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THE TENDER NARRATOR IN GUZEL YAKHINA'S *ZULEIKHA*

Our relationship with literature as its readers is extraordinarily thought-provoking.¹ Literature is a source of unexpected wisdom, self-awareness and attitude of humility toward others. Often introspective, it tolerates no self-indulgence or hypocrisy and serves as a tool to awaken critical thinking. It is also a way of communicating a unique experience of the world and of reaching the unique mind. Many authors employ first-person narration in the belief that they have something important to tell their readers. Doing so protects their individual points of view, as though protecting their egos. Olga Tokarczuk, a Polish Nobel Prize winner in literature (2018), in her Nobel lecture, takes a critical view of egocentric narration:

The expression instinct may be just as strong as other instincts that protect our lives – and it is most fully manifested in art. We want to be noticed, we want to feel exceptional. Narratives of the “I’m going to tell you my story” variety, or “I’m going to tell you the story of my family,” or even simply, “I’m going to tell you where I’ve been,” comprise today’s most popular literary genre.... Remarkably often, the readerly experience is incomplete and disappointing, as it turns out that expressing an authorial

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“self” hardly guarantees universality. What we are missing – it would seem – is the dimension of the story that is the parable. For the hero of the parable is at once himself, a person living under specific historical and geographical conditions, yet at the same time he also goes well beyond those concreto-particulars, becoming a kind of Everywhere Everyman. (Tokarczuk 6-7)#

Literature’s diversity brings with it a multitude of perspectives to take and a multitude of roles to empathize with and experience. Precisely for this reason, literature exists so that we could each find one’s own life story in the experiences of others. Authors, however, seldom succeed in achieving what William Shakespeare did. His Ophelia and Juliet, Hamlet and Romeo are the “Everyone” in whom all can find their questions and tribulations. How can this be done? Can it be thanks to literature offering a cold analysis of human life, an analysis that follows the struggle of its heroes at a distance and calculates, rather than meditates, their eventual fates so as to make them more credible to the reader? What is more important to literature: truth or love? Does the truth of the message necessarily require an omniscient narrator controlling and judging the characters’ actions from the lofty heights of the narrator’s intellectual Parnas? Or should the narrator, instead, remain down here among the things and sights of this world, approaching the heroes’ sufferings with a solidarity that is void of touchy-feely sentimentality and yet full of tenderness? Can these two perspectives be reconciled?

I shall answer these questions by analyzing the début novel, *Zuleikha*, written by a Russian author of the younger generation, Guzel Yakhina. The novel takes place in 1930-1946, in the former USSR, with the Bolsheviks in power following the victorious 1917 revolution, now “dekulakizing” the farmers, i.e. nationalizing their property and murdering those who would not submit to the political change. In one fell swoop, our Tatar Zuleikha loses everything she has – her husband, home and farm – and is deported with thousands of others to Siberia. She fights for survival, not only her own but also that of her child, for *en route* to the kolkhoz it turns out that she is pregnant. Yakhina shows the heroine’s maturing into a new, distinct personality. As Russian writer and columnist Lyudmila Ulitskaya states in her introduction to the Polish edition: “Guzel Yakhina’s novel is unquestionably a feminine work – one of feminine strength and weakness, of sacred motherhood amid not an English child’s room but a labor camp, a hellish reservation conceived by one of humanity’s greatest malefactors. It remains a mystery to me how the young writer managed to create such a powerful work describing love and tenderness in hell” (Ulicka 8). That love and tenderness are not only the *essentia* of Yakhina’s novel but also her way of imagination.

Yakhina's style, as Ulitskaya puts it, comprises cinematographic narration reinforcing the dramatic gravity of the plot and its expressiveness, precise observation, subtle psychology and... love: "without which even the most talented writers turn into cold registrars of the maladies of our time" (Ulicka 8).

In this article I wish to demonstrate that the challenge for literature is not to communicate the author's perspective as much as to do so in a way to which the readers can relate and find themselves in it. How does the Russian writer manage to turn a "dekulakized" farmer into a woman who is close to the universal ideal? – this is the question I will attempt to answer. I will do so by first looking into the meaning of tenderness as a psychic construct and then following up with its application as a narrative tool. Then, I will move on to how Yakhina's narration brings out the heroine's defenselessness, which comprises her corporeality, dependence and emotionality. I will ponder what distinguishes her novel from examples of camp or historical literature and also whether the use of a tender narrator as a technique is not an influence of the *écriture féminine*, as discussed by Hélène Cixous. I will show that Guzel Yakhina's novel is an example of literature focused on the accentuation of human internal freedom even when freedom is endangered by fate, the laws of history or political mechanisms – and thus a relatable literature, one that is close to the experiences of every reader and acts primarily as a record for the experienced and lived world.

