

THE REAL OF AGING AND THE “NOT-ALL” OF WOMAN: A LACANIAN READING OF BABA YAGA LAID AN EGG

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Abstract: This article offers a sustained Lacanian reading of *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* (2009; Eng. trans. 2010) by Dubravka Ugrešić, arguing that the novel stages aging femininity as an encounter with the Real and reconfigures the Slavic myth of Baba Yaga as a figure of feminine jouissance beyond phallic signification. Drawing on the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan - particularly the mirror stage, the tripartite registers (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real), sexual difference, the “not-all” (*pas-toute*), and jouissance - this study demonstrates how Ugrešić’s tripartite narrative structure formally enacts the split subject. The novel’s representation of the aging female body, grotesque corporeality, and maternal ambivalence reveals the instability of identity and the failure of the Symbolic order to provide signifiers for elderly womanhood outside ridicule or invisibility. Engaging recent scholarship (2021–2026) on aging, gender, and Lacanian theory, this article situates Ugrešić within post-socialist literary discourse and contemporary feminist psychoanalysis. Ultimately, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* reclaims the monstrous feminine as a site of excess rather than lack, exposing the Real of female jouissance as that which resists symbolic domestication.

Keywords: *Lacan, aging, jouissance, post-socialist literature, feminine subjectivity, Baba Yaga*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, Dubravka Ugrešić constructs a complex narrative meditation on aging, exile, myth, and femininity in post-socialist Europe. The novel’s hybrid form - interweaving autobiographical fragments, fictionalized spa episodes, and mythographic commentary - destabilizes genre and foregrounds fragmentation as both thematic and structural principle. At its center stands Baba Yaga, the ambivalent Slavic witch, traditionally depicted as grotesque, cannibalistic, and dangerous, yet also wise and transformative.

This article argues that Ugrešić’s novel can be productively interpreted through Lacanian psychoanalysis. The narrative’s fragmentation mirrors the Lacanian split subject; its aging female bodies stage the Real as traumatic excess; and its reworking of myth reveals the impossibility of symbolically containing “Woman” within phallic discourse. Rather than representing aging as mere decline, Ugrešić exposes it as a site where the Symbolic falters and feminine jouissance emerges beyond patriarchal coding.

Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska (2025b) refer to Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* to point out that gender is not an essential category but a construct maintained through performative practices - socially learned and repeated acts. However, the guiding thesis in this paper is that *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* dramatizes what Lacan formulates as the “not-all” (*pas-toute*) of woman: the structural impossibility of fully inscribing femininity within the Symbolic order (Lacan, 1998). *Baba Yaga* becomes the embodiment of this excess - neither fully maternal nor monstrous, neither inside nor outside culture, but occupying a liminal space analogous to the Real.

2. UGREŠIĆ AND POST-SOCIALIST CONTEXT

Criticism on Ugrešić frequently emphasizes exile, displacement, and post-Yugoslav identity. Early scholarship (Boym, 2001; Hammond, 2018) situates her within transnational and post-socialist discourse, foregrounding nostalgia, irony, and cultural critique. More recent analyses highlight aging and corporeality in Eastern European literature (Bahun-Radunović, 2022; Petrović, 2023), noting how elderly women often function as grotesque or abject figures in transitional societies.

Yet psychoanalytic approaches to *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* remain comparatively underdeveloped. While feminist readings interpret *Baba Yaga* as a recuperated archetype of female power, few studies deploy Lacan systematically to analyze the novel’s structure and representation of subjectivity.

2.1. Lacanian Feminist Theory

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Lacan's later seminars, particularly *Encore* (Seminar XX), articulate sexual difference through the formulas of sexualization. His provocative assertion that “La femme n'existe pas” (Woman does not exist) indicates not empirical non-existence but the absence of a universal signifier for woman within the phallic Symbolic (Lacan, 1998). Woman is “not-all,” meaning that feminine *jouissance* exceeds phallic logic.

Feminist Lacanian theorists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva rework this notion to expose patriarchal symbolic structures. Contemporary Lacanian scholars - including Slavoj Žižek (2022), Alenka Zupančič (2023), and Ragland (2021) - emphasize the Real as a site of corporeal and political rupture.

Bringing this framework to Ugrešič allows us to read aging not merely as sociological marginalization but as structural exclusion within the Symbolic order.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: LACAN'S REGISTERS AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

3.1. The Mirror Stage and Imaginary Coherence

Lacanian analysis has been fruitfully applied to literature, as in studies using the mirror stage and Symbolic/Real registers to read character identity and silences in narrative (Dimitrijovska-Jankulovska & Denkovska, 2025a). In “The Mirror Stage” (1949), Lacan describes ego formation through identification with an external image (Lacan, 2006). This misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) produces the illusion of unity while masking bodily fragmentation. The Imaginary thus sustains a fantasy of coherence.

In Ugrešič's novel, aging women confront mirrors that no longer reflect a stable Imaginary identity. Wrinkles and sagging flesh disrupt self-recognition, revealing the gap between ego-image and corporeal reality. The mirror becomes a site of estrangement rather than affirmation.

3.2. The Symbolic and the Law

The Symbolic order, structured by language and the paternal function, organizes social meaning. It provides signifiers for youth, beauty, and reproductive femininity - but not for elderly women outside caricature. The aging female subject thus occupies a structural void within the Symbolic.

