes it difficult to judge a disadvanta-

geous situation and, as a result, prolongs suffering (Zigon, 2009). In the case of *Rok kohouta*'s narrator, hope forces her to continue her efforts:

But we will not stop playing football. We want to encourage him with rewards (Boučková, 2007, p. 46).

When the child rejecting his parents gives even a shadow of hope that things can gain a positive turn, it suffices to revive maternal feelings once again:

Dinner was prepared by Lukáš. . . . I thanked him and said it was nice of him. [. . .] Luky . . . Well? I love you (Boučková, 2007, pp. 98–99).

At times like these, it is easy to give in to the power of a recurring feeling and make a mistake. The narrator describes the situation when – influenced by the sentimentality of old photographs – she decided to withdraw the application for institutional care over Lukáš, who was a thief and took drugs. She performs a detailed analysis of her emotions and knows that it is actually hope that motivated her, but she is not sure if it is good:

I do not even know if I am happy, or am I happy that we have found, together with Marek, the remnants of faith in improving this state? (Boučková, 2007, p. 129).

In the end, it turns out that it is not. Lukáš goes to the institution a month later. As I have already mentioned, hope has a wishful character. We hope that there will be a certain state of affairs. The narrator is aware of what she wants: „To be proud of Patrik” (Boučková, 2007, p. 155); but she knows that she will never achieve it.

The frustration that grows as the action unfolds tells the narrator to move gradually to a position of self-defence and to record the reduction in love and attachment. The author is not limited, however, to the simple construction of a narrator's account of the subject passed on to the reader; the reduction takes place on several levels and is articulated gradually. It should be noted that, as a result of cumulative tension, stress, and suffering, the gradual loss of love takes place first in the adoptive mother's sphere of subconsciousness. An indication that

the process of dealing with the situation psychologically has been going on for a long time occurs in a scene in which the narrator is looking at family photos and realizes that she does not remember any events captured in the pictures. Her subconsciousness prepared her for the inevitable loss and carried out the form of constitutive oblivion (Connerton, 2008, p. 63). The essence of this oblivion is not the loss associated with the impossibility of remembering certain things but rather the benefit obtained as a result of getting rid of unfavourable memories.

Information about loss, however, finds a path to reach the narrator's consciousness. At some point, a dream is recorded. It must have been very intensely experienced, because other dreams are not mentioned in the narration:

I was walking on a mountain meadow and was looking for a place where I had buried Patrik. I confessed to Marek that I had murdered him. I woke up sweating (Boučková, 2007, p. 23).

The metaphor of murder is not difficult to read, and the dream gives a clear message that it is necessary to get rid of the feeling in order to save herself from the destructive influence of the family. This dream seems to confirm the findings of Gregory Keck and Regina Kupecky, who show that profoundly frustrated adoptive parents can experience disturbing feelings, such as fantasies of hurting or even killing their child (Keck and Kupecky, 1995). From this point on, gradual and conscious disclosure of a change in attitude towards the adopted sons begins. Initially, this takes on the delicate form of talking about her cynicism or sense of nonsense. Then intensification occurs. The narrator does not enjoy the prospect of spending Christmas together with the boys:

Marek invited Patrik to Christmas Eve with us. I don't know if I want it (Boučková, 2007, p. 132).

The narrator breaks another taboo, because the conviction of the absolutely familial nature of Christmas is deeply rooted in the general Czech consciousness.

The next step in the reduction of maternal feelings is realizing, at some point, that further emotional involvement is destructive: „Any support in the form of emotional investment is unnecessary, hurtful” (Boučková, 2007, p. 180), which leads the narrator to the increasingly expressed desire to free herself from the adopted sons:

I don't want to live here! I don't want to live here! . . . I can't stand it! I don't want here to be like that! I don't want to! I don't want to have such a disgusting, shitty, fucked-up home!” (Boučková, 2007, p. 141)

We do not wish to have him at home at all” (Boučková, 2007, p. 209)

I took a breath and told Lukáš openly, ‘I cannot live with you under one roof any more’ (Boučková, 2007, p. 323)

It is worth paying attention to the first of the quoted passages, in which the fivefold use of the words „I don't want” captures the essence of the narrator's despair. Finally, a declaration of the termination of the maternal relations appears:

