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Breaking the social pressure of infinite maternal love

Introduction

The aim of my article is to explore the way of constructing a literary voice about the experience of the loss of maternal love, which in Western culture has so far been subject to strong limitations. Therefore, we do not encounter too many cultural artefacts that would refer to this experience. Since I am not aware of any autobiographical works written by a biological mother, I would like to use the testimony of an adoptive mother, which I think may be an inspiration to ask universal questions. At the same time, I would like to consider the fact for whom it is easier to confess the loss of maternal love – for either biological mothers or perhaps adoptive mothers.

I would like to base my deliberations on the autobiographical novel *Rok kohouta (The Year of Rooster)* by Czech writer Tereza Boučková, whose novel was considered as the book of the year in 2008. Born in 1957, Boučková is the daughter of a well-known Czech dissident and writer Pavel Kohout, 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 for adoption. 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, therefore they

had to deal with the upbringing of both boys all by themselves.¹ After the adoption, an unexpected biological son was born to the couple.

Maternal love in the context of adoption

In the post-modern world of unlimited possibilities of individual self-fulfilment,² the bond between a child and a parent seems to be the last indissoluble and non-changeable social relationship. Partners come and go, while the child stays. The relationship celebrates the anachronistic experience of the original and indissoluble tie which, as a result of progressing individualization, is becoming more and more difficult to achieve.³ This is quite a special shift, because as the history of childhood being perceived in Western culture teaches, boundless love towards children is a relatively new invention, at least not lasting more than three hundred years. This significant change also made a correction in terms of the perception of femininity, which from the 18th century was more strongly identified with motherhood.⁴ It began to acquire the attributes of sanctity, derived from the supposedly natural predispositions of mothers and the absolute needs of children. An integral part of this process was also strengthening the conviction that there were no bad children. If a mother loves her child, she manages to preserve the original good. Culturally sanctified motherly love implies that the mother should be ready to sacrifice her life for her child. She should be ready to follow their

¹ S. Uhlová, *O pěstounské péči a adopcích romských dětí: Měli jsme volné místo u stolu*, in: <http://www.romea.cz/cz/romano-vodi/o-pestounske-peci-a-adopcich-romskych-deti-meli-jsme-volne-misto-u-stolu> [accessed: 22.5.2019].

² Z. Bauman, *Liquid fear*, Cambridge: 2006, Polity Press.

³ U. Beck – E. Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*, London: 2001, SAGE Publications, p. 181.

⁴ J. Kristeva, *Stabat mater*, trans. A. Goldhammer, "Poetics Today", 6, 1/2, 1985, p. 133-152; E. Badinter, *The myth of motherhood: an historical view of the maternal instinct*, London: 2001, Souvenir Press E&A.

development and be able to fully adapt to their needs and desires⁵. As noted by Sharon Hays, in today's Western societies this model, built over several centuries, took the form of the so-called intense mothering, which has not been tarnished even by feminism pointing out its ideological and constructivist character.⁶ Therefore, the experience of maternal love has so far been surrounded by the nimbus of holiness. This results in the persistence of cultural limitations when talking about the loss of such love.

Is providing a 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? It is generally accepted that adoptive motherhood, when socially constructed, is less valuable and constitutes only a substitute for biological motherhood.⁷ In Western culture, the biologically-related relationship system is perceived as the only possible reality that is not called into question. Unfortunately, it is often forgotten that our thinking about this relationship is equally culturally conditioned.⁸ The status of an adopted person as well as adoptive parents is often stigmatized as a result of the above. Because of the lack of blood ties and physical resemblance, people tend to regard relationships in the adoptive family as weaker than relationships in biological families.⁹ In the case of motherhood, such social pressure is strengthened by additional

⁵ S. Hays, *The cultural contradictions of Motherhood*, New Haven - London: 1998, Yale University Press, p. 7-8.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. X.

⁷ S. Weistra – N. Luke, *Adoptive parents' experiences of social support and attitudes towards adoption*, "Adoption & Fostering", 41, 3, 2017, p. 229; M. MacDonald – D. McSherry, *Open Adoption: Adoptive Parents' Experiences of Birth Family Contact and Talking to Their Child about Adoption*, "Adoption & Fostering", 35, 3, 2011, p. 5.

