



# Mothering in a foreign language: Silent and/or multilingual mothers in Dalia Staponkutė's *The Silence of the Mothers*

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## SYNOPSIS

This article analyses the figure of the silent mother portrayed in Dalia Staponkutė's essay *The Silence of the Mothers* partly based on many Lithuanian women who, after the fall of the Berlin wall, emigrated to Western countries through marriage and are often negatively stereotyped as passive, silent, sexualized and unintelligent. I argue for a more complex interpretation. The silent mother's inability to embrace the language of the host country originates in her trauma associated with the complicated history and gender culture of her native, recently decolonized post-Soviet Lithuania. Conversely, the multilingual mother, as also portrayed in Staponkutė's essay, embodies the potential to overcome the trauma and alleviate the pain of motherly silence. The mechanism of shuttle translation evoked in the essay enables her to overcome her personal and cultural trauma as well as create and sustain an embodied linguistic bond with her children.

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## Introduction

In the last ten years Lithuania along with the rest of the post-Soviet world – the other Baltic states, Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia – has been usefully theorized as a postcolonial space (Baločkaitė, 2008, 2009; Chioni Moore, 2006; Kelertas, 2006). For over a hundred years all of the countries in the area, Lithuania not being an exception, were subject to “often brutal Russian domination (styled as Soviet from the 1920s on)” (Chioni Moore, 2006: 17). Although Lithuania was only annexed to the Soviet Union in 1940, having enjoyed a brief period as an independent state between the wars, from 1795 until 1918 it was subjected to the rule of Imperial Russia (Kiaupa, 2002). Two decades into its newly created democracy, contemporary Lithuania displays many qualities recognizable as postcolonial, such as a transition to new societal and economic principles and practices based on a Western European model, and social, emotional and ideological confusion (Baločkaitė, 2008).

One of the most striking features of post-Soviet decolonization is the opening of the borders, resulting in significant numbers of formerly sedentary and contained postcolonial subjects setting out to explore the world beyond the Iron

Curtain. Women have been extremely active in seizing this opportunity, not only to discover new territories and to join the ranks of short-term migrants, but also to permanently relocate to what was and still is seen as a better world, and one of the means for this has been international marriage. Rasa Baločkaitė argues that migration through marriage from the post-Soviet space is often driven by economic reasons, although she admits that “it is very difficult to determine when such marriages are built on genuine feelings and when they are motivated by the desire to move to an affluent country” (Baločkaitė, 2009). I would also suggest that the two are not mutually exclusive. As a result of these developments, there is a rapidly growing corpus of exile literature written in Lithuanian and published in Lithuania and often by women. It reflects on the postcolonial migrant experience, including specifically female migrant experiences. However, fiction exploring the experience of exile through marriage is scarce (Kelertas, 2006; Klevinskienė, 2012; Litvinskaitė, 2013; Satkauskytė, 2011). In this article I shall focus on the only existing text in the Lithuanian language dealing with the subject *Motinių tylėjimas* [*The Silence of the Mothers*] by Dalia Staponkutė (first published in 2003 in one of the most widely read cultural weeklies in the country, “Šiaurės Atėnai”).<sup>2</sup> At the turn of the century, which

coincided with Lithuania's breaking free from the Soviet Union (Lithuania announced the restoration of independence on 11 March, 1990), intellectualized personal essays became the dominant genre in Lithuanian literature referred to by literary critics as the “essay”.<sup>3</sup> Writing for an international academic audience in English, Lithuanian literary scholar Dalia Čiočytė describes it as follows: “In Lithuanian, the term ‘essay’ is used to define a genre that balances between fiction and journalism: critical writing with elements of fiction: ‘critical essay’ and ‘literary essay’ (most closely related to the term ‘personal essay’ in English)” (Čiočytė, 2011: 242). “Critical” in this case means academic and “literary” means non-fiction, emphasizing its belonging in the realm of creative writing.

