

## The “Soviet Discourse” in the Works of Young Russian Writers at the Turn of the 21st Century

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**Abstract:** This study is focused on the number of distinctive features of the works of young prose modern writers. The researchers of the study hold the opinion that the topic of the “Soviet past” is becoming especially popular among modern writers in the context of its interpretation. The output of Ksenia Buksha, the prize-winner of the “National Bestseller” literary award, includes the most significant form of this topic in the context of the works of young writers. Buksha builds up the narration using the transformed version of the model of the so-called “big family”. This model was the basic one in the literary works from the epoch of socialist realism (30-50s of the 20th century). The researchers of this study analyse the text of Buksha’s novel “the “freedom” factory” and come to the conclusion that the writer’s attitude toward the “Soviet past” is ambiguous. She finds the ways to rejoice at the grand achievements in the building of socialism to point the giftedness and ambiguity of her characters. And yet, the general atmosphere of disorder and poverty of Soviet people’s lives, the lie and hypocrisy of the official slogans and some other things stir up the writer’s deepest disapproval.

**Key words:** Prose of the youth, soviet discourse, Ksenia Buksha, achievements, atmosphere

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### INTRODUCTION

The development of modern literature in Russia at the turn of the 21st century is characterized by an unusual contradictoriness and dynamism. Yet, despite these features, several common traits can be marked out (Timina, 2011; Cherniak, 2009). The following peculiarities can be considered these traits: “a stress on the maximum individualization of the writer’s own fictional world, an aesthetic egocentrism in the process of building of the personal literary universe”; the usage of the depiction of the “other world” in its different forms; a predilection for reflections on the philosophy of history; the centralization of the reader’s attention on the writer’s own self (“a peculiar brutal autobiographism”); a “strange”, “autistic”, “schizoid” hero as a sign of an “interesting” plot, attractive for the reader and implying escape from the commonplace of life; the domination of the novel in the context of genre strategy; the intentional “drop of the language” in the context of style, leading both to the obscurity of the vocabulary and the paradoxicality of the plot (Tatarinov, 2015).

Several scientists and critics hold that the concept of “Soviet” as a problem that “evokes nostalgic feelings and

does not imply an exhaustive solution” (Tatarinov, 2015) has a special status in prose and poetry of the late years. A sufficient quantity of works is already devoted to this topic. For instance, the publishing of “The Socialist Realistic Canon” (Giunter and Dobrenko, 2000) the collection of study written by Russian and foreign researchers has become an important event. The attention of the literary critics was above all drawn to the articles by Kh. Giunter (“The Phases of Existence of the Social Realistic Canon”, “The Archetypes of the Soviet Culture”), K. Clark (“Stalin’s Myth of the “great family”, “A Positive Hero as a Verbal Icon”), E. Dobrenko (“An Entertaining History: Historical Novel and Socialist Realistic Realism”) and others (Giunter and Dobrenko, 2000).

The “Soviet Discourse” has also become a subject matter of three international conferences (“The Soviet Discourse in Modern Culture”: Moscow, June 25-26, 2009; Moscow, October 4-5, 2010; Moscow, June 15, 2015). A. Volodina holds that “the idea that unites all the participants < of these conferences > has initially appeared as a result of the reflections on the semiotic specificity of the Soviet culture or more precisely, the specificity of the Soviet sign as such. The

“Soviet-meaning” forms of culture, initially constructed, later consolidated and were canonized whereas their meanings are constantly transforming in accordance with the changes in society and the policy of the authorities”. The methodological paper “Semiotics of the “Soviet” in 2009 by V.Vs. Ivanov as well as the papers “The Soviet Discourse of the Post-Soviet Culture” in 2010 by I.V. Kondakov, “The Soviet Directors of 1960-80s as a Part of the Soviet Discourse” in 2010 by P.B. Bogdanova and some others are of particular interest to researchers. They contain conceptually significant theses about the necessity of consideration of the Soviet literature in the context of the world literary development (V.Vs. Ivanov), show the ways of transformations of the Soviet paradigm in post-Soviet prose (I.V. Kondakov) and dramatic art (P.B. Bogdanova).

