

## ‘Old Age is no Place for Sissies’: Representations of Older Women in Dubravka Ugrešić's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*

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### Abstract

*Since the aging population is becoming a global phenomenon in both the developed and developing world, recent representations of older women found in fiction illuminate both the harsh realities of aging and specific aspects of women's social roles and sense of self. Novels that focus on female characters and the aging process explore both negative and positive elements of senescence, the biological process of aging, and adaptive strategies for women. This essay uses an interdisciplinary approach to analyze how fiction reflects observed and statistical aspects of aging in Eastern Europe, and specifically examines the contributions of Dubravka Ugrešić to a growing body of representation of older women, in the novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, and how the portrayal of women in the novel reveals the ambiguities of female aging, in particular within the unique cultural context of post-war Croatia.*

**Keywords:** Aging, Senescence, Novel, Croatian, Ugrešić, *Baba Yaga*, Interdisciplinary, Demographics

### Introduction

Every individual struggles with how the aging process fits their sense of self and the expectations of their society. Senescence, the biological process of aging, is inevitable, but literary representation situates the image of the aging individual in social and historical contexts, and provides a mirror of how people live with the implications of that process as well as a window into sociocultural attitudes in specific national contexts. Dubravka Ugrešić, who was a prominent writer of the former Yugoslavia, in her novel *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2010)<sup>1</sup> provides a number of different portrayals of women aging, each with different prognoses and outcomes, which exemplify the representations and realities to be found at the intersection of gender and aging in what is now Croatia as well as in Central Europe more generally, and that can perhaps be extrapolated to women's experience of aging throughout myriad cultures. The three-part novel follows multiple story lines that acknowledge various negative and unfortunate aspects of aging, but narrates them to highlight positive qualities that present the potentially empowering force of the senescence process.

### 1. Representation, Reality, and the Older Woman

Ugrešić's novel begins with a prologue that, in a sense, states the question that underlies much of the narrative force of this text and other representations that feature aging female characters.<sup>2</sup> Where are older women, how are they seen (or unseen) by others, and how do they see themselves? The excerpt below exemplifies the prologue-like section entitled "At First You Don't See Them" at the beginning of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* which situates older women in a physical context:

Yes, at first they are invisible. They move past you, shadow-like, they peck at the air in front of them, tap, shuffle along the asphalt, mince in small mouse-like steps, clutch a walker, stand surrounded by a cluster of pointless sacks and bags, like a deserter from the army still decked in full war gear. (1)

Ugrešić, arguably the best-known contemporary female writer from Croatia, in the novel's first paragraph brings into focus a deceptively invisible army of old women in a city (presumably Zagreb, Ugrešić's birthplace), their physical deterioration, old-fashioned dressing habits, and eccentric behaviors.

<sup>1</sup>Originally published as *Baba Yaga je smjelajaje*, 2008. All quotations in the text are from the 2010 English translation.

<sup>2</sup> A good bibliographical list of primarily Anglophone sources can be found in Brennan's *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*, pp. 175-6.

Images in the excerpt above and the rest of the opening section repeatedly dehumanize old women by comparing them to a variety of smaller animals and everyday objects such as scurrying mice, pecking birds, old bulldogs, dried apples, and lost luggage. The descriptions focus on older women's odd sense of fashion, such as strange hats, outdated handbags, moth-eaten furs, and embroidered blouses; the descriptions mercilessly point out old women's deteriorating physical characteristics, from creased and badly made-up faces to sagging upper arms and visible spider veins. It zeroes in on old women's social isolation, their inability to communicate effectively, and their difficulties in executing independently simple tasks such as crossing the street.

The metaphors and comparisons in the prologue establish the old ladies as a social "Other," different from the presumably younger, able-bodied readers, yet the repetitive nature of images also underscores the unavoidable and pervasive presence of old women. The narrator's tone is probing and shifting; one paragraph describes older ladies in almost endearing and nostalgic terms; the next, in quite unappealing ways (the collars of their shirts are dirty, their stockings sag, and their buttons do not line up with their buttonholes). For a brief moment they seem to provoke pity, but almost immediately they repel with their aggressive gaze and manipulative requests. This tone underscores one of the glaring contradictions in the representation of old women; despite their ubiquitous presence, they remain invisible. Most people do not want to see them.

