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UTOPIAN MOTIFS IN THE NOVEL "ZULEIKHA" BY GUZEL YAKHINA

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Abstract: Contemporary Russian writer Guzel Yakhina, in her novelistic opus, examines lesser-known aspects within the traditional thematic framework of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, such as the dispossession of the Tatars, the life of the Volga Germans, or the famine in the Volga region. In her debut novel ZULEIKHA, the author thematizes the metamorphosis of the main character and her path to gradual emancipation and self-knowledge through a series of trials and changes she experiences during the civil war. This paper reveals the presence of numerous basic motifs of literary utopia and examines their function in shaping the ideological structure of this novel. Several differences from the usual utopian model are observed because the author replaces the typical isolated utopia with a penal camp, focusing more on the main character's personal growth and self-improvement rather than on social issues and creating a new social order. Since one of the significant aspects of the main character's personal growth is her liberation from gender stereotypes, the work also touches on gender issues, drawing several parallels between this novel and works of feminist utopia. The parallel with Zakhar Prilepin's contemporaneous novel, THE MONASTERY, featuring similar themes and creation dynamics, is also noteworthy. Both works advocate the view that love is a force capable of turning universal hell into individual, personal paradise. In the author's words, it is a novel about "overcoming mythological consciousness, whether male or female" (Yakhina 2016). With this novel, the author Guzel Yakhina enters into a polemical relationship with both utopian and camp themes, stepping out of the socio-political sphere into the sphere of anthropological and religious antinomies.

Keywords: *Guzel Yakhina, literary utopia, camp theme, gender stereotypes.*
Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of the contemporary Russian literary scene, Guzel Yakhina has achieved remarkable success and can rightly be considered a literary phenomenon. She began her creative journey in 2013 by publishing short stories in the literary magazines NEVA and OCTOBER. In 2014, she presented chapters of her debut novel, ZULEIKHA, for the first time in the magazine SIBIRSKIE OGNI, which she wrote while working on the screenplay for the Moscow School of New Film that she attended. The history of the novel's publication reflects a true "overnight success"—for a year, she submitted the manuscript to numerous publishers without success, receiving a response from only one, which was a rejection. She then sought assistance from a literary agency, and with their help, the novel saw publication in 2015. ZULEIKHA soon became a literary sensation with its story of a Tatar peasant woman exiled to Siberia after being dismembered; it won readers all over Russia and received the highest honors, including the Russian Big Book and Yasnaya Polyana awards. In her next novel, A VOLGA TALE (2018), Yakhina once again turns to a historical theme—the life of a German colony on the Volga during the first decades of the 20th century. This work, written in the spirit of magical realism, was rated by many critics as artistically more successful than its debut (Chernyavskaya, 2018; Gavrikov, 2022), and its value is confirmed by the prestigious Russian Big Book award, which the novel won again. With A VOLGA TALE, Yakhina has established herself as an author who adeptly explores the theme of "the little man in the Great History" (Basinskiy, 2018), weaving in elements of lyricism, folklore motifs, mythology, and subtle fantasy throughout her prose. Yakhina also devotes he third novel, TRAIN TO SAMARKAND (2021), to a lesser-known chapter of Soviet history—the evacuation of children from the famine-stricken Volga region in 1923. Through the destinies of children and adults who follow them, Yakhina explores themes of sacrifice and hope in the conditions of a shattering reality. This novel was also shortlisted for the Russian Big Book award, which speaks of the consistency and quality of her literary work.

It appears that a key part of the success that the novel ZULEIKHA has achieved with the audience lies not so much in the thematicization of the Soviet past and its painful fractures as in the specific lens through which this history is illuminated — the prism of an unusual protagonist. The eternal literary theme of the "little man in the whirlpool of the Great History" is here transformed into the fate of a "little woman" caught in a whirlwind of epochal events, shown from a perspective that bears the characteristics of women's writing: a narrative that emphasizes the inner world of the heroine, her emotions, inner transformations, and subjective experience of reality, rather than the historical and social context as such

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(Sargsyan, 2023). This kind of reading opens up space for interpretations that focus on the character of the main character but also on the richness of folklore, mythological, linguistic, and cultural elements that make up the textual world of the novel. Numerous scientific papers have already dealt with these aspects, while in this paper we try to shed light on a relatively neglected dimension — the presence of utopian motifs and their function within the novelistic structure.