As regards the methodology used in the text, I subscribe to philosopher Colin McGinn's view that literature can serve as "a vehicle of moral thought" (McGinn, 176) and that propositional conclusions can be inferred from it. This makes it possible to interpret a literary work in terms of ethical categories, such as defenselessness or freedom. However, Yakhina's novel can be read on an even deeper level, through the lens of a characteristic conception of experience in which the novel is understood, to use philosopher Martha Nussbaum's expression, as "a paradigm of moral activity" (Nussbaum, "Finely Aware" 148). Thus understood, the novel can be seen as a method of ethical reflection, or even more than that – Nussbaum is convinced that certain novels can be considered moral philosophy in themselves, with moral philosophy (as distinct from moral theory or ethical theory) comprising various types of moral inquiry, often non-systematic, centered around the question of how to live. In this sense, the content of a novel can become part of the reader's experience, which comprises attentive perception and sensitivity, the ability to interpret situations, and the ability to distinguish what is significant for thought and action (Nussbaum, "Form and Context" 44). Consequently, literature can be not only a source of propositional knowledge, consisting of theses that – in this case – are ethical in nature, but also

a source of phenomenal cognition, of “knowledge-how,” which encompasses various ways of understanding and perceiving the world (Kieran 194). This way of novel reading may therefore imply an understanding and evaluation of the situations presented in the novel, which the author himself or herself helps to bring out. It is he or she – as the implied author,² to use Wayne Booth’s term – who is responsible for the meaning of life and the worldview presented in the novel (cf. Booth ch. 6).

TENDERNESS AS A PERSPECTIVE OF NARRATION

What is tenderness? How does one tell it apart from compassion, empathy or sympathy? These distinctions are not merely a figure of speech, for they denote true differences among the phenomena they describe. The most neutral of our triad, sympathy, is a benevolent attitude to others that does require empathy but merely calls for the understanding of someone else’s situation. Empathy, next in turn, is the imaginary reconstruction of the experience of another and is sometimes understood to combine feeling and judgment to enable us to imagine the situation of a different human being. Compassion, by contrast, appears to be a more intense experience than either of the preceding two. In my view, it implies an intense degree of lived participation. It can contain the experience of suffering caused by something that has occurred to someone and should not have. Compassion, therefore, is “co-feeling” with others, that is sharing in their emotional states, such as sorrow. Underlying it is the conviction that the suffering lived by that someone is not deserved (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 301-302; Dadlez 33-35, 55-60, 163-173; Clark; Eisenberg and Strayer). What, in this perspective, is tenderness and how does it relate to the narration of a story?

The tender narrator is a bit like the Creator beholding His creation and decreeing it to be good. He traces each and every moment in the creation of the novel’s cosmos. As Tokarczuk puts it: “Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture ‘here’ is connected to a gesture ‘there,’ that

² On the other hand, Tokarczuk in her Nobel Lecture mentions “a new kind of narrator – a ‘fourth-person’ one, who is not merely a grammatical construct..., but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of them” (21). This concept constitutes the core of her idea of the tender narrator.

a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between 'mine' and 'yours' starts to be debatable" (21). The tender narrator is an omniscient narrator whose gaze sweeps the whole picture – it presents every character's point of view. That perspective makes ontological and ethical sense; it means the world is interlinked with, shall we say, ontic threads that build up the sense of events of which we, the readers, may as yet remain oblivious, although they will be gradually revealed to us together with ethical threads; this is because characters are not lone islands but one is tied to another, though they be enemies. This oneness of the world makes it so that in the readers' eyes divides such as nationalities and ethnicities, social classes and historical circumstances cease to be relevant. As Tokarczuk says: "the universe of literature is a single thing, like the idea of *unus mundus*, a common psychological reality in which our human experience is united. The Author and the Reader perform equivalent roles, the former by dint of creating, the latter by making a constant interpretation" (22). Thanks to the characters' fates being "felt" or "lived" by the narrator inwardly, none of the characters and events described are random but all have their own place, for they all share the same fate – the fate of man doomed to suffering and death. Tenderness is something more than sympathy, compassion or even empathy; tenderness is, as Tokarczuk observes, "the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not feature in scriptures or gospels, no one swears on it, no one cites it. It has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime or prompt envy. It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our own 'self'. Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond the empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious – though perhaps a little melancholy – sharing of fate with another. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering or to the effects of the passage of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself" (24). This psychological mechanism, underpinning probably almost any novel, allows us, in Tokarczuk's view, to travel in time and engage in mutual communication by similar impressions and experiences being the effect of reading.