⁸ P. Šanderová, *Tělesnost jako významný faktor procesu adopce: kulturně antropologický problém*, Praha: 2011: Sociologické nakladatelství (SLON), p. 34-35.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36-40.

arguments of biological nature, referring to the mother's functions related to the production of oestrogen and milk. And although women get pregnant, have lactation, and often experience a specific animal instinct to protect their offspring, it is, however, a small fragment of what in today's world we understand as proper motherhood.¹⁰

Literature provides many descriptions of maternal suffering associated with the loss of children, but very rare are autobiographical texts that are records of reducing maternal love in order to save one's own psyche. If we take into account the cultural conditions as described above, the following questions will certainly arise. Is it easier or harder for mothers to cope with the deterioration in relations with an adopted child? Is it easier to rationalize failure in the face of a belief that is unacceptable on a conscious level but subliminally penetrating the psyche that the relationship with an adopted child is not fully valuable in terms of social aspects? Or maybe it is just the opposite? If there are ideas based on an adoptive mother built on the conviction of her altruistic attitude, then perhaps it is much more difficult to admit to losing one's feelings for an adopted child? Perhaps the fear of even greater stigmatization is more paralyzing in this case? As Sabina Weistra and Nikki Luke point out, there is a kind of unwillingness of adoptive parents to share their experiences for fear of negative social judgement.¹¹ Researchers do not mention it, but do biological parents eagerly share such experiences?

In any case, social attitudes towards adoption have a significant impact on the self-perception of adoptive parents.¹² They are exposed to

¹⁰ S. Hays, *The cultural contradictions...*, op. cit., p. 13.

¹¹ S. Weistra – N. Luke, *Adoptive parents' experiences...*, op. cit., p. 229.

¹² *Ibidem*.

unprecedented levels of stress because of the necessity of being an ideal parent while being exposed to social stigmatization, connected with the status of being infertile.¹³ Starting from the application stage they must prove that they will be good parents. At the same time, they are expected to deal with the child's problems resulting from the pre-adoption period. On the one hand, in social perception adoptive parents are described as desperate. On the other hand, there appears an idealized and romantic image of adoption, which makes them heroes who sacrifice themselves to a child that on the biological level is not theirs.¹⁴

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 unsuccessful upbringing of adopted children becomes a confirmation of all stereotypes about their maladjustment to the social mainstream?¹⁵ 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 an autobiographical literary text?¹⁶

The Year of Rooster, published in 2007, has a form of autobiographical notes that show a gradual disintegration of the narrator's adoptive family over a period of one year. Moreover, the book is also a chronicle of the public perception of the author's narrative about

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 234.

¹⁵ P. Šanderová, *Tělesnost...*, op. cit., p. 92-94; S. Ali, *Multicultural families: Deracializing transracial adoption*, "Critical Social Policy", 34, 1, 2014, p. 68; R. Barn – D. Kirton, *Transracial Adoption in Britain: Politics, Ideology and Reality*, "Adoption & Fostering", 36, 3-4, 2012, p. 25-26.

¹⁶ M. Czermińska, *O autobiografii i autobiograficzności*, in: *Autobiografia*, red. M. Czermińska, Gdańsk: 2009, Słowo / obraz / terytoria, p. 12-15.

problematic adoption. The text is largely characterized by the common signs of female writers autobiographies as defined by women's studies. There is a very clearly visible anchoring of the identity of the female autobiographical "self" in relation to the chosen "others", who in this case are family members.¹⁷ The plot of the book is a kind of epic of problems with adopted sons who, entering puberty, chose a style of life that is completely different from the system of values of adoptive parents (escaping home and parenting centres, thefts, drugs, reluctance to do anything and eventually the younger adopted son begetting a child with a minor girl). The novel provoked extreme reactions in Czech society. On the one hand, the author was praised by literary critics¹⁸ for undertaking undoubtedly daring problems and for the aesthetic values of the text. She also encountered many positive reactions from readers who had found themselves in a similar life situation and assured her of the therapeutic function of her work. On the other hand, Boučková got criticised by people who accused her of over-generalizing and lack of awareness of the effects that the novel might cause among people who were considering adoption of children from other ethnic backgrounds.¹⁹ In 2014, Martina Vančáková, a psychologist and employee of the J&T foundation for informing and supporting transethnic adoptions in the Czech Republic, noted that in the period after *Rok kohouta* was published, there actually was a temporary decline in interest in adoptions and even foster care for children of the Roma origin. People would openly say that they had even

¹⁷ M. G. Mason, *The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers*, in: *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. J. Olney, Princeton: 1980 Princeton University Press, p 207-235; E. C. Jelinek, *Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition*, in: *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. E. C. Jelinek, Bloomington: 1980, Indiana University Press, p. 1-20.