Finally, at the very end of the prologue, the narrator transforms images of old ladies as a social "Other" to show that, ultimately, these old ladies represent all readers. The narrator ironically warns readers that in the moment they start to sympathize with the old ladies, "precisely at this moment that you should dig in your heels and, resist the siren call, make an effort to lower the temperature of your heart. Remember, their tears do not mean the same thing as yours do. Because if you relent, give in, exchange a few more words, you will be in their thrall" (3). Here the narrator bridges a gulf between the "old women"—dangerous "Sirens"—and the presumably able-bodied younger readers inscribed in the text with the pronoun "you." Readers are warned to avoid empathy towards old women lest they "will slide into a world [they] had no intention entering, because [their] time has not yet come, [their] hour, for God's sake, has not come" (3). Through the irony and sarcasm in this warning, Ugrešić exposes dismissive social attitudes in dealings with elderly women, and in a final twist old ladies truly become the metaphor for all of us—of course, it says, the reader's time has or certainly will come. The old ladies are all of us, we are all inevitably approaching old age, and we might face the same attitudes ourselves.

Ugrešić's opening confronts a number of issues common in other popular as well as literary representations of female senescence, namely the portrayal of old women as "Other" to the social norm because old age brings deterioration to the body and the spirit, resulting in decreased functionality, social isolation, and dehumanization. Significantly, the older women's state of invisibility particularly contrasts constructions of the female identity through continuous gaze and visible display that is one of the cornerstones of the Western patriarchal culture. In other words, by becoming "invisible," older women experience not only dehumanization but also de-feminization; they become a double "Other."

Just like many novels examined in recent studies of fiction about aging written by women, such as Brennan's study *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction*, Ugrešić's novel "engage[s] with and more importantly challenge[s] society's axiomatic beliefs about old age in areas ranging from dependency to sexuality" and "refuse[s] to deal solely in the language of stagnation and decline" (Brennan 1). Ugrešić's novel, while exposing many similar patterns of sexism and ageism, portrays some innovative practices of resistance that stem from the specific cultural situation of her characters. The novel's portrayal of an Eastern European society emerging from the decade-long violence of a Civil War into a world of global capitalism extends the analysis of the portrayals of female senescence in the West to the developing world, and reveals that the issues of senescence and the responses to them are in many ways global.<sup>3</sup>

## **2. Situating Ugrešić's novel in Local and Global Contexts**

My analysis of Ugrešić's novel is framed by examinations of female senescence in several disciplines from demography to feminist studies of aging and literary analysis. Demographic data reinforce the fact that the ubiquitous presence of old ladies as presented in Ugrešić's novel is not only a literary metaphor.

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<sup>3</sup> Another important study on the relationship between aging and representations of woman is *Adventures of the Spirit: The Older Woman in the Works of Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, and Other Contemporary Writers* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007).

According to the latest demographic data projection, if we are to believe the CIA factbook, in Croatia (all the main characters in Ugrešić's novel are from Croatia, and the first section of the novel is situated there), in the population of people who are 65 and older, women account for over 60%.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, snapshots into Eastern European female senescence, offered in Ugrešić's novel and supported by demographic data, reveal that the end of the twentieth- and twenty-first century population trends present in West Europe and the United States—namely, the noticeable increase of life span that has increased the absolute and relative numbers of the older population in developed countries and at the same time exacerbated the gender imbalance among the oldest—is even more apparent among Eastern European populations.

A World Bank Report *Red to Gray: The "Third Transition" of Aging Population in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* (2007) examines in detail the consequences of demographic trends in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union region in global contexts. It notices that "aging in the region occur[s] in the context of unprecedentedly weak institutional development," pleads for "policymakers to shed their complacency and to act—now." One can glean what actions the World Bank experts would like to encourage in the "policymakers" to undertake by examining the comparison the experts offer between the prudent behaviors of an individual in response to aging to future social policies. The report appeals to policymakers on a personal level:

Each of us knows that old age is likely to bring feebler bodies, lower incomes, and higher medical costs, but only some of us take this realization to its natural end—that, to ease aging travails, we need to exercise our bodies and minds, save for retirement, and insure against catastrophic risk. Those who do these things have a good chance of enjoying a happy and productive old age. The same holds for the region. (43)

This comparison, coupled with some more specific suggestions delivered in a deceptively neutral language from the previous pages, such as shrink social benefits and increase productivity and the retirement age, reveals an excruciatingly naïve belief that the standards of individual prudent behavior (of specifically an upper middle class citizen who stands to profit from global capitalism) can be somehow easily mimicked by various social policies. Furthermore, even if we leave aside the false proposition that implies that feebler bodies, lower incomes, and higher medical costs are somehow to be examined as phenomena of essential natural "rank" (while feebler bodies are, at least for now, a natural occurrence, the lower incomes and higher medical costs are decidedly not one, but a product of the current social, economic, and historic system, i.e. global capitalism). Now, after several years of recession, the belief in the rampant forces of global capitalism implied in the report has led not to an amelioration of Eastern European (and global) demographic trends but to an exacerbation of them.

