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Literary criticism

Gaidash A. V. Reviving the Memory of the Holodomor in Oksana Zabuzhko's Novel "The Museum of Abandoned Secrets"

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REVIVING THE MEMORY OF THE HOLODOMOR IN OKSANA ZABUZHKO'S NOVEL "THE MUSEUM OF ABANDONED SECRETS"

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The article studies how the memory of Holodomor is restored in contemporary literature, using the example of the largest novel by Oksana Zabuzhko, a powerful and influential novelist whose image as an ambassador of Ukrainian culture worldwide is recognizable. Restoring the memory of the Holodomor genocide is relevant not only for contemporary Ukrainians but also for the entire democratic world, as Russia continues to use grain control as a weapon. The aim of the article is to demonstrate the formation of the Great Famine theme in the novel using the imbrication technique. To achieve this goal, historical findings are employed, and a close reading method is used. The analyzed historical sources (A.Applebaum, A.Kozytskyi, R.Conquest, L.Lawton, S.Plohy, O.Subtelny) prove that in addition to the terrible suffering that killed people of all ages, the traditional Ukrainian lifestyle in the countryside was destroyed, the genetic fund of the people was violated, which caused irreversible psychological changes in the Ukrainian (self)awareness. Literary scholars (V.Dibrova, O.Pukhonska, N.Tymoshchuk, O.Wallo) recapitulate that the deliberate silencing of the Holodomor by the Soviet regime and government control created an equally deep trauma not only for the survivors but also for the next generations of Ukrainians, which is reflected in fictional texts. The article's author detects and interprets the episodes in which the novel's theme of the Great Famine is manifested. Although the action unfolds in later times, and the Holodomor does not pertain to the text's main events, the trauma of starvation as a factor in the reality of the

characters, and thus of the entire Ukrainian society, is salient in all subsequent historical stages. In "The Museum of Abandoned Secrets," reflections on the Holodomor genocide take the form of characters' memories and constitute rhetoric of post-memory. Though episodic fragments, the abandoned past is revived and constitutes the present. The author builds the mystical interaction between the Ukrainian generations.

Keywords: *Holodomor; famine; starvation; genocide; secrets; Oksana Zabuzhko; memory.*

Гайдаш А.В. Відродження пам'яті про голодомор у романі Оксани Забужко «Музей покинутих секретів»

Стаття присвячена темі відновлення пам'яті про Голодомор у сучасній літературі на прикладі найбільшого роману Оксани Забужко, чий імідж письменниці як амбасадорки української культури у світі є впізнаваним. Відновлення пам'яті про Голодомор-геноцид є актуальною не лише для сучасних українців, а й для всього демокритичного світу, через те, що Росія продовжує використовувати контроль над зерном як зброю. Метою статті є продемонструвати формування тематики Великого Голоду у романі за допомогою техніки художнього вкраплення. З-поміж використаних методів застосовано культурно-історичний і метод повільного читання. Проаналізовані історичні джерела (Е.Епплбаум, А.Козицький, Р.Конквест, Л.Лоутон, С.Плохій, О.Субтельний) доводять, що крім жахливих страждань, у результаті яких гинули люди різного віку, було знищено традиційний український спосіб життя на селі, порушено генетичний фонд народу, що спричинило тяжкі морально-психологічні зміни в українській (само)свідомості. Літературознавці (В.Діброва, О.Пухонська, Н.Тимощук, О.Валло) відзначають, що навмисне замовчування Голодомору радянським режимом та урядовий контроль сформували не менш глибоку травму не лише у тих, хто вижив, а й у наступних поколіннях українців, що відображено у художніх творах. В основній частині статті простежено й проінтерпретовано епізоди, у яких у романі проявляється тема Великого Голоду. Хоча дія роману розгортається у пізніші часи і Голодомор не належить до основних подій роману, травма голодування як чинник реальності персонажів, а відтак і всього українського суспільства, присутня на всіх подальших історичних етапах. У «Музеї покинутих секретів» роздуми про Голодомор-геноцид побудовані у формі спогадів персонажів і становлять риторичну постпам'яті. Крізь епізодичні фрагменти відроджується покинуте минуле, яке впливає на сьогодення. Авторка вибудовує містичну взаємодію українських поколінь.