How does tenderness manifest itself in Yakhina's telling of the world?

DEFENSELESSNESS AS THE OBJECT OF TENDERNESS

In answering the above question, it will be worth noting how the creation of the titular heroine, Zuleikha Valieva, overtakes us with her fragility and frail posture from the very first pages of the book. She is about thirty years of age and has been married to Murtaza for fifteen. The narrator does not tell us what she looks like (other than “she isn’t tall”, Yakhina 33) but only how she behaves – the early rising on a chilly morning, walking carefully not to wake the husband or the mother-in-law, with her cold-numb feet moving quickly around the house by muscle memory. The narrator depicts her as a jealous mother of four who have died, for whom she cares even in their deaths, bringing a piece of dried goose meat to the good spirit who wards off the evil ones in the village, so that the spirit would watch over the wee daughters’ grave. We see how, when she works with her husband in the forest, gathering firewood, her thoughts go to whether she will manage to bring her supplicatory offering on time. She knows that if the husband were to leave her in the middle of the forest, she would be lost. No one will ask any questions about her absence or even devote as much as one word to her existence. As she returns home, there is no rest for her. Murtaza orders her to warm the bath for her mother-in-law. The Vampire Hag – for that is what the narrator calls her – is not satisfied with her daughter-in-law’s work. She scolds her: “You didn’t end up with either height or a face. Of course maybe there was honey smeared between your legs in your youth but again that spot didn’t exactly flourish, now, did it? You only brought girls into the world and not one of them survived.... Your family line is ending, wasting away, you thin-boned thing” (23). She defines her through the weakness of her body. She is convinced that her son will leave his wife for one who can love him with more strength. She believes her to be as though dead, and if still alive, then soon to die—so she is told by her night dreams. The Hag manages also to throw in a thing or two about Zuleikha’s disposition, as well: “You’re always silent, mute. If I had to live with someone who was silent all the time, I’d kill them.... You can’t hit or kill or learn to love. Your fury’s sleeping deep inside and won’t ever wake up now, and what’s life without fury? No, you’ll never really live. In short, you’re a hen and your life is hennish” (29). Mildness, meekness, patience – these are the traits of Zuleikha’s character. When she is done with the bath, the Hag pretends to her son that his wife and her daughter-in-law have injured her. As Murtaza is about to give his wife a beating, anger passes away and he gives in to carnal lust. He wants to possess her but fails – “‘Even my flesh doesn’t want you,’ he tells her without looking, and leaves the bathhouse” (33). Only at night does her husband manage to satiate his lusts on her.

Zuleikha's paltry frame and the family's cruel conduct build the metaphor of her defenselessness, composed of her corporeality with implied dependence on her husband, her emotionality and the goodness visible in her attitude to the departed little daughters. This defenselessness causes her to be utterly beset by multiple types of danger – originating from her own biological weakness, from her husband and from her mother-in-law, from the frosty wind and from the grim forest in which she could lose her way, and even from the Hag's night dreams of Zuleikha's death. On the one hand, this defenselessness is nothing else than a component of human nature – man is a finite, destructible being. The destructibility of the body, however, can also be understood as a consequence of what Martha Nussbaum calls the fragility of goodness – man is destructible matter and the goodness that man is can be destroyed, being as it is closely linked to human corporeality. Goodness cannot be abstracted from human conduct; it does not subsist in a world of Platonic ideas but is always linked to an individual's specific goodness (Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness* 243), in which sense Zuleikha's goodness can be destroyed by threatening forces looking from every which quarter.

Defenselessness also incorporates dependence: Zuleikha is not a self-determining subject; she is in all things subject to her husband, who does with her as he pleases, from sexual exploitation to beatings. Zuleikha cannot satisfy her own needs; she is only an instrument for satisfying those of her husband's, whom she constantly looks after. But she does not appear to experience the feeling of missing out on something; there is hardly a trace of bitterness or complaint in her. We sense her constant attention to others, an anxiety not to fall behind in her duties, and not a trace of any narcissistic focus on herself such as would lead her to hold a grudge against her loved ones. She braves her fate gamely, does not seek consolation from anything in her life, which she appears to live out in almost a heroic fashion, denying herself and making herself available to others.

Her defenselessness also stems from her emotionality – her anxiety for her babies, even after death, when there is nothing to threaten them anymore. The pious Muslim woman that she is, she is still attached to them, even when they are no more among the living; their loss has not led her to moral ruin nor caused the destruction of the feelings she had for them when they lived. She is convinced that her children continue to exist, albeit in a different world, one in which she wants them to be happy. Perhaps that faith, to which she is entitled, gives her something to prevent a breakdown. The tragedy of losing her children has not brought about her moral downfall, such as anger with fate, with her loved ones or with herself.