Feminist examinations of female senescence, such as the collection of essays edited by Marilyn Pearsall, *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women Aging*, while not dealing specifically with the Eastern European region, reframes issues of demography and aging as issues that overwhelmingly affect women and cannot be understood without showing "linkage between gender inequality and the political economy of the material conditions of older women" and "intersections of age and gender with dimensions of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality" (4). Rather than talking about issues of aging in the language of diagrams and in terms of benefits and costs, the essays in the collection examine some actual representations of aging women and philosophical and ideological as well as moral and ethical underpinnings of these representations.

Mirroring the older woman's position of invisibility in the society in general—a position that has received concurrent interpretations even by some of the great names of feminism, such as Simone de Beauvoir<sup>5</sup>—the Eastern European literary canon for centuries offered very few portrayals of elderly women beyond simplistic and comic characters, such as overbearing mothers-in-law or idealized and victimized aging mothers of the young hero and/or heroine. Classics of Croatian literature, and literatures of other states that originate from the former Yugoslavia, boast remarkably few differentiated and complex representations of older women (or men). Most portrayals of older female characters in fiction from the region, like the texts that Brennan analyzes, "heavily rel[y] on stereotypes, popular portraits of aging suggest[ing] a very limited range of images and behaviours" (2). The "demented and isolated" woman, a la Miss Havisham, is definitely present in the literature of the region.

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/hr.html>

<sup>5</sup> While Simone de Beauvoir is certainly one of the first empathic women to recognize and document the situation of women aging in *Old Age* (1970), she does not offer any empowering solutions.

The Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić's novel *Gospođica* exemplifies this character.<sup>6</sup> The main character was a spinster, from early twentieth-century Bosnia, who became involved in business. As a female that ventures outside "proper" female roles, she becomes increasingly avaricious and even paranoid, afraid that she will lose her money. She leads an old maid's isolated life, and although she dies in early middle age, she seems a veritable representative of an old woman. Less negative portrayals of older women are the ubiquitous sacrificing wives and good grandmothers that offer a counterbalance to many comic portrayals of vicious and meddling mothers-in-law.

In this context, Ugrešić's *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* is a ground-breaking text. Ugrešić and other female writers of her generation started bridging the gender gap in the literature of the countries in the former Yugoslavia, which parallels the gender disparity in the literature of other Eastern European and former Soviet Union countries. With the exception of a few poets and a popular female author here and there, the traditional literary national canon of Eastern Europe sorely lacked female authors.<sup>8</sup> Since the 1970s (that is, for several decades now), Ugrešić (and other women writers<sup>9</sup>) have been introducing to Eastern European Literature a number of complex and diverse female characters and female voices. While Ugrešić never openly categorized herself as a feminist, her texts, from her early comedy *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life* to her first two novels written after the war—*The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (2002) and *The Ministry of Pain* (2004)<sup>10</sup>—not only center around a main female character but also develop a set of, arguably, specifically female issues, such as portraying a woman in search of an intimate relationship, a woman and her circle of female friends, and a mother and daughter relationship. And although her two novels *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain* are primarily the novels of an exile, Ugrešić's exiles have a decidedly female, autobiographical voices. Perhaps spurred by the aging of her own generation or even as a logical continuation of the topics in her previous novels, her last novel ventures into an often ignored topic: the issue of elderly women.

Zoe Brennan finds that many female twentieth-century writers from Britain and America offer anti-stereotypical representations of female senescence. This same sensibility can be recognized in the women in Ugrešić's book: 1. "the angry and frustrated," 2. "the passionate and desiring," 3. "the contended and developing," and finally, 4. "the wise and archetypal." My analysis will show that although Ugrešić's characters certainly contain elements of all four types of older women characters that Brennan categorizes, her characters go beyond these groupings. Most interestingly, Ugrešić creates a new "wise and archetypal" character. While Brennan finds the "wise and archetypal" in portrayals of older female detectives, Ugrešić uses Baba Yaga, an old witch figure from Slavic folklore, to infuse images of older women who resist the stereotypical portrayals of female senescence with power and insight.

### 3. Gender and the Generational Divide

After Ugrešić develops and implodes in her prologue the stereotypical images of older women as ubiquitous but invisible into an image that is uncomfortably close to all readers, the first section of her novel, "Go There—I Know Not Where—and Bring Me Back a Thing I Lack," portrays encounters between a middle-aged daughter, a writer in exile, and her eighty year old mother, in a number of scenes told through first person narration. The mother three years before had received "an ugly diagnosis," not as ugly as Alzheimer's but presumably terminal, and possibly but not clearly related to "the metastases to the brain which had appeared seventeen years after a bout of breast cancer and had been discovered in time and treated successfully" (9). The mother refers to her illness repeatedly as a "cobweb of mine." While several scenes in this section of the novel allude to the mother's repeated hospitalizations, the narrator/daughter reflects on her mother's illness and aging through detailed observations of the mother's psychological and behavioral changes.