I strike it off! I strike such motherhood off. I'm done with it. I'm fed up with it. Enough (Boučková, 2007, p. 102),

which is followed by Patrik's room being swept away and his belongings thrown out. Nevertheless, this fragment is very specific, since it perhaps reveals a greater ease of reconciling the loss of maternal love with an unsuccessful adoptive motherhood than a biological one. Note that the narrator uses the term “such motherhood” here. Although it is spoken in a state of strong emotional distress, it nevertheless indicates the recognition of her own motherhood as a specific experience, perhaps not fully valuable in the subtext. This connection to adoptive motherhood further strengthened by the use of the verb “strike off,” as if it were another civil action carried out in the registry office. If one can become a mother by submitting a proper application, then it may be easier to cancel such a relationship mentally if it becomes unbearable and the layers of maternal feelings have been completely exhausted.

One of the very clear signs of the disappearance of maternal love is the expression of a sense of complete alienation towards the adopted sons. The breaking of the primary and strong ties between the mother and the teenager is a typical phenomenon that forms part of the logic and physiology of adolescence itself; but in *Rok kohouta*, this normal detachment assumes an extremely distinct shape. In one case, it is a frequent reminder of the perceived disgust towards the physicality of the boys, who, due to their disregard for the basic principles of personal hygiene, begin to stink horribly:

I said aloud: if you weren't so dirty and stinky, I would invite you for dinner (Boučková, 2007, p. 39).

However, the embarrassing feeling of their inability to reach an agreement is more acute. The mother just does not know what to talk about, and probably she does not know why they should talk:

There, I came upon Patrik. . . . When he noticed me, he stopped. [...] Maybe he thought I would not notice him, that I would go past him. . . . I said hello. He replied. What now? Should I stop? Go further? (Boučková, 2007, pp. 101–102).

This is particularly painful in the description of Christmas, which in today's Western world has become more of a synthetic normative practice of family life rather than a religious holiday (Miller, 2017, pp. 415–418). A cultural imperative has been very internalized by the narrator, which is why she finally decides to spend Christmas with her adopted sons, although she is fully aware that it could be a devastating experience for her psyche. In the plot, nothing exceptional happens during this time spent together, no major conflict explodes, no other scandal takes place. There is, however, a boundless sense of alienation, which actually shows that the people who once made up the family have nothing in common with each other and that there is essentially no reason why they should stay together. The end of the holidays turns out to be a relief:

We don't enjoy it anymore! And because we invited you for Christmas, and the holidays are over, we'll say goodbye tomorrow after dinner. . . . Well, thanks. All the best! Bye! (Boučková, 2007, pp. 154–155).

In this state of alienation, capturing the nonsense of making any attempt to change the existing state of affairs is perhaps the most poignant element.

Reflections

Boučková's not only records the narrator's emotional journey but also reflects on the child-rearing process, the essence of being an adoptive parent, the social conditions surrounding transethnic adoption, and the reaction of the outside world to the adoption experience. In other words, the narrator in *Rok kohouta* tries to find an answer to the question of why her experience of being an adoptive mother reached such a low point and how one should deal with the social reception of this situation. The narrator confesses that for a long time she believed that she would manage to raise the boys to be decent people. Her failure, however, makes her question the effect of nurture over nature:

Does man have an influence on anything? With their love, energy, the way they live? (Boučková, 2007, p. 15).

And here the novel touches on a key problem: whether modern parents can have expectations of their children, and, if so, are they justified? On the one hand, the individualistic discourse teaches mothers and fathers that children are not their extensions, that they are separate individuals who have the right to independent self-fulfilment. Is it then the task of a parent to accept that their feelings cannot be hurt because they have no right to expect anything from their children? On the other hand, culture exerts enormous pressure, especially on mothers, and has a great effect on how they rear their children. This factor is also connected to the issue of defining maternal love. Does this love stem from a specific reason, for example, receiving emotional feedback from a child, or is it love in of itself, despite anything, even if it means the self-destruction of a loving subject?

