

# The Theme of Motherhood in the Novel «Zuleikha Opens Eyes» by Guizel Yakhina

Irkabaeva Feruza Makhkamovna<sup>1</sup>, Sultonova Nadira Rustambekovna<sup>1</sup>,  
Usmanova Anastasia Andreevna<sup>2</sup>, Irkabaeva Firuza Zhumanali Kizi<sup>2</sup>  
and Alikulova Raikhon Abdizhabbarovna<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek, Uzbekistan

<sup>2</sup>Department of Russian Literary Studies, National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek, Uzbekistan

Keywords: Theme, Novel, Heroine, Image, Episode.

Abstract: The article is devoted to the analysis of the theme of motherhood in the novel «Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes» by the modern famous Russian writer Guizel Yakhina. This study includes an analysis of the theme of motherhood as one of the main ones in the novel, which is revealed through the image of Upyrikha, which is key to the plot outline of the novel.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Guizel Yakhina's novel «Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes» published in 2015, is the writer's first major work, which reflects the turning point in Russia's history – dispossession and resettlement, based on real events that happened to the writer's grandmother. The novel tells the story of the socio-political events of 1930 - dispossession and deportation to extremely remote, uninhabited corners of the country. The novel describes one of the bloodiest and most complex historical processes on the territory of Russia, affecting various nationalities (Russians, Tatars, Germans, Chuvash) and sectors of society (peasants, intelligentsia, officials, doctors), which are skillfully combined with the story of the fate of the main character of the novel.

The theme of Guizel Yakhina's novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes” is wide: the fate of a person in the whirlwind of historical events, the theme of sacred motherhood, the theme of equality (inequality) of men and women, the theme of spiritual insight and awakening and transformation of the system of moral values, the theme of love, the theme of man's attitude to religion.

The main character of the work is a young Tatar woman, Zuleikha, who has spent fifteen years of her family life leading a monotonous and tedious life, the whole day of which is filled with chores around the house, unquestioning fulfillment of household orders,

uncomplaining submission to an oppressive mother-in-law and a rude husband. However, the resettlement became the starting point for Zuleikha's new, unknown life. The author of the novel shows a generalized type of eastern woman from a remote Tatar village: uneducated and submissive, believing and preserving the culture of her people, against the backdrop of large-scale political events. The way of thinking of the main character of the novel is transformed along with the change in Zuleikha's lifestyle: the author raises the question of the ambiguity of the negative impact of political reforms on the fate of ordinary people.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

One of the key and controversial images in the novel is the image of Upyrikha, presented as a woman-mother through the prism of magical realism.

Upyrikha is a blind old woman who gave her entire life for the benefit of her only son, who survived the Great Famine. Upyrikha embodies the image of a selfless, strong woman-mother, capable of doing anything possible for the sake of her child.

At the beginning of the novel, the author reveals to us the image of Upyrikha through the retrospective view of Upyrikha herself: in a conversation with her beloved son, the mother recalls her former youth, the courtship of her future husband, the author paints us

a completely different image of Upyrikha: young, perky, brave, beautiful: «As your father saw I drooled all the way down to my waist and forgot to wipe it off» (Basinsky 2015) // «I had the most beautiful apron in Yulbash... and a monisto in two rows across my chest//That summer they played kyz-kuu...well, I'll catch up with him, as usual, I'll whip him to his heart's content: If you didn't manage to catch up with the girl, pay up and get it!» (Breininger 2022).

One of the significant passages of the novel that reveals the image of Upyrikha is an inserted episode - Upyrikha's memory of the difficult times of the Great Famine, including cannibalism. The upyrikha tries to assure Murtaza that the blood brothers and sister died their own deaths: «We didn't eat them. We buried them. Themselves, without a mullah, at night... And that there are no graves, I'm too tired to explain to you that that summer everyone was buried - without graves» (Pustovaya 2019). The author leaves the truth of Upyrikha behind the scenes, does not even reveal her thoughts to us, but it becomes clear that in fact, everything was exactly like this: «Those who spread these vile rumors about you and me have long since become the earth themselves» (Pavlova 2018) This fact complements the image of a selfless mother who, in an extreme situation, behaved harshly and categorically: she saved her youngest child, sacrificing her older children: «Everything that was in me, to the last drop, I left for you. At first they tried to fight - they wanted to take your breasts by force. They were stronger than you. And I was stronger than them. And I didn't give you offense» (Ibragimova 2020).