2. UTOPIA

The category of utopia is present in very broad areas of human creativity, and therefore it is difficult to define it unambiguously. Broadly understood, utopia is synonymous with contemplating paths to an ideal social order or interpersonal relationships, an ideally conceived country, or a community with perfect social relations where well-being and happiness reign (Klajn & Šipka, 2006, p.1297). The authors of utopian literature, in their works, give an idea of an ideal society in accordance with their value system and historical context. Utopian works are often set in a perfect society and take place in an idealized world. As is well known, the concept of utopia and its fundamental form were conceived by Thomas More in 1516 in his work UTOPIA, but the concepts of an ideal place, a land of abundance and bliss, and happy and carefree inhabitants have been present since pagan times. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, there is a description of the divine garden, which is not a utopia in the strict sense but contains some recognizable utopian topos: already here, utopia is conceived as a fortified city, a magical garden, or an island, which will be the basis of most recent utopias. Homer's myth of Elysium and Hesiod's Golden Age also contain utopian ideals. Plato's REPUBLIC is the most famous ancient representation of an ideal social order, but the Old Testament story of the Garden of Eden has an immeasurable influence on the formation of older utopian representations. As noted by Zorica Đergović-Joksimović, it is significant "...not only as a story of the original sin, but also as a source of hope that somewhere hidden, there exists a paradise on earth to which one can return, either through a humble Christian life or literal seeking." (Đergović-Joksimović, 2009, p.49). It is precisely the search for the land of bliss that marks ancient and early Christian utopias. The "classical" utopia, which originates in the works of Thomas More, François Rabelais, Francis Bacon, and others, is based on the principles of rationalism, where the greatest attention is paid to social institutions, and order and harmony are the result of the efforts and virtues of the inhabitants themselves. The canonical scheme of the Renaissance utopian work, largely inspired by great geographical discoveries, is based on a description of an ideal city, which the narrator, most often a traveling sailor, arrives at after a journey full of temptations (often shipwrecks), as if he had been rewarded for his courage by arriving at a port of peace, order, and enlightenment. Taught by the experience of living in an ideally arranged community, the visitor to the utopia returns to modern society, in order to spread the acquired knowledge. With the development of human society and a new historical context, the utopian idea acquires new dimensions, enriches itself with new motives, but retains the basic aspiration to create a protected and isolated space of social harmony, material security and general prosperity. The negative aspects of utopian concepts, already contained in Plato's REPUBLIC, stem from the "best intentions" of utopian aspirations to portray the life of happily ordered societies, while the individual principle is ignored or completely suppressed.

3. UTOPIAN MOTIFS

Guzel Yakhina's ZULEIKHA takes place in the 1930s, in an era of social fractures and collisions resulting from a violent attempt to create an essentially utopian, communist society. However, it is not a historical epic or a utopian novel, but a story about the maturation and liberation of the main character. The novel explores her "eye-opening" experience (as suggested in the original title), providing a deep look into herself and offering a clear perception of the world around her and her place within it. Although it basically touches on the socio-political sphere only as a framework for the narrative, the novel contains a number of recognizable utopian motifs. One of them is the motif of travel — not only as physical movement and conquest of the unknown, but as a process of internal transformation and self-knowledge. The search for a utopian space, whether in the form of a land of bliss or an earthly paradise, is accompanied by dangers and temptations, which is a motif deeply rooted in pagan tradition and early Christian texts. Zuleikha's journey to the east—the symbolic direction of paradise, according to the early Christian apocrypha — is just such a journey. Through a series of personal losses and sufferings, she undergoes an inner metamorphosis. Her husband's death and the abandonment of the family home mark the beginning of her exit from the private, subordinate sphere and into social reality. Zuleikha's departure from the confines of her family home signifies not only a loss of protection but also complete exposure to the cruelty of a new reality. From the first moments of her journey, she faces unspeakable humiliations: surrounded

by unknown men, witnessing hunger, disease, and death, and being transported in cattle wagons. This part of the novel emphasizes the brutality of the new order, particularly strikingly illustrated through the desacralization of space in the scene of spending the night in a mosque that has been converted into a cattle shelter. Zuleikha is placed on the "male" side, the mullah dies that same night, and Ignatov and Nastasya have sexual intercourse, which further emphasizes the violation of the sacred. Loss, humiliation, dehumanization, and exposure to scenes of physical, religious, and moral destruction are, for Zuleikha, the trials she will overcome at the beginning of her journey to self-knowledge.

The final destination intended for the settlers bears the features of a utopian new world, which will be colonized by the efforts of future inhabitants — it is an uninhabited place on the banks of the Angara River, surrounded by a symbolic "sea" of the Siberian rainforest. This space, resembling a new beginning in the spirit of the Puritan colonies, symbolically represents a difficult-to-reach lonely island, which provides protection and refuge for the utopian community. They arrived there by ship, but after the shipwreck, only about thirty people survived, including agronomists, painters, and intellectuals, but also fishermen, peasants, and artisans — the founders of a new community. All of them collectively participate in the construction of a planned, organized space — work and residential buildings — which is a key element of the utopian vision, in which society is shaped from the beginning, through reason, work, and community. Even the name of the colony, devised by the settlers, Semruk (Seven Hands), carries the symbolism of human hands capable of creating an entire microcosm.