<sup>6</sup> Although the literal translation is "Miss," the title of the book translated into English is *The Woman from Sarajevo* (New York: Knopf, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the satiric works of Branislav Nusić from early in the twentieth century show women as ridiculous figures that fit every female stereotype and his works are still well known throughout the former Yugoslavia.

<sup>8</sup> A notable exception is Marija Jurić Zagorka, a writer of popular literature from the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in Croatia, who developed a large following writing romances and genre fiction.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Slavenka Drakulić has written about the plight of women in the recent war in *S: A Novel about the Balkans*.

<sup>10</sup> The original titles are: *Muzej bezuvjetne predaje* (Belgrade: Samizdat B92; Zagreb: Konzor, 2001 – 2002) and *Ministarstvoboli* (Belgrade: Fabrikaknjiga; Zagreb: Faust Vrancic, 2004)

The daughter is explicit in stating that the mother doesn't seem to feel any physical pain or even discomfort, and that although the mother's eyesight is failing (due to cataracts for which the mother refuses an operation), she can get around with the use of a walker.

The daughter's observations, however, expose in great detail her mother's mental deterioration and behavioral rigidity. The overall narrative tone of the scenes is not mean, despite the occasional frustrations that the daughter experiences; it is also mostly void of pity for the mother's failing condition, but at the same time it is not cold and clinically objective—the words that come to mind to describe the tenor of this section are that the tone is clear, direct, and honest. The daughter relates her mother's linguistic slippages that sometimes lead to inappropriate and quite funny pairings (in asking for a "swiffer" so she could clean some dust in her apartment, in Croatian called "swifter," she uses the word "sfinkter," which is Croatian for "sphincter"); other times, the mother's linguistic confusion causes anger in her and frustration for the daughter.

The mother's failing memory is portrayed in equal detail; she confuses her friends' names but once she gets on the phone with the right person she has a delightful conversation with the "old witch." More disturbing to the daughter are the mother's apparent conflation of her husband and her father by referring to them by the same word, "tata" [Dad]; the daughter observes that the mother used to make a clear difference between her husband [tata] and her father [deda]. Since both "tata" and "deda" had died several decades before, these confusions reveal to the daughter serious lapses in her mother's memory. The daughter also notices that the mother changes the details about certain events for no clear reason; for example, she changes (or misremembers) the last words of her own mother, the daughter's grandmother.

While the most obvious changes occur in her mother's linguistic abilities, the daughter observes increasing rigidity in her mother's behavior as well. Her interests and focus narrow. While constantly complaining of loneliness and boredom, the mother refuses to participate in any activities outside of her set daily routine. She doesn't want to travel, either on her own or with her daughter; she refuses to move in with her son's family or even closer to the son's neighborhood; she refuses to participate in any groups for seniors, or take up a hobby. On the other hand, she stubbornly sticks to her aggressively rigid opinions that encompass everything from the proper way to cook onions to moral judgments about other people. She continues to obsess about cleanliness and develops a limited daily routine that she observes almost religiously.

The daughter copes rather realistically and patiently with all of these developments, but without idealization. At first, she attempts unsuccessfully to disabuse her mother of one of the cultural clichés, "old age is a great misfortune," that the mother keeps repeating. The daughter goes through a series of logical arguments pointing out to the mother that her old age is not that horrific, especially considering the situation. The daughter finally manages to budge the mother from her lethargy by pointing out to the mother her relatively good fortune even in comparison to famous movie stars from her mother's generation; the daughter points out Ava Gardner's unenviable old age, illness and death, the deaths of Audrey Hepburn and Ingrid Bergman (all of them died younger than the mother); she points out that even Elizabeth Taylor, who is several years younger than the mother, already needs a wheelchair and has had some very serious bouts with illness. Finally, she reiterates the famous Bette Davis quote, "Old Age is No Place for Sissies." The discussion of Hollywood celebrities temporarily enlivens their discussion and makes the mother more responsive to the daughter's attempts at communication.

While these conversations do not resolve the underlying issue of aging for the mother, they point out for the reader that certain ideological underpinnings of aging and sexism cross cultural and historical barriers. The mother's behavior, including her willing response to movie star news, is quite a common global phenomenon. It creates a kind of community, certainly distant in reality but seemingly shared culture. Ultimately, however, the daughter does not quite manage to help her mother resolve her issues of aging or illness or develop a more proactive attitude, leaving the section without a dramatic resolution. Readers are left with another of the mother's semi-humorous slippages, this time between "cvarci" (food) and "cvorci" (bird) (translated as a slippage between "starlings" and "darlings").

