

# The Mask of The Vigilante: Age, Gender, and Justice in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over The Bones of The Dead*

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## Abstract

Polish author Olga Tokarczuk raises questions about the moral and ethical concerns regarding vigilantism in her novel *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*. The novel presents an alternative perspective regarding truth and justice, and interconnects this with the themes of revenge and ecological activism. This paper will examine how Olga Tokarczuk portrays the narrator, Janina Duszejko, who uses negative ageist stereotypes to mask her vigilante identity. Robert N. Butler's concept of "ageism" provides the basic framework for analyzing the text and understanding how the concepts of age, gender, and crime overlap in the novel. The paper will further draw upon Italian Criminologist Cesare Lombroso's work on female criminality, and will thereby explore how the narrator's maternal instincts influence her involvement in crime. It will also examine how the narrator uses her old age and gender to disguise her vigilante identity, enabling her to carry out the murders in a clandestine manner.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Vigilantism, Ageism, Animal rights.

Traversing the nexus of age, justice, and gender, this paper intends to shed light on how the protagonist's recourse to vigilantism overthrows traditional social perceptions in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, authored by Olga Tokarczuk. Published originally in Polish, the text was later translated into English by Antonia Lloyd Jones. The narrative follows the life of Janina Duszejko, a woman in her sixties living in a remote Polish plateau. As a result of her confrontations with deeply ingrained anthropocentrism and androcentrism, as well as her recurring disillusionment with the justice system, Janina opts for the path of vigilantism. Rachel Riederer aptly describes the novel as oscillating between a crime story and a fairy tale, with Janina and her strange Plateau existing on the edge of the magical and mundane realms. The paper seeks to examine the representation of "vigilantism" in Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, with a focus on the way the narrator employs stereotypes related to Ageism to conceal her identity as a vigilante.

In the novel, Janina Duszejko exploits ageist perceptions to maintain her secret identity as a vigilante, as she knows society tends to overlook older women like herself. People around her perceive her as “an old woman, gone off her rocker living in this wilderness” (Tokarczuk 192). Duszejko uses her advanced age and gender to conceal her lethal acts, which she perceives as a means of seeking vengeance for the relentless abuse and killing of animals by poachers. The paper combines perspectives from Age studies and Cesare Lombroso’s classic text *The Female Offender* to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework for looking at *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, considering how Ageism, gender, and perceptions of criminality intersect in the portrayal of Janina’s character and her vigilantism.

Ageism refers to the portrayal or treatment of individuals based on their age, and this often leads to stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization. It comes under the broad category of Age Studies. Though this term is often used interchangeably with Age discrimination, essentially, these two terms are different. If one makes arbitrary decisions about an individual solely based on the age group that individual belongs to, be it young or old, it can be termed as age discrimination. It is manifested in multiple ways, which include the depiction of older characters as weak, incompetent, lacking in agency, etc. It also includes how older individuals are discriminated against in various social situations.

Ageism sneaks into literature in the form of tropes and archetypes that are connected with old people. Characters like the ‘caring grandmother’ and the ‘wise old man’ have appeared in so many books that readers start attributing wisdom to any old man, and a grandmother without kindness feels like a non-existent entity. These stereotypes not only establish but also perpetuate ageist attitudes in society. Moreover, a feeling of invisibility is generated in the psyche of elderly individuals when they are subjected to narrative marginalization, which leads to a lack of representation and voice.

Tokarczuk’s portrayal of her protagonist, Janina Duszejko, in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is undoubtedly a brave act of deliberately subverting all these stereotypes. Through her work, Tokarczuk attempts to subvert the ageist stereotype by depicting Janina as a complex and unruly woman. Through Janina’s character, Tokarczuk highlights the importance of representation, agency, and voice in dealing with Ageism and promotes a more nuanced understanding of aging and older adulthood.