The later events told by the narrator demonstrate that, for all her defenselessness, Zuleikha has a strength about her that will allow her to survive the difficult times, first the death of her husband and sole protector, and then deportation to Siberia. This paradoxical and antithetical form of narration puts us, the readers, in the epicenter of a historical process that can be likened to the Heraclitean river destroying fragile human lives in its path. The narrator puts Zuleikha's life in a web of circumstances threatening her and affecting not only herself but also all the farmers whom the Soviet government has decided to resettle and strip of all property. There is, however, something constant in that changing process. It is Zuleikha's strength founded on a paradox, revealing itself in the wake of her husband's death by a bullet shot by a Soviet soldier, Ignatov, followed by the passing away of the Vampire Hag, one who had been so certain of outliving her daughter-in-law.

The narration does not, however, exclusively follow Zuleikha's perspective. Later in the novel, a second narrative voice is given to Ignatov of the Red Army. Conducting the convoy of which she too is a part, he looks at a different woman, of whom he thinks: "She's a good-looking woman" (Yakhina 83). It is not love he is thinking about. "He didn't understand how it [could be] possible to love a woman. One could love great things: revolution, party, one's country. But a woman?" (87). Ignatov only thinks to satiate his manhood; to him, love is "only feelings, a bonfire of emotions. It's nice while it burns but when it dies down, you blow away the ash and live on" (87). Ignatov also thinks of Zuleikha:

It's disconcerting for Ignatov to look at the next sledge. It would appear that, well, he'd killed a man, leaving his wife without husband. That had happened more than once already. It was the man's own fault: he'd rushed at Ignatov with an axe, like a madman. All they'd wanted in the beginning was to ask the way. But a repugnant sort of feeling gnaws at Ignatov's guts; it won't leave him alone. Pity? That woman is painfully small and thin. And her face is pale and delicate, as if it were paper. It's clear she won't survive the road. She might have made it with her husband, but like this... Ignatov has as good as killed her as well as her husband (84).

Perhaps for this reason, he looks at her somewhat differently – with disguised tenderness – and allows the caravan to stop when a foal belonging to Zuleikha suckles at the mare's teat. The tender narrator is in no rush with that scene – the picture of a youngling at one month and a half demanding milk is in dissonance with the landscape etched with cruelty and the lack of mercy. It is the picture of a mother that must feed her baby, as one of the Red Army soldiers observes. Ignatov pulls a face at that description in disgust, for he thinks it brings

a dissonance to what he believes to be the Soviet way of thinking, one which has no time for tender feelings. Such passages in which the narrator paints a picture of tenderness in hell there are more than one.

Zuleikha must spend a month in prison with the other divested *kulaks* awaiting transportation to Siberia. Come worse times, she touches her fingers on the sugar cube that can relieve her of life's misery but does not eat it. Slowly, however, she gets used to the thought of death, death that looms everywhere and appears to be: "slyer, smarter, and more powerful than a silly life that will always lose a skirmish" (Yakhina 131). Her fragile life, together with the fragile lives of other weary exiles traversing Kolyma, the Yenisei River, Zabaykalsky Krai and Sakhalin Island, is contrasted with the ascendancy of the revolution, to which, as Ignatov believes, the future belongs, with only one answer for anyone who dares make to draw a wry face – a bayonet between the eyes. Tasked with conducting the enemies of the Soviet government to their place of exile, he does not want to say where they are going to or will they have anything to eat. He believes that they should be grateful for not having been shot yet.

The mutual infiltration of tenderness and cruelty, a few crumbs of good and the immensity of evil, is highlighted by a narration built on antitheses passing fluidly from one to another. The people sardined in rail cars hardly have room to move a finger and Zuleikha is ashamed to have to sit so closely with a strange man who urinates in her sight. She feels pangs of hunger on the voyage but tries to distract herself. Children die first on that voyage. The dead are buried at the rail track in collective graves. The passengers become fewer and fewer and Ignatov suddenly begins to tell their faces apart. He wants food for them and shows mercy, surprising the soldiers. Eating his porridge, he thinks about them also, including "the small woman with the pale face and the green eyes half [the] size of her face" (168). Meanwhile, a small, ginger-chested bird builds a nest under the roof of the car she travels in.