¹⁸ P. Janoušek, *Tereza Boučková: Rok kohouta*, „Tvar“, 19, 10, 2008, p. 3.

¹⁹ P. Šanderová, *Tělesnost...*, op. cit., p. 9.

thought about this form of adoption, but they read the novel and withdrew their applications.²⁰ However, according to Petra Šanderová, the author of a comprehensive monograph on transethnic adoption in the Czech Republic, Boučková's personal experience of trauma related to the breakdown of ties with adopted sons was not a breakthrough and could not have a particularly destructive impact on the whole sphere of adoption practices. For this was a general and deeply rooted view in the whole society²¹ that at one point found vent in the literary artefact.

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 most hidden level, i.e. from not fully realized way of the narrator expressing herself about her sons, which undergoes a gradual transformation in the text, through a more and more conscious record of the colourful scale of emotions encountered by the narrator, to fully thoughtful reflections on the nature of upbringing, being an adoptive mother and facing the assessments flowing from the outside world.

Words

The reader of the novel will certainly notice that the way the narrator expresses herself about her sons is a kind of litmus test that allows to read her condition and important turning points in the process of self-defensive cutting from being an adoptive mother. The text is concededly dominated by the use of their names in a neutral way (Patrik, Lukáš and Matěj) or the general term "boys", which includes both adopted sons and the biological

²⁰ S. Uhlová, *O pěstounské péči ...*, op. cit.

²¹ P. Šanderová, *Tělesnost...*, op. cit., p. 11.

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: "Matěj ... His situation resembles a family in which other children are **disabled**. There is no more energy or time for the **healthy** child, and the healthy child is not noticed much because of parents' exhaustion" (p. 34).²² Throughout the text, we will not come across one place where the narrator, speaking of all three children, would divide them into adopted sons and the 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 way of expressing herself is different when it concerns particular boys. While the open declarations of motherhood and the use of the son category appear in the opening chapters of the text, with the passage of time, traces of gradual detachment begin to appear, especially in the descriptions of further serious educational problems. For the first time, this is revealed in the scene when the narrator goes to a notary in order to disinherit the eldest 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" (p. 15). The distance is built gradually. In the following reflections on Patrik, the narrator uses the word "man" devoid of emotional charge: "His disorder will soon be revealed, namely the absolute lack of interest in other people - also the nearest and dearest (...). It took me years before I could barely realize that such a disturbed man would have no feelings" (p. 24). When it turns out that the adoptive mother is no longer able to deal

²² T. Boučková, *Rok kohouta*, Praha 2007. All quotes taken from this edition.

with the educational situation which overwhelms her and jeopardizes her existence, the building of the distance clearly accelerates. The manner of speaking begins to emphasize the adoptive nature of the relationship, as if an unconscious way of escaping a full educational failure was revealed:

“We share experiences with children who were taken” (p. 55); “adoptive parent” (p. 69); “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 allows the narrator to maintain her mental integrity. However, the loss of feelings is not an easy and one-time experience. The text reveals a rather non-linear 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 the quick acquisition of distance and cutting off the past is not possible. 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” (p. 102), throws out the narrator, as if, after all, she could not come to terms with the definitive disintegrations of the relations.

Emotions

The disappearance of the bond with the adopted sons which had been built up for many years is a long-lasting process that consists of a series of emotions recorded in detail in the narration. These can be unambiguous emotions, such as the shame experienced while searching through the pockets of Lukáš robbing his parents: “It's humiliating! (...) I am ashamed

that I must do it"(p. 9) or condensed anger expressed in a verbal and somatic manner (jittery, tension, stuttering): "I was shouting again, I was shaking again and I could not catch breath. A never-ending story of hopelessness. Today, just as before Patrik left us, I felt double anger" (p. 79).

However, unequivocal emotions do not appear on the pages of the novel too often. The narrator shows high self-awareness of emotional ambivalence associated with the process of emancipation towards her adoptive sons. She knows perfectly well that there is no zero-one situation here, and that the only thing she can do is to talk about the endless wave of emotional ambivalence, balancing between the need for hope and gradual self-defence acceptance of the loss of love. It is said that hope dies last. It is a wish that a certain state will occur and uncertainty that this will happen. It can be treated as a positive emotion that speaks of the extent of our humanity and faith in another human being. One can also look at it as at an emotional drug, the use of which makes it difficult to judge a disadvantageous situation and, as a result, prolongs suffering.²³ In the case of the narrator, hope forces her to continue her efforts: "but we will not abandon football. We try to encourage him with rewards" (p. 46); "Marek decided that we would control him. (...) We must bring it to an end. (...). We must. (...) I wish he were there" (p. 82). One moment suffices when a child rejecting parents gives even a shadow of hope that things can gain a positive turn, so that maternal feelings are revived again: "Dinner was prepared by Lukáš (...). I thanked him and said it was nice of him. Very nice! And that I would love to have him like that all the time. Luky... Well?"