#### ***4. Family Matters and the Aging Process***

The relationship between the narrator and her mother in the first part of the novel illustrates the "invisible" veracities of aging exposed in the prologue.

Once the reader, tempted by the narrator's ironic statements, actually begins to look at (and think about) invisible old ladies, the complex realities of old age emerge. The mother, a widow, in many ways manages a privileged existence; she still lives independently in her own apartment. The son's family lives close by, and she could have even more contact with them if she wanted, but she refuses. The son's family apparently encouraged the mother to live with them, but she thinks the children, her grandchildren, are too tiresome. The mother's response is difficult to interpret; is it a plea for genuine independence, or does this assertion of independence in old age just mask her feeling that she would not quite be welcomed in the son's busy family life? In any case, her attitude runs contrary to the stereotypes of the grandmother (or grandfather) who is the happiest when she lives in the background with grandchildren around. And it is the dependency factor that emphasizes the situation many older women find inescapable. There is no longer a sense of peer sharing, of community interest, but only of increasing helplessness and the potential of being a burden.

This part of the novel also offers intriguing insights into the mother/daughter bond. The involvement of parents in adult children's lives, the result of specific historical, cultural, and economic developments in Central and Eastern Europe, is more common than that found in North America, for example, where typically adult children are encouraged to move out and start their own nuclear families. Recently, the most famous portrayal of the oppressive nature of this familial bonding and how it can spin out of control is Elfride Jelinek's novel *The Piano Teacher*.<sup>11</sup> In that novel, the masochistic mother is so oppressive and controlling that her adult daughter, with whom she lives, lashes out violently.

Ugrešić paints a less shocking and more quietly nuanced portrayal of the mother-daughter bond. The daughter, although she lives in another country, feels an intense psychological bond with the mother—she even acts as her own mother's "proxy" in a trip to Bulgaria during which she is trying to revisit her mother's past (Bulgaria is the mother's native country), and her own childhood. She repeatedly travels to her hometown for many weeks in order to nurse her mother; the mother seems quite happy to relinquish much of the control to the daughter—the daughter redecorates the mother's apartment and rearranges things. On the other hand, the tension in their relationship is also depicted; the mother has trouble hearing and understanding the daughter. The breaks in communication occur because of the mother's illness, old age, or they are just simply differences in their personalities. This tension provokes an array of emotions from anger to sadness as well as humor in the daughter/narrator that are transmitted through the first-person narrative to the reader as well.

The other important reality of old age is depicted in the mother's daily routine and her relationship with the woman who helps her by bringing food when the daughter is away. The mother follows a very strict routine—which seems to confirm some of the stereotypes of old age—in the sense that some older people thrive best in familiar circumstances with established routines. The routine portrayed in the novel is reminiscent of the routines revealed in novels about old women analyzed by Brennan. However, the character of the "mother" portrayed in Ugrešić's novel overlaps the two types analyzed by Brennan; she is both an angry woman and a woman content with her daily routines. These nuanced portrayals in Ugrešić's novel seem to be her genuine contribution to the conversation about portrayals of women and old age in fiction. The creation of complex multifaceted characters of older women, who do not easily fit into any stereotypes, can perhaps most successfully disrupt the prevalent invisibility of old ladies. The role of the family is critical in this process, and can be an important element in both physical and psychological aspects of the aging process. People who feel needed, desired, and visible, can often fare better than those who are ignored and invisible.

### ***5. Creating Communities: The Empowering Possibilities of Aging***

The empowering solution to aging and illness is offered in the second section of the novel, "Ask Me No Questions and I'll Tell You No Lies," which describes three old women, friends from Zagreb—Pupa (who also appears in the second part of the novel as the mother's friend), Kukla, and Beba, as a group of Eastern European "Golden Girls" on a six-day vacation in a Czech spa that has become a "wellness" center. The three Eastern European "Golden Girls" are over sixty and retired.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>*The Piano Teacher* (New York: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988). Jelinek, an Austrian Nobel Prize Laureate, often delineates the seething tensions just beneath the surface of middle class existences.

<sup>12</sup>Each of their names are nicknames, doll names in fact, and provides an irony, because their life histories are in sharp contrast to their names—like Nora in Ibsen's *Dollhouse*, they have strength forged through experience. The relationship

They cultivate a long-term friendship; Kukla is Pupa's sister-in-law, and Beba and Pupa worked in the same hospital. This part of the novel is written in traditional third person narrative, yet it offers the strangest and the most humorous content of all the other parts of the novel. The old women have distinct personalities and their portrayals are empowering; in contrast to the mother from the first part of the novel, they are willing to not only act but also to act out. More importantly, their life histories are conceived as alternatives not only to the portrayals of senescent women as invisible, inactive and suffering, but also to the attempts of Western medicine to solve the "problem" of aging and the ensuing commercialization of a search for a modern "fountain of youth."