Zuleikha is reminded of her defenselessness by her own body, telling her she is eighteen weeks pregnant. We again have an antithetical narration here. On the one hand, there is the helplessness of the body, and, on the other hand, its strength, though this is not what she thinks. Rather, she thinks her husband must have cheated death, for it is his seed now quickening in her belly. She attributes the strength not to herself but to him. She is afraid it will also be like with the daughters this time, the loss of yet another child again being her fault. Zuleikha's defenselessness is founded on her emotionality, her attachment to the child. There is also a different source for it. She cannot control neither the natural behavior of the body, nor her fear of what is to come. She is afraid: "But maybe no baby will

be born.... The child will live a while in the belly, grow a little, and then tear itself out of its set place before its time and flow from the womb so all that's left is a clump of blood on the pants" (Yakhina 187). Pregnancy in that situation is a torment. So is the lasting shame of the unbearable stench of an unwashed body or how she clings to a strange man sleeping beside her, due to the cold. When the doctor loudly pronounces her pregnant, she only thinks what a shame it is she cannot hide in her husband's house; that she will have to go into labor watched by others and to grieve her loss also watched by them. Her defenselessness is not only the consequence of the mores or the cultural norm in which she had grown up and lived by but also of her helplessness against the fate that appears to have a new tragedy waiting in store for her.

Before giving birth, however, she will be witness to an unexpected triumph of her body. After transferring from the rail cars to a barge overladen with passengers, Ignatov is surprised to see the fragile Zuleikha having survived the onerous journey in a cattle car. The prisoners on the barge, just as their guards, must confront the inevitability of fate, against which they are defenseless. The barge starts to sink, taking its passengers down. Zuleikha, too, begins to drown, for she cannot swim. But somebody saves her. Ignatov. He holds her by her long tresses of hair and orders her to lie flat on the water, belly up. Three hundred people went to the bottom; he saved one. Zuleikha thinks of the poisoned sugar from her husband, going down the Angara. That is the moment of death's symbolic defeat. "Perhaps Fate wants her to live?" (236). Suddenly, Zuleikha regains her strength. She does not want to be useless. In the camp, where she is with some other survivors, she makes herself useful – she prepares meals for the group and eventually even goes out hunting. Before then, in everybody's sight, she gives birth to Yuzuf. And, thus, she lives, and so does the child. Is this a twist of Fate against which she is defenseless or a paradox of strength concealed in her defenseless body?

Zuleikha's defenselessness, emphasized by the tender narrator, involves two other aspects – motherhood and her relationship with Ignatov. Let us focus on the first. Zuleikha is astounded to have given birth to a boy with a head as soft as bread and a hot, vigorously pulsating spot between his skull bones. The child is beautiful precisely because it is defenseless. She carries the infant on her breast, on her bare body. She clutches it with all her strength. She protects it from the air, which she judges to be too cold. She warms the tiny body with her warm body, listening closely to be sure the baby breathes. The wee one is always with her, even when she works. She feeds it often and long. Her breasts are full with milk. The child feeds hastily and greedily.

She knows that if the child dies, her own heart will also stop beating. "This knowledge sustains her, filling her with strength and some sort of unfamiliar courage" (Yakhina 273). In the wilderness of the Siberian backwoods she finds happiness, though she fears that it may be one of a passing kind. When she starts lacking milk and the boy is still hungry, Zuleikha tries to cheat him – she cuts her finger and gives it to the child to suck blood. The child complies, suckling rapaciously, as he did the milk before; his cheeks redden up and eyes close for calm sleep.

From the time of maternity, she feels Ignatov's lustful gaze on her. Every day she brings him his supper. She keeps for him the fattest chunks of meat. "She doesn't know what's happening. No, she knows. She knows what's happening. There's no point in hiding it from herself" (324). Ignatov again looks at her and the air thickens like honey, honey on which she floats as though in a dream. Zuleikha is overwhelmed by emotions. She feels shame she wants to run away from. One day, Ignatov tries to get closer. In the dead of the forest, where no one sees them, he unbraids her hair and admits to waiting for her every night, but his voice is coarse: "But you're a woman. You need a man" (341). Zuleikha wants to chase him away, even grasping for her rifle, but suddenly a bear appears in front of them, prompting the little Yuzuf to stand on his little legs. She kills the animal and becomes the kolkhoz's first hunter, taking over men's role and hunting for food.