²³ J. Zigon, *Hope dies last: Two aspects of hope in contemporary Moscow*, "Anthropological Theory", 9, 3, 2009, p. 253–271.

"I love you" (p. 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 – under the influence of old photographs – she decided to withdraw the application for the 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 Mark, the remnants of faith in improving this state. Or is it pure romanticism? Or rather a desire not to delete the relation with Lukáš yet?" (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: "What do I really want? To be proud of Patrik" (p. 155), but she knows that she will never achieve it.

The frustration that grows as the action unfolds tells her to gradually move to self-defence positions and record the reduction of love and attachment. The author is not limited, however, to the simple construction of a narrator's account of this subject passed on to the reader. The reduction takes place on several levels and is articulated gradually. First of all, it should be noted that as a result of cumulative tension, stress and suffering, it takes place in the sphere of subconsciousness of the adoptive mother. A track indicating that the process of psychological dealing with the situation has been going on for a long time is a scene in which the narrator watches her family photos and realizes that she does not remember any events captured in the pictures: "How many attractions have we prepared for the boys! I do not remember

anything. Nothing beautiful has remained. Nothing but pictures” (p. 215). Her subconsciousness prepared her for the inevitable loss and carried out the form of oblivion, which Paul Connerton calls constitutive oblivion. 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. What helps to forget also builds a living space for new ventures.²⁴ 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” (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: "how much I did not want to be alive because my family life has been destroying me" (p. 16). From this point on, gradual and conscious disclosure of a change in attitude towards the adopted sons begins. Initially, this takes on a delicate form of talking about her cynicism or sense of nonsense: "on the table, a note from Lukáš that he misses me. I thought cynically what cataclysm hides behind this longing?"(p. 102); "It does not make any sense, any at all. Any at all!" (p. 161). Then intensification occurs. The narrator does not enjoy the prospect of spending Christmas together with the boys: "Marek invited Patrik to us to Christmas Eve. I do not know if I want it” (p.132). It is about breaking another taboo because the conviction about the

²⁴ P. Connerton, *Seven types of forgetting*, „Memory Studies“, 1, 1, 2008, p. 59–71.

absolutely family nature of Christmas is deeply rooted in the general Czech consciousness. The next level of reduction of maternal feelings is realising at some point that further emotional involvement is destructive: "Any support in the form of emotional investment is unnecessary, hurtful" (p. 180), which leads the narrator to the increasingly expressed desire to free herself from the adopted sons:

"I do not want to live here! I do not want to live here! (...) I cannot stand it! I do not want here to be like that! I do not want to! I do not want to have such a disgusting, shitty, fucked up home!" (p. 141); "I want him to come back to the educational institution" (p. 193); "We do not wish to have him at home at all" (p. 209); "I took a breath and told Lukáš openly: I cannot live with you under one roof any more" (p. 323).

It is worth paying attention to the first of the quoted passages, in which the five-fold use of the words "I do not want" captures the essence of the narrator's desperation and 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." (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 reconciliation 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 is 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 proper application, then it may be easier to mentally cancel such a relationship if it is unbearable, and the layers of

maternal feelings have completely exhausted: "I think I've already cried all my tears out. I am an empty woman deprived of emotions" (p. 327).

One of the very clear signs of the disappearance of maternal love is the expression of a sense of complete alienness towards the adopted sons. The breaking of the primary and strong ties between the mother and the teenager is a typical phenomenon and is part of the logic and physiology of adolescence itself, but in the novel by Boučkova it takes on an extremely distinct shape. First of all, it is a frequent remembrance of the perceived disgust towards the physicality of the boys who, due to the negation of the basic principles of personal hygiene, start to stink horribly: "I said aloud: if you weren't so dirty and stinky, I would invite you for dinner. But that's probably not possible, you have to admit it "(p. 39). However, the embarrassing feeling of inability to reach an agreement is more acute. She just does not know what to talk about and probably she does not know why they should talk:

"I did not know what to talk about to Patrik" (p. 37); "We are standing in silence. (...) Bye. Patrik solved it. Bye. Each of us went away in the opposite direction" (p. 40); "There, I came upon Patrik. (...) When he noticed me, he stopped. He was looking and did not know whether he should come up to me or rather pretend he did not know me. He did not greet me. 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?" (pp. 101-102).

