

DOCUMENTS II

Marie Curie-Sklodovská was not only the first woman who won the Nobel Prize—in 1903—but she has also been the only one who achieved this honour twice—again in 1911—this time for chemistry.

Eliška Junková beat all men in their domain—car racing—in the Grand Prix of Germany in 1927, as well as in the famous Targa Florio in Italy a year later.

Only few men possessed such strength as Alžběta Pomořanská, the fourth wife of the Emperor Charles IV. She 'straightened and broke a new, thick iron horseshoe with her bare hands as if it were made of wood; broke strong knightly and kitchen knives like carrots; tore the Emperor's knights' armour-plates all the way down in half'.

n.a. 1987b. 'Minuty našeho času: V historii například' [The Minutes of Our Time: in History, for Example, ...], *Mladá fronta*, 7 March, p. 1.

To be fragile and delicate is not a shape, but a property. And an ability. Also a large woman can be fragile and delicate [...] I repeat now and will repeat in future: *feminine womanhood*. [...]

Women should make decisions, or participate in decision-making, about the important matters of this world. They know better the price of life, giving it in pain. For men, armament and war can be games. Women cannot comprehend this. Let's learn about their incomprehension! [...]

Man fills his life with work; [...] Woman fills her life with man: with looking after him and their common work, which is family.

Miroslav Horníček, 1988. 'Hovory H: žena: Rozhovor se zasloužilým umělcem Miroslavem Horníčkem' [The H Talks: Women: an Interview with the Artist of Merit, Miroslav Horníček], *Mladá fronta, Víkend supplement*, 5 March, p. 1.

[Zdena] propped her head—a crew-cut with light highlights in it—with her slim, blackened fingers, and only two incredibly large and beautiful eyes were left of it.

[...] How can anybody ask whether the coke-plant was my dream? Can all this—everything black, dirty, stinking, dangerous that it still gives me creeps—be something to dream about? I simply did not have a choice in eighty-one when I finished technical school. Without being able to secure a favour from someone, the only jobs I could get were either to punch holes in the computing centre, or to come here. [...]

I saw her [Zdena] last week at the Third Plenary of the Central Committee of the Union of Czechoslovak Youth. She is a member of the Presidium. She was slim, beautiful, clad head-to-toe in hand-knitted clothes, with a huge pom-pom on her hat.

Marta Prokešová, 1988. 'Frézie z koksu vykvetlé' [Freesias Blooming out of Coke], *Mladá fronta*, 8 March, p. 1.

In the two hours during which we had the opportunity to accompany her, we all realised why the world spoke about this fragile woman in superlatives: charming, elegant, very sweet and spontaneous, with a sense of humour. She approaches everything and everybody she encounters with incredible knowledge and genuine interest.

That was the case at the Charles University, and also during her visit to the Anežský Convent [...] She inquired about the architecture of the building, about the course of the reconstruction, the exhibits, and the collection of the nineteenth-century paintings. [...] At that occasion, Comrade Gorbacheva's hosts realised what profound cultural knowledge she possessed and how much she knew about our art.

Zdena Líkařová, 1987a. 'Minuty s Raisou Maximovnou' [Minutes with Raisa Maximovna], *Mladá fronta*, 10 April, p. 2.

4. DISCOURSE OF FEMININITY: THE 'SUPERWOMAN' IN ZDENA FRÝBOVÁ'S *FOR UNKNOWN REASONS* (1988)

My argument so far has suggested that the ideological/discursive environment of the state-socialist Czech Republic consisted of the opposition of the dominant state-socialist ideology and the resistant discourse of consumer capitalism, with the interventions from the residual patriarchal discourse. I should like to show the interplay of these three elements through considering the construction of the main female character, Anka Berková, in *Z neznámých důvodů* (*For Unknown Reasons*), a novel published in its first—pre-November—print run of 95,000 copies (1988) and republished in 1993 and 2001 (my references to the 1993 edition).¹ I mention the numbers and the two editions, because such a success of a fairly mediocre novel in both pre- and post-November periods suggests something about its relevance to all these readers regardless of the historical and political environment. With regards to the focus of this chapter, I will first define the difference between the discourse of femininity and feminism within this work, then I will discuss how the text attempts to reconcile the ideology of state socialism with the residual patriarchal discourse and, finally, I will suggest how the discourse of femininity acts as a subversive element to the ideology of state socialism by means of presenting images of femininity common in representations of women in Western capitalist discourse.

Before I proceed with the analysis of the character of Anka, I have to explain how I distinguish between the discourses of femininity and feminism for the purposes of this study. By femininity, I understand culturally constructed attributes considered 'proper' or 'typical' for an individual of a female sex. In Chapter 2.3., I discussed the definition of femininity by several feminist scholars: some focus on the attributes associated with the external appearance and/or body (Bartky 1988; Smith 1988) others include issues of morality, personal values or psychology (Millett 1990; Ferguson 1983). All these are usually contrasted with the attributes of masculinity, which is normally seen as 'the opposite' of femininity. Most of the critics cited above look critically at what constitutes 'the cult' (Ferguson 1983) or 'the script' (Ussher 1997) of femininity in a patriarchal society and its representations of women. However, some of them, for example Dorothy Smith (1988) or Sara Mills (1991), also discuss the possibilities for 'negotiating the discourses of femininity', that is, for women's appropriation of the discourse for the purpose of their own empowerment.² In this work, I will draw the dividing line between the discourses of femininity and feminism roughly between these two positions: the construction of femininity and its critical reading will be the subject of the discussion in this chapter on the discourse of femininity, while the possibilities of an empowered reading of, or empowering elements in, literary texts will be treated in the chapter on the discourse of feminism. More specifically, this chapter will consider the relation of femininity (that is, a concept from within the residual patriarchal discourse of the ideological/discursive theoretical model I

¹ In addition to the three Czech editions, the novel was published in 1990 in Slovak under the title *Z neznámých dôvodov* (Bratislava: Tatran).

² The phrase 'negotiating the discourses of femininity' is borrowed from the title of Sara Mills's article (1991).

outlined in Chapter 3) to the state-socialist ideology. Chapter 6 will examine the possibility of claiming the novel for feminism through its subversion of the traditionally patriarchal narrative formula of romance.