Ignatov had an accident. He lost one foot and was forced to use crutches. This changed his relationship with Zuleikha. She dressed his wound every day and witnessed his suffering. She had to learn his body, memorize it. One evening Ignatov tries to stop her. She does not object and spends the night with him. The time stops or runs differently and Zuleikha feels as though she was a fish or a wave. When she is with him, neither the past nor the future matters – only the present does. She is no longer overtaken with shame – "Everything she was taught and learned by rote as a child has left her, gone away" (421). Despite the lack of sleep, she gains strength; she no longer walks but flits. When Ignatov wants her and Yuzuf to come and live with him, she does not respond. One night, when she is with her lover, her son goes out into the taiga and is lost in the wilderness. They find him but he is frozen cold and not about to regain his consciousness soon, by the looks of it. Zuleikha is convinced that the heavens have punished her for living with an infidel, her husband's killer, and without the blessing of marriage. Ignatov pays them daily visits but Zuleikha does not react. Finally, she says she will not be coming to him anymore, for she has been punished. Her decision is final, even though Yuzuf is healed. Then she senses the

full extent of her dependency on her son and cannot imagine a life without him, even if she must pay dearly for renouncing her love and part with Ignatov.

Soon it turns out she will also have to let Yuzuf go. He wants to apply to the school of art in Leningrad. He has no money nor travel documents and is held back by thoughts about his mother, who has now grown old and become helpless like a child after she had to leave the hunters' artel. Zuleikha senses that her son intends to leave her for good. She is desperate and wants him to stay with her. Her defenselessness stems from her sense of loss and loneliness. Though life seems to be coming to an end for her, she goes to Ignatov to ask him to let Yuzuf go. She has never asked anything of him before. She is even ready to give herself to him but he is not willing. He allows the boy to escape and, in the paperwork with Yuzuf's personal record, he writes "Iosif Ignatov", thus claiming the boy's paternity. Yuzuf gets a chance to have a new life – as a son of a Red Army soldier. Now Zuleikha understands he must break all ties to his mother. She follows him to the Angara, from where he leaves on a boat. Zuleikha sees her son standing in the boat and waving his hand at her. This is their final goodbye. On her way back to the kolkhoz, she encounters Ignatov – crooked, gray and lame. The pain does not entirely go away but at least gives her room to breathe. Both – defenseless but free – have a chance to stay together. The tender narrator indicates that their defenselessness gives them freedom and brings them back to the state of human existence.

LITERATURE AS THE EXPERIENCE OF FREEDOM

When reading Yakhina's novel, one feels one could accuse her of describing fictitious historical events that have little to do with facts. Certainly, the presentation of the world offered by the tender narrator is radically different from the picture painted by Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*, by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński in *A World Apart* or by Józef Czapski in the *Inhuman Land*. Thus, I would place Yakhina's novel in historical fiction rather literature of fact that documents the gruesome life in an enforced labor camp. The book deals with historical³ events when it presents the activities of the Red Army's or the "dekulakization" of the Tatars resisting the rule of the Soviet government. But

³ This is also how I would classify Hilary Mantel's novels set in the Tudor period and not describing naked historical facts, either (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*). Mantel tries to show the "human face" of such historical characters as Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell or Anne Boleyn and expose the internal rhythm of historical developments.

this is only one part of the narrative. The tender narrator also attempts to depict an individual's fate in a tense, dangerous world and does so by focusing on an individual point of view that is not reducible to general, historical summary. This means that an individual is not constrained to think what history or politics would dictate. Individual attitudes – Zuleikha's and Ignatov's – are perspectives made from their interiors, based on their subjectivity and freedom of thoughts, emotion and feeling. This aspect cannot be eliminated from a faithful characterization of the plot. Unlike the worlds presented in typical literature on labor camps, Yakhina's world is more inward and unfolds through events that happen in the sphere of the main characters' freedom, emotions and feelings.

Yakhina wants to show that literature is not a record of external facts but a chronicle of personal experiences which differ from one individual to another. This is beyond any doubt a distinguishing feature of her prose. The naked truth of the labor camps, as narrated in the memoirs of Herling-Grudziński or Czapski, is not to be found here. Her book shows instead how a person placed in degrading conditions can regain a personal identity despite all the calamities and oppression, and this is different from a dispassionate presentation of the objective situation at the camps (produced quite often for the benefit of the posterity). Yakhina wants to demonstrate how, even in spite of the outward imprisonment, an individual can remain oneself—thanks to the awareness of freedom, cultivation of the freedom to think, observation of the world, intensive experiencing of love and happiness when they spontaneously arise.

Moreover, Yakhina demonstrates that much more important than historical facts are the ties between events, which Orhan Pamuk calls “a sea made up of these irreducible nerve endings,” where “every point contains a bit of the protagonists' soul” (Pamuk 80). This approach relies on narration imbued with a sense invoked in the reader's experience. The facts presented in the book that are interpreted and understood by the reader are also intensely colored and experienced by the reader. This is what Tokarczuk discussed in her Nobel Lecture: “Events are facts, but experience is something inexpressibly different. It is experience, and not any event, that makes up the material of our lives. Experience is a fact that has been interpreted and situated in memory. It also refers to a certain foundation we have in our minds, to a deep structure of significations upon which we can unfurl our own lives and examine them fully and carefully” (Tokarczuk 10-11). It appears that only when we begin to understand Yakhina's novel in a way similar to myths that describe events that have never happened but at the same time are registered incessantly in a symbolic way, can we embark on a fuller reception of literature. In this sense, as Tokarczuk

repeats after Aristotle, fiction is, in a way, a type of truth – something that unfolds as fiction becomes a kind of truth “for me” to use a phrase coined by Kierkegaard. Only by realizing this can the reader enter the level of sympathy, empathy, compassion or even tenderness.

Yakhina places her the plot of her novel in the space of tender and course events, leaving us not only genuinely overtaken with Zuleikha’s situation but also beginning to wonder about all other individuals hacking their way through in the mesh of ideologies, disrespect, proclaimed indifference to understanding of others. What makes Yakhina’s novel remarkable and essentially different from typical labor camp literature is the absence of typical dividing lines. Zuleikha loves her enemy and he seems to respond in kind, even though he initially does not understand why he does so. He begins to care for her and for her son’s survival. He would not condone an open mutiny and he would not allow them to escape from the camp but he makes her free to take unusual free decision that break the causal chain of events that everyday necessities impose on her. She can love whomever she wants, and free emotions create a new world in herself and around herself. Later, when she decides to break up with Ignatov, her decision also marks a new form of freedom for her. Also the decision to set Yuzuf free and give him a chance to enjoy life as a free person, is also a manifestation of her emotional independence. Tenderness knows no bounds, for now it becomes clear that the narrator’s tender gaze not only encompasses the lives of the victims of a totalitarian regime but also imbues with compassion her husband’s murderer.⁴ We also see Yuzuf’s reaction during his escape. We would perhaps prefer him to remain with his mother and care for her but his bold decision to gain independence is made possible by the contribution of his mother who is helping him to discover the life of a free man and helping herself to gain a partial freedom, because now she can be united with Ignatov and receive the fullness of his care. In this way the tender narrator expresses the idea that the existence of every human person has a sense of its own, and that everyone deserves a second look that may reveal a new tender aspect of his or her situation.

⁴ In this context, one can wonder whether Yakhina is not rewriting the history of the 20th century, whitewashing Ignatov’s character, similarly, for example, to what Bernhard Schlink did in *The Reader* and *Olga*, for which he was frequently reproached. Yakhina appears to take a different path in how she depicts the conduct of the Red Army’s soldiers with specific accuracy and no whitewashing; moreover, as a Kazan-born ethnic Tatar, whose nation suffered at the hands of the Russians, she tells her tale from the victims’ perspective but in the use of tender narration she also wants to show that of the other side.

THE *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*

There is also the question of whether the narrative tenderness here may follow from the fact that the author is a woman. That is certainly significant, I would say, and Yakhina's novel subscribes to the *écriture féminine* distinguished by Hélène Cixous as something different from *littérature masculine*. In general, literary fiction cannot do without binary oppositions and divisions of reality. But the feminine writing (and perhaps the masculine writing as well) is antibinary. This is to be understood not as one to obliterate the differences between women and men but rather as an attempt to deemphasize social and cultural divides that split reality into "us and them", the good ones and the evil ones.

For example, at some point in her novel, Yakhina challenges the dichotomy between male activeness and female passiveness, especially when Zuleikha assumes typical manly duties and becomes the kolkhoz's first hunter or when she decides to stop seeing Ignatov, or refuses to turn to him for help. Things were very different before. Zuleikha had been subordinated to her husband, she acted only as a passive tool of satisfaction for his needs in a world where the man is the Self and the woman is a thoughtless Other. This perception of a woman still manifests itself in what Ignatov initially thinks of her, when he abhors the idea of falling in love with a woman that is a camp prisoner. But Yakhina's novel belongs to *l'écriture féminine* which is revealed in Zuleikha's decision to gain as much independence as she can appropriate – by giving birth to a baby in front of staring inmates, to shoot a bear in self-defence, and consequently to win membership in the group of hunters. As I have underscored before, this writing style inspires a sense of transition and brings out reminiscences of Heraclitus's ever-changing river (as opposed to the masculine style, heavier and too burdened by its weight to be able either to move or to change) (Putnam Tong 264). To quote from Cixous, Yakhina's writing "is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 879). By this way of writing Yakhina prevents Zuleikha from becoming marginalized and smothered, locked in a "harem" (Cixous 881), though initially she refrains from speaking out loud because she knows her voice would not count anyway. Yakhina shows that Zuleikha, though living in a world ruled by political interests, becomes a sovereign subject capable of changing something in the world through her love that transcends social, ethnic, cultural and political barriers. Zuleikha finds accomplishment in her corporeality and motherhood. She breaks away from the constraints of a "woman without a body, dumb and blind" (Cixous 880). Now she