This is particularly painful in the description of Christmas, which in today's western world is a rather synthetic normative practice of family life than a religious holiday.²⁵ A cultural imperative is very internalized here, which is why the narrator finally decides to spend Christmas with the adopted sons, although she is fully aware that it can be a devastating experience

²⁵ D. MILLER, *Christmas An Anthropological Lens*, „Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory“, 7, 3, 2017, p. 415 -418. Ibidem, p. 416-418.

for her psyche. In the plot, nothing exceptional during this time spent together happens, no major conflict explodes, no other scandal takes place. There is, however, a boundless sense of alienation that actually shows that 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:

"Lukáš is standing, leaning against the stove and looking. Patrik is sitting at the table (...) and is also looking. Or they are both sitting on the stairs, staring into space, and neither one of them thinks of reading or doing anything else, anything! (...) When staring lasts for an hour and begins to drag on the next one, I get almost crazy about it. (...) This activity is called: waiting for a notebook. (...) With perseverance they go on immersing in the overwhelming boredom (...). When staring into emptiness continued into the third hour, I told them to go somewhere and go back to supper" (pp. 152-153).

The end of holidays turns out to be benign: "We do not enjoy it anymore! And because we invited you for Christmas, and the holidays are over, we will say goodbye tomorrow after dinner (...). Well thanks. All the best! Bye!" (p. 154-155). In this sense 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 novel is not only a record of the narrator's emotional journey. There are also reflections on the upbringing process, the essence of being an adoptive parent, social conditions for transethnic adoption and the reaction of the outside world to the adoption drama. In other words, the narrator tries to find an answer to the question why her experience of being an adoptive mother reached such a point and how to deal with the social reception of this situation. The narrator confesses that

for a long time she has believed that she would manage to raise the boys to be decent people. The failure, however, makes her ask questions about the scope of educational opportunities: "Does man have an influence on anything? With their love, energy, the way they live?" (p. 15). And here the novel touches on a key problem, whether modern parents can have expectations. Do their desires towards children have any justification? 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 the parent to accept and explain that their feelings cannot be hurt because they have no right to expect? On the other hand, culture exerts enormous pressure, especially on mothers, and accounts for educational effects. This is also connected with the issue of defining maternal love. Is it love for some reason, e.g. receiving emotional feedback from the child, or love despite anything, even if it meant the self-destruction of a loving subject?

Because the story told does not provide a positive answer to the question, the narrator attempts to rationalize the situation: "When the boys stopped manifesting the desire to adapt to our lifestyle, when they developed their natural inclinations and unnatural deprivation" (p. 62). In the quoted passage, to the foreground comes the conviction of the narrator about the innate predispositions of the boys that might be caused not only by inherited genetic codes, but 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 educational 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 style is valuable and desirable. 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 that the type of potentially concealed maternal mistakes was of the kind that it resulted in the demoralization of the boys.

The reflective layer of the novel is also co-created with considerations about the sense and essence of the adoption itself. This 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 remembered, however, that the literary autobiography, even with the assumption of a strong referentiality inscribed in its essence, is not intended to show the full truth, let alone to shape certain social attitudes. Its primary purpose is to provide a subjective testimony of one's own life.

However, before we analyse the tone of the narration, it will be necessary to ask the basic question for the people living in the post-modern world about the sense of having children. One can, of course, refer to the existence of social pressure implying the belief in parenting as a condition of a fully valuable life, but at today's pace of civilization changes and more and more modern forms of self-fulfilment, it should not be overestimated. I think, however, that it is rather about a natural and rationally inexplicable need of many people to simply possess the offspring. It is the reason why couples who have unsolvable 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.²⁶ 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" (p. 191).

Besides, in the far-famed interview published in 2006 on the pages of the Czech edition of the "Marianne" magazine, the author herself stressed that: "- But today, I would advised against it (adoption) to everyone. - And if you were thirty again... - ... Well, I would probably decide for it again."²⁷ One may conclude that the narrator is aware of the bi-directionality of emotional transfers related to the adoption experience. However, it does not prevent her from constructing a message about her own sacrifice and losses resulting from decisions taken 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?" (p. 86); "all my persistent effort (...) to save an artificially created family is completely hopeless" (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 the fate was the greatest value of my life. The worst is unnecessary and senseless sacrifice" (p. 127).

The above fragments clearly show that the adopted boys are positioned as taking, while the adoptive mother is the one who sacrifices herself and has a nature of a giver. Is it possible to talk about the inconsistency of the message? First of all, one should be aware that the autobiographical text as a narrative about the emotions of the autobiographical subject does

²⁶ B. Depaulo, *How We Live Now. Redefining Home and the Family in the 21-st Century*, London – New York: 2015, Atria, p. 121.

²⁷ I. Jirků, *Rozhovor s Terezou Boučkovou: Sedmnáct let s dětmi odjinud*, "Marianne: život ve Třiceti", 2, 2006, p. 20.

not have to be logically coherent at all. Second of all, 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 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 his biological mother. Then the narrator also admits the possibility of talking about the self-sacrifice 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 17 years of life!” (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!” (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 gratefulness, we are sending him back to the correctional facilities and we have to pay alimony for it!” (p. 199).

If it is impossible to explain defeat and loss of feeling in emotional categories, then there is 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 the racial aspect being part of it. In any case, it was the main catalyst for the criticism that the author had to face after *Rok kohouta* was published. It is worth emphasizing because she was hardly criticized for the confession of

losing feelings towards the adopted sons, but for having dared to speak about it in the context of transethnic adoption. The exact reading of the text shows, however, that when speaking about the Roma origin of the adopted sons, the narrator is particularly cautious. She prevents herself against binding their psychophysical predispositions to Roma origins, 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 in Czech society there is unfortunately 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 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.²⁸

The first and very discreet 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 black hair of one of the boys that distinguished him on the background of the family's hair. Later, bodily difference is discussed once more when the family has to face the information that Lukáš conceived a child with a fifteen-year-old Eva. The

²⁸ P. Šanderová, *Tělesnost...*, op. cit., p. 97-98.

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 are reactions to the boys being labelled by the outside world. The first such moment is the narrator's remark that as far as Lukáš could not pronounce many words correctly and did not understand their meaning, he learned to say the word "discrimination" perfectly. When the teacher at the vocational school wanted him to clean up a wheelbarrow with grout, he replied that it was "discrimination against the Roma." This remark is, of course, a bitter joke in the context of Lukáš's behaviour at home and at school. However, it points to the fact of interfering with the outside world, which gave the boys a sense of their Roma origins. "Labelling" of the boys is practised by everyone, starting from the mother of the narrator: "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" (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!" (p. 279), and ending with psychologists to whom they turn for help: "You have to reckon with the fact that Roma people steal, why are you surprised?" (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 in her story 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!" (p. 161). She also tried to

build a sense of positive ethnic identity in 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 the 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" (p. 181).

It is impossible to make a clear diagnosis 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" (p. 181), or individual conditions of both adopted sons. In any case, Boučková's novel provides evidence for the existence of the phenomenon described by Šenderová, and the issue of eliminating ethnic prejudices, however very right and necessary, should not be a factor of self-censorship for one's own painful autobiographical stories.

As it has already been mentioned, adoptive mothers in connection with the cultural paradigm of intense motherhood are exposed to unprecedented stress associated with a continuous social evaluation. With noticeable stigmatization, they are expected to be both excellent and heroic at the same time, meaning that they will be part of the widespread idealized notion of adoption. The narrator's story also reveals this very nasty aspect of being an adoptive parent. Mentions about being judged are rather sparing, but on their basis one can assume that the awareness of being exceptionally exposed to the confrontation with the 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" (p. 202). This

statement makes us conclude that those who have no real experience with adoption are the most willing to make strict judgements. In other words, it would confirm that it is not about a real assessment of the situation, but about the fear of violating someone's ideas about what motherhood, upbringing and adoption itself should look like. The narrator could always count on a properly functioning system of external evaluations that operated without any objections, 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. Very significant here is the example of school institutions that would give her plenty of good advice always incorporating 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" (p. 92).

However, when it turns out that all efforts do not bring any effects and it is necessary to take decisive steps to save herself and the remnants of the family, the 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" (pp. 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" (p. 119). Especially the fear of being accused of unequal treatment of children is paralysing: "We risk one more condemnation: they have thrown out their adopted son but are spoiling

their own one” (p. 68). Is this, however, sufficient reason to be silent and use self-censorship? After the interview published in “Marianne”, the narrator has doubts whether it is really important to speak in public 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 the whole 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?” (p. 138-139). Certainly, the price was high if measured by the number of negative reactions, but the awareness of empathic understanding on the part of many adoptive and non-adoptive mothers seems to make that price worth paying.