Jan Škoda, Frýbová's 'expert consultant' for issues of technical precision, labels *For Unknown Reasons* a 'professional novel' in his foreword (Škoda 1993). What this means is that the plot is set in a work environment, there are long, detailed and informed descriptions of issues in that field of work and the development of characters centres around their profession. In English-language literature, the popular novels of the Canadian/British Arthur Hailey are a standard example of the genre.³ *For Unknown Reasons* complements the purely professional concerns with complicated interpersonal, family and love relationships, as well as with accounts of the psychology of the characters by the omniscient narrator. The omniscience of the narrator is a key element in the ideological/discursive clashes in the text which allow certain possibilities of feminist reading and I will return to this issue in Chapter 6. The genre alone provides an ideal platform for structuring a female character in a way which reveals all the ideological/discursive practices imposed upon and available to a woman/femininity in a text which was produced under the ideology of state socialism practised in a patriarchal environment.

A necessary outcome of the need to reconcile the ideology of state socialism with the residual patriarchal discourse not only within a single story, but within a single female character, is the image of the 'superwoman': a character which encompasses both the values of the public and the private spheres. Anka Berková is one such prototype of a 'superwoman': a proper emancipated socialist woman adorned with career successes, while at the same time a professional in domestic feminine skills and possessing a flawless feminine appearance.⁴ She has the qualities, with which Margaret Marshment characterised 'a woman of substance': a type of heroine in the late 1970s–1980s Western fiction. She 'has the conventional entrepreneurial qualities: ambition, hard work, determination, ruthlessness, intelligence, initiative, imagination. [...] In addition, she is beautiful, talented and possessed of impeccably good taste' (Marshment 1988, 34).⁵ *For Unknown Reasons* gives a retrospective story of Anka's childhood in a family of two devout professionals and how that formed her resolve not to have children and singularly pursue a career. The following quotation is from the narrator's summary of Anka's perceptions about the relation of her parents toward her when she was fourteen:

³ Arthur Hailey has written eleven novels of which several have been translated into Czech from the 1970s and have been immensely popular (for the English originals, see, for example, Hailey 1971; 1975).

⁴ The news coverage of the reception of the women's delegations to the Prague and Bratislava Castles at the occasion of the International Women's Day, usually starts by making the implication of the synonymous relation between 'women' and 'workers' or 'public functionaries': 'a delegation of Slovak women [...] the delegation of the foremost women-workers from the various sectors of national economy' (n.a. 1987c); 'Meeting *Representatives* of Women [...] a group of twenty-five functionaries of social organisations, political parties and ethnic and cultural associations' (n.a. 1989b; my emphasis). The articles then frequently end up by positioning women in their triple-burden role: 'He [the Slovak Prime Minister] expressed respect, admiration and thanks to them for their self-sacrifice at the workplace, commitment in political and public life, and care for and upbringing of the young generation' (n.a. 1987c).

⁵ Marshment borrows the label for her type from the title of Barbara Bradford Taylor's *A Woman of Substance* (1979). The characteristics in the quote relate to the heroine of the novel, Emma Harte, although the analysis of this particular novel exemplifies a more general trend in fiction for women.

When Johanka died a year ago, Anka began to feel the full terror of the family house, in which comfortable furnishings, luxury and good taste emanated chill. It cannot be said that her parents were unkind to her. Quite the opposite. They never spoke to her harshly. They only weren't at home: You are a big girl and you'll look after yourself, won't you, Andulka? Our studio is a madhouse right now so we'll be coming home late at night the whole week. Don't stay up and wait for us, but go to sleep. See, we've bought you a new Japanese tape-recorder ... or they were at home but shut themselves up in their study. (Frýbová 1993, 68)

This aspect of her upbringing is brought up with disturbing frequency and I will discuss the implications of Anka's childlessness later in this chapter. The story continues through Anka's brilliance at school, her single-mindedness in the selection of her career as a biochemist and obsessive enthusiasm for research when, at twenty, she gets a position at a top research institute to work on her PhD. Later she becomes an indispensable team member at the institute, in which very few women are considered as having academic importance.

This dazzling character of a 'woman of substance' (Marshment 1988) is enhanced by the story of her femininity. The whole novel opens with what in the main story-line is the penultimate event (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 15): the funeral of Anka's husband, the institute's director Miloš Zouhar. The first appearance of Anka in the novel begins with the list of her academic titles followed by a description of her appearance—and its impact on the men looking at her:

Rigid faces of the men in attendance—rigid mostly due to the fact that heart attacks were slaying their generation at the drop of a hat—enlivened slightly when RNDr. Anna Berková-Zouharová, Csc. entered the now ceremoniously silent, overcrowded hall through a side door from a private room. She walked arm in arm with Professor Prokop, her immediate supervisor, on the one side, and his wife on the other. Even at this moment, the men appreciated her perfect body clad in a simple little black suit. Those who knew Anna, knew also that her veil covered an engaging face denying the recently passed thirty years. (Frýbová 1993, 17)

On the one hand, the meticulous citation of both the 'RNDr.' (that is, *rerum naturalium doctor*, approximately an equivalent of an MSc) and 'CSc.' (that is, *candidatus scientarium*, approximately an equivalent of a PhD) places Anka in the elite echelons of public life, while her youth further underlines her exceptional achievement. Also, the setting itself is from the world of work: the funeral is a professional, rather than a private matter and Anka is accompanied by people from work, not by family.⁶ On the other hand, the reader is first informed about the reaction of men to Anka and the source of this response is explained subsequently: she possesses a perfect body and an interesting face. The image of the emancipated public woman thus goes hand in hand with the image of traditional femininity. This structure of Anka's introduction to the reader is not different from some examples from real life, such as, in some of the reporting on Raisa Gorbacheva's visit to Czechoslovakia in 1987. At the same time, as the reporter emphasised her breadth of knowledge and public interest, she frequently modified Raisa's appearance by adding 'feminine' adjectives: Raisa is characterised as a 'frail woman', but 'charming, elegant, very sweet' (Líkařová 1987a), 'not only wise, but also a modest woman' (Líkařová 1987b).

⁶ Since throughout the story few relatives of either Anka or Miloš are mentioned and both their parents are dead, the absence of family at the funeral is logical, but at this point of the novel the reader does not know anything about the family situations.