Beba, the youngest of the three, is seemingly the most affected by the "traditional" portrayals of aging women. In containing an absurd blend of spinster-like and over-sexed womanly qualities, Beba's character reframes stock portrayals of women in patriarchal narratives. Contrary to both Pupa and Kukla who were married multiple times, Beba was never married but has subordinated most of her life to men, both her lovers and her son. Of the three characters, she is the most keenly aware of sexuality; in a conversation she defines herself as a "child of the sixties" or a "victim of the sixties," and in her silent musings she asks herself, "had not everything revolved around sex for a major part of her life." However, she accepts a typically heterosexual male vision of sexuality; she uses one of her lover's interpretation of relationships—"Men and women are like snap fasteners"—and comments how "she was prepared to die for that damned 'snap fastener'" (121). Still, while the image is male, Ugrešić through Beba gives it a female twist because the word is really a sewing term a man would be unlikely to use. Still, she internalizes "traditional" female body images and perceives her aging body as "punishment," while clinically examining how it has changed. The narrator observes: "Beba and her body lived in a state of mutual intolerance" and "betrayal" (117). While pondering the disconnectedness between herself and her body, she cannot quite decide which details contribute most to the unflattering image of herself she perceives in the mirror. She centers on "her breasts, which had been neither large nor small," and "had become big and then too big, and then so huge . . . that things happened like this morning, when she was leaving her massage" (118) and a Russian man compared her to a hippopotamus. And although she tries to improve her shape—for example, she wears a "'minimizer' corset. Her body constantly betrays her, she thinks. If it were not for grooming, her feet would become 'hooves' and she would seem like an unkempt animal. Inevitably,

she was gradually turning into what she found repellent: one of those bleached old hags with cropped hair, their faces overcooked from tanning in cheap solariums, their hands mottled with swollen veins and aged freckles, decorated with strikingly cheap rings and thick rhinestone bracelets. And as for their ears, those sorrowful, elongated ears drawn down by wearing too many heavy earrings. (119)

Since she is turned into an "old hag," she cannot acknowledge that she is conflicted about her sexual feelings. While she notices Mevlo's erection (he is the masseur from the wellness clinic), she doesn't want to be seen noticing it. She is jealous when Mr. Shake, an American businessman staying at the clinic, courts Kukla, she is relieved when a "much better looking man," Dr. Topolanek, approaches her. But when she again looks in the mirror she sees "everything [. . .] hanging out, everything [. . .] old, everything [. . .] distorted, but only that 'little bush' down below, sprinkled with gray, [. . .] still luxuriant" (120-121). She chooses to repress and ignore sexual feelings and wraps her "out-of-control body" tightly in a robe.

Beba not only wages war with her body, but she doesn't acknowledge her intellect either. Although she graduated from the Zagreb Art Academy, she "consider[s] herself stupid—and those immediately around her did not exactly fall over themselves to disabuse her" (104). She not only has an excellent knowledge of art, especially paintings, but also often uses intellectual comparisons from Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* to Pushkin's "Ruslan and Lyudmila." Beba's able to speak in tongues, conjuring foreign languages she never learned, confuses words, and spouts random numbers—her linguistic traits relate to fantastical and magical elements in Ugrešić's text, Beba also conjures some of the most pertinent feminist analyses in the text. While in the spa awaiting her massage, she looks at the reproductions of classical paintings strategically positioned around the "wellness center" to stimulate the mind of the patients, connects the paintings she remembers from her study of Art History and suddenly realizes that "all this sexual business is connected in the male imagination with—ornithology! In the history of the male sexual imagination the role of women was constantly to pull onto themselves, and then push off, the birds of all shapes and sizes" (140).

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between the nicknames and dolls, their importance in Slavic mythology and to Baba Yaga, is further elaborated late in the novel (286-290).

Beba arrives to such an understanding by remembering the words “piša” and “pipica,” used by adults in conversation with children to refer to penis and vagina. Interestingly, “pipica” is also a diminutive word for a chicken—which somewhat startled Beba as child since the “pipica” ended up on the dinner table—but it also allows her to make the connection with numerous images of women/girls and birds. The English translation relatively successfully uses the words “pecker,” “fanny” (British slang for the vagina), and “fantailed” chicken, to approximate the word play in the Croatian original.