Because the story told in *Rok kohouta* does not provide a positive answer to the question, the narrator attempts to rationalize the situa-

tion: „When the boys stopped manifesting the desire to adapt to our lifestyle, when they developed their natural inclinations and unnatural deprivation” (Boučková, 2007, p. 62). In this passage, the narrator's conviction about the boys' innate predispositions comes to the foreground – predispositions that might be caused not only by inherited genetic codes but also, to a large extent, by the emotional deprivation they experienced during pregnancy and the first few months of their lives. The novel does not say anything about the child-rearing mistakes that the narrator might have made, and the words about the refusal “to adapt to” a particular “lifestyle” testify to the belief that this lifestyle is valuable and desirable. In the context of the transethnic adoption of Roma children, this way of thinking could be considered as slightly ethnocentric. It is a widely held belief that both the Czech majority and the Roma minority perceive each other's axiological systems rather negatively. According to Czechs, the Roma lifestyle, which is deeply rooted in cultural tradition, is asocial, parasitic, loud, and, last but not least, promiscuous. Romas, however, view the Czech lifestyle as materialistic, mercenary, dull, and conceited (Večerka, 1999, p. 420). One can, of course, be suspicious of one-sidedness, which is, for understandable reasons, inscribed in the subjectivism of an autobiographical text. There is no reason to believe, however, that this type of potentially concealed maternal mistakes was of the kind that resulted in the demoralization of the boys. The crucial question occurs in the context of the clash between two completely different value systems, if one can truly speak of demoralization. This question can only be posed, though, since it is impossible to give an unequivocal answer.

The reflective layer of the novel is also co-created with considerations about the sense and essence of adoption itself. Such reflection is dominated by the tone of self-sacrifice, which unfortunately strengthens the stereotypical image of adoption as an act of altruism towards an abandoned child. It should be noted, however, that the literary autobiography, even with the assumption of a strong referentiality inscribed in its essence, is not intended to portray the full truth, let alone

to shape certain social attitudes. Its primary purpose is to provide a subjective testimony of one's own life.

Before we analyse the tone of the narration, we must first consider the basic question of why people in the postmodern world have children. One can, of course, refer to the existence of social pressure that implies that parenting is a condition of a fully valuable life; but considering the pace of changes to modern civilization, and more and more modern forms of self-fulfilment, the effects of this social pressure should not be overestimated. I think, however, that having children stems rather from a natural and rationally inexplicable need of many people simply to possess offspring. It is the reason why couples who have unsolved infertility problems decide to adopt children, and singles who do not want to combine procreation with a romantic relationship enter into the arrangements of parental partnership (DePaulo, 2015, p. 121). Adoption is therefore a form of satisfying this need, as the narrator says in an open way,

I only wanted one thing for all these years. To get pregnant. And when I failed for the first time, I miscarried. And when I failed for the second time, it was an ectopic pregnancy. And when we did succeed for the third time . . . we had had two adopted boys at home (Boučková, 2007, p. 191).

In addition, in the renowned interview published in 2006 in the pages of the Czech edition of the magazine *Marianne*, Boučková herself stressed, „[Boučková:] But today, I would advised against it [adoption] to everyone. [Interviewer:] And if you were thirty again? [Boučková:] Well, I would probably decide for it again” (Jirků, 2006, p. 20). One may conclude that the narrator is aware of the bidirectionality of emotional transfers related to the adoption experience.

However, this emotional wavering does not prevent Boučková from constructing a message about her own sacrifice and losses resulting from decisions made years ago. Let us look at the following fragments:

I remember perfectly well the wretched condition the boys were in when we got them. . . . How not to feel sorry for them? How not to love them? How can you not want to reward them for the lack of love? (Boučková, 2007, p. 86)

All my persistent effort . . . to save an artificially created family is completely hopeless (Boučková, 2007, p. 124)

I would sacrifice myself. In the end, I have been doing it for seventeen years, because for fifteen years I firmly and irresistibly believed that the family I had fought for so hard with fate was the greatest value of my life. The worst is unnecessary and senseless sacrifice (Boučková, 2007, p. 127)