Robert Butler defined Ageism as “the subjective experience implied in the popular notion of the generation gap. Prejudice of the middle-aged against the old in this instance, and against the young in others...” (243) and called it a bigotry that people often tend to overlook. According to Butler, Ageism manifests in society through various forms, including derogatory remarks about the elderly, the notion of the vulnerability of older individuals to crime, and discrimination in employment regardless of competence. He further argues that Ageism is reinforced by cultural attitudes that favor the youth (244).

It would be inaccurate to say that Ageism is just concerned with social perceptions. In fact, this stigma sidelines older individuals into the margins and has a negative impact on their social standing and economic opportunities. Additionally, it will impact the way they are represented in media and politics. The way youth is privileged in almost every culture cannot be labeled as a mere preference but is a structural bias that supports disregarding older people in all the key spheres of influence. These key spheres of influence cannot be restricted to just the workspace but extend beyond to fields like urban planning and healthcare policies. Society should view aging as a continued stage of growth rather than a stage of decline and doom, as this view will leave older individuals having no say in even the critical discussions that affect them.

Butler exposes concealed Ageism in normalized cultural practices such as mandatory retirement. He calls this a way to eliminate the elderly from mainstream life. Butler states, “Ageism is manifested

in the taunting remarks about ‘old fogeys’, in the special vulnerability of the elderly to muggings and robberies, in age discrimination in employment independent of individual competence, and in the probable inequities in the allocation of research funds.”(244). Ultimately, the apprehensions of the younger generation towards disease, irrelevance, and frailty disconnect older generations from their communities and lead them to alienation. In *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, these same biases allow Janina to slip unnoticed through society, reinforcing her ability to operate undetected as a vigilante while simultaneously critiquing the way older women, in particular, are disregarded and dismissed.

As Erdman B. Palmore puts it, “Ageism is a kind of prejudice like racism and sexism. But Ageism is different from the other two “isms” in two important ways: it is the only one to which we all are, or will become, vulnerable (if we live long enough), and yet most people have never heard of it or are only vaguely aware of it” (418). Despite their valuable cultural contributions, elderly individuals are frequently overlooked and dismissed as ‘good for nothing’ and are often seen as inactive or irrelevant. Even those who actively contribute to family and community life often encounter discrimination and marginalization due to their age, both in professional and social contexts. Poland, which is the setting of Tokarczuk’s novel, is no exception to this trend.

Ageism is depicted in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* through the attitudes and behaviors of people and institutional practices directed towards the protagonist, Janina Duszejko. Janina’s ailments appear throughout the story by means of her complaints about various symptoms, including muscle and joint pains, skin rashes, vertigo, sensitivity to light, and mood swings. By her own narrative, she comes across as a typical old woman frequently plagued by poor health. Janina says, “My Ailments were destroying my body, gradually, relentlessly. Each year my knees ache more, and my liver was clearly no longer fit for purpose” (Tokarczuk 103). Throughout the narrative, the narrator emphasizes the word “ailment” by capitalizing the initial letter, underscoring Janina’s status as just another elderly woman with her fair share of ailments. This choice highlights Ageism, which permeates the novel through stock depictions of older characters as feeble, inept, or lacking agency.

In the opening sentence of the novel, Janina states that she has reached an age where she must be careful to wash her feet before going to bed as there is a chance she may have to be removed by an ambulance in the night. This hints at the old age of the protagonist. The statement about winter disregarding Janina and her neighbor Oddball, like the rest of the world, perpetuates the stereotype that society often neglects and disregards the elderly, failing to acknowledge their existence or to provide care.

Janina persistently interrupts the police investigation into the local murders with letters and complaints, all of which are disregarded. She is dismissed as a “crazy old crone” (Tokarczuk 35), and even her name is mispronounced as “Duszenko”, stripping her of agency. As she herself observes, she is perceived as “useless and unimportant”(192) by those around her. Apart from all this, her ‘wild’ theories about the animals being the murderers also contribute to her image as someone who keeps blurting out baseless statements, a quality which is more often than not associated with old age. Janina even explains to the readers in detail how the deers would have planned and killed the Commandant, raising doubts in the readers about the fabulousness of her narrative. It is only revealed later that the murder is her own deed. Subsequently, in the novel, drawing a comparison between herself and her aging car, Samurai Suzuki, Janina says, “I know it has reached quite an age by now, and with each year, it’s finding it harder to move about. Just like me”(125).