Beba is not only a shrewd analyst of male sexual imagination and the linguistic wordplay that is imbedded by the patriarchal culture, but she is also capable of accurate feminist observations about female senescence. After remembering some famous popular culture examples of women who lived into old age—from Nazi filmmaker and Hitler’s friend, Leni Riefenstahl, to Jessica Fletcher and Gloria Swanson—Beba observes that “when [women] stumble into old age . . . most are left with the ‘old-lady in good-health look.’ These are desexualized old hags with short, masculine haircuts, dressed in light-coloured windcheaters and pants, not differentiated in any way from their male contemporaries, and noticed only when they are in a group” (120). Beba seems to accept that to “disguise oneself as a third sex, a sex without a sex, and to live an unnoticed parallel life” is preferable to other “variants” in the typology of old women such as “dotty old creatures surrounded by cats,” “greedy old hags of unquenched sexual appetite,” and “wealthy old women who submit hysterically” to anti-aging treatments—if only she could make peace with her body.

Kukla’s character is in many ways opposite to Beba; the hotel receptionist Pavel Zuna describes her as “exceptionally tall, slender and of astonishingly erect bearing for her advanced years” (83). As opposed to the emotional and undisciplined Beba’s appearance, Kukla is refined; she wears a “simpler outfit: dark straight skirt, light silk blouse, usually white, and a fine woolen cardigan, usually grey. She always w[ears] a small necklace of real pearls. Her hair was dark, well streaked with grey, secured at her nape with an ordinary little comb” (135).

While Beba’s life focused on sexuality, Kukla avoided sex. Although married three times, she remained a technical virgin due to her first “disagreeable” sexual experience when she experienced a vaginal spasm. And that tragic-comic incident, that is “neither as bizarre nor as rare as people think,” unfortunately marked her relationship with men. She married her boyfriend out of “shame” and then when he died of leukemia and she became a young widow she married one and then another much older invalid. She nursed her husbands, and “although she would have never admitted it to herself, [her] husbands served her as a shield: as a married woman she had tangible cover that there is nothing wrong with her.” For her husbands she is a shield too: “she was a perfect wife, a wife-cover, wife prosthesis, wife-mask. . . . She was feminine, but not provocative, open to a certain point, pleasant, but not overly so” (159). Despite her unusual height, she gave “the impression of being fragile” and men perceived her “as a protector, nurse, mother, surrogate wife, all in one package” (160). Therefore, while seemingly preserving her independence, Kukla lives in the shadow of her husbands as their helper and nurse—her situation is echoed in her comment that “sacrifice is a strictly female accessory” (128).

Only after the death of her third husband does Kukla become interested in a man, this time much younger than herself. While it is not clear whether Kukla and the young man develop a sexual relationship, it is evident that the young man’s attention—he was a young researcher who tried to figure out if there is any posthumous work left behind by Kukla’s third husband, who was a writer—leads Kukla to become creative herself. Kukla is perceived as educated—she taught English in a high-school and serves as translator to Mr. Shake—contrary to Beba who thinks of herself as stupid, albeit unjustifiably so; however, her creativity blossoms in her old age and she publishes a novel, under her husband’s name, which is heralded as “the greatest event on the Croatian literary scene for the last fifteen years, if not longer” (124).

Pupa is the oldest of the three friends and, although physically the most frail, she is frequently the most outspoken. If the narrator likens Kukla’s life to a “bad film,” one could be tempted to categorize Pupa’s life as an amazing action movie. The frail woman who keeps both of her feet in a large fur boot and has frequently to be taken around in a wheelchair, was not only one of the first generation female ob-gyns, but also a partisan guerrilla fighter during World War Two. She joined the fight with her Jewish husband, who did not survive the war. After the war she was unjustly accused of being a Stalinist and sentenced to several years on the infamous Barren Island (a prison). Although rehabilitated later, she doesn’t manage to get back her first daughter, who was shipped off to the safety of England before the war, but, nevertheless, manages to continue working—she helped with the birth of thousands of babies—and even starts a new family that gives her another daughter.

Pupa is a woman of amazing strength; the above details of her personal history were not available even to her friends.<sup>13</sup> When they are revealed, Beba remembers that she once walked in on Pupa wailing in pain, but they never discussed that scene. While the narrator doesn't dwell on her painful life history, anyone familiar with the history of Yugoslavia would easily understand that Pupa's situation was not completely unusual for one of Tito's communist fighters; in fact, it covers some of the crucial cultural and mythical points in Yugoslav history.

While it might seem that Pupa was nudged towards communism because of Hitler's treatment of Jews, her more recent history reveals that her political choices were not accidental. Currently, Pupa's daughter Zorana is married to an extreme Croatian nationalist. Pupa thinks of him as "a notorious creep":

Some eighteen years ago something in him had responded to the call of Croatian nationhood, and he had vehemently supported the government of the time, shouting from the rooftops that all Serbs should be slaughtered, and suggesting in passing that neither Muslims nor Jews had much more appeal. Overnight, the man had become an anticommunist and a devout Christian, hung Catholic crosses round Zorana's and his children's necks, and a portrait of one of his ancestors, an Ustasha cut-throat, on the wall." (116)

The reader learns that his devout nationalism led him to an important managerial position in the hospital as well as to embezzlement, and all of that has not prevented him from taking his place among "the newly minted Croatian elite." To add insult to injury he went "so far as to accuse her, Pupa, and her commie friends of being to blame for everything, being part of 'a bloody Yid conspiracy'" (117). Pupa cuts off the relationship with him when "he said something ironic about Zorana's father, calling him his 'stupid Serbian father-in-law, who had the good fortune to be in the grave.'" Despite her old age and failing physical abilities, Pupa manages to preserve not only her daily independence but also her intellect, like Kukla who publishes a novel, and Beba, who is mentally active and agile.