The above fragments clearly show that the adopted boys are positioned as the ones taking, while the adoptive mother is the one who sacrifices herself and has the nature of a giver. Is it possible to talk about the inconsistency of the message? First, one should be aware that an autobiographical text as a narrative about the emotions of the autobiographical subject does not have to be logically coherent at all. Second, such a message should be interpreted as a form of saving oneself and acquiring the necessary distance towards one's own failure as a parent. However, this message is only present in the text from a certain moment. The suppressed inner conviction about adoption as sacrifice reveals itself only when the narrator learns that the older adopted son, Patrik, is looking for his biological mother. His goal is not to build his own identity but to seek compensation from her. It is only then that the narrator also admits the possibility of talking about the self-sacrificial nature of adoption that has been abused. Patrik's materialistic and extreme egocentric activity triggers another self-defence mechanism in the text, namely, the indication of specific financial costs incurred by the adoptive parents. This should be considered as a kind of safety valve that the narrator usually uses in situations of extreme emotional tension:

Hold me! If anyone should get anything, it should be us who paid for his seventeen years of life! (Boučková, 2007, p. 43)

I paid for Patrik's and Lukáš's vaccination against jaundice of all types (for Matěj I did not have enough money). It cost six thousand! (Boučková, 2007, p. 53)

We took Lukáš from the orphanage, we looked after him at our own expense for seventeen years, he almost destroyed us in his ungratefulness, we are sending him back to the correctional facilities, and we have to pay alimony for it! (Boučková, 2007, p. 199).

If it is impossible to explain defeat and the loss of feeling through emotional categories, then there remains only a tough materialistic discourse that perhaps allows to understand anything.

As I have already mentioned, the situation of the loss of maternal love described in Boučková's novel was particularly difficult due to its racial aspect; in any case, it served as the main catalyst for the criticism that the author had to face after *Rok kohouta* was published. It is worth emphasizing this factor, because she was criticized not so much for confessing to the loss of feelings for her adopted sons but rather for having dared to speak about it in the context of transethnic adoption. A close reading of the text shows, however, that when speaking about the Roma origin of her adopted sons, the narrator is particularly cautious. She prevents herself from binding their psychophysical predispositions to their Roma origin, and her narrative argues rather for the existence of the phenomenon of „labelling” or, in other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Šanderová writes, social labels with a specific semantic charge, which are then assigned to specific individuals, are created in every human collectivity. As a result, a given person adapts in their actions to the meaning of the label assigned to them. People create ideas about themselves on the basis of assessments from the outside world. It is well known that Czech society unfortunately holds a deeply rooted conviction about the negative traits of the entire Roma population. Therefore, in the case of adopted Roma children, their different appearance becomes an indicator of the way children will be treated by the rest of the society surrounding the adoptive family. The treatment can affect the shape of the child's identity and behaviour. If the Roma child hears all the time that the Roma are thieves who do not work, it is very likely that they will adapt to this stereotype (Šanderová, 2011, pp. 97–98).

The first and very distinctive mention of the physical dissimilarity of the adopted boys, which would indicate their Roma origin, appears only in one third of the novel. The narrator mentions one of the boys' black hair, which distinguished him as different from the ethnic background of the adoptive family. Later, bodily difference is discussed once again when the family has to face the fact that Lukáš had con-

ceived a child with fifteen-year-old Eva. The husband of the narrator says, in desperation, that at least a paternity test will not have to be carried out, because it will be clearly visible if this is really Lukáš's child.

The rest of the exchanges related to race amount to reactions to the boys being labelled by the outside world. The first such moment evident when the narrator remarks that although Lukáš could not pronounce many words correctly and did not understand their meaning, he did learn to say the word „discrimination” perfectly. When a teacher at the vocational school wanted him to clean up a wheelbarrow with grout, Lukáš replied that this was „discrimination against the Roma” (Boučková, 2007, p. 135). This remark is, of course, a bitter joke within the context of Lukáš's behaviour at home and at school. However, it highlights the interference of the outside world, which gave the boys a sense of their Roma origins. Labelling the boys is practised by everyone, beginning with the narrator's mother:

When she saw what situation Lukáš had led us to, she said, 'It will not be different. It's just inside of him. Such are Roma people' (Boučková, 2007, p. 161);

by neighbours:

If you had not taken him! You! It is all your fault! It's you who have brought Gypsies to the village! (Boučková, 2007, p. 279);

and ending with psychologists to whom the parents turn for help:

You have to reckon with the fact that Roma people steal. Why are you surprised? (Boučková, 2007, p. 268).

In fact, no one except the adoptive parents perceives Patrik and Lukáš as boys; everyone sees them primarily as the Roma. The narrator unequivocally emphasizes that she never intended to agree to such an essentialist explanation:

Such are the Roma, that's the way it is, you have to put up with it. After all, not everyone! All the Roma are not like that! . . . We cannot agree to the lifestyle Lukáš was attracted to because the Roma are like that. I do not want my son to be like that. I will never come to terms with it! (Boučková, 2007, p. 161).

She also tried to build a sense of positive ethnic identity in the boys, which is one of the basic recommendations for the transethnic adoption:

I have always been able to explain this to everyone: being a Gypsy . . . is nothing bad, nothing to be ashamed of. I have told Patrik and Lukáš many times that they are of Roma origin, . . . and therefore there is no point in rebelling against it or treating it as an insult. Let them be aware of their values, and if they are faithful to them, stupid talk cannot upset them (Boučková, 2007, p. 181).

It is impossible to make a clear diagnosis of whether the self-fulfilling prophecy has worked here (“And then they began to accurately implement all the stereotypes about the Roma and all the stories about unsuccessful adoptions of the Roma”; Boučková, 2007, p. 181), or whether the boys’ development represents the individual conditions of both adopted sons. In any case, Boučková’s novel provides evidence for the existence of the phenomenon described by Šanderová, and the elimination of ethnic prejudices, however very right and necessary, should not be a factor in self-censorship within one’s own painful autobiographical stories.

Conclusion: To Talk or to Stay Silent?

Adoptive mothers, parenting against the backdrop of the cultural paradigm of intense mothering, are exposed to unprecedented stress associated with a continuous social evaluation. While subject to noticeable stigmatization, they are expected to be both excellent and heroic at the same time, meaning that they will contribute to the widespread idealized notion of adoption. Boučková’s story reveals this very nasty aspect of being an adoptive mother. Although her references to being judged are rather sparse, one can assume, on the basis of those mentions that are present in the novel, that the narrator’s awareness of being exceptionally exposed to confrontation with an environment willing to judge others is present all the time: “At the same time, we are constantly exposed to harsh judgements that are not based on one’s own experience. In the end, not even on a comparison” (Boučková, 2007, p. 202). This statement leads to the conclusion that

those who have no real experience with adoption are the most willing to make harsh judgements. In other words, the narrator’s experience confirms that such criticism involves not a real assessment of the situation but the one’s fear of violating long-held ideas about what motherhood, child rearing, and adoption itself should look like. The narrator could always count on a properly functioning system of external evaluations, both at the time when she was still trying to save her adoptive family and later when, after the failure, she decided to share her experience with others. Of significance here is the example of school institutions that would give her plenty of good advice that always incorporated an element of judgement but evidently would not show any empathy:

Let us do something with the boys, let us bring them up, let us talk to them, let us spank them, let us spend even a little time with them, let us praise them, let us give them a detention, let us motivate them, let us bring them to heel, let us tell them, let us force them, let us stop them, let us not abandon them, let us let us let us (Boučková, 2007, p. 92).

However, when it turns out that all of the narrator’s efforts result in no positive effects and it is necessary to take decisive steps to save herself and the remnants of her family, her awareness of being under constant observation evokes a feeling of fear of being condemned. It reveals itself in the process of taking actions (“I was afraid that the notary would . . . condemn us. . . . The notary gave us a hand at the door and said she admired our courage. . . . Not everyone condemns us”; Boučková, 2007, p. 14–15), as well as in the face of talking about her own experience:

I cannot say how it really is with us! . . . I would not be able to face the attacks (Boučková, 2007, p. 119).

The fear of being accused of unequal treatment of her children is especially paralysing:

We risk one more condemnation: they have thrown out their adopted son but are spoiling their own one (Boučková, 2007, p. 68).

Is this fear, however, sufficient reason to remain silent and practise self-censorship? After the interview published in *Marianne*, the narrator has doubts about whether it is truly important to speak publicly about such intimate issues. Will she not pay too high a price for breaking a certain cultural taboo?

I've been thinking about this interview all night. Why did I get involved in this? Why do I have to analyse my problems with children with a mass of unknown readers? Why do I need it? (Boučková, 2007, p. 138–139).

Certainly, the price was high, if measured by the number of negative reactions, but the empathetic understanding on the part of many adoptive and nonadoptive mothers seems to have made that price worth paying.

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