Janice Winship (1987b) argued that the ideology of women's magazines treats women as commodities to be enjoyed by men. This is how Anka is presented in the quotation above and, to an extent, throughout the novel. I will take the argument a step further and suggest that Anka is 'permitted' to fulfil herself outside the discourse of femininity, only under the condition that she meets the criteria of that discourse—at least that part of it which prescribes the properties of body (Sandra Lee Bartky, 1988, identifies the appearance and gesture as the key loci of femininity).

Dorothy Smith (1988) argues that femininity is a 'textually mediated discourse', that is, that images of femininity enter into social consciousness through texts, as well as that texts confirm—and thus perpetuate—the image of femininity already existing in social consciousness. Rosemary Betterton points out that visual discourses present a 'feminine ideal which is white, heterosexual, young, able-bodied and usually middle-class' (Betterton 1987, 10). Although both these critics draw on the Western discourse of femininity, similar characteristics seem to apply to the quote above.⁷ I already mentioned Anka's body; her whiteness is understood as a matter of course, because she is Czech; and her heterosexuality is implied in the circumstances of the opening scene. Her middle-class status is a potentially resistant element of her personality to the state-socialist ideology and will be discussed further in more detail. It is the remaining component, youth, which is crucial in the negotiation between the state-socialist ideal of a woman active in public and the requirements of the residual patriarchal discourse. The last sentence in the quoted paragraph is phrased clearly to suggest that a woman over thirty is, if not outside, then at least on the borderline of the traditional image of femininity. In other words, *because* Anka is over thirty, she can be 'excused' for her professional (read 'unfeminine' in the language of the patriarchal discourse) interests and aspirations.

As the story unravels, it becomes increasingly obvious that Anka's femininity is a performance which enables her to get what she wants, what would otherwise be inaccessible to her, because she looks and moves in the manner corresponding, not merely to some general idea of femininity, but to the ideal of feminine gesture and appearance. However, it is a performance required by the audience, by 'a panoptical male connoisseur', 'an anonymous patriarchal Other' (Bartky 1988, 72) and not consciously executed by Anka herself. In this respect, her feminine performance is not a learned process involving specialised knowledge, skills and a lot of work, as Ferguson (1983) and others (for example, Smith 1988; Bartky 1988; Butler 1990; Mills 1991) conclude from the evidence collected for their studies. Rather, her femininity is structured dangerously along the findings of Winship concerning the presentation of femininity in women's magazines: it is a pleasure and it is 'natural' because it is a part of being a woman—'the spectre of superwoman looms' (Winship 1987b, 65). The passage below illustrates well the requirements of 'visual' femininity on Anka:

She stood before him as beautiful as he imagined her to be years ago. Tall and slim, but at the same time gently and womanly rounded, with perfect long legs, a face cleverly modelled by an artist who knew the value of small disharmonies and used them masterfully. Subdued colours. Lustrous fair hair, still as light and dashed with matt locks as she had in childhood; still the smooth silky skin the shade of cream with a spoonful of coffee, the skin without a single blemish not

⁷ My own research on post-1989 advertising in the Czech Republic also arrived at this conclusion (Indruchová 1995a; 1995b). I will discuss femininity in advertising (billboards) in Chapter 9.

only on the face but also on the arms; pale, wide, but gently modelled mouth, pronounced cheekbones—and in this face, as if veiled by a light mist and without a touch of makeup, stood out only her clear green eyes framed in auburn eyelashes and a curve of the eyebrows of the same shade. (Frýbová 1993, 73)

It is a description of Anka when, at sixteen, she meets Marek—with whom she later develops the crucial relationship of her life—for the first time since childhood. The focaliser is Marek, and his thoughts are represented by an effective use of free indirect discourse (Rimmon-Kenan 1983). The passage is of the kind which appears in almost any example of lowbrow fiction for women across the Western world and, in that sense, nothing exceptional. It emphasises Anka's sexual maturity ('womanly rounded') as well as 'the body of early adolescence, slight and unformed' as Bartky put it (Bartky 1988, 73). Emphasis is placed periodically throughout the novel on Anka's unchanging body and unaging face. For example, Marek assesses her appearance in the closing scene of the novel after twelve years of separation by this reflection:

If, at nineteen, she looked sixteen, now at thirty-two she looked twenty-two, ran through his mind. [...] At the same time he felt gratitude that at least this image—the picture of a beautiful fair girl—she has not shattered for him. [...] Still the childlike gentle contours of the face with pronounced cheekbones, the flawless line of the chin and neck descending to the womanly full breasts—this as before has been the only mature, womanly feature of her appearance ... (Frýbová 1993, 540)

Marek and other characters often reproach Anka for her supposed emotional immaturity and infantility, however, it is precisely these features which are valued on her body (with the telling exception of her breasts) by her male audience: 'an infantilised face must accompany her infantilised body, a face that never ages or furrows its brow in thought' (Bartky 1988, 73). If we realise that Marek is fifty-five at the moment of their reunion and the childlike appearance is what he values the most on her exterior, his taste verges on paedophilia. It is the womanly breasts which legitimise Marek's sexual attraction to Anka and make it 'normal'.

The repeated emphasis on the perception of Anka's bodily perfection by men gives her femininity the quality of a performance. The novel, nevertheless, does not suggest that Anka is aware that she is performing. Although it is mentioned here and there that she likes nice clothes and at one point expresses a desire for perfume, there is not a single instance of Anka cultivating or making a comment on her body. The oblivious treatment of the feminine potential of her body is noticeable also at the level of narration: the omniscient narrator, who is otherwise very judgmental in giving the reader the exact meaning of what the characters do or say either through evaluating statements or adjectives, does not use any of these in respect to Anka's conscious relation to her body. There is perhaps not a single incidence of Anka using her bodily femininity to her advantage, no gestures or even utterances are labelled as 'coquettish', 'coy', 'seductive' or similar expressions denoting the power of femininity to extract favours from men. On the contrary, the narrator mentions at several places how coldly Anka behaves toward other men. The first comment of this kind comes in the scene from the funeral: 'not even a gossipy woman with the wildest imagination in the whole institute could say that [...] doctor Zouharová is less curt with a new post-graduate student than she usually is in dealing with men' (Frýbová 1993, 17).