It is far beyond the imagination of even the most creative reader that an old woman who has multiple illnesses, including mobility issues, will have the courage to commit such spine-chilling

murders. It is instances like this that reveal the double stereotyping faced by Janina, being both a woman and an elderly individual.

In the concluding section of the novel, as she confesses to the murders, Janina admits how her identity as an “old lady” served as a shield for carrying out the crimes. Her statements, “No one remembers meeting old biddies like me” (253) and “Nobody takes any notice of old women who wander with their shopping bags”(249), serve as strong evidence of how she took advantage of the social perception of age to execute her plan.

Though Janina’s actions are in no way justifiable, it is essential to consider the narrative within the context of Ageism. In doing so, we are able to recognize that the narrative challenges ageist stereotypes by showcasing Janina’s capability to undertake actions deemed improbable for an elderly woman.

Vigilantism, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is “the practice of ordinary people in a place taking unofficial action to prevent crime or to catch and punish people believed to be criminals” (“Vigilantism”). Typically, when people think of vigilantes, they picture physically fit [wo]men in their prime. This image has mostly been perpetuated by representations in popular culture, particularly in DC and Marvel comics. However, Tokarczuk challenges this stereotype by portraying Janina as a vigilante, thus introducing a new, unexpected face to vigilantes: a ‘cranky’ old woman. Janina Duszejko, the protagonist of *Drive Your Plows Over the Bones of the Dead*, resorts to vigilantism to take vengeance for the gruesome murder of her pet dogs, whom she very dearly addresses as “my little girls” (Tokarczuk 42). She is a stern critic of anthropocentrism and is seen constantly standing up for animal rights. When she realizes that the ones who should be making sure that justice is served are the actual culprits here in this story, she decides to take justice into her own hands.

Janina, in the novel, takes it upon herself to ensure justice is served outside the official channels of law enforcement or the legal system because it has failed miserably, according to her. Acting as the “punitive hands of justice” (249), she hides her identity to avoid legal consequences or retribution from the ones she targets. Typically, vigilantes act in response to personal or societal grievances by seeking revenge. Like most vigilantes, Janina also lost faith in the biased judicial system, especially when her complaints were ignored by the police, who labeled her as “mad.”

Though a majority of society perceives vigilantes as murderers, a few consider them heroes and champions of justice. Characters like that of the Dentist belong to the latter category. They firmly believe in vigilante justice and defend the vigilante for delivering the deserved punishment to hunters and poachers. The novel is told from a first-person point of view, and one tool that the narrator employs throughout the novel to hide the vigilante identity from the readers and the characters is the frequent use of ageist stereotypes.

Janina also cleverly employs her gender to conceal her vigilante identity. Historically, women are often the last to be suspected of crimes, as societal perceptions frequently associate acts of violence or murder with male perpetrators. By exploiting this stereotype in addition to the ageist stereotype, Janina makes her actions even less noticeable. Janina’s non-pretentious way of behaving and the existing notion as to how women are incapable of committing such calculated murder ensure that nobody suspects her. This implicit bias allows Janina to move around freely and unnoticeably, using the image of the harmless old woman to her advantage. Through the narrative, Tokarczuk implicitly criticizes both Ageism and gendered assumptions, which are the two factors that shield Janina from scrutiny.

The text can be perceived as a compelling critique of dual forms of oppression as it subverts not just ageist but also gendered stereotypes. Janina manipulates the societal biases in a skillful manner, and this aids her to slide through the patriarchal as well as ageist structures that would

otherwise confine her. Tokarczuk's depiction of the prejudices against Janina underscores how older women are frequently dismissed and underestimated. Even though the narrative shows how a marginalized individual is reclaiming her agency, it also raises so many unsettling ethical questions. It is the ability of Janina to act unnoticed that enables her to commit acts of violence. Her actions demonstrate how systemic neglect can have many consequences. Instead of celebrating the cunning woman, the novel urges the reader to question the ambiguity of her actions. Even at times when the victims themselves are the perpetrators of harm and even if it helps the protagonist reclaim her visibility, vigilantism cannot be justified.