### 3 FINDINGS

The image of Upyrikha is represented by cruelty towards Zuleikha. The mother-in-law hates her daughter-in-law: she reproaches her for her inability to give birth, slanders Zuleikha by beating her, endlessly terrorizes her with household chores, and finally, with gloating, predicts her «...quick death at the hands of the three fiery farishte» (Sirota 2020) whom she saw in a dream. The image of Upyrikha is simply filled with maternal fear for her son, which manifests itself in hatred of her daughter-in-law for her inability to give birth to an heir for Murtaza. The old woman cannot afford to die only because Zuleikha is afraid to leave her son to the «wet chicken» (Yakhina, 2020) Upyrikha demonstrates the instinct of motherhood and preserving the family even after her death, appearing to Zuleikha in the form of a ghost. Left to the mercy of fate, it would

seem that the old woman should soon die, which, most likely, happens behind the scenes of the plot, but in the novel for Upyrikha, place and time know no boundaries.

The image of Upyrikha, as the key one in the plot outline of the novel, is a conductor of cultures - past and modern, helping Zuleikha not to get lost in the new world. This image is a symbol of female perseverance, wisdom, strength, and motherhood. This image is the first to reveal the theme of motherhood as one of the main themes of the novel, which is realized through several models of relationships between mother and child. This mainly concerns the “Mother-Son” model using the examples of the images of Upyrikha and Murtaza, Zuleikha and Yuzuf. The image of motherhood is revealed in the first part of the novel “Wet Chicken” using the example of the “Upyrikha-Murtaza” models and in the three subsequent parts “Where?”, “Live”, “Return” using the example of the “Zuleikha-Yuzuf” model.

The love of Upyrikha and Zuleikha for their sons is the same in its manifestation: deep, selfless, boundless, however, there is a huge difference in the mothers who love their sons - in accepting their child as an individual with his own destiny.

The upyrikha literally merged with her son so much that she perceived the arrival of her daughter-in-law painfully acutely: «The upyrikha, with martyrdom on her face, herself dragged her numerous chests, bales and dishes to the guest hut. I didn't talk to him for two months. That same year, she began to quickly and hopelessly go blind, and after some time, she began to go deaf» (Yakhina 2020). The scene in the bathhouse speaks of jealousy, when the old woman herself asked her daughter-in-law to steam her with bath brooms, and then complained to her son that Zuleikha had beaten her: «For what? - The ghoul bends her mouth like a steep rocker, two large shiny tears roll out of her eyes, she falls to her son and shakes silently. I didn't do anything to her» (Yakhina 2020) Thus, the author portrays the image of the mother-in-law as hard-hearted and cunning.

However, the description of a sincere evening conversation between mother and son radically changes the idea of Upyrikha. A completely different image appears before us: a woman, having listened to her son about the next upcoming pogrom of the Red Army, instills hope in him, assures him of her own strength and intelligence: «You are strong, Murtaza, my boy. Strong and smart, just like I was» (Yakhina 2020). The dialogue turns the ordinary mother-in-law Upyrikha into a mother, loving and beloved, due to a shift in the angle of view: the image of the mother-in-

law - grumpy, despotic – is presented by daughter-in-law Zuleikha, and the image of a loving mother is depicted by the objective author-narrator. The author sharply reversed the negative impression of Murtaza's mother, recreated from the first pages of the novel.

## 4 ANALYSIS

During the dialogue between mother and son, the author uses the technique of retrospection, which helps to quite fully and succinctly recreate the image of Upyrikha, covering the main milestones of a woman's life: youth, marriage, the Great Famine.

We can say that the heroine's monologue about her past is a short story in a novel, which has its own small set of plot elements: prologue - words of reassurance to her son, plot - memories of past beauty, attention from potential suitors, development of events - memories of a competition at games with her future husband, about marriage, memories of the Great Famine, the climax - the mother's vows that she did not kill or eat her older children to save the life of the younger Murtaza, the denouement - the conviction in the strength and intelligence of her son. By personal confession, Upyrikha claims that «...she gave birth to ten for her husband, and the last one for herself» (Yakhina, 2020) Most likely, the last one became her last maternal love, whose life she wanted to preserve at all costs, even despite the suffering from hunger of her older children: «At first they tried to fight - they wanted to take your breasts by force. They were stronger than you. And I was stronger than them. And she didn't hurt you, but they died. All. There was nothing more» (Yakhina, 2020).

Upyrikha convinces her son: «We didn't eat them. We buried them. You were just little and forgot everything» (Yakhina 2020). But precisely because of these beliefs, according to Murtaza's doubts, according to Upyrikha: «Those who spread these vile rumors about you and me have long since become the earth themselves», it becomes clear that in fact Upyrikha killed the elders so that the younger one could survive.