For Zuleikha, the new settlement becomes a space of personal transformation, emancipation, and self-discovery. In a place that marks a new beginning for the community, she begins to write her own new identity. From a "lazy woman," as her husband and mother-in-law humiliated her, she becomes a woman capable of replacing the entire work unit with her work. From the position of a submissive, invisible servant in the family hierarchy, she grows into a socially useful individual — her work is no longer in the service of the patriarchal structure but contributes to the survival and progress of the community. She nursed a vicious mother-in-law, and now she is a nurse; she was accused of being barren because her newborn children died, and now she is the mother of a son. Her personal development is parallel to the construction of a new world — and in this process, utopia is realized not only as a space but also as an internal possibility of transformation. In addition to social and work emancipation, Zuleikha also undergoes an emotional rebirth, which is reflected in the gradual liberation from patriarchal notions of love, sexuality, and the role of women in intimate relationships. Her sexual experience goes through three phases: from object status and unquestioning submission in marriage, through a relationship with the doctor that she initiates as an act of gratitude and a sense of duty — but which he, guided by nobility, refuses — to the full acceptance of herself as a subject of desire in a relationship with Ignatov. It is in this relationship that Zuleikha takes the initiative for the first time, experiences pleasure, and builds a relationship based on equality and mutual trust.

Zuleikha is the one who experiences the greatest transformation in the colony, but she is not the only character who experiences the beneficial effects of her stay there. Although the colony's inhabitants are formally referred to as "convicts" or "resettlers," as the author describes them to avoid an explicit camp context, there are individuals among them who embody the ideal citizens of utopia. These are cultured, educated, and noble people like Dr. Leibe, the Sumlinsky couple, and the painter Ikonikov, who, with their knowledge and experience, build the foundations of a cultured, humane community. They become mentors to Zuleikha's son Yuzuf, symbolically representing a new generation in which meaning and hope are invested. Ikonnikov teaches him painting and reveals the world to him through art — he paints Russian and world landmarks, landscapes, plants, and animals for him, creating a "painting encyclopedia" as a form of visual education. Isabella teaches him French, the language of the former Russian aristocracy, while Dr. Leibe introduces him to the secrets of anatomy. This instructive aspect of utopia — where a newcomer to the community gains knowledge from the wise and then continues his journey into the "real world" — is realized precisely in the figure of Yuzuf. He is the only one who leaves the colony forever, carrying with him the legacy of its highest values.

4. GENDER STEREOTYPES AND FEMINIST UTOPIA

Zuleikha's liberation from the gender stereotypes and imposed roles that dominate the opening part of the novel, where Zuleikha is presented as submissive, invisible, and completely subordinate to a man in a patriarchal family, is a significant aspect of the novel. The emancipation of Zuleikha takes place within the framework of a utopian commune, which can be considered a conscious thematization in the spirit of a feminist utopia. While early utopias, such as More's UTOPIA, were essentially conservative in terms of gender roles, marriage, and sexuality — forming an ideal society for men — feminist utopias focus

precisely on women's liberation from patriarchal constraints, especially in the realm of reproduction. In the golden age of feminist utopian fiction in the 1970s, women's worlds were often radically redefined: either men were eliminated (biologically, culturally, or mythologically), or they were societies in which gender had lost its significance. In this context, it is no coincidence that the development path of Zuleikha is realized only after the death of her husband, the symbolic bearer of patriarchal repression. In the works of classic feminist utopia, such as Charlotte P. Gilman's HERLAND (1915), women live without men in an isolated society based on cooperation and nonviolence. Similar to Gilman's novel, for Zuleikha, the space outside the patriarchal community becomes a space of personal growth. Although men in the settler commune have not been eliminated, social circumstances have changed—there is no family hierarchy, everyone is forced to cooperate—and therefore a different distribution of gender roles is possible. In the more radical vision of THE FEMALE MAN (1975) by Joanna Russ, where the existence of men is set as a prerequisite for women's freedom, essentially the same process is thematized: women's autonomy is possible only outside of traditional relationships. The death of Zuleikha's husband, therefore, has the same symbolism as the disappearance of male dominance in feminist utopias.