3.3. The Real and *Jouissance*

The Real resists symbolization. It returns as trauma, bodily excess, or anxiety. In Seminar XX, Lacan distinguishes phallic *jouissance* from feminine *jouissance* - an additional enjoyment beyond symbolic containment (Lacan, 1998). This surplus *jouissance* aligns with Baba Yaga's excess, grotesquery, and unpredictability.

4. FRAGMENTED FORM AND THE SPLIT SUBJECT

The novel's tripartite structure parallels Lacan's three registers:

- **Autobiographical section** – Imaginary identifications and maternal memory
- **Spa narrative** – Symbolic social comedy
- **Mythographic commentary** – Confrontation with the Real

This formal fragmentation enacts the split subject (\$), barred by language and structured by lack. No single narrative voice achieves coherence. Instead, subjectivity emerges as dispersed and decentered.

The first section centers on the narrator's aging mother, whose decline destabilizes filial identity. The second section's satirical spa narrative exposes commodified femininity. The third section's mythographic analysis ruptures narrative illusion, confronting the reader with the myth's archaic excess.

4.1. The Maternal Body and the Uncanny

The narrator's mother occupies an ambivalent position: nurturing yet oppressive, familiar yet strange. Freud's notion of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) illuminates this ambivalence, but Lacan deepens it by situating maternal presence prior to symbolic separation.

As the mother ages, her body becomes fragile and abject. The daughter confronts mortality - her own future inscription within the same corporeal decline. This confrontation stages the Real of death.

Recent scholarship (Ragland, 2021) links Lacan's later work to aging and the death drive, emphasizing how bodily deterioration reveals the limits of Imaginary coherence. Ugrešič's depiction of the mother exemplifies this revelation.

4.2. The Spa as Neoliberal Symbolic Order

The Czech spa in the novel promises rejuvenation - Imaginary restoration of wholeness through cosmetic and therapeutic rituals. Yet its commodification of youth underscores the Symbolic's demand for desirability.

The aging protagonists are simultaneously customers and failures: consumers of beauty who cannot fully re-enter erotic circulation. Their humiliation exposes the fantasy underlying neoliberal femininity.

Žižek (2022) argues that contemporary capitalism intensifies surplus enjoyment while masking

structural lack. The spa becomes a microcosm of this logic - selling jouissance while revealing its impossibility.

4.3. Grotesque Corporeality and the Real

Ugrešić does not aestheticize aging. Instead, she foregrounds bodily fluids, sagging flesh, and awkward sexuality. Such grotesque imagery recalls Bakhtinian carnival, but Lacanian analysis reveals a deeper function: these bodies represent the Real breaking through Imaginary fantasy.

Petrović (2023) observes that the grotesque aging body in Southeast European fiction destabilizes national and gender narratives. In Lacanian terms, the grotesque marks the failure of the Symbolic to contain corporeal excess.

5. BABA YAGA AND THE "NOT-ALL"

Baba Yaga inhabits the forest - a liminal space outside civilization's law. In Ugrešić's retelling, she becomes a metaphor for aging women themselves: feared, ridiculed, yet powerful.

Lacan's formulas of sexuation describe woman as "not-all" under the phallic function. This does not imply deficiency but structural non-totalization. Baba Yaga embodies this non-totality. She cannot be reduced to mother, witch, or crone.

Zupančič (2023) emphasizes that the feminine position introduces a structural crack within universal logic. Baba Yaga, as mythic figure, occupies this crack - an embodiment of excess rather than absence.

5.1. Exile, Language, and Symbolic Displacement

Ugrešić herself experienced exile following the Yugoslav wars. The novel's multilingual and transnational setting reflects symbolic displacement. Language becomes unstable; identity unmoored.

Lacan insists that the unconscious is structured like a language. Exile thus intensifies the split subject's alienation. Baba Yaga's wandering mirrors this displacement.

5.2. Aging as Ethical Position

Rather than sentimentalizing old age, Ugrešić presents it as confrontation with lack. The protagonists' solidarity suggests an ethics of acceptance - acknowledging fragmentation without fantasy restoration.

Ragland (2021) argues that Lacanian ethics involves fidelity to desire beyond imaginary identification. The elderly women's refusal to conform to youth ideals exemplifies such fidelity.

6. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

The novel's exploration of aging intersects with post-socialist transformation. Elderly women, often marginalized in neoliberal economies, embody historical memory.

Žižek (2022) suggests that the Real appears as political rupture. Baba Yaga's disruptive presence can be read as resistance to commodified femininity and nationalist nostalgia.

Through Lacanian analysis, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* emerges as a meditation on the impossibility of total identity. The aging female body reveals the cracks in symbolic structures that privilege youth and beauty.

Baba Yaga functions as the Real of woman - excessive, unruly, irreducible. The novel reclaims monstrosity as subversive potential.

7. CONCLUSION

By mobilizing Lacanian psychoanalysis, this article demonstrates that Ugrešić's novel stages aging femininity as encounter with the Real and reconfigures myth to expose the Symbolic's limits. Baba Yaga embodies feminine jouissance beyond phallic containment, transforming grotesque excess into a site of ethical and political resistance.

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg thus stands as a profound literary articulation of Lacanian subjectivity in post-socialist Europe - revealing that what culture seeks to exclude as monstrous may in fact mark the irreducible truth of the subject.

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