This moment in the novel puts the theme of motherhood in a difficult position: killing everyone for the sake of one. Most likely, such a brutal act does not justify the mother, but gives this image exceptional selflessness, mixed with callousness and coldness.

Then, to the existing characterization of Upyrikha, another most striking element is added - the eternal maternal fear for the life of an already adult child:

«You and I will stay in this house, my heart, and we will live for a long time. You are because you are young. And I - because I can't leave you alone». This fear, perhaps, will be the important reason why Murtaza will not set off with the rest of the settlers: she will remain with her mother in the same house. Zuleikha, as if through a genetically programmed code, is transmitted from Upyrikha the maternal fear for the child, which appeared from the moment the doctor reported that the woman was pregnant and which accompanies her throughout the entire novel. This fight for your life in the name of your son's life, and the fight for his life, for his health, together pushes the theme of motherhood to its peak. However, the spiritual transformation that occurred in Zuleikha, after which she “opens her eyes,” allows, not immediately, of course, to assess the situation differently: the mother is ready to let her son go for the sake of his future. The eternal maternal fear described in the novel loses out before the mother's sincere desire for a better life for her son.

So, two women-mothers have a number of similarities and a number of differences. Upyrikha's love for her son is selfless, deep, but bordering on fanaticism, a love that has been formed for centuries in the conditions of Eastern culture. Zuleikha's love for her son is also deep and strong, but it grew up in different conditions - in a different reality, which changes both the heroine herself and her view of important spiritual categories. The young woman understands that her son's stay in the settlement brings with it unfreedom (physical and moral) and makes a decision in favor of Yuzuf's freedom.

The image of Upyrikha in the novel is the main artistic framework on which the method of magical realism will be applied, including dreams, predictions, and ghostly visions. The image of Upyrikha is an image of dark forces. At the very beginning of the novel, the image of Upyrikha, introduced by the author as a barely visible silhouette, casts doubts on the reality of the existence of the image. The reality of existence is, of course, then confirmed, but the ominousness of the image is filled with the heroine's ability to see the future through dreams. The prophetic dreams of Upyrikha «...strange, sometimes creepy, full of hints and unsaid visions in which the future was reflected vaguely and distortedly, as in a cloudy, crooked mirror» come true after a while.

Due to her abilities, the heroine receives the nickname Upyrikha, “old witch.” The external portrait characteristics of the heroine – blindness and deafness, which are easily compensated for by the rare ability to see in advance – have a special

additional effect. So, we can say that the image of Upyrikha gradually becomes a “gray eminence” in the movement of the plot, anticipating the main events of the novel: predictions about the Holodomor in 1921, a big fire in the village, the death of four granddaughters - the daughters of the main character of the novel.

## 5 DISCUSSIONS

One of the striking examples of this is a dream predicting the departure of the main character from her husband’s house: «You will die soon, you saw it in a dream. Murtaza and I will stay in the house, and three fiery farashte will fly after you and take you straight to hell» (only Upyrikha interpreted it not quite accurately - as the daughter-in-law being sent to the underworld, but she guessed the fact itself - leaving).

A similar image is the image of the ghost of Upyrikha - the main line of the novel, anticipating events, warning against wrong actions, sometimes frightening, but always deeply meaningful. The ghostly image of Upyrikha is scattered throughout the novel in five parishes associated with the key events of the novel.

For the first time, Zuleikha does not see the image of the ghost of her mother-in-law, but hears her muffled call: «Zuleikha-ah! – Upyrikha’s voice is heard from afar, as if from underground. «Zuleikha-ah!»). Zuleikha perceives her mother-in-law’s voice as a cry of indignation for the adultery of infidels taking place around her in the holy mosque. The second arrival, the image of the mother-in-law is filled with efficiency in the mother’s work, watching the anguished screaming hungry child Zuleikha and suggesting that the child needs to be fed differently. Having once survived the times of the Great Famine, Upyrikha did anything to save her son from hunger, and the situation with Zuleikha is not new for her mother-in-law. The arrival of the ghost of the mother-in-law is represented by the words: «It was as if the wind had breathed, and the long shadows running from the stove door began to quiver, sway, and fidget. Upyrikha sits with her elbows on her sharp knees spread out to the sides». The third coming of the ghost of the mother-in-law is caused by anger and indignation for the feelings of the widowed daughter-in-law for another man, moreover, for the murderer of her husband, the ghost of Upyrikha anticipates a future criminal connection, in her opinion, calling Zuleikha “fehishe”.

Note that the heroine does not experience any fear or the slightest fright, she takes the event for granted, as part of everyday life - which is a sign of magical realism.