It is hard to decide what the significance of this kind of 'unperformed performance' is: whether it should be rejected on the grounds of femininity being presented as 'natural' and therefore the only way for a woman to exist, and on the grounds of Anka being made into an object, a commodity with a value attached to her body which is also her 'passport' to the masculine world of work; or whether it could be viewed as a camouflage of the text which fashions Anka with the feminine façade so conspicuously that it is almost ironic and, therefore, potentially subversive to the residual patriarchal discourse. To paraphrase John Berger: Anka 'appears' as femininity dictates, but this quality enables her to 'act', that is, to get away with a masculine characteristic (Berger 1977, 47). Her 'doctrinal allegiance', in Foucault's phrase, is so well staged that she avoids the danger of 'exclusion':

But doctrinal allegiance puts in question both the statement and the speaking subject, the one by the other. It puts the speaking subject in question through and on the basis of the statement, as is proved by the procedures of exclusion and the mechanisms of rejection which come into action when a speaking subject has formulated one or several unassimilable statements. (Foucault 1981, 63–64)

Her feminine façade is so perfect that the not so feminine character underneath can go unnoticed by the 'censoring' patriarchal eye: she is far from being submissive, passive or soft, as her ambition in research suggests.⁸ Some answer to the dilemma may lie in the subversive potential of femininity thus constructed to the ideology of state socialism, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Another side of Anka's femininity is expressed in the passage on her domestic skills. The extract below, reported by the omniscient narrator, is a list of assets which Anka brought to the marriage with Miloš:

When he rushed to wash up after their first meal of their married life, Anka said: 'Oh, come on, leave it.' She briefly and definitively explained to him that she could not stand a man in the kitchen or cleaning the house. [...] just as her mother, she liked to cook and cooked well; just as her mother, she hated untidiness and did not regret the money spent on domestic help.⁹ [...] Anička then managed her household just like her mother and just like her, she also could not stand a man meddling in women's work. [...] Anka cooked every day, cooked wonderfully and cooked meals which Miloš had never tasted before. [...] She loved a beautifully laid table, whether for a quick breakfast before going to work or for Saturday dinner for five guests. (Frýbová 1993, 338)

It is again a rather stereotypical list of female domestic accomplishments known from standard women's fiction. Up to a point, Anka's abilities in this sphere are again presented as a 'natural' part of being a woman. Anka enters into a marriage when she is barely twenty two and yet she is a culinary expert and a professional in entertaining guests. It is true that, before her marriage to Miloš, she lived in a shared household with Marek for a year since nineteen, but the ease with which she performs domestic tasks suggests that it came to her 'naturally'. The quote mitigates the 'naturalness' by suggesting that Anka learned household management and maintenance skills from her mother. However, the idea that she went through a long process of learning is undermined when we realise that Anka's mother never had time to spend with her

⁸ Yet, Anka makes one prominent 'unassimilable' statement: she refuses to have children and thus spoils the image of the complete 'superwoman'. I will discuss this issue in relation to the state-socialist ideology and its implications for the reader below and in Chapter 6.

⁹ I will discuss the subversive significance of Anka's modest claims to middle-class status in a virtually classless state-socialist society below.

daughter because of her professional commitment (as I mentioned before) and that both Anka's parents died when she was nineteen.

Anka's 'unconscious' femininity with respect to her body and 'by the way' femininity concerning household 'duties', together with the real concerns of her life—her profession and passionate desire for knowledge—make her into a 'superwoman': her character brings together the ideals of women's emancipation in the workplace as promoted by the dominant state-socialist ideology and the prescriptions of femininity upheld by the residual patriarchal discourse. On the surface, then, there is a reconciliation of the two. Nevertheless, further analysis will show that just as Anka's exterior femininity may be merely a façade covering a non-feminine character, the seeming merger of state-socialist and patriarchal values may be a cover-up for discourses of resistance against both. The kind of femininity with which Anka is endowed can be seen as resisting the state-socialist ideology; and the image of the 'superwoman' may be seen as so obviously improbable that it mocks both sets of values and the effort to merge them.¹⁰ The possible subversions of the residual patriarchal discourse will be discussed in Chapter 6, but at this place I will now make suggestions for a subversive reading of femininity in relation to the ideology of state socialism.

The subversion—or resistance—can be located in the way Anka is described: as a glamorous woman of the kind people in state-socialist Czech Republic looked for in foreign fashion magazines like the *Burda*, the *Neckermann* or the *Neue Mode*.¹¹ I remember how throughout my elementary school, secondary school and university years, these would invariably be passed from friend to friend and form a basis for discussion in communities of women (and not only women). The undercurrent of these discussions would always be how beautiful the Western women were, what clothes they had available and therefore how much better that world had to be. If we now look at the description of Anka in the quotation from the funeral (see p.63), the phrases a 'little black suit' and 'her veil covered an engaging face' belong to the realm of fantasies about

¹⁰ Tereza and Sabina in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* perhaps bear witness, on the one hand, to the mutual exclusiveness of such a merger within the patriarchal discourse and, on the other, to the narrator's identification with the idea of a woman's independence. Tereza, of whom her husband often thinks as 'a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent down stream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed' (Kundera 1985, 6), is, to a great extent, a patriarchal ideal of a domestic woman. She has no professional ambition, lives only for her husband, depends on him and knows that 'he considered her fidelity an unconditional postulate of their relationship' (ibid., 17). Both Tomas and the narrator are attracted to this image of a woman, as well as to the image of the sexually provocative (a type of a *femme fatale*), professionally successful, and independent Sabina. Both women are portrayed with sympathy and an overt effort of the narrator to explain and understand them (the narrator frequently inserts long didactic accounts explaining the behaviour of his characters who are, in his words, 'my own unrealised possibilities'—ibid., 215). In other words, he admires them both, which may testify to his partial identification with the emancipated ideal, but writing without the pressure of the state-socialist ideology hanging over him, the two types of women remain separate, rather than merged in one 'superwoman' like Anka.

¹¹ I deliberately mention magazines rather than other media, because Western magazines could have been and were brought into the country privately—thus already acquiring the status of subversion—while Western films and TV programmes for public broadcast were selected more or less for their aspects of social criticism of the Western system. (This is not to say anything about the quality of these films and programmes: glamour was not desirable, therefore, it was often good-quality art films or at least decent middlebrow productions which were purchased.) See Chapter 3, note 10 for discussion of another function these magazines had.