Ключові слова: *Голодомор; голод; голодування; геноцид; секрети; Оксана Забужко; пам'ять.*

Introduction. Each nation's history has its vital moments that define its people. For Ukraine, one of the pivotal times was the Holodomor genocide. In his history of Ukraine, Orest Subtelny argues that "The famine that occurred in 1932-33 was to be for the Ukrainians what the Holocaust was to the Jews and the Massacres of 1915 for the Armenians... it traumatized the nation, leaving it with deep social, psychological, political, and demographic scars that it carries to this day" (1988, p. 413). In tune with Subtelny, Serhii Plokhly highlights the trauma of the Ukrainian society which was incapacitated "for open resistance to the regime for generations to come" (2015, p. 254). The genocide of the Ukrainians was

performed by the seizure of food from the peasants forced by non-fulfilled dragon norms of bread harvesting (grain-procurement quotas) imposed by the soviet authorities from Moscow. Communists used food as a weapon. In her study of the export of Ukrainian grain abroad in times of famine, Anne Applebaum relies on the evidence of the witnesses: “To Ukrainians watching food leaving their hungry republic, the export policy seemed crazy, even suicidal” (2017, p. 211). Mass hunger of millions of Ukrainians had drastic consequences: apart from the terrible suffering resulting in the deaths of people of all ages, the traditional Ukrainian way of living in the countryside was wiped out, and the genetic fund of the people was violated. It caused heavy moral and psychological changes in Ukrainian (self)awareness; on top of that, the deliberate silencing of the Holodomor by the soviet regime and the governmental surveillance of keeping it secret formed no less deep trauma among several generations of Ukrainians. Thus, the task of the scholars and fiction writers is to share the knowledge that Holodomor was a manufactured famine.

Ukrainian literature reflected this tragedy in a number of fictional texts throughout the last ninety years. Oksana Zabuzhko, among a number of other Ukrainian and Diaspora authors, endeavors in her fiction to rediscover the truth that the communist regime had hidden for half a century. A prominent world-known novelist and philosopher, Dr. Zabuzhko is a modern influencer whose books are translated into different languages and reprinted continuously. It is difficult to overestimate her role as the ambassador of Ukrainian culture, which makes the study of the Holodomor genocide in her most popular texts translated into English timely and necessary.

The Holodomor tragedy is to be understood in the context of the “Ukrainian question,” which means the people’s will for independence and freedom. In 1935, a British journalist, Lancelot Lawson, presented an address, “Ukrainian question,” for the Anglo-Ukrainian Committee in the House of Commons. Lawson’s speech focused on the need to secure freedom for Ukraine, encompassing the brief history of the Ukrainians. In it, the journalist stressed the distinct and separate life of the Ukrainian nation, the inability of the Russians “to admit that there is such a people as Ukrainians” (Lawson, 2006, p. 109), the “Western European quality” of the Ukrainians along with “a strong consciousness of nationhood” (Lawson, 2006, p. 110). The first mention of the Holodomor by Zabuzhko is made in the broader frame of defining Ukrainianness: “... what happened to all of them afterward, did they all die out in the 1933 Famine? Did they perish in the camps, in the NKVD

holding cells, or did they simply work themselves to extinction on the collective farms?" (2011, p. 89). Despite all imaginable repressions of the Ukrainians by their northern neighbor, Lawson asserts the national spirit in Ukraine among educated classes and peasantry. It is the vigorous resistance of the Ukrainian peasants against Bolshevik government that led to unequal struggle and a great famine in 1932-33. In his address, the journalist highlights: "Of this famine the soviet government denied the existence, though the evidence of its occurrence and severity was overwhelming" (Lawson, 2006, p. 117).

Ethnic and national issues were the reasons for the famine used as a weapon against the Ukrainian population who was non-compliant with the communist regime (Stanislav Kulchytskyi, David Marples, 2012). Apart from the research on the history of the famine, modern Holodomor studies focus on retrospective representation and appropriation of the genocide at large, as there has been silent treatment as well as political exploitation of the subject at different periods of time in Ukrainian society. In her study of the history of the Holodomor, Anne Applebaum provides a broad context from the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917 onwards (2017).

Theoretical Background. In her 2005 thesis, Natalya Tymoshchuk outlines the most significant Ukrainian prose texts on Holodomor written within over seventy years. She studies them as a manifestation of antitotalitarian or non-conformist discourse. This is the systematized approach to the analysis of literature in question in which the author offers several taxonomies of her own: one of them is a demarcation of the numerous short prose fiction from novels. What is indicative of short stories and novellas is a shift of the narrative focus from the third person (more distanced and therefore rather objective) perspective to the first one; action can be limited to the internal reflections of the narrator; the tragedy of Holodomor is rendered by means of individual experiences and visions of the characters (Тимошук, 2005, с. 56). The big prose of the 1980s-1990s tackles the Great Famine primarily through the lens of historical and documentary fiction based on archival sources and factual accuracy, infers the scholar (Тимошук, 2005, с. 164). I assume that episodic references to the Great Famine in Zabuzhko's novel function as short prose within a bigger textual space and employ the features indicative of the smaller texts in the taxonomy of Tymoshchuk.