Significantly, Pupa also refuses to accept the attempts to prolong old age promoted by the wellness center in the Czech spa. She exposes the absurdity and the commercial nature of the attempts of the health industry to look for the fountain of youth. She claims that "primitive cultures" had much more realistic and empathetic way of dealing with old age and death:

While today hypocrites, appalled by the primitive nature of former customs, terrorise their old people without the slightest pang of conscience. They are not capable of killing them, or looking after them, or building proper institutions, or organizing proper care for them. They leave them in dying rooms, in old people's homes or, if they have connections they prolong their stay in geriatric wards in hospitals in the hope that the old people will turn up their toes before anyone notices that their stay there was unnecessary. (115)

In this paragraph Pupa rejects as hypocritical and inhumane virtually every way that modern society deals with the aging; she sees all of the social measures to treat the elderly—from institutional to private—as inadequate. Finally she ends this section by claiming that Dalmatians on the Croatian coast treat donkeys better than their elderly by leaving them to die on the uninhabited islands of the coast.

Pupa is especially bitter because she perceives that her frail body and her failing health have prevented her from exercising choices. She understands that the human life span is limited. She is realistic and wants to be able to end her life on her own terms. In relation to this goal, she sadly sees herself treated as a "rubber plant, moved from place to place, carried out onto the balcony to have its fill of air, brought into the house so as not to freeze, regularly watered and dusted" (115). And while she doubts—"How could a rubber plant make decisions or commit suicide"—her wishes are granted when she dies peacefully while floating in the swimming pool with a defiant fist showing a finger to the world she left behind.

In fact, all three women subvert the common fate of older women: poverty, personal and professional invisibility, and illness. Beba wins a sizeable amount of money in a casino, and Kukla gains fame by writing a masterpiece which she manages to get published by pretending that these are the writings of her late husband. Pupa finally manages to choose her death and dies with dignity.

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<sup>13</sup> The narrator tells Pupa's story within the larger plot of the novel, 201-204.

## 6. The Paradox of Female Realities and Projecting Positive Futures

The narrative does offer unusual solutions to the traditional fate of older invisible women. As described above, one of the empowering possibilities is in maintaining independence and cultivating community. Another possibility is suggested by ties to the folkloric tradition, in this novel accomplished mainly by narrative harnessing the power of Baba Yaga, an ever-present figure of an old witch from the Slavic folklore of Eastern Europe. The third section of the novel, in fact, explains how all of the female characters from both previous sections of the novel have Baba Yaga's attributes. The explanations are written as "Baba Yaga for Beginners" by Dr. Aba Bagay (an inversion of Baba Yaga).<sup>14</sup> In this primer, Aba explains that Beba's ability to speak in tongues and to spout numbers that bring luck (which helps her win at roulette) relates to Baba Yaga. Likewise, Kukla's uncanny ability to survive her husbands, including Mr. Shake who was courting her in the spa, and Pupa's description as an old crone who has one leg (since she puts both of them in a single boot) reveal that both Kukla and Pupa are "reincarnations" of Baba Yaga, as ultimately are all the female characters.

Ugrešić uses narrative strategies that resemble the incorporation of folklore in the nineteenth-century Russian novel and the magic realism of the late twentieth-century Latin American novel. Eventually, Ugrešić's novel connects the power of Baba Yaga through a series of interesting and imaginative permutations to the power of writing and storytelling. And again, while the power of the pen certainly won't solve the problem of ailing old bodies, the text is the only power that any writer has to present a radical critique to the impositions of global capitalism on Eastern European societies, in this case by revealing myths such as the one about the inevitability of "falling income and rising medical costs" in old age. Ugrešić's novel searches for different solutions, and if they are not quite realistic yet, the stories told in her prose dispel the cloak of invisibility, offer the seldom heard voices of older women, and suggest the need to seek solutions to the typical entrenched responses to aging.

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<sup>14</sup> Aba Bagay also features as a young Bulgarian graduate student character in the first section of the novel. In that first section, Aba visits the narrator's mother in Zagreb and accompanies the narrator on the trip to Bulgaria.