Western women. The veil may have yet another significance here if we consider that the scene takes place in 1985, that is, at the time when this accessory was hardly fashionable. Rather, it was a part of an image of a bourgeois woman of the 1920s and 1930s: the time of capitalist Czechoslovakia, which ended with the establishment of the communist government in 1948, and thus remembered with nostalgia. Dorothy Smith comments on Angela McRobie's research from 1978 that it showed how 'fashion becomes a resource through which a group of working class girls assert their independence of the institutional powers of the school and the privilege of class' (Smith 1988, 51). Similarly, the way the novel presents Anka, gives her a status of independence of the state-socialist uniformity and drabness.

In general, Anka's tastes are what would be described as 'bourgeois' at the time (today we would probably say middle-class): not only financially inaccessible to most people, but also tastes, which were not promoted by the official discourse in the media or in commercial displays (not promoted partially because they would point to the inadequacy of the system which could not satisfy them). In this light, the emphasis on Anka's relish in cooking exotic dishes and in the aesthetics of setting the table in the quote about the assets she brought into her marriage (see p.85) have the quality of resistance to the dominant ideology which put forward the values of work and duty, rather than enjoyment. Anka's traditionally feminine tastes are closely connected to the market—to its limited offer and dysfunctionality under state socialism. The social reality of efficient but often bland institutional catering, unimaginative clothing and uniform drab kitchens which are caricatured in the pre-marital experience of Miloš are challenged through the idealised femininity of Anka.¹²

In Chapter 3 I mentioned the emphasis on collectivism as opposed to individualism in state-socialist ideology.¹³ Although Anka is a team member at her research institute, she is a strongly individualistic character. 'Egotistic' and 'selfish' are some of the adjectives often used about Anka by the narrator. The narrator seems to be uncertain about her (his?) allegiances: on the one hand, Anka is presented as a likeable character, but on the other, this image is constantly undermined by comments on Anka's selfish individualism. Here is a typical schizophrenic passage which denies Anka any merit in her harmonious marriage to Miloš:

Miloš, who was used to calculate accurately all his life, was touched and thought that Anka wanted to compensate his financial providing, which he declared was fully on him, by her care for the household. He took it as another proof of Anka's good character. He was totally wrong.

Everything that Anka received, she always took for granted in her egocentrism. It never occurred to her that she should be grateful or return favours. If she herself

¹² The quote below makes an ostensible contrast between Miloš's life with his mother before he got married. However, the selection of these contrasting images would be familiar to the reader from an ordinary social context—this makes the contrast effective: 'He moved from a council flat, where trams rattled under the windows and convoys of cars spouted their deadly fumes, to a cosy house in the garden at comfortably green and quiet Bertramka. [...] Another dazzling experience from marriage for Miloš was that home-cooked food could be incomparably tastier than food at any restaurant (after all, a sausage warmed up three times over at a fast food stand was a choicest dish compared to the culinary skills of mother Zouharová), and that a home-cooked Sunday lunch did not have to be followed by cramps in the stomach. [...] Mother Zouharová considered a plastic table cover as the only practical option, and she took out decent cutlery, china and glassware only on Christmas Eve' (Frýbová 1993, 337–38).

¹³ In real life, post-1989 sociological research also points out the individualistic orientation and values of Czech women (Heitlingerová and Trnková 1998, 182–84).

gave—and it is true that she gave often and on many levels—it was because it suited her or that it happened to give her pleasure. (Frýbová 1993, 338)

The logical nonsense of the last phrase is striking: for in what way is giving which brings the donor pleasure selfish; would an act of giving which brings one grief or similar negative emotion less selfish? However the phrase, as well as the whole passage, is symptomatic of the efforts of the *narrative voice* to downgrade Anka to the reader. In Anka's *actions*, there is hardly ever a moment which would justify the accusations of selfishness. Rather, she is guileless and painfully honest, and it is the result of these features which sometimes makes her appear selfish (see my discussion of Anka's reunion with Marek in Chapter 6). One reason for this narrative 'schizophrenia' could be the requirement of the state-socialist ideology to make a statement against individualism on the primary level, while the text makes individualism attractive 'underneath'. It puts up a façade in a fashion similar to Anka's 'external' femininity and 'internal' 'masculine' behaviour. Another reason for the ambiguous presentation of Anka can be an analogous principle but in relation between the residual patriarchal discourse and potential feminist discourse in the novel. I will discuss some aspects of this in Chapter 6.

One of the instances of Anka's (attractive) individualism comes when she starts her first job after graduation. She enrages her future superior Prokop by telling him what research *she would like* to do without a second thought to what *he might want* her to do. Her individualism is again subversive to the ideology: on the surface, she is a model team worker, but she asserts pigheadedly her own will and interests. We may say that it is once again her feminine *appearance* which excuses the fact that she also '*acts*' in front of her—most of the time exclusively male—audience. The best example of this comes when Anka announces to Miloš (her husband and the head of her research institute), her direct supervisor Prokop, and all her other colleagues, first, that she would like to participate at the world congress of biochemistry in Perth in Australia, because her idol in research Arthur Casey is going to speak there, and a few months later that she had already arranged her participation. The whole team first discusses the congress at a weekend cottage in summer:

'What?! Arthur Casey is going to be in Perth? That Casey who discovered miradiaron? [...] That, of course, changes the circumstances. I am going there, too,' said Anka, picked up the knife again and continued to chop apples.

Everybody laughed and Prokop said: 'Wonderful. Everybody will be envious of me, because they'll think that I travel around the world with my young mistress.'

'Watch out for troubles with the Australian police supervising public decency,' warned him Miloš. 'Anka still looks under age.'

'What dress are you going to take to Perth, Anka?' inquired Zámeš.

'And are you going to chair a whole session or just a panel discussion?' asked Pecháček.