The next fourth arrival of the ghost of Upyrikha confirms the inclusion in the realistic narrative of the novel of a supernatural element that cannot be explained from the position of the usual laws of the universe, which includes a warning about the danger threatening the son of the main character (the moment Yuzuf is surrounded by wolves).

The last fifth coming of the ghost of the mother-in-law is associated with creating the effect of the presence of a magical world, achieved through a realistic description of unusual images or situations. The main character of the novel enters into dialogue with the old mother-in-law, who instantly became a wise mother-in-law in Zuleikha’s mind, hugging «... a powerful body, burying her face in something warm, dense, muscular, living, feeling strong hands - on her back, on the back of her head, around yourself, everywhere, which then strangely turns out not to be a ghost, but an old, gnarled larch».

In the last fragment of the arrival of the ghost of her mother-in-law, a radical revolution occurs in the consciousness of the main character of the novel: Zuleikha finds the answer to the question that tormented her for so long about why her mother-in-law went to the dense urban area: «It was a long time ago, she was a stupid girl... She was looking for death - salvation from unhappy love. I came to Urman, but she was not there, death».

In this short but meaningful dialogue, the image of Upyrikha is transformed from an ominous one, predicting terrible prophecies, cruel and ferocious into a deeply unhappy woman who has not known female happiness. This dialogue also contains the final debunking of the image of the forest as a supernatural place, the abode of evil spirits. Although the main character began to become convinced of this on her own during the first and subsequent hunts for living creatures, while picking berries for her son, the words of Upyrikha became the final chord in the transformational thought flow of Zuleikha.

The first appearance of Upyrikha in the novel is represented by a «barely distinguishable silhouette in a black doorway», and the nickname of the harmful old woman - Upyrikha - refers to this image as a demonic one. This reference closely connects the image of Upyrikha and the image of the forest, which at the beginning of the novel was filled with sacred meaning in the worldview of the main character, as the abode of evil spirits. It is paradoxical that at the same time «...the dense urman, the windfall thicket,



the abode of wild animals, forest spirits and all sorts of evil spirits» also plays a saving role in the life of the villagers of Yulbash during the Great Famine.

## 6 CONCLUSION

The image of the forest in Zuleikha's mind is represented as a certain place where supernatural things happen, in which «...prayers do not work. Pray or don't pray, it's all the same – you'll perish». Thus, the image of the forest is certainly associated with the image of imminent death, then, while in Siberia, in subsequent chapters Zuleikha «opens her eyes» and in the heroine's mind the image of the deadly forest is replaced by the image of fertility, the image of which makes it possible to find food, and therefore the opportunity to live: «In the spring and in the summer she carried fat grouse and heavy geese with thick elastic necks from the taiga» (Yakhina 2020). The image of the forest ceases to be a sacred place where evil spirits dwell and changes to a place where it is possible to find life. The image of Upyrikha is directly related to the image of the ominous forest. The fragment about the trip to the forest and the successful return of Upyrikha – «she returned safe» - evokes fear of the supernatural, «after all, no one returned from the forest alive». The image of the forest is a metaphor for Upyrikha: seemingly an evil, scary, malicious old woman, Upyrikha turns into a source of maternal strength and life wisdom.

Thus, we have come to the conclusion that the theme of motherhood is one of the main ones in Guzel Yakhina's novel «Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes», which is realized through the image of Upyrikha as the main source of life's wisdom and maternal boundless love. Maternal instinct did not allow the heroine to leave this world and leave her only son, Murtaza, in the care of her daughter-in-law, who did not give birth to him. The heroine's instinct for preserving the family allows her to save her grandson's life in extreme situations: Upyrikha is ready to cross the boundaries of the unreal world and appear in the real world in the form of a ghost.

## REFERENCES

- Basinsky P. Incredible. Obvious, Rossiyskaya Gazeta. – M., 2015. Online source: <https://rg.ru/2015/12/14/basinskij.htm> (06/10/2019).
- Breining O. Harsh “Baroque”: a new historical novel. – M., 2022.

- Pustovaya V. and Pogorelaya E. About modern literature. Genres, trends, prospects and even a list of must-read books <https://textura.club/pustovaya-i-pogorelaya-o-literature/>. – M., 2019.
- Pavlova N.I. Poetics of visuality in G. Yakhina's novel “My Children”: on the question of the phenomenon of literary success. – Tver, 2018.
- Ibragimova Sh.N. The theme of collectivization in Guzel Yakhina's novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes.” – Mozyr, 2020.
- Sirota E. Linguistic and stylistic features of Guzel Yakhina's novel “Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes.” – M., 2020.
- Yakhina G. Zuleikha opens her eyes. – M., 2020.