can fight and is no longer a shadow of a warrior. Though initially she is presented as a self-effacing substitute of a woman (as perhaps the Hag would put it), in the course of time her helplessness wanes away and Yakhina finds strength in herself to take in a deeper breath. Animated by the gust of freedom, she becomes a fully entitled subject, entering history and shaping her life, pursuing if not happiness, than at least the value of life. Or, in Cixous's words: "In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history" (Cixous 882), the history of a woman fighting for her freedom. In this sense Yakhina expresses the rebelliousness in her writing, presents herself as open to possibilities and changes, multivariety and admission of different perspectives. To quote Cixous again, a woman writes in "white ink" (Cixous 881), which means that her words are not controlled by economies of dichotomy or categories of male dominance and female subjection: "She lets the other language speak loud—the language of 1,000 tongues which know neither enclosure nor death. To life she refuses nothing. Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (Cixous 889). Thus, in my opinion, the tasks of the tender narrator and of the *écriture féminine* converge.

Guzel Yakhina has written an amazing tale of people in the hell of history. It is a tale of human defenselessness and freedom, as well as a tiny gesture of goodness proving that a human being not only wants to survive but also needs to live in dignity, to find a place in the world of the merciless laws of history and politics, despite the cruelty of the circumstances. In this context it may be useful to quote Tokarczuk's encapsulation of a writer's mission: "I believe I must tell stories as if the world were a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it" (Tokarczuk 25). The characters in Yakhina's novel are small in their defenselessness and powerful in their longing for freedom. Therein lies their similarity to ourselves.

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THE TENDER NARRATOR IN GUZEL YAKHINA'S *ZULEIKHA*

Summary

The main assertion in this paper is that the tender narrator, whom the Polish writer, Olga Tokarczuk, made the subject of her Nobel Lecture, can convey the author's perspective in such a way that all readers can find themselves in it. Using the example of Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha*, the author of this paper demonstrates how tender narration brings out the titular character's defenselessness as a quality of the human condition. The author ponders what distinguishes Yakhina's novel among other examples of camp or historical literature and also addresses Hélène Cixous's concept of *l'écriture féminine*, concluding that the perspective of tender narration is coextensive with the feminine narration that is open to voices arriving from a multitude of perspectives. The author also demonstrates that Yakhina's *Zuleikha* is an example of literature that highlights and explores the experience of a human being's internal freedom, which is inalienable, even though its external freedom may be endangered by fate, the laws of history or political machinations.

Keywords: Yakhina; Tokarczuk; Cixous; tender narrator; defenselessness; *l'écriture féminine*

CZUŁY NARRATOR W *ZULEJCE* GUZEL JACHINY

Streszczenie

Główną tezą tekstu jest przekonanie, że będące wyzwaniem dla literatury pięknej przekazanie perspektywy autora w taki sposób, by każdy czytelnik mógł w niej odnaleźć samego siebie, jest możliwe dla tzw. czułego narratora, któremu swoją mowę noblowską poświęciła polska pisarka

Olga Tokarczuk. Na przykładzie powieści Guzel Jachiny pt. *Zulejka otwiera oczy* autorka tekstu pokazuje, w jaki sposób czuła narracja wydobywa z postaci głównej bohaterki jej bezbronność jako cechę kondycji człowieka. Zastanawia się nad tym, co wyróżnia powieść Jachiny na tle innych przykładów literatury obozowej czy historycznej. Podejmuje także problem pisarstwa kobiecego (*l'écriture féminine*), o którym pisała Hélène Cixous, dochodząc do wniosku, że perspektywa czulej narracji jest tożsama z perspektywą kobiecą otwartą na głosy dochodzące z różnych perspektyw. autorka pokazuje również, że *Zulejka otwiera oczy* to przykład literatury eksponującej i eksploatującej doświadczenie wewnętrznej wolności człowieka, które nawet w warunkach wolności zagrożonej przez los, prawa historii czy mechanizmy polityczne, nie może zostać utracone.

Słowa kluczowe: Jachina; Tokarczuk; Cixous; czuły narrator; bezbronność; *l'écriture féminine*