'Laugh while you can,' called Heda through the open kitchen door. 'As if you didn't know that if Anka decides to do something, it's done'. (Frýbová 1993, 395)

The extract is framed in domesticity: Anka is chopping apples for a strudel. The content of her speech, however, is entirely professional. I would suggest that this blatant juxtaposition of the typical 'woman's place' and the traditional masculine world of hard science creates a mocking image of femininity, particularly, because Anka carries out her domestic task as if by the way, her mind is on her work which is the most important thing. The mockery, but in a reversed form, is taken up by the men present: they slight her professional importance by making humorous references to her appearance. The question about chairing a session further mocks her research ability, because it is clear

that at her age (and for her sex?) such an achievement is impossible. The men attack Anka's youth and femininity, making it obvious that it is acceptable if she contributes to their work in the laboratory, but it is not acceptable if she aspires higher than they do—none of them would have had the courage (or cheek) to apply for the congress, because they acknowledge the prohibition of the discourse, '[they] know quite well that [they] do not have the right to say everything, that [they] cannot speak of just anything in any circumstance whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever' (Foucault 1981, 52). These discursive prohibitions and the men's submission to them resound in the following passage from the conversation—again at a weekend cottage—when Anka announces her participation in Perth:

I took great care with the poster for Perth,' she said with childlike importance. 'I'll show you the draft.'

While Heda and Alena acknowledged the simple fact that Anka prepared a poster for the congress in Perth, the men looked at each other with slight embarrassment. This is no longer a game but an affliction.

[...] 'And who, if we may be so bold, is going to give you the few thousand dollars?' asked Zámeš sweetly, while Prokop indicated that the idle talk bored him.

'Who do you think should be giving me anything?' retorted Anka. 'If you followed professional literature like I do, you'd know in what journals the International Union for Biochemical Pharmacology advertises its scholarship offers.'

[...] 'My child,' said Zámeš, 'forget it. Such organisations receive hundreds of times more applications like yours than they can accommodate. And I can't say that they give preference to candidates from socialist countries. You are bound to be disappointed when you receive a politely phrased rejection.'

'That's what you think,' gave Anka her favourite reply.

'Have they already approved your application?' asked Heda, whose faith that Anička achieves everything she wants was boundless.

'Of course. They will pay the two-hundred-dollar registration fee, provide free accommodation in a student dormitory and give me two hundred and fifty dollars of pocket money,' said Anka, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

[...] 'Brilliant!' said Alena. 'And what did you write to them, so that they enabled you to attend the congress?'

'That's quite simple: a brief curriculum vitae, a list of publications and a topic I propose for my presentation at the congress.' Prokop was the first from among the men who found his speech.

'But the main item still remains: the plane ticket.'

'UNESCO will pay for that. [...]'

Heda and Alena nodded thoughtfully, the men gaped in amazement.

Finally, Miloš said: 'We all, of course, are happy for you that you were so successful, but you should have consulted us, before—'

'Right!' cried Heda. 'So that you could discourage and depress her by saying how futile it was and God knows what.'

'It's true that Anka breached a dozen regulations,' continued Miloš. 'Don't you know that you can apply for a foreign scholarship only with the approval of your supervisor and the head of the institute?'

'Didn't I tell you way back in summer that I was going to go to Perth?! And who did you think was going to send me there? Prague Mills and Bakeries?' responded Anka angrily.

'That's right,' said Heda. (Frýbová 1993, 397–98)

It seemed to me necessary to quote the passage at length to demonstrate that it is not just Anka's colleagues' condescending attitude to femininity, but it is the ideology of state socialism which is manifest in this discourse and that her colleagues submit to it, while Anka—if only because of her femininity—is outside the prohibition. Her femininity is a means of resistance; as a woman, she is of less importance and that allows her to get what she wants: not only in the world of men but also in the world governed by state-socialist ideology. This lesser importance of women is further underlined by Heda, Prokop's wife and Alena, Heda's sister: the men do not take heed of what the women say. On the other hand, the two women do not take heed of what the men say, because *they know*. The scene sets up a situation, in which the reader can identify with one or the other group of 'spectators' (either with the men from the institute or with Heda and Alena). If we presume that a woman-reader is more likely to identify with women and a man-reader with men, this is one of the moments in the novel when the text invites the woman-reader to join in the 'superior/bonding knowledge' of the women and, by extension, in the heroine's success. At the same time, the text more or less excludes the man-reader, because the only position with which he can identify is that of powerlessness.

The argument of mockery of domesticity and resistance of femininity becomes even more clear in this extract than in the previous one. The discussion starts with infantilising Anka: she speaks 'with childlike importance' and she is called patronisingly 'a child' by her colleague. This is contrasted with Anka's rationality and professional skills. She is the one who lectures others on the correct procedure of a grant writing process—by the way, a skill which is still scarce in the region of Central and Eastern Europe at present. The women are not surprised, because *they knew*, while the men now have to acknowledge the seriousness of Anka's intentions. Miloš uses the power of the institution (that is, an institution ruled by the state-socialist ideology) to undermine Anka's individualistic success on the one hand, and to reveal the prohibitions, exclusions and hierarchies of the ideology to the reader on the other. It is Anka who has the last word: she insists that she duly informed everyone about her intentions as the regulations required, by which she implies that the men chose not to listen.

Anka's victory is double edged, however, as is the whole argument about the subversive powers of femininity in state socialism. The reader knows not only that Anka has a feminine appearance, but that she also has 'personal relations' with the people who have the power to decide about her travel abroad. This may have been a coded comment to the reader on the corrupt nature of life under state socialism. Moreover, a few pages earlier, Anka's position in the institute is interestingly related also to the patriarchal discourse. She achieves a symbolic value in that discourse as 'one of the buddies' *after* she gets married. It is during an informal conversation with her colleagues and superiors about why she kept her maiden name ('Because, professor, I will not set aside the name which I strove so hard to make famous.'—Frybová 1993, 341) that Professor Prokop suggests that she calls him and her other male colleagues in the institute by their first names and uses the informal form of address. He explains his proposal by 'feeling his age' (he is around fifty) when he uses the informal address to her and she responds in the formal way. Nevertheless, the sequence (marriage—talk about it—proposal of informality) also suggests that Anka, as a woman, could gain status and thus legitimise her position and research interest only by marrying.

The text uses also a more significant means of subversion of the state-socialist ideology apart from Anka's exterior femininity: the concept of family. The analysis of women's magazines conducted by Ferguson (1983) reveals the aim of 'the cult of femininity': a heterosexual relationship with the view of marriage and with family as the ultimate goal. Similarly, state-socialist ideology also saw the family as the 'foundation of the state' which was documented in the relatively generous social benefits for young marriages and families with children. Ivo Možný (1991) summarised the function of the family in the state-socialist ideology in the following way:

The entire rhetoric explained to each family that it was the family that had numerous unsubstitutable functions in society. Their fulfilment could be formulated also as a 'task' and those who did not meet this task could be seen as selfishly damaging the society and parasitising on it. (Možný 1991, 17)

In the novel, Anka pursues a heterosexual relationship first with Marek and then with Miloš. The first relationship ends after a year of life together when Anka leaves Marek abruptly under the pretence that she had found somebody else. There are hints made throughout the novel that there was some other reason, but the schematic structure of the novel postpones the 'big revelation' of her 'unknown reasons' until the very end—probably to achieve rather hollow suspense. The reason for the separation is that Anka mistakenly concluded (from overhearing a certain conversation and finding 'evidence') that Marek, a surgeon of high standing, was corrupt and took bribes from his patients. Anka's heightened sense of honesty and morality did not allow her to continue her relationship and she left Marek, although she knew she could never love anybody else. The explanation of the whole mistake twelve years later and the reunion of the lovers after Miloš's death make this crucial element of the plot a cliché belonging to the genre of romance (which the novel ultimately is, as I will discuss in Chapter 6). The aesthetic value, however, is not an issue for discussion in this study. The important aspect is how these relationships fulfil the family values proclaimed by both the traditional idea of femininity and the state-socialist ideology.

The first relationship is destined to be childless because neither participant wants children. Marek explains his unwillingness to reproduce by his commitment to work and not having the time it takes to be a good father. Anka is similarly resolved on account of her own experience as a child with her parents. The second relationship, Anka's marriage to Miloš, is not only childless, but it is not even a marriage as traditionally understood. Miloš is impotent and Anka incapable of a sexual relationship due to the emotional pain she suffered through her break up with Marek. They married ('for unknown reasons', to some) because they both wanted to get rid of the social pressure to have a relationship:

Anka could now go out with a girlfriend without fear that she would bump into a former classmate with serious intentions; Miloš could go out alone without fear that he would be seen by somebody from the institute, and speculations would arise as to how come that Zouhar had gone alone to the Philharmony on a Saturday night. He really doesn't have a woman? (Frýbová 1993, 339)

Theirs was a marriage of two friends, in which 'the greatest intimacy of the Zouhars was that they walked occasionally arm in arm, danced together from time to time and, once a year, they kissed: on New Year's Day at a midnight toast' (ibid.). In agreement with both the state-socialist ideology and the residual patriarchal discourse, the self-esteem of these two people and their social position centre around forming a

heterosexual relationship and conclude it in marriage. Nevertheless, the way it is done, gives this value an ironical slant: Anka and Miloš pursue a relationship and marriage as a performance for the world around them so that they gain a relative personal freedom from the oppressive residual patriarchal discourse. In other words, they are aware of what 'the rules' are, but they do not internalise them, their manipulation by 'the rules' is fully conscious. This surface compliance with the patriarchal 'rules' may also be read as an act of resistance to the state-socialist ideology. The idea of family as 'a foundation of the state' is fulfilled only on the outside, because the marriage is intentionally non-reproductive.

It is not just anybody who refuses to reproduce, but the characters who are modelled more or less as the exemplary citizens committed to their work (that is, to the goals of society). It would be impossible for the text to suggest that either Marek's or Anka's decisions are politically motivated, so the text's subversion remains at the level of implication: the best citizens refuse to reproduce the system.¹⁴ Several other characters in the novel—Anka's supervisor and friend Prokop, her colleagues Zámeš and Forejt and others—all described as models in the novel's main emphasis, the commitment of individuals to their professions, are also childless.¹⁵ The message of the novel is thus paradoxical—and potentially subversive. The reader is offered stories of glorious scientific successes of these professionals, successes which not just move humanity ahead, but show how *productive* and 'good' the state-socialist system is. This is then undermined by the fact that these excellent researchers, adorned with state awards, passively express their disagreement with the system by being biologically *unproductive*.

Of course, this conclusion can only be speculative, although similar patterns of the refusal to reproduce in that political system could be found in real life, and we find it also in the marriage of Tomas and Tereza, the two main characters of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In that novel, written in exile, Kundera was not restricted by the state-socialist censorship and its ideological mores. Thus Tomas divorced his wife, 'an orthodox communist' (Kundera 1985, 207), after two years of marriage, then tries to struggle with his ex-wife for visiting rights to his son for a while, but after a short time he 'decided on the spur of the moment never to see him again' (ibid., 11). He then embarks on a promiscuous lifestyle, in which sex is for pleasure without even a hint at reproduction and establishing a new family. When he marries Tereza, he does not want to have children. His resolve is not explicitly phrased as a refusal to bring children to that world, but the context in which this is brought up allows the reader to make that connection. It comes at a later stage in the novel, in the scene when Tereza brings home a half-dead crow, which some children buried alive:

¹⁴ Miloš, who is seen by most other characters as an example of a professional, but with a warped character, is 'not given the option to choose' by the text, but is 'made' impotent. In terms of a symbolic value of his character compared to Anka and Marek who have their flaws but are honest people, he 'does not deserve' the option, he is 'a less valuable citizen' and thus his *decision* not to have children would not have the same power of resistance.

Nevertheless, Miloš can be seen as a symbol of decaying state socialism: glossy on the outside, but warped and impotent inside. (I am indebted to Adam Bžoch of the Slovak Academy of Sciences for this observation.)

¹⁵ To be precise, Prokop is childless at the time of the main story of the novel. We learn that he and his wife decided not to have another child, because their first-born died in infancy.

'It was children,' she said, and her words did more than state a fact; they revealed an unexpected repugnance for people in general. It reminded him of something she had said to him not long before: 'I'm beginning to be grateful to you for not wanting to have children.'

And then she had complained to him about a man who had been bothering her at work. (Kundera 1985, 204)

Children, in this context, are deprived of the idealised aura of innocence and become a part of the generally bleak picture and hostile environment of Prague in the years following the Soviet occupation in 1968. The connection is made clear by the last sentence in the quotation by mentioning a man who harasses Tereza. The scene with the man and Tereza's reflections on it are recorded earlier in the novel and it is suggested that the man was a secret police agent whose task was to compromise Tereza. It is not clear whether Tereza's fears had some justification, but their importance lies in that having to think constantly about whether one is being watched or not makes one live in perpetual distrust towards one's environment, and such life is not liveable. The refusal to produce children is then a refusal to contribute to that life.

In another novel from my sample, *Memento* by Radek John, childlessness of the main protagonists seems to confirm the value of children and family, which was promoted by the state-socialist ideology. I will deal with the text in detail in Chapter 5, but for now I will just mention that the novel is clearly written with a strong political motive: to raise awareness in the Czech population about the dangers of drug abuse—an almost taboo topic at the time of publication. With this goal underlying the whole text, it is not surprising that it is a novel which complies with, rather than attempts to challenge, the qualities valued by the state-socialist ideology. The text declares very much openly its intention—to borrow a popular phrase from the media jargon of the time—to criticise the 'residual negative phenomena in our society' for which 'conditions are created by the insufficient moral maturity of *individuals* disrupting the principles of socialist community' (from a 1978 article in the *Rudé právo*, quoted in Fidelius 1998, 122; my emphasis). Nevertheless, it does not necessarily intend to (or maybe cannot) say anything against the system in which these phenomena spread. After all, the wording of the quotation above makes it plain how these 'negative phenomena' have to be positioned: they come from the *previous*, that is, capitalist system, since they are merely 'residual', and some individuals, rather than a social climate and state institutions, are responsible for them. In this context, when *Memento's* narrator brings up repeatedly the inability of Eva and Michal to make love and to produce a child due to their only motivation in their lives—to obtain a daily dose of drugs—it is to convey to the reader the ultimate horror of drug addiction: the destruction of the fundamental and most desirable experiences of life.

At the level of the text, the childlessness of some of the characters in *For Unknown Reasons*, then, carries certain resistant / subversive potential in relation to the state-socialist ideology. I say potential, because I showed also the many contradictions of the text and a degree of compliance with at least that part of the state-socialist ideology which was shared with the residual patriarchal discourse (such as, the concept of the woman-mother). Nevertheless, this dilemma is perhaps inevitable for any kind of a text produced in a complex discursive environment. As Sara Mills puts it:

Although we often read texts as having unitary effects (and in many ways the dominant readings of texts are unitary), it is possible to trace the instability of individual statements when read against other sections of the text. Each discursive position is undermined or called into question by other elements within the text, and while some elements may be dominant, there are sections of the text which temper a straightforward position being offered. (Mills 1993, 197)

This approach bestows greater power on the reader and her or his ability to negotiate a position within the various clashing discourses. The level of reception, in the case of *For Unknown Reasons*—and generally pre-1989 Czech readership—however, cannot be easily resolved. On the one hand, given the positioning of childlessness in both the state-socialist ideology and the residual patriarchal discourse, its 'encoding' as a resistant message may not have been immediately recognisable to the reader who was used to the uncomplicated polarisation of the Cold War rhetoric. We have to consider that an average reader reading this novel in the period before the 'Velvet Revolution' in November 1989 probably never encountered a critical interpretation of any text beyond rigid Marxist analysis in her or his educational experience.¹⁶ On the other hand, there is evidence that readers of the time were well 'trained' in discerning political messages in literary texts. Martin Hilský (1994) notes that pre-1989 theatre audiences, for example, went to a play in order to pick up certain lines in authors like Shakespeare and politicise them by relating them to the contemporary political and social life in the Czech Republic. My own experience with Czech theatre before 1989 certainly confirms this claim. I remember audiences finding political innuendoes in *An Ideal Husband* (Wilde 1999) or applauding, with knowing smiles referring to the social reality, to Sallieri's lines about mediocrity in *Amadeus* (Shaffer 1980). Katrin Sieg, writing on gender and state-socialist ideology in the GDR, arrives at a similar conclusion:

In the absence of counter-cultural spaces, entire institutions in the GDR—such as the theater—became ideologically charged, and turned into potential sites of dissent. [...]

Theater artists had worked under a stable system of censorship and oppositional readings, which produced stable, dissident subjects defined by way of their distance from official ideology. (Sieg 1995, 112 and 127)

This means that audiences/readers did look for certain 'codes' in texts which communicated to them subversion of the existing political system and social relations within it. My previous example of Western fashion magazines suggests that middle-class consumer standards were possibly among these 'codes' and thus recognisable even by the reader not trained in detailed textual analysis. In this respect, Anka's femininity carried some of that resistance. Whether her childlessness was also understood in those terms at the time or whether it would have been seen merely in terms of the confirmation of the patriarchal values of motherhood which took precedence over a woman's desire for self-fulfilment, remains unanswered.

My aim in this chapter was to examine the positioning of the discourse of femininity within the ideological/discursive environment I explained in Chapter 3. Mills advocates the importance of feminist questioning of femininity through discourse theory:

However, feminist analyses [...] are attempting to re-write discourse theory to enable a description of femininity which enables resistance, and which sets femininity within a range of discursive conflicts. It is by describing discourses in this way that we are able to see ourselves as not simply being feminine or not,

¹⁶ Learning by rote memorisation (including literature) rather than problem-solving has been a frequently discussed feature of the Czech educational system. See, for example, Holmes 1997, or the Green Book of Education (Čerych et al. 1999). I will discuss this issue in more detail in Chapter 6.

but rather as being in a complex, contradictory process of negotiation with a variety of discourses. (Mills 1991, 283)

Given the complexity of the environment, it is perhaps impossible to arrive at an unambiguous understanding of femininity in *For Unknown Reasons*. Nevertheless, I see the importance of this analysis in contributing to the understanding of the multi-faceted significance of femininity in Czech state socialism.

This text, as all the other fiction examples I will be using in this work, has to be read politically. Not only, because it was produced in a heavily politicised environment, but also because it is openly critical of some social phenomena, such as immoral behaviour, dishonesty, exploitation of social benefits, or an uncommitted attitude to work. The popularity of the novel was probably greatly enhanced by its critical stance, because the general audience was waiting eagerly for any hint of criticism of the system. However, all these social negatives had to be packaged in an ideologically acceptable way if a book was to be published (see the Introduction on the multi-levelled censorship before the 1989 changeover): they had to be presented as existing because of 'some individuals' not because of some inherent flaw in the system. It is this need to appear compliant with the state-socialist ideology which is largely responsible for the text's inability to maintain a consistent position within discourses.