In his essay on the state-of-the-art Holodomor fiction, Volodymyr Dibrova sees the seeds of numerous social problems in Ukraine, in particular, the corruption and imbalance of the political elite, as well as the inconsistent nation-building

policy of the governments of independent Ukraine precisely in the tragedy of the Great Famine of 1932-33 (2008, p. 265). Dibrova proves that those Ukrainians who survived after these years had to renounce their native language so that they would not be accused as “enemies of the people” of so-called “bourgeois nationalism”. When the native language is treated as foreign, it is tough to “maintain historical memory and national aspirations” (Dibrova, 2008, p. 266). “The typical reaction of those who survived the Holodomor,” writes Dibrova, “was always a frozen facial expression with indescribable horror and sadness, as if saying: ‘Not to remember!’” (ibid.). The scholar detects a common denominator of “a typical reaction of famine survivors” (Dibrova, 2008, p. 267): apart from the emotions of ineffable terror and sadness, the victims try to forget their past, as Dibrova infers, in order to keep their sanity and go on living. Although a Ukrainian historian, Andriy Kozytstky, warns against generalizing and simplifying the Holodomor Genocide, the scholar extends and clarifies Dibrova’s sentiment with the following inference: in times of the Great Famine and especially in its aftermath, the survivors had to give up their usual lifestyle, which led to the loss of self-respect, leveling of the traditional values, and moral inferiority (Козицький, 2021, сс. 64-65). Regarding fictional texts, Dibrova is convinced that “... literature in Eastern Europe had to perform the function of a public forum where the nation tried to cope with its traumas and insecurities” (ibid.). Zabuzhko addresses this challenge by highlighting the silenced knowledge in her fictional texts. In her recent study of the traumatic memory of the Great Famine in modern cultural texts, Oksana Pukhonska underlines that only a few novels, including “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”, “describe the Holodomor in a broader context as an indispensable event of the twentieth century’s national trauma” of Ukraine (2023, p. 174). Together with Zabuzhko’s first novel, “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex”, addressed from the perspective of the Holodomor representations further in the article, the theme of the Great Famine occupies an important place in the novelist’s works and makes her role in the development of genocide theme in Ukrainian literature significant.

Methods. Holodomor Studies is an interdisciplinary enterprise based on findings from history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political studies. Thus, the important excerpts from Ukraine’s history are included in the Introduction. Literary criticism is also important in raising awareness about the Holodomor Genocide. In further analysis, a close reading of the relevant

fragments revealing the significance of the Great Famine for understanding the national identity in Zabuzhko novels is employed.

Results and Discussion. Oleksandra Wallo defines “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets” as a national biography (2019, p. 117). The novel explores fragments of Ukraine’s past over the last sixty years of the 20th century. The voluminous text exposes several interconnected developments montaged in accordance with museum principles (a detailed account of the novel’s action revolving around the protagonist Daryna is undertaken by Wallo in the chapter “Excavating the (Gendered) Nation: Oksana Zabuzhko’s Museum Novel”). Overall, the book is built on the model of a detective story, although not all the national and individual crimes are unveiled. Plochy argues, “The famine was part of the eastern Ukrainian experience, while nationalist resistance and insurgency had characterized western Ukraine” (2015, p. 314). In “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”, Zabuzhko enables the coexistence of the memories of both tragic periods of the nation’s history, organically imbricating the narratives about the Holodomor into the discourse of two subject lines taking place in the past and the present alternately.

Thus, in the protagonist’s memories of her deceased aunt who managed to survive despite all odds, there is a direct mention of the Great Famine: “... that’s how 1947 did not become, despite the Ukrainian plans of the mustachioed Generalissimo, a conclusive repeat of 1933, so the UIA (Ukrainian Insurgent Army – A.G.) can be credited with winning at least *this* (italics of the author) war, one that’s not mentioned in a single history book” (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 42). Using the metaphor of the eponymous museum of abandoned secrets for the whole country, the author aims to fill in the gaps in national history by means of her protagonist. The Ukrainian TV journalist Daryna collects bits and pieces of Ukraine’s Soviet past subverting “silence and continuous victimization” (Wallo, 2019, p. 123) that creates “Zabuzhko’s alternative history project” (ibid.). It should be mentioned that the woman novelist developed the literary tradition of exposing hidden secrets initiated by Diasporan writer Vasyl Barka in his Holodomor novel “Zhovty Knyaz” (1962).

Among the dominant Galician characters in the novel’s subject line of the past, there are important exceptions. A minor character, Gypsy in the small division of UIA is an Easterner from Slobozhanshchyna, who justifies his stay among Galich-men angrily: “What else would I’ve fought on the motherfucker’s side? For what they did in ’33?” (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 154). Notably, the Galician

characters refer to the rest of the country as Great Ukraine, a decolonizing technique the novelist employs (Zabuzhko debunks the use of “little Ukraine” rooted in historical Russian discourse). One of the features of the novelist’s decolonizing discourse is the negation of victimization. The awareness of the Holodomor (trauma) without victimization complex helps enhance national identity (Gorta Mor, pp. 12-13).

In a further development of the theme Gypsy shares his painful memories of the death of his parents, who were buried alive by the Soviets in the Holodomor:

“All his life he’d made crosses and they shoveled him in without one. Threw him into one big dump, and that’s that... <...> During the hunger. The drag went around the village, picking up the corpses. Mother was still breathing, but the driver said, ‘She’s got a day, no more; I ain’t making another trip tomorrow’. So they shoveled her in, too” (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 162). In his book “The Harvest of Sorrow”, Robert Conquest infers that there were numerous similar testimonies of burying still-breathing peasants in those years on the basis of eye-witness accounts from Olexa Woropay’s 1983 memoir “The Ninth Circle” (1986, p. 231). A boy back then, Gypsy survived thanks to his grandfather, who stuffed him unnoticed into the train car with the kolkhoz horses headed for Kharkiv. Gypsy’s story is summed up by his prophecy of an Easterner to the Galicians that “When kolkhozes come <...> you’ll see it with your own eyes” (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 397).

In the climax of her 1996 novel “Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex”, Zabuzhko takes a family stance on the Holodomor memory. The protagonist’s Mother is a great famine survivor who was three years old in 1933. Her story about the stalks of wheat stolen from the field for what the child was cut across her face with a whip is narrated in a third-person point of view, almost in a documentalist style. What is also important is the recognition of the epigenetic consequences of hunger trauma: “American Sovietologists still can’t figure out why there are so many fat, shapeless women in this generation” (Zabuzhko, 2011, p. 149). Psychological distress led to a cultural code of securing food leftovers and spare bread.

Food becomes a litmus test for recognizing Ukrainianness or humaneness as opposed to the Soviet regime in “The Museum of Abandoned Secrets”. In the narrator’s reflections (the subject line of the present), this distinction is unambiguous: “... if we won’t give a hungry man a piece of bread, how are we different from the Bolsheviks who feed only the ones they choose, their handmaidens – some with pea soup and some with the caviar from officers’ rations?” (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 406). Also, the state’s appropriation of peasants’

individual food became another weaponry in the never-ending war waged by the imperialistic neighbor.

In the novel's subject line of the present, the Holodomor is referred to in the transatlantic context. One of the male characters (Vadym) expands on the imperialistic position of the Soviet Union: "Take even what happened in '33— Stalin got the West right where he wanted them when he flooded the world market with all that genocidal Ukrainian wheat! And remember, it was the Great Depression – d'you think Roosevelt just happened to roll over and recognize the USSR exactly then?" (Zabuzhko, 2009, p. 496). The mention of "genocidal Ukrainian wheat" widens the scope of the famine and raises the issue of the Western perception and visibility of the catastrophe: there was no wide international recognition of the Holodomor (apart from a few exceptions), not to mention sympathy or support (Dibrova, 2008, p. 268).

Investigating the death of her lifelong friend, Daryna discovers a "humongous grave" of the starvation period, which was blasphemously asphalted in the soviet time. Ukrainians have always been known for their reverent attitude to death and the dead, which was deliberately and systematically violated by the policy of the Bolshevik regime (Козицький, 2021, сс. 54-55). Using the dialog of two minor characters, residents of the nearby village, the author adds the flavor of the surzhyk (also preserved in the translation) and the fatal consequences for those who dared to desacralize the burial site. In this climactic episode, Wallo detects the connection between the national past and "mystical ties of familial retribution" (2019, p. 123).

Conclusions and perspectives.

One of Ukraine's abandoned secrets, long time ignored, is the Great Famine, which Zabuzhko repeatedly rehabilitates and resurrects in her fiction, widening the public visibility of the Holodomor genocide. Unleashing the silence of the tragedy, the woman writer exposes the trauma in the background of the Galician guerrilla war. The novelist tackles death by starvation from two perspectives in "The Museum of Abandoned Secrets": autobiographical reminiscences of the tragedy in the subject line of the past and reflections on the desacralization of the victims' mass grave in the subject line of the present. Minor characters narrate both perspectives. Their accounts create the distance indicative of the documentary style. Zabuzhko's distinctive decolonizing discourse negates the victimization complex frequent in historical narratives of Ukrainian fiction. The next study will address a revival of the collective memory of Holodomor in the drama genre ("The

Grain Store” (2009) by Natalia Vorozhbit), which tackles the epigenetic consequences of the famine-genocide.

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