Tokarczuk contributes to expanding the discussion on who can take justice into their own hands through her characterization of Janina. She also brings attention to the act of vigilantism and its ethical and moral side. Janina's actions are rooted in a strong sense of love and commitment towards animals. The one thing that should not be overlooked is that the protagonist's actions entirely bypass the legal system and rely on her moral compass and personal judgment, which is inherently flawed and subjective. Janina's reliance on ageist stereotypes to ensure her tasks are carried out smoothly manipulates and perpetuates societal bias rather than confronting them directly.

The method Janina adopts to stop the killing spree carried out by the hunters in itself is very 'bloody'. Her intention is to stop the atrocities inflicted upon the animals, but her actions for the realization of this cause are ruthless. I firmly believe that there is nothing worth applauding about her self-proclaimed role as the "punitive hands of justice" (249), as this thrashes the judicial and legal frameworks that are designed to ensure that everyone is granted justice and fairness.

The novel calls for addressing the systemic flaws in the judicial system. If it is not rectified, individuals like Janina who are denied justice will start taking justice into their own hands, and this will lead to the disruption of society. No matter how justifiable Janina's actions may appear to some, they are inherently wrong and wreak havoc on the very foundations of justice and equity. Janina's act of vigilantism blurs the line between justice and revenge and puts forth a dangerous example of instances when criminals use personal grievances to justify extrajudicial actions.

Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso explored the relationship between motherhood and criminality in women in his text *The Female Offender*. The incident that triggers Duszejko to seek justice on her own terms is when she realizes that her pet dogs have been ruthlessly murdered by the hunter gang in the Plateau. She was completely shattered by the fate that befell them, as she had a very deep maternal affection for the dogs. It is revealed in the course of the novel that her maternal affection was not just restricted to her dogs, but it encompassed a broader, more inclusive compassion towards all the animals. Though later academicians have effectively discredited Lombroso's methodology, certain portions of his work remain pertinent even in contemporary times. He contends that motherly and protective instincts lead some females to commit crimes. The infamous case of Marianne Bachmeir, Germany's 'Revenge Mother', is a striking example of crimes driven by maternal instincts.

In 1981, during the trial of her daughter Anna's murderer in the district court of Lübeck, West Germany, Bachmeir shot and killed the accused, cementing her place in history as a vigilante figure.

Lombroso's argument can be considered highly accurate in the case of Janina Duszejko. From the way she treats animals to the way she raises her voice against hunting and poaching, the immense love she has in her heart for animals is evident. She addresses her pet dogs as "my little girls" as if she is talking to her daughters, "They were my only loved ones. My family. My daughters" (Tokarczuk 231). Janina even has a graveyard adjacent to her house solely to bury the unfortunate remains of the poached animals she finds from the Plateau. Her love is not limited to her pets but is universal as it is directed towards each living being she spots in the valley, from boars to foxes

to deers. She addresses the deers as “young ladies” (14). She gives names to animals and observes their movements with so much curiosity, love, and care: “Far in the distance, I also saw a familiar fox whom I call Consul - so refined and well-bred he is. He always wanders the same paths; the winter reveals his routes - straight as an arrow, purposeful. He’s an old dog fox, he comes and goes from the Czech Republic - clearly, he has business to attend over here” (105). Here, she describes the fox as if she were talking about a human being. Subsequently, upon encountering the carcass of a boar, the profound emotional distress Janina experiences underscore her deep compassion for animals.

It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that she harbors a love and attachment for the wild creatures equal to, or perhaps even more than, the affection one typically feels towards a fellow human being. Janina says, “How many times can one look at a dead body? Is there no end to it? I felt a stab of pain in my lungs and found it hard to breathe. I sat down on the snow, and once again, my eyes began to stream with tears. I could feel the huge unbearable burden of my own body” (106). Janina is so much bothered by the relentless murdering of the animals by hunters and poachers and feels “an endless sense of mourning for every dead animal” (106). She also mentions how she is in a constant state of mourning as this blood hunt is never-ending.

While the seeds of vengeance had been planted in Janina’s mind long before, it is the moment that she discovers a picture of the hunting group displaying the bodies of her long-lost pet dogs that propels her into action, “In the middle was the Commandant, and beside him the President. On the other side stood Innerd, dressed like a commando, and next to him Father Rustle in his clerical collar” (Tokarczuk 254). It was beyond her power to not do anything about it.

The methods Janina resorts to commit each murder are formidable. At the end of the novel, while confessing to the murder of the President, Innerd, the Commandant, and Father Rustle, Janina says that the animals actually chose her to be the “punitive hands of justice” (249) and firmly stands by her decision to murder the four by glorifying what she did as a “perfectly fair punishment” (254).

Undoubtedly, the novel stresses that Janina’s maternal instincts drive her to adopt such drastic measures to avenge her “little girls.” The fact that Janina is leading a solitary life makes her direct all her care and affection toward her beloved pets and other animals, which makes her need to avenge even more urgent.

The representation of female vigilantism through the character of Janina Duszejko in Tokarczuk’s *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* challenges conventional stereotypes, especially the ones that are associated with Ageism and gender. In the novel, Tokarczuk crafts a narrative that subverts traditional notions of vigilantism and underscores the multiple facets of both the protagonist and the issues that she confronts by employing a complex interplay of ageist perceptions, maternal instincts, and societal marginalization directed toward the elderly. Janina Duszejko comes off as an intimidating figure who resists and rebels against societal expectations of age and gender. As an elderly woman suffering from physical illness and societal neglect, Janina deliberately employs ageist stereotypes to screen her identity as a vigilante. Janina presents herself as an unremarkable and uninteresting old woman and thus makes her way through a world that often dismisses and underestimates her.

In addition to this, Tokarczuk, at once, connects, in a very subtle manner, maternal instincts into Janina’s character and highlights her deep empathy and connection with animals. Janina’s love for her pets and her intense mourning for the never-ending slaughter of wildlife is what fuels her quest for justice. Considering herself as the “punitive hands of justice” (249) chosen by the animals to seek revenge against the crimes committed against them by humans, Janina challenges the traditional notions of morality and agency and thereby establishes herself as a frightening force that intends to punish people who are inflicting pain upon animals.

This paper exposes the underlying connection between gender, age, and vigilantism in Tokarczuk's narrative by looking at the text through the frameworks of Ageism and Cesare Lombroso's Theory of Criminality. The exhaustive analysis shows how Janina's character surpasses the stereotyping and marginalization and navigates her way through the complexities of societal expectations. Reading Janina's actions within the framework of Ageism unmasks the way she tactically utilizes her old age, gender, and the perceived weakness that is associated with it as tools for hiding her vigilante activities.

Janina takes advantage of society's tendency to underestimate elderly women and operates in a very discreet manner to overthrow men who are relentlessly hunting and poaching animals in her place. Moreover, the way Janina embodies maternal instincts complicates traditional notions of criminality and moral agency. For the unsuspecting reader, Janina's extreme devotion to her pets, her unfluctuating commitment to avenge their deaths, and the lengths that she traverses for the purpose are quite unfathomable.

The paper concludes by arguing that *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* is the biggest testimony to Olga Tokarczuk's ability to provoke thought and reflection in the readers regarding layered social issues. Through the portrayal of Janina Duszejko, the intimidating narrator, Tokarczuk invites her readers to reconsider their perceptions of age, gender, and justice. The story of Janina's vengeance unravels the ways in which the pursuit of personal justice and acts of confrontation raise unsettling questions regarding an individual's ethical and legal responsibilities.

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