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SOCIOCULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF CHILDHOOD

Edited by

**Petya Bankova, Michelle Janning, Aude Le Guennec,
Elya Tsaneva and Violeta Periklieva**

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Social Change and Images of Children in 1920s – 1930s Ukrainian Women’s Literature

Snizhana Zhygun

Abstract: This chapter describes the mismatch between Soviet conceptions of motherhood and real mothers’ experiences in late twentieth-century Ukraine via analysis of images of children in Ukrainian women’s literature. This period is marked by the considerable social and ideological changes caused by Bolsheviks’ decrees. Legally, they destroyed patriarchal society of that time. But realization of these ideas mutilated them. On the contrary, women’s texts of that time, in particular by N. Zabyla and R. Troyanker, glorify motherhood approve it as the intelligent choice. These texts significantly discord with the propagandized ideas of a child as a new person saved from inheritance of tradition (the character of R. Troyanker, the Ukrainian Jew, worries future identity of the daughter Olenka); of a child as the hope of society (N. Zabyla sees continuation of own femininity in the new-born daughter); of a child aloof from mother (the characters refuse the new relations for the sake of the child). The propagandized condemnation of “blind motherhood” is shown in the conflict between personal and public which paints motifs of a child’s disease or death. Thus, the analysed texts recorded real women’s experience of motherhood that does not match the ideological constructs relayed by the Soviet literature and media.

Keywords: Children images, Women’s literature, Motherhood.

Biographical note: Snizhana Zhygun is a Doctor of Philology, Associated Professor at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University and a researcher at T. Shevchenko Institute of Literature of Ukrainian National Academy of Science. She received Master’s degree in philology and creative writing from Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, a degree of a Candidate of philological science (PhD) at Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, and Doctor’s degree at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University. She is interested in literary theory, Ukrainian literature of the 20th century, and ideological influence on texts and by texts.

Affiliation: Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University

Contacts: s.zhyhun@kubg.edu.ua

Introduction

The features of understanding and implementing policies in the field of childhood at the early stages of the Soviet state development are decisive for the Soviet culture formation, taking into account the particularities of child socialization in the 1920s-1930s, which influenced the next generations. But the reconstruction of childhood, referring only to legal or media discourse, will be incomplete due to the gap between the official propaganda discourse and real experience that characterizes Soviet culture. Therefore, it is interesting to consider the image of a child in the women's texts of Ukrainian literature, since childhood is closely connected with motherhood. Therefore, in this chapter, the main focus will be on the gap between the advocated views on childhood in the 1920s -1930s and the images of children in women's literature, that allude to the real experiences of those times. For this purpose, the articles devoted to children's topics, published in the central newspaper *Proletarska Pravda* (Proletarian Truth), have been analysed. Attention is paid not only to the ideas that shaped the image of the Soviet child, but also to the way in which this image was formed. This media construct has been compared with the image of a child in women's texts, the themes and problems that these texts emphasize, and a number of discrepancies have been identified, that constitute the main interest of the chapter.

The Bolshevik revolution became the reason of not only political, but also public changes. Already the earliest decrees of Bolsheviks "On Marriage Abolition", "On Civil Marriage, Children and on Entering into the Acts of Civil Status" (1917) and "The Decree on Child care and Motherhood" (1918) had significantly changed the status of woman and child. A woman had acquired the right to material and sexual self-determination, to the choice of the place of residence and citizenship, received the four-months paid holiday in connection with pregnancy, and the right to paid breaks for the feeding of a new-born. The Decree "On Civil Marriage" and the Family Code of 1918 equalized in rights the children born in wedlock and out of it, the decree proclaimed all children to be the children of the republics, confirming care of a child as a direct duty of the state. The code also declared the principle of every possible protection of children's interests. It also assigned the care of homeless children to the state. Adoption was introduced in the legal field only in 1926. And only in the Stalin Constitution of 1936 was the protection of childhood connected to motherhood. Normative legal acts seemed to be rather progressive and were often glorified by researchers (Rostova, 2007; Sazhyna, 2013), but the Soviet history all the time was showing the striking gap between the law and its implementation. Therefore, we should pay attention to the ideology of that time, which influenced the development of events often more considerably than the law.

The main ideologist in this field in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution was Alexandra Kollontai, who proclaimed the ideologem of the "new woman" characterized by "self-discipline instead of emotionality, the ability to value freedom and independence instead of obedience and 'depersonalization', asserting own individuality instead of naive effort to take and display someone else's image of the 'beloved', the demand of the rights to earthly joys instead of hypocritical wearing a mask of integrity, eventually, assignment to love experiences of the

subordinated place in life. There is not a female and man's shadow before us. There is a personality, a 'person-Woman' before us" (Kollontai, 1919: 29).

The name of Kollontai is associated with the ideas of "free Eros", whose perverted realization caused a defective world view paradigm that led to social collapse and a large number of abandoned children, who did not have enough places in the created shelters.

Mother and Child in the Mirror of Ideology

The media discourse in the second decade of the 20th century shows the disunity of the women's and children's themes. Thus, the main trend of the women's discourse is successes in work, social activity, and the working-class movement. Pages of the analysed general political newspaper *Proletarska Pravda (PP)* (1928) offer readers photos of factory workers, delegates, shooters, inventors, etc., not depicting mothers or housewives (as well as popular singers or actresses), which can be explained by the target audience. (Picture 1) But these "progressive" images



Picture 1. Original photo caption: "Only Soviet authority makes free woman. The woman at work and at a club. When mother is at work, her children are in pre-school". Globus, 1929, 5, p. 73

contrast with the “Red Court” and “Cases” headings, which convince that violence, abortion, struggle for alimony, lack of rights and dependence on husbands at home and at work were an integral element of the women’s life of that time.

The resolution of the 13th Congress of the Russian Communist Party insisted on the active involvement of women in public and political life, therefore, children’s institutions were considered as means to increase the productivity of their work and rationalize production (PP, 1928a: 2) or as method of influence:

It is the best of all to organize the woman around kindergarten. In the course of work from preschool education it is the easiest to awaken her political consciousness, to clarify her social role, to make of her the active member of society (“For preschool business”. PP, 1928b).

A woman appears in the media as mother only with a new-born and as an object of the state care: article on perinatal centres “Milk Drop” (PP, 1928f: 3) or holiday homes for mother and child (PP, 1928d: 5). The educational role of the mother is completely ignored. Family education is condemned as a source of “hooliganism, anti-Semitism, chauvinistic sentiments” (“Pioneers and School”. PP, 1928g: 5). The solution of the problem of replenishing the street children ranks by children having parents who can’t find for them enough time was seen not in the parents unloading, but in the social organization of actions.

The socialization of children was the main trend of the children’s topic in the press. The most frequent were the articles of two groups: one fight against homelessness and on kindergartens, playgrounds, schools, shelters and other forms of children’s “collectivization”. (Picture 2)

As the article “Attention to Children’s Collectives!” (PP, 1928j: 5) convinces:

the main task of the Soviet pedagogy by which it differs from bourgeois one, is to cultivate collectivist skills, communist desires, to train children to be builders of the new socialist system.

Moreover, the author assigned to children such tasks as: “help to poor pupils, distribution of loans, defence of the country, organization



Picture 2. Homeless. Globus, 1927, 1

of children's clubs, playgrounds and many other things". It is worth reminding that in the third decade of the 20th century, "these many other things" covered antireligious propaganda, hours of labour, denunciation, and participation in terror. True, a school and a kindergarten prepared not only future builders of communism, but also were considered as a breeding-ground of agents of change: in the analysed periodicals it is a question of bringing to the family norms of hygiene, agriculture, etc. In art texts it will change in ideological control of parents by children.

The important motive of reports about state sponsorship of children is formed by texts about hot meals that were established in schools, kindergartens and playgrounds, which was very important because of low level of well-being. The theme of entertainment is embodied in the reports about children's performances at theatres, children's films, books and broadcasts because they were considered the effective instrument of education. The presence of toys in the Soviet child's life is confirmed only by one article ("ABC on cubes". PP, 1928c: 5), which criticizes the unsatisfactory quality and calls to the ideological control of cubes. One more article contains a mention of that time games ("Cooperation cares for children" PP, 1928e: 3). Such distortion of the discourse was caused by popularity of the beliefs of the Kharkiv specialists in pedagogy that proletarian children need neither toys, nor fairy tales, nor songs. The theme of the holidays is focused on organizing arrangements for the revolutionary event anniversaries, and for March 8. A significant segment is made by articles on the struggle with the Christmas trees as an element of antireligious propaganda. (Picture 3 and Picture 4)

It is also important to point to a clear tendency to depersonalize children who appear in figures ("How many children study at schools?" (PP, 1928i: 3), "Through preschool education to a new way of life" (PP, 1928a: 2), "About kindergartens in Kyiv" (PP, 1928h: 3)) or in different groups: "homeless children", "pioneers", "preschool children", and in rare stories about certain children, they hardly ever mention the name of the child. Describing these or those phenomena of the children's world, the authors don't submit the children's assessment, leaving the adults views as the only ones worth attention.

V. Gudkova (2008), analysing features of the Soviet plots in the second and third decades of the 20th century, identified the typical features of children's images of that



Picture 3. Visualization of foreign and soviet children in media. Original photo caption: "The bourgeois entertainment". Globus 1927, 22, p.507

time (the material for her was mainly male texts, in which women ones were dissolved). The ideologies of the new woman and the world revolution as the highest goal caused the fact that in plots of the early 1920s the birth of the child was thought as narrow-mindedness, as a collateral, burdening result of “the need satisfying”. New women in the stories of that time did not want to waste time and energy on raising children. Many characters didn’t want and couldn’t have children: “Paradoxically the playwrights whose central and ‘right’ characters are constantly dreaming of the future describe the break of life, the life deprived of continuation” (Gudkova, 2008: 178).

By the way, the state concept of the post-revolutionary development of the country emphasized the role of the child: it seemed logical that the truth is surely saying by the infant’s mouth that a new person who did not live in the “reactionary dark past” has no its marks (Gudkova, 2008: 173).

Therefore, the child began to be thought of as the authority that taught and controlled adults. Besides, in the state which is consistently denying any private property, it becomes unimportant whose child, who brings up him: he belongs to society in general from the birth (Gudkova, 2008: 182).

Accordingly, the plots fixed the rupture of family relations, replacement of private experiences.



Picture 4. Visualization of foreign and soviet children in media. Original photo caption: “A young Leninist”. *Globus* 1925, 13, p. 294

Women’s Texts: Between Ideology and Experience

In her essay “Professions for Women”, Virginia Woolf (1931) expressed the idea that women writers surely should overcome a certain phantom, an ideological construct, which demanded from them to meet public expectations. It was “The angel in the house” for V. Wolf, and it became the “new woman” for the writers of the 1920s. Accordingly, women’s art work became the arena of the struggle between the need to conform to ideological requirements and the desire to express one’s own experience, which is more often embodied in the lyrics than in the epic. The struggle and conquest of ideology was not only the immanent motive of the analysis of the Ukrainian authoress’ works, but also of their lives. The second decade of the 20th century was the time of active cultural development and arrival of many beginning women writers in the literature, but already in the next decade the Red

Terror became more active, and some of the writers were repressed and shot. Some of the writers left the literature, but some of them confined themselves to the works for children. As a result, practically nothing is known about many writers of that time. Natalia Zabyla and Raisa Troyanker are among those the records about whom have been kept in private archives and memoirs, therefore there is an opportunity to compare their works with the real experience of a woman of the 1920s.

The peculiarity of the artistic world of the lyrics by N. Zabyla and R. Troyanker, whom contemporaries called erotic poetesses, is glorification of motherhood. The main value for N. Zabyla was the family with children, for R. Troyanker it was mother and child relationship.

Motherhood as the intelligent choice defines actions of N. Zabyla's lyrical character: for the sake of the child she is capable to ask about preservation of the family; to break off the premarital relations ("There can't be any love, / If there is no child, – / There can't be a child, / My son is somewhere far away"). The emphasis on the continuity of the maternal connection with the child sharply disconcerted with the social tendency to alienate the child from the mother.

A child never appears in Zabyla's lyrics as "Little Octobrist" or "pioneer", she never thinks of him as a hope of society (even in ideologically biased ballad *Lena*). Instead, she sees continuation of her own femininity in her new-born daughter. In general, her lyrics convey feelings about her own children (and the characters of her children's works have their names: Tarasyk, Yasochka, Halochka-Strybalochka, Maryna Dmytrivna).

It should also be noted that N. Zabyla turns to the lullaby genre, developing it as a fantastically symbolic lyrics. These verses are too remote from traditional lullabies both by original figurativeness, and by rhythm-melodic, and stay on the verge between a poetic fairy tale and lyrics. Fantastic motives (the explanation of natural phenomena through their personalization) were a challenge to the prevailing ideas concerning the harmfulness of fairy tales and fantasies for the upbringing of the Soviet child.

The media discourse in the second decade of the 20th century which so actively showed children in figures, avoided the infant mortality rate, but obviously it was high, judging by objective conditions of life. The media and art discourse in the third decade were filled with the idea of the child victim for the sake of the future. The active use of children in the Ukrainian village subjugation by artificial famine (the pioneers revealed grain caches, took part in protecting collective farm fields from hungry fellow villagers) led to the victims among them that were subject to sacralisation.

Considering the theme of children's death in the Soviet culture, M. Stolyar (2012: 26) points out that: not only and not so much the future is "loved" in the child, but that innocent victim capable to give the strongest impetus to the struggle. The child sacrifice on the altar of hatred is not reflected in the culture that proclaims the child the most important idol.

Children's death in women's texts is a personal tragedy, taken hard, described with emotional details, where there is no place for the victim pathos. Even in those texts where the traditional role of the mother woman is compared to the "new woman", professional duties are a rescue in the most difficult time:

And you don't cry, / you are not only a mother / who will carry pain and sadness in the heart, – / To you winged, dreaming to build / New buildings of joyful houses (N. Zabyla, 1930: 17) (she had buried three daughters during her life).

And in A. Turchinska's verse (1929: 355), having the real addressee, the consolation has a philosophical note: "But I know that not to learn the joy / Without pain, tears, without costly loss". Even in, on the whole, ideological text *Traktorobud* by N. Zabyla (1931-1933), who represents the participation of women in the future creation, which the plant embodies, the death of the child is a part of the intrigue but is not conceived as a victim. According to the plot the engineer Halyna Klynko, as a member of the Komsomol group, projects a part of the plant while her mother looks after her little son. The decision to give birth to a child has caused the gap between Halyna and her husband, who wanted to focus on engineering work. In the novel's course, he repeatedly reproaches Halyna, accenting her inability to take care of the child because of the work and the Komsomol loading. It is characteristic that he doesn't pay alimony for the child, but in the novel Halyna's work is motivated not by this fact, but by emancipation and production enthusiasm. After all, the boy dies and only this tragedy forces Halyna to miss several days of her work. The character suffers her grief stoically, forbidding colleagues to express sympathy and even recall it. Her internal state is proved by a mistake in calculations because of which there is a threat to the construction. Thus, unhappy motherhood is thought by the writer as a threat to the woman professional realization.

However, in other aspects of the theme the story entirely reproduces an ideological discourse: the character in the second part Leta Azarova works as the concreter at the Traktobud construction. She also has a child named Maivka, whom she has left with her ex-husband, despite the fact that he is poorly suited to the role. But when his maid comes back to the village, she brings the child to the hut where Leta lives. Her co-workers decide to take collective care of the girl, and when more children came, they arrange a nursery.

Another characteristic image is a son of the engineer Rolensky, who questions whether his father is bourgeois and who pushes him to join the engineers Komsomol members. The political literacy of the son, obtained from conversations in the yard, does not annoy Rolensky, but it is perceived as entirely rightful.

Thus, we have the embodiment of the main ideological narratives: a new woman, a social child, and a child agent of changes. *Traktorobud* is represented in the story as a variant of utopia, for which the characters refuse feelings, proper living conditions, even health for the sake of building the future environment in which women will be realized in labour, and children will be taken care of in state institutions.

If the border between texts of the "new woman" and own maternal experiences in N. Zabyla's works coincides with the boundary between lyrics and epic works, then in R. Troyanker's works it is within lyrics. Such verses as "My father is upset and silent" and "Evening" belong to the works by the "new woman". The first one in the form of a drama monologue fixes a break with Judaic tradition, but adding to the character the invented details ("I work at the Veka factory/ And my child is a Little Octobrist"), Troyanker betrays that speaks not for herself, but on behalf of someone more appropriate to the new ideas.

The researcher of her works, Y. Petrovsky-Shtern (2018: 193), who is analysing this verse, draws attention to the fact that Jