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(*) Corresponding author
Peer review method: Double-blind
Professional article
DOI: 10.20544/HORIZONS.1.1.24.P04
Section A



**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER
RELATIONSHIP AND THE LOSS OF THE MOTHER THROUGH THE
PRISM OF THE NOVEL "BELLA SAMA" BY VIOLETA TANCHEVA-
ZLATEVA**

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Abstract: The subject of interest in the scientific article is the latest prose work of the Macedonian writer Violeta Tancheva-Zlateva, titled unusually “Bella sama”. The novel follows the family history of the adolescent Bella, from the moment before her birth, up to her enrollment in college. The article examines the mother-daughter relationship, through Maria Lena's relationship with her aunt, as a surrogate mother figure, then the relationship between Maria Lena and her daughter Bella. In the article, great attention is paid to the meaning of this relationship, in order to highlight its importance in the development of a young person. Accordingly, the article discusses the impact of the loss/death of the mother on the adolescent Bella, the way she copes with grief, but also how she manages to continue fighting in life on her own.

Key words: adolescence, death, mother-daughter/child relationship.

Introduction

There are authors who amaze the readers with each of their works. One such author is Violeta Tancheva – Zlateva¹. The last prose work of Violeta Tancheva - Zlateva, entitled “Bella sama” even with its unusual title will "tickle" our curiosity, and with its content it will shake our emotions. Or, as Lidija Dimkovska would say, “Bella Sama” is a poignant novel about growing up in which the polarization mother - daughter, niece - aunt, husband - brother, city - village, good - evil, child - adult, art - reality, love - hatred, body - soul, life - death is mirrored in an authentic way in the fate of Bella Samakoska, who during the transition from childhood to youth not only faces tragic family losses but also an attempt of abuse by a family member. Vulnerable and hurt, Bella finds the strength to live only in her own artistic talent that, nourished by the artistic heritage of her mother, shines like a firebird from the ashes of the present. The female principle in the story, torn between patriarchy and emancipation, is personal and collective. Bella Sama is also Bella and Sama, in fact, like so many other girls, women and women who pass by us with their burden that only our inner eyes can see. Violeta Tancheva-Zlateva in a warm humanistic way gives them the right to vote and thus offers us a reading for thinking, for remembering, for support and for action (Dimkovska 2024).

¹ Violeta Tancheva-Zlateva was born on April 25, 1968, in the village of Borievo, Strumica. She completed her primary education in her hometown and in the neighboring village. Turnovo, and secondary education at the "Jane Sandanski" high school in Strumica. In 1991, she graduated from the Faculty of Philology in Skopje, from the group of Yugoslav literature with the Macedonian language. From 1994 to 2013, she worked at TNID "Gjurdja", Skopje, at first as an editor of the magazines "Dopri me nežno" and "World Press IZBOR", later as chief and responsible editor of the publishing activity, responsible editor and proofreader. Since October 2013, she has been working as a proofreader at the TRI Publishing Center in Skopje. She has been a member of the Society of Writers of Macedonia since 2000. She is a member of the Editorial Board of the magazine for literature and culture AKT, of the magazine "Stožer", a newsletter of the Society of Writers of Macedonia, as well as of the Association of Readers of the Republic of Macedonia. Her literary work consists of the following works: Book of dreams, 1992; Returns, novel, 1993; Returning to Borievo, short stories, 1999; My Picasso/My Picasso, poetry with English overtones, Skopje, 2007; My Picasso/My Picasso, bilingual edition, sung in Bosnian, Banja Luka–Belgrade, 2008; Colorful letters, a novel for children in letters, 2008; Prisoners of silence, poetry, 2010, Fire, poetry, 2011, Our story, poetry, 2013; Year without summer, poetry, 2015; The road, poetry, 2018; On the edge of the world, poetry, 2021; Time drips, poetry, 2021; Stories from the Last Century, a collection of short stories, 2022; Deaf time, poetry, 2023; Bella Sama, novel, 2023.

The riddle surrounding the title is revealed to us by the narrator - Bella himself in the Prologue of the book, with which he identifies himself: "I have a strange name... My mother once told me that I have one syllable from the grandmothers in it, so that both parties are satisfied." And I'm really white. Like the cheese of your grandmother Lazarica...And your eyebrows are like the blossoming sardines of your grandmother Bežanija" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 7). Self-identification is not limited to naming: "My last name is Samakoska. Now, as I look back on the memories, I am most defined by his first two syllables: Sa-ma. Bella Sama" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 7).

About the novel - about the loss - about the pain

The four-part compositional structure of the novel "Bella sama" by Violeta Tanceva-Zlateva reveals two different narrators. The first two chapters of the novel are dominated by the narration of Maria-Lena (Bella's mother), whose name also came about as a compromise to please both families. In the next two chapters of the novel, the narrator Bella "unravels" the events after the great tragedies in the family. One gets the impression that the first two parts are the history of Maria Lena's life, and the second two parts - of Bella.

The first part of the novel is an optimistic picture of the formation and consolidation of a new family, which at first consists of only Maria-Lena and her aunt Nevena. Nevena devoted her life to her family, after Maria Elena lost her parents at an early age: "She is now my mother and father. After dad and mom died almost one after the other, she came to my apartment, so that it would be more spacious for us, and she rented out his two-room apartment in the center to an accounting firm" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 14). Thus, aunt Nevena becomes a maternal figure in Maria Lena's life, who remains to live with them (upon their persuasion) and after her marriage to Ilia/Ilko. It is the aunt, as a real mother, who will be the first person to invite Ilia to lunch after learning that he is the boyfriend of her beloved niece: "She used to make coffee for himself when he got up. Now she is waiting for us to leave the room, she wants us to drink it together and talk before everyone starts their day. Because now we are a family, a small community of three. A little strange, but functional" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 14). This aunt-niece relationship is identical to the mother-daughter relationship, especially since Maria Lena herself says that her relationship with her mother was cold and distant. She realizes this especially when she gives birth to Bella and when she observes how her aunt behaves with her niece: "The two of us never got close. At one point, I just longed for her hug, for two or three warm words of understanding and love. But I didn't know how to trick her, much less how to tell her... I was angry with her then, but now I feel sorry for her... I never saw her relaxed or smiling, she was always

in a fit, always leading account for something fearing that things may go in the wrong direction” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 28). The parent-child relationship and its effects on the child have intrigued researchers because parents hold an important place in human life. In family life, the mother as the main caregiver has a more important role than the father in raising children. On the other hand, mother and daughters have a stronger attachment and greater intimacy than any other parent/child relationship. The importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the lives of both women, especially daughters, has been discussed for decades (Onaylı 2010). That relationship between adult daughters and their mothers often involves closeness, intimacy and support, that is, sharing a deep bond throughout their lifetime. According to Fisher (1991), interdependence and emotional connection in the mother-daughter relationship is much higher than in other dyads. This relationship is very important for a woman's self-definition. Therefore, this relationship must be positive (Fischer 1991, 237-248).

The newly created life in the family – Bella, complements the final picture from the first part of the book, with the vision of a happy family of four. In it, we follow the pregnancy of Maria-Lena, the birth of Bella and the new dynamics that she brings to family life, her growth, going to kindergarten, building a summer house in Ilko's native village, and especially Maria Lena's love for her child, for which Aunt Nevena sometimes knows how to reprimand her in a patriarchal spirit: “Love the child with your heart, not with words... You should not exaggerate anything, Lenche, not even in love. A person should have a measure in everything” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 27).

Already in the second part of the novel, the narrator Maria Lena brings us a different picture, in which family happiness and harmony is past, and everything is a sign of the death of aunt Nevena: “Then the three of us remained, me, Ilko and Bella, dumbfounded by the emptiness of the apartment after her sudden departure. Now it's just the two of us, me and Bella. ...We are left without the fulcrum that maintains the balance of the home, of life, of the heart. We scatter like two specks of dust in the void, clinging to each other convulsively, fearing that we will be swallowed up by the giant space” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 87). The death of the aunt, who leaves quietly and unobtrusively, is somehow acceptable, but the loss of the husband and father Ilko is something that turns the lives of Bella and her mother upside down. In that dark period, Sunday is only a day of the week when the resting place of loved ones is visited, as opposed to the previous period: “With freshly fried pancakes that fill the house with an intoxicating smell of vanilla, cinnamon and jam, mostly from strawberries and apricots. With hot cocoa in the cooler mornings. With cold lemonade in the middle of summer. I remember some other, happier weeks, when I was woken up in the

morning by their mixed voices, their laughter, when dad often knew how to sing 'Your eyes, Leno mori, they are water cherries...' (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 88-89).

It is unfortunate that children will experience sadness in their lives. However, honest, specific and supportive conversations are very important for children's reactions and attitudes to grief and death. Children's books can provide a way to reach out and support children as they experience trauma and begin to understand the emotions surrounding their grief. It is important to understand the psychological process of grieving in order to help children understand death from an emotional point of view (Corr 2010, 1-20). The loss of Aunt Nevena does not seem to cause a greater emotional upheaval in Bella than in her mother. It is understandable, given Bella's age, but also the relationship between her mother (Maria - Lena) and aunt Nevena. But the loss of the father means a lot to Bella. First, from an economic point of view, because she and her mother leave the city and move to her father's native village. Renting out the apartments in the city helps them to survive, because the mother does not have permanent employment. Children experience death in many ways—whether it's the loss of a family member, friend, or pet. Death has a huge impact on children and often causes what is called a 'grief reaction'.

Children's grief reactions, the way they react to the loss/death of a loved one/close person, depend on the socio-cultural context and individual development of the child. As a result, children demonstrate multidimensional ways of perceiving and responding to experience. When children are dealing with grief, they show complex emotions and feelings related to their personal identity, cultural background, and relationship with the loved one. They may show feelings of sadness, anxiety, and even show physical symptoms of anxiety, such as headaches: "I don't feel like going anywhere. Nothing is being done to me. I want to stay on the bench next to dad for a long time and remember the things we did together. If I close my eyes, I can hear his voice reading to me at night tucked under my little quilt with his legs poking out. And I like to imagine that the sun's rays caressing my face are his long, warm fingers" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 90). As Corr points out, whether they are aware of it or not, parents and other caring adults serve as role models for children. When adults can express their own grief in the presence of their children and explain these reactions to their children, they contribute to their children's well-being. For example, it is normal for very young children to feel upset when a parent cries (Corr 2010). Therefore, a visit to the cemetery, for Bella and her mother, means only sitting on the bench, talking about the deceased father, taking care of the grave. The fact is that death cannot be hidden from children. A parent trying to shield a child from the experience of death only adds confusion and anxiety to an already difficult world. When

there is a deceased person in the family, the feelings of the adult family members are transferred to the children in many non-verbal ways, such as facial expression, tone of voice, body posture, etc. (Vidal 1976, 175-184). Bella's pain is also evident at the moment when she reconsiders his senseless death, so she also has a feeling of anger towards the deceased: "I miss my dad a lot... He kept telling me to be careful where I'm going - I say with a tight throat. And why didn't he pay attention? - He slipped... - Mom is struggling. We always stick to that. He slipped... But why wasn't he careful not to slip? I am very angry with him, very!" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 90). Kliman says that guilt, anger and anxiety are part of grieving, because children often feel a great deal of guilt and imagine that they may be somehow responsible for the death of a loved (Kliman 1968).

Thanks to her mother's down-to-earthness, Bella quickly adapts to her new life situation, continuing her life in the countryside. During that period, Maria-Lena pays a lot of attention to her daughter, she talks to her about the need to read books, they take action to clean up the waste in the village, and the conversation about the way of accepting and facing pain is particularly indicative: "Your pain Is your friend, Bella... And you should listen to her, because if you don't pay attention to things, if you don't take care of them, it can be really bad" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 66-67).

As the end of elementary school approaches, Bella expresses her desire to continue her education in the city, at a secondary art school, as her mother once did. The joy of the mother, who will introduce Bella to the basics of art education through the analysis of her drawings, is evident, but in doing so, Bella is taken aback by what she will discover in the painting: "I stare at her, because if I blink, I'm afraid that the tears that have collected in my nose will flow... Such a heavy sadness comes over me that my breath is cut off. I can't seem to breathe. Is it possible that she is so dark inside, in her soul?" (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 105-106).

At the moment when the second tragic moment in Bella's life happens, the death of her mother from cancer, Bella is an adolescent. From the text in the novel, we learn that at that moment, she is fourteen years old, a semi-graduate, because she previously informed her mother that from next year she wants to continue her education at the secondary art school in the city. It places Bella within middle adolescence, when adolescents are already becoming aware of the physical, emotional, and cognitive changes that are occurring to them. As a reminder, the word "adolescence" comes from the Latin word "adolescere", which means "to mature". It is the life stage between childhood and adulthood. Adolescents are also called teenagers, and the period of adolescence is closely related to the teenage years (Kapur 2015, 233-250). Adolescents experience not only physical growth and changes, but also emotional, psychological, social and mental changes and growth.

Adolescence can be broadly categorized into three stages – early adolescence (approximately age 11 to 13 years), middle adolescence (approximately age 14 to 17 years) and late adolescence (approximately age 17 to 19 years) (Salmela-Aro 2011, 360-368). One of the characteristics of middle adolescence is the search for one's own identity. Identity formation is a significant moment in this period, due to which adolescents may suffer from anxiety and mental disorders in the future. Adolescence is important for girls because of the special emotional, physical and cultural conditions and the role of the mother as the closest emotional person to her daughter. During this period, the mother informs her teenage daughter about the issues and problems of puberty, as well as about friendships. Given the importance of the mother's presence during this period, her death/loss is one of the greatest possible shocks during this period, which can have far-reaching effects on her (Shariatmadar and Taghdisi 2022, 166-202).

Bella loses her father at a young age and the presence of her mother during that period works as a kind of shock absorber so that she does not feel the loss to such a great extent. But with the loss of the mother, everything changes. As Davidman points out, children who have lost their mothers feel as if they have lost a secure foundation in their lives (Davidman 2000).

In her field research and articles on death and dying, psychologist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross identifies five stages of grief and loss: anger, grief, denial, self-doubt, and depression (Kubler-Ross 1969). Throughout the narrative, we see Bella faces all these stages, before accepting the new situation and moving forward. At first, she can't bear the sympathetic and pitying looks that people give her, so she wants to stay in the cemetery alone: “And I felt their pitiful looks clinging to my back. First light and somewhat soft, like a spring summer mist. Then more and more assertively....Go away, I wanted to tell her. Go away! You have completed your obligation and now you have a place to gather. You have each other to talk how beautiful the casket was, how dignified the funeral was and that there was food for everyone” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 125-126).

Bella has a burning feeling of anger towards all living people, but also towards her deceased parents, so for those reasons she refuses to accept the finality of their death, which is why she does not want to go to the cemetery, according to tradition, forty days after death of the mother: “I locked myself in the bathroom and sat on the toilet seat for a long time, with my face buried in my hands. I expected to cry, scream, and shout angry questions... But I felt nothing. Nothing. Just a void, a huge hole in me. And just one big WHY that echoed off the stone walls of the void inside me. I sat for a long time and squeezed my chest, so that the abyss inside me would not suck me. The darkness behind my closed eyes. The ice inside me that had

petrified all my senses...I could only smell it... the smell of dark incense and dry basil from the preacher's lamp” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 130).

The refusal to accept the mother's death is evident in the moments when Bella remains living in her cold house, despite her aunt's efforts to move in with them: “I passed my aunt's house. With a sideways glance, I saw the aunt standing at the window. But he didn't come out to call me. He didn't even wave at me. ...I came back to our house. The exceptional. More in the chest than in the legs” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 133).

While the loss of either parent has lifelong consequences for most children, male or female, the psychological impact of her mother's death on a daughter's life and identity is unmatched by any other experience. Mother and daughter carry each other's identities and potentials both genetically and psychologically. Their relationship connects them to the cyclical and impermanent nature of life: a lineage of birth, death, and birth that stretches behind and before them. In other words, their relationship is a natural way of a mother seeing herself through her daughter's eyes, and a daughter seeing herself through her mother's eyes. When a mother dies in the life of a young daughter, the bond that was once created; now the daughter's sense of self is changed forever (Pascual 2014). Hence, refusing to accept the finality of death, Bella tries to relive the moments when her mother is still alive: “Only the door creaked when I entered the cold chamber. Ice. Silence. Darkness. Three words. Three abstract nouns with concrete meaning. Three things that start with the same letter as mom. They are the only ones left for” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 134). But even though she returns home, the cold and empty house gives her no comfort. In her grief, she loses the will to live, constantly lies covered in the cold room, refuses to go to school and refuses to eat, because she feels guilty: “Aunty scolds me again for not eating, for bringing me food for nothing in her little pots with transparent lids. I take a bite and forcefully swallow it, along with the tears that collect in my throat and run down my nose and eyes. How can I eat, how can I talk, how can I wash, comb, dress, laugh... when mommy can't do any of that?” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023:137-138).

Edelman writes that because girls love their mothers they want them to be flawless when they lived. Girls honor their mothers by giving them posthumous perfection and soothe themselves by creating mothers they wish they had. One of the key reasons why mothers cannot be replaced when they are gone is that there is confusion about who is being missed—the ideal mother or the real mother (Edelman 1995). And Bella idealizes her mother at certain moments and tries to bring her character closer, through the lessons she gave her: “My mother loved the lively, playful colors. All her scarves are overflowing in such bright joyful tones. What beautiful turbans she made with them!...With them she looked even taller, more beautiful” (Tanceva-

Zlateva 2023, 145); “She was always honest with me, she didn't try to twist things, hide them from me. Even when she herself was ashamed of some of her former actions and words” (168); “Mom didn't like to keep a lot of things. She often cleaned, got rid of excess things” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 170). There is general agreement that there is a certain set of emotions that tend to arise in children who experience the death of one of their parents. These reactions include unconscious and sometimes conscious denial of the reality of the parent's death; a screening of all affective reactions related to the death of a parent indicated a significant increase in identification with and idealization of the dead parent; decrease in self-esteem; feeling guilty; and persistent unconscious fantasies of a permanent relationship or reunion with the dead parent. These responses are thought to indicate an avoidance of accepting the death of the parent and the need to make a radical reorganization in the attributes given to the desired object (Miller 1971): “Today I decide to take all the books off the shelves. ...I wipe them one by one and arrange them on the table, on the bed, on the rug on the floor. I stare at their titles, caress them where mom used to touch them. I flip through them. I'm reading about a line. And I squint to remember the days when I listened to her frantically turn the rustling pages. All the books smell like you, Mom” (Tanceva-Zlateva 2023, 170).

Conclusion

The novel “Bella sama” by Violeta Tancheva-Zlateva is both a family novel and an adolescent novel, which, among other things, examines the mother-daughter relationship. This relationship was the subject of our interest in order to show its crucial importance in the development of the young person, and especially in the case when the young person loses that precious person from his life, how she copes with grief, where she finds the strength to continue with life. Although, no story should be expected to offer a complete philosophy, to depict all the stages of grief and to adhere to the "typical" set of circumstances. Literary characters can provide experiences and actions to guide readers toward empathy or model positive choices (Lovelace and Smith 2002). For those reasons, this book can be an extremely useful read for young adolescents in overcoming difficult situations in life and how to deal with negative emotions.

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