5. CAMP THEME

The organization of life in the colony, viewed outside the context of coercion, is reminiscent of Thomas More's utopian vision: a community of modest, hard-working individuals who spend their days in a strict division of labor, without much spare time, eat and sleep together in collective spaces, have no private property, and live in a spirit of equality and modesty. But the main difference is that this is a punitive community, not a voluntary one. It is precisely this forced nature of residence, the absence of freedom and choice, that turns the seemingly utopian structure into its opposite — a dystopia. The paradoxical feature of this novel is precisely this "replacement of theses," where the outside world is understood as chaos and threatening elements, and the penal camp as a utopian place, where personal development, motherhood, and love are possible. The inhabitants of the colony live in a utopian frozen moment, while outside it the most dramatic moments of Russian history unfold. The place of the novel's heroine's small personal happiness is remembered as one of the darkest stains of the Soviet era. To emphasize the thesis that self-realization and an almost idyllic life are possible even in camp captivity, the author softens or removes all motifs of the "terrible world." Death, although omnipresent, is not directly depicted; it is only communicated. Hunger and cold are just challenges that the residents overcome with united efforts and then remember as a hardship that brought them closer together. The end of the 1930s marked a period characterized by the most brutal Stalinist purges, and in the colony depicted in the novel, 1938 was notable for a predominance of birth rates over mortality. The fates of individual characters only indirectly and in a satirical tone speak of the persecution and imprisonment of leading intellectuals of that time in camps: Ikonikov was honored to create twenty-four busts of Stalin, Dr. Leibe is a famous surgeon and former university professor, the camp agronomist is a former member of the Ministry of Agriculture, and the elementary school teacher is the author of the textbook used there.

The novels ZULEIKHA by Guzel Jakhina and Zakhar Prilepin's THE MONASTERY (2014) are connected by a similarity of motifs in the way they rethink the camp space — not as an exclusive place of dehumanization and suffering, but as a potential focus of inner transformation. Both works feature the motif of a romantic bond between members of two opposing factions, a prisoner and a guard. Both novels articulate the thesis that hell and heaven are personal categories and that it is love that determines the character of space: it can transform the camp into a personal "paradise corner" in the midst of a general hell. Zakhar Prilepin's novel THE MONASTERY is a genre hybrid that can formally be classified as a corpus of camp prose, where historical, love-psychological, and adventure elements intertwine. However, at the heart of this narrative structure is a Christian context, which serves not only as a thematic framework but also as an ideological center that allows for the connection of diverse motifs into a single authorial vision (Osmukhina, Karpov, & Beloglazova, 2021). However, the differences in the treatment of the love motif essentially separate the two texts. In THE MONASTERY, the love relationship is not the focus but is only one aspect of a broader spiritual issue that encompasses sacrifice, moral ambiguity, and the possibility of repentance. Prilepin's heroes vacillate between the animal and spiritual principles but often remain stuck in the sphere of the physical, incapable of true transformation (Shchepalina, 2024). In contrast, Yakhina's ZULEIKHA epitomizes unconditional maternal love: at one point, she literally feeds her son with her blood, rejecting personal happiness due to the superstitious belief that it contradicts motherhood. Even the names given to the mother and son characters in ZULEIKHA reference famous Eastern lovers, which further enhances the symbolic layer of the love theme (Bukareva & Sushkova 2022), unlike the book THE MONASTERY, in which love is more of a temptation than a deliverance.

The inclusion of the love motif within the framework of camp literature is, it seems, possible only in a specific narrative and historical context — one in which the camp has not yet become a complete machine of dehumanization and the camp inmates have not been reduced to a mere survival instinct. This is precisely why Guzel Yakhina does not call her heroes "camp inmates" but "resettlers," thereby narrowing the repressive framework and leaving room for personal transformation and affective relationships. On the other hand, the plot of Prilepin's THE MONASTERY is set in the first, more "human" phase of the Gulag's existence — on Solovki, in the first camp of its kind — where the illusion of spiritual choice, repentance, and inner freedom still exists.

6. CONCLUSION

Although the elements of the utopian model are recognizable in the novel ZULEIKHA— collective life, the transformation of space, the emancipation of the individual — this work is not a utopia in the sense of genre, nor is it a typical camp prose. As the author herself points out, it is primarily a narrative about overcoming internal limitations, about a gradual liberation from the mythical, the given, the tacitly accepted (Yakhina, 2016). In this context, utopian motifs are not carriers of social change, but a means of poetically illustrating the inner transformation of the heroine — the moment when she comes into harmony with herself and her new position in the world. Instead of focusing on social utopias or ideologies, Yakhina locates her story in the realm of existential, anthropological, and spiritual polarities: captivity and freedom, guilt and redemption, fear and self-acceptance. It is this dimension that makes this novel exceptional and difficult to define in terms of genre.

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