The “Soviet discourse” has become a subject of artistic research in works of many famous modern writers. According to A.V. Tatarinov, “it is actively protected (by means of propaganda of the Soviet literature) by Z. Prilepin, S. Shargunov and G. Sadulaev. The metaphysical level of the “Soviet Empire” is continually reconstituted in the novels by A. Prokhanov. A consistent negation (though sometimes we can define it in a less categorical way an overcoming) of the “Soviet” can be found in the novels by V. Lidskii (“Russian Sadism”), D. Bykov (“ZhD”), B. Akunin (“Aristonomy”), L. Ulitskaia (“Green Tent”), V. Pelevin (for example, “Omon Ra”). V. Sorokin’s artistic world gives a more complicated picture. For this researcher, the concept of “Soviet” is a permanent source of sarcasm and at the same time, inspiration that makes him revive the communist reality in his plots again and again (“Blue Salo”, “Day of the Oprichnik”, “Kremlin Made of Sugar”, “Telluria”). The “Soviet” (in this context it’s Fedorov’s idea of resurrection) as a natural inversion of Orthodoxy is a typical subject of the novels by V. Sharov”. A. Volodina emphasizes that a modern writer as well as his reader is attracted by the Soviet concepts because of their exoticism and romantic, maximalistic charm of utopia.

#### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

A composite method of research is used in this article. It includes comparative-historical and typological methods of research as well as the researchers own methods of analysis of the verbal art of youth (Zolotova and Efimova, 2014; Zolotova, 2015). The material of the research is the novel “the “freedom” factory” by Ksenia Buksha, the prize-winner of the “National Bestseller” literary award.

#### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The subject matter of the research turned out to be a highly interesting phenomenon in the context of the youth literature of the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century. In our opinion, the young authors’ attitude toward this topic has the fullest representation in the novel “the “freedom” factory” by Ksenia Sergeevna Buksha. In 2014 this young writer (born in 1983) and her novel were awarded the “National Bestseller” literary award.

In the virtual interview (March 30 to April 6, 2015) organized upon the initiative of Tatiana Kabanova, the student of the Faculty of History and Philology of Mari State University, Ksenia Buksha told about the story of creation of the novel “the “freedom” factory”. The writer was working on the creation of a brand-book for one of the large war plants of St. Petersburg. During 8 months Ksenia and her friends have questioned >100 employees from the plant manager to workers of different workshops. All the material that was not included in the brand-book formed the contents of one of the most original texts of modern times. The destinies of the characters of the novel turned out to be correlated with the interviewees’ lives. The plot of the novel took on the features of a certain event. It follows the story of formation and development of a large defense-industrial establishment from the moment of its foundation (the first youth shock brigades of the end of 1930’s), through gaining of the world leadership in certain fields of the military industry in 60-70’s, up to the gradual decay and desperate attempts to save the factory in hard times of 90’s and finally, a faint hope to get a new life as a part of some concern in 2000’s. This nature of the novel can and should be taken into account in the course of consideration of the researchers reconstruction of some common “Soviet discourse” components of the so-called occupational novels. It seems appropriate that Dmitrii Bykov, though detected a certain paradox in the book, still considered its analysis in relation to the genre of an occupational novel possible (Buksha, 2014). Indeed, “the “freedom” factory” gives an impression of a novel of this kind but it is an “inside out” occupational novel as long as it tells less about the struggle for the creation of the industrial colossus than in a sense, about its destruction: “one man is discharged from the “freedom” factory every 5 min. It makes 2000 a month. The “freedom” factory loses two thousand workers per month. And this month is not the first. The factory is wasting away. Soon it will vanish completely” (Buksha, 2014).

In our opinion in the process of recreation of the factory’s history Ksenia Buksha uses a number of

archetypal models of the Soviet culture of 30-50's (the canonization phases of the socialist realistic canon) and mainly the model of the so-called "big family". In the mentioned period of time it was spread among all the members of the Soviet society and represented a complete triangle in its deep structure: "the father", "the motherland" and their heroic "sons" and "daughters". We should also mention the archetype of "the enemy" which personifies a permanent threat to the big family (Giunter and Dobrenko, 2000). The researcher converted the model of the big family into the model of the factory family in which the role of the father is played by a regular factory manager; the image of the motherland is embodied in the figure of a gigantic woman on whose body the factory stands and functions and the workers become sons and daughters. The enemies of the factory depend on the period of time: during the Great Patriotic War it's an external, foreign enemy while 1950-90's this role is played by different internal groups of people: "apparatchiks" (the bureaucratic upper circles), untrustworthy suppliers, Vodokanal (a water-supply concern), "bratoks" (mobsters), etc.

Of all the characters, the factory manager N should be admitted the closest to the original role of the father in the big family model. He is generally recognized as a "simple and pure man", a "communist", a "force". Under him the factory has reached the highest productive capacities ("hundreds of trade-school graduates are being hired. The machines are being bought in Japan. everything's mobilized"). His relationship with workers is almost kindred ("...just 2 months passed and he already knows everyone by name", "walks below, sees everything"). His appearance is accentedly democratic ("... and he was all blushing and looked crumpled. He was wearing a panama ... on his head. The manager pulled it off from his bald head, fanned himself with it and then wiped the face" (Buksha, 2014). When N has to make decisions of fundamental importance, he consults with the workers ("...on the 13th of December he enters the workshop and says: "I understand that it's impossible to manufacture four sets of the "Lily" bombsights for Yak-28L airplanes by the beginning of the New Year but still: what are your terms, what do you need to manage the task?" (Buksha, 2014). At the same time, he shoulders overall responsibility, just as the father should ("well, we say that's the end of our manager ... but he'll still have time to shift the blame onto us-it turns out that it's our fault: the control men didn't manage to finish the device off. We're going to be fired, quartered right on the spot! But N doesn't even think of quartering anyone" (Buksha, 2014). He demonstrates the knowledge of the working masses' psychology ("we were given time to redeem

everything. But at first we all need a good rest. Otherwise we won't be able to do it. That's why tomorrow our work collective goes away on holiday to Baikal by all means. With tents. I've settled the questions of transport and food" (Buksha, 2014). He works and rests together with his workers ("the whole factory comes here <to the seashore > to spend a vacation ... well, maybe not the whole but half of the workers definitely does. That's why N has come to see them to check if they are resting well" (Buksha, 2014).

The managers keep their fatherly attitude to the Factory and its workers for the whole life. V, for instance, "as an active blessed manager, rarely visited the workshops" but having retired on a pension, at the age of 85, moves along the factory "with a boundless swiftness and liveliness", talks to workers and takes a keen interest in their opinions on the future ("oh come on, you're going overboard, what end of the world? It's all stuff and nonsense. You know, we were ... launching missiles in our time. Many people were afraid. But it turned out that the world had passed through that. So, it will pass through this trouble as well! Think we'll have to resettle? That would be really cool but it's difficult for me to imagine" (Buksha, 2014).

While a father was a personification of virtue in the scope of the Soviet "big family" model, his "sons could manifest certain spontaneity, immaturity and passion for adventures" (Giunter and Dobrenko, 2000). That is just the version of the fathers-sons relationship that is shown by Ksenia Buksha in the "Antarctica" chapter. F, a young promising control man tired of day-to-day difficulties ("Coming late-pay a fine. Absence from work a reprimand. ... And the queues at dinner-time are terrible!"), decides to reverse his life completely and to go to Antarctica as a radar-location technician. When he asks the factory manager N to let him go, N suggests that he should have his hair cut (!) and then they have the following conversation: "I'm not letting you go." "But you are obliged to by all means!" "What do you want? You need money? Well, we can arrange about that we'll give you a raise." "Oh no, that's not the point. ... I thought that in this place I will be different but I'm the same. It's all the same!" "So and you think Antarctica will change you, don't you? And I don't think so..." N does not only reject F's request but also makes him register his arrival to the workplace every day for 3 months. "In case of non-observance ... Yes, write exactly like this! Bastard, F! And in case of death within these 3 months we will write on your grave that you are a bastard!" (Buksha, 2014). Later (the "Mimosa" chapter) F admits that that was the moment when he "conceived a desire to mend his ways". And at crucial times, when the factory's destiny is

hanging by a thread, F, being by that time the director of production in a literal sense saves the situation by not letting the workers leave the factory by force: “no orders?!” F draws near to them like a grey storm-cloud. “... Bullshit!!! You must stay at the factory! I’ll make you cut threads on your noses but you will not leave! Because without you there is no factory!! You got it?” (Buksha, 2014).

The sons’ spontaneity is also shown in the chapters “Druzhdina” and “Agitbrigada”. In the first of them Pashka a worker-takes over the duty but his only thought is about fighting: “Ah! It would be great if a fight happened between anybody! I’m just itching to fight a bit!” (Buksha, 2014). In the second one the factory workers go to the village in order to accomplish its “merging with the town” and enter into a conflict with local youngsters: “Wait!! Catch him!! ... So, we treat them to pig and they make faces at us?! And take an interest in our girls?!” (Buksha, 2014).

And yet it’s sons and daughters that are real heroes of labor. It’s them who constructs unique from the military point of view “Lilia” (“Lily”) and “Mimosa” as well as the radar installation “Astra” (“Aster”) an object of the whole world’s admiration for which there is no analogue (“on the next approach he < the American pilot > shakes his fist at me and laughs! And I also laugh and raise my fist! We shout with laughter and shake our fists at each other! ... And the ocean, pink as a buckwheat field in blossom, gleams above our heads and the sky shines” (Buksha, 2014); who does the rationalization activity (“at our factory everyone is a rationalizer ... from a cleaning woman or a probationer and to the factory manager”); who reveals creative abilities and exemplifies the true enthusiasm (“we all lived in space! Even if we six were together in a dorm! Still-in the Universe!” (Buksha, 2014).

From this point of view, the short story called “Mimosa” is especially remarkable. Its main character is already familiar to us-it’s F. “Mimosa” is nothing more than a unit of fire including “sixteen missiles with the underwater place of start and 7000 km range; every missile strikes four targets” of the dimensions like “twelve cabinets like this, plus wheels and wires”. F explains that it took 6 months of work to construct three sets like this and all the workshops of the factory were working in three shifts without any vacations. And suddenly shop manager B (“a legendary person he was”) comes and says: “you know, F, ... the fact is that we must construct four more “Mimosas” by the 7th of November”. Well, if we must-than we’ll do-I respond to him”. And they did! At the cost of superhuman efforts and physical tension: “...I didn’t want to sleep at all. All month long. ... I sometimes had a nap in the workshop for an hour or two

and felt myself fresh and ready to work again” (Buksha, 2014). The reasons of this logically impossible situation, according to the hero himself are the following: “at work I go nuts. ... and situations like this just add pepper in my blood” (Buksha, 2014).

There is another impressive short story in the novel, called “Bearings”. The narrator of this chapter is a woman, an ex-member of an experimental design engineering bureau. She accounts her “lively” and, moreover, “happy” (!) interest in work (“you’re coming home and cooking soup but all your thoughts are in work: you’re constantly thinking how it would be better to construct. When going to bed, you put a notebook and a pen under the pillow. Starting to fall asleep but suddenly an idea comes to your mind. You’re snatching out the notebook, writing the idea down and then sleeping calmly”) for a number of circumstances. Firstly, for a special atmosphere of that times (“people didn’t lie then, ... there was no lie ... the country won the war and it was such a happiness such truth that it lasted us a couple of decades ... everyone worked sincerely, learned and taught sincerely...”). Secondly, for a collectivist spirit that was characteristic for the Soviet people: “...everything’s born during the discussion or after it in a word-amidst us” (Buksha, 2014).

The personification of the woman in the context of the model of the family/the factory is embodied in a symbolic image of a huge girl or a woman. It is literally not made by hands but formed from a great number of cracks and fissures on the asphalt. This image is as a rule, clearly visible from the window of the Central Tower: “...you can see a huge half-faced girl. That’s cracks on the asphalt that covers concrete slabs. There’s one more slab in her head. So she’s a girl with a slab. She looks not very young and not especially perfect” (Buksha, 2014). However, on the one hand it perfectly blends in with the ponderous structures of the factory buildings with their towers and numerous crossings and dead-ends and on the other hand it is quite similar to sculptural portrayals of women with a sickle, a book, ears, an oar, etc. that were wide-spread in the Soviet period. This image usually appears in correlation with the private side of the workers’ lives. For instance, the outlines of the huge girl-woman appear in the novel against a background of the fates of the women from the galvanic workshop (the chapter “Inga and the Women of Hell” or of a luckless story in the life of the character Z “The Outsider”). Every time the apparition of the huge woman adds a certain dramatic effect to the narration. In the first case the author draws attention to the huge woman’s cheek which is “sprinkled with green-grey”; in the second the whole image of the woman suddenly becomes “white, transparent and icy” (Buksha, 2014).

As for the reflection of womanhood as such in the novel, it is represented in quite full measure in the images of the women-characters. Since, the middle of 1930's the ascetic features of the image of the woman became sidelined in the Soviet culture. A woman starts to personify the "emotional and vegetative basis of life"; her image is now "associated with love, laughter, cheerfulness, happiness and beauty". This assertion is clearly established by Kh. Giunter by the example of mass Soviet songs, comedy movies and paintings (Gunter and Dobrenko, 2000). In Ksenia Buksha's novel the woman nature is also always surrounded by the atmosphere of certain warmth or even intimacy; it is often poeticized no matter if it is shown in a hyperbolized form ("R enters the workshop. She is a blooming, hot and tall lady. She has large everything. A huge bosom. A high black coiffure, resembling a tower. Prominent brown eyes. Scarlet lips"), or conversely, shaded ("she <Inga> dresses herself in elegant angles and shades"). It seems quite natural that A.V. Tatarinov considers Buksha's work to be a variety of the woman's prose and calls it an "optimistic woman's novel". In the chapter "by the sweet-bitter strawberries" the heroines' charm is emphasized in an impressionistic manner: they are shown against a background of "rippled transparent water", "a black whortleberry-bush", "red shadows of firs and pines" (Buksha, 2014). The reader, along with K, the hero of this short story is truly fascinated by the lazy grace of young M, by her "unintentionally effective pose", "orange freckled skin" and "fluffy halo of light red hair" (Buksha, 2014).

The heroines of the novel are connected with a very important idea for the socialist realistic canon of 30-50's the one of the "sincere" or "heartly" "affection". On the one hand, the concept of heart is associated with the control station of the factory ("what is a control station? It's the heart of the plant..."). On the other hand, the main woman characters of the novel (the philologist Tanechka, lawyers Inga-1 and 2) show sincere concern for people ("what's a trade union now? It's nothing. And still, every day she argues with the new chief financial officer, trying to convince him that the women from the galvanic workshop no matter how many of them there are must have their milk as a hardship pay for account of the factories. And every day, when she signs clearance chits for people who leaves the service, she still tries maybe not to dissuade them but to say something good at parting to make them remember this place and maybe someday decide to come back" (Buksha, 2014).

The space model of the novel's setting is also canonical: it is hierarchic. The light from the central tower ("there is a searchlight above the passageway; the beam of light shoots steeply up ... <into> the dull and foggy

sky but its aim is not the outer space but the clock on the central tower") is headed to the main building (the factory manager's office) and spreads to almost all the workshops. But the galvanic workshop is practically devoid of light ("green fog spreads out under the faint yellow light of the lamp hanging from the ceiling" (Buksha, 2014). It correlates quite well with the name of the chapter describing the fates of the workers of this workshop: "The Women of Hell".

There are other constituents of the big family model in the novel as it was already mentioned above but the interpretation of their contents has very little in common with the guidelines suggested by Kh. Giunter in his study.

For example, Ksenia Buksha adverts to the events of the Great Patriotic War and these references run through the whole plot of the novel. This interpretation of the concept can be undoubtedly called researcher's own touch; it corresponds with the archetype of the enemy in Giunter's conception. The events of the war are connected with the subject matter of individual chapters ("the central tower"); they define the heroes' fates (for instance, the factory managers' G and N), command respect and admiration ("... comrade C is a big man... He can lift an elevator with one hand. In the war, you know, he blew up several tanks. He has decorations" (Buksha, 2014), make up acute memories and feelings of the main characters ("Valia K. suddenly remembers ... <the time> when he was little and they were leaving Leningrad on a barge. "Look!" said Valia's elder brother. Valia turned back to look at the city and saw a fantastic sinister sun above it. Its blaze was thundering in the black sky. "Mom, is it the end of the world there?" asked Valia. That night Badaevsk depots were burning. The barges were bombed; the one that cast off before theirs drowned with all the passengers" (Buksha, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

As the analysis shows in K.S. Buksha's novel "the "freedom" factory" a fundamental for the Soviet society of 1930-50's model of the big family is used (the father, the motherland, sons and daughters, their enemies). The traditional triangle as applied to the factory, transforms in the following way: the father is the regular factory manager; the mother (land) is the symbolic image of the girl/the woman; sons and daughters are the workers. We think that Ksenia Buksha understands the archetypal nature of this model and the image of Artemii Volynskii (on the place where his dacha had stood the factory was built) is also nonrandom in this context. The traditional interactions of the model constituents can also be traced: the spontaneous energy of the sons is restrained by the

father of the mother the emotional warmth and cordiality are characteristic, etc. At the same time of all the factory managers only N shows the complete correlation with the concept of the father; the image of the girl-woman is quite abstract; moreover, the plenitude of femininity in the novel belongs to the women-workers. Before our very eyes the object of meaning becomes its subject, a form that contains this meaning as well as the technique of its transfer in a number of cases. However, one should admit that the components of the Soviet discourse connected with a man's personality (collectivism, enthusiasm, creativity, consideration of the future) are represented in the novel vividly and earnestly. The researcher's attitude toward the "Soviet past" is ambiguous: she finds ways to rejoice at the grand achievements (that is when the exciting images of space, ocean and the like appear), to underline, regardless of stereotypes, talents and ambiguity of her characters (the engineer-inventor of the Golden sphere and others), to show different types of women and their charm (Tasia, Tania, Inga, R, M, L). And yet, the general atmosphere of disorder and even poverty of Soviet people's lives, the lie and hypocrisy of the official slogans, the fear of repression dwelling in people's minds, emergency work and unpaid overtime as well as some other things in a word, everything that the author implies using the word "maniacality" stirs up the her deepest disapproval.

"The "freedom" factory" is undoubtedly a new genre constitution. It is not just an "inside out" occupational

novel. Its last chapter "engineer N" outlines some future trends in the existence of both the factory and Russia on the whole. This novel is a certain synthesis of documentary (the "verbatim" technique), epistemological (the archetypes of the mass consciousness) and essentially artistic (lyricism) principles. It is a mature work of great talent.

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