Dalia Staponkutė's autobiographical essays are part of emerging contemporary Lithuanian exile writing. Her texts offer a personal, philosophical, poetic, and often melancholic reflection on the state of a migrant Lithuanian woman and mother. Staponkutė was born in 1964 in Šiauliai. After graduating from the School of Philosophy of Saint Petersburg State University (at the time, Leningrad State University) she taught philosophy at the University of Šiauliai for several years before moving to the Greek part of Cyprus in 1989, with the intention of marrying a Greek Cypriot man she had met during her studies in Saint Petersburg. In Cyprus, she started translating from English, Russian and later from Modern Greek to Lithuanian (Nikos Kazantzakis) and from Lithuanian to Greek (Lithuanian poet Sigitas Parulskis' work). Staponkutė says that her translation work and constant travelling between her “two homelands” have led to her research in comparative literature, translation studies and made her discover Mikhail Bakhtin's and Alphonso Lingis's philosophies of language.<sup>4</sup> Having completed a PhD on travel writing and translation, Staponkutė teaches translation theory and travel writing at Cyprus State University and elsewhere. Now a divorced mother of two adult daughters, she lives in Nicosia (Cyprus), works internationally, and continues to write non-fiction in Lithuanian and academic research in English. Her monograph *Exultant Forces of Translation and the Philosophy of Travel of Alphonso Lingis* was published in 2014 in New York (Staponkutė, 2014a). Staponkutė's essay *The Silence of the Mothers* later featured in her collection of essays *Lietumi prieš saulę [Rain Versus Sun]* is the only example of Lithuanian exile writing dealing with the complex issue of international motherhood (Staponkutė, 2007).<sup>5</sup> In this text she explores the state of mothers who do not share the same linguistic and cultural environment with their children. For Staponkutė, silent mothers are “mothers who are unable to talk to their children in their native language” (Staponkutė, 2009a), which suggests the refusal to transmit the native tongue not through design but by circumstance. In the following section I shall discuss Staponkutė's portrayal of such women in the context of female post-Soviet migration from Lithuania, which serves as a cultural, social and critical background for the character of the silent mother in contemporary Lithuanian exile writing. *The Silence of the Mothers* is a subjective philosophical reflection on migrant mothers' lives in a meditative, almost poetic vein, informed by Staponkutė's personal experience of international and multilingual mothering and her extensive reading in philosophy and critical theory. It is a personal essay, a non-fiction text, though observing some of the rules of fiction and storytelling, making use of different literary devices and

enjoying a distinctive voice. It is also generously dotted with theoretical references and is structured as a classical Montaigne's essay.

My aim in this article is to analyse the perplexing figure of the silent mother portrayed in Staponkutė's essay. This figure is partly based on many Lithuanian (and by extension Eastern European) women who, after the fall of the Berlin wall, emigrated to Western countries through marriage and are often negatively stereotyped as passive, silent, sexualized and unintelligent. However, I will argue for a more complex interpretation. In the first section of the article, entitled “Traumatic and traumatizing silence”, I offer a critique of the stereotypically negative portrayal of marriage exiles from post-Soviet Lithuania and argue that the figure of the silent mother in Staponkutė's text can be read as marked by personal and cultural trauma: the personal trauma deriving from her silence in relation to her children; and the cultural trauma being a result of her own national and historic background that is Lithuania's traumatizing history in the twentieth century and the gender culture of post-Soviet Lithuania. I also suggest that her inability to adopt and appropriate the language of the host country could be a result of the Lithuanian national discourse on motherhood and the role attributed to mothers in the Lithuanian cultural imagination, which puts the responsibility of safeguarding the Lithuanian language and, by default, the Lithuanian state, primarily on the shoulders of mothers. This might be one of the reasons why Lithuanian migrant mothers are particularly subject to traumatic and traumatizing silence vis-à-vis their children. In the second part of the article entitled “Obtaining a voice” I focus on Staponkutė's alter ego multilingual mother who carries something of a silent mother within her and also appears to be traumatized to a degree by linguistic and cultural distance from her children. Conversely though, the multilingual mother, as portrayed in Staponkutė's essay, embodies the potential to overcome the trauma and alleviate the pain of motherly silence. Staponkutė's text suggests that the multilingual mother's efforts to learn the language of the host country, whilst maintaining the possibility to communicate with her children in both her native and the language of the place in which they live, enable her to overcome her personal and cultural trauma and embark on a new beginning as a woman and mother.

As a special contribution to wider interests of *Women's Studies International Forum* and the current Special Issue of the journal, the article introduces writing from the Lithuanian diaspora and sheds light on Lithuanian cultural history in which mothers played a crucial role in preserving Lithuanian language in the face of Soviet efforts to downgrade or eradicate it. In a wider context of exile, the article explains the mother's role in passing the tongue of the motherland to the children and explores the role of language in helping migrant women to overcome personal and cultural traumas of the native country's troubled history.

The theoretical framework of my analysis consists of two main sources: Cathy Caruth's psychoanalytic trauma theory and Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* that is part of her psycholinguistic interpretation of language. Caruth's theory developed from Freud's work on trauma, including his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which he describes and analyses experiences of the veterans of World War I, consisting of repetitive dreams of the battlefield, bringing back vivid memories of violent scenes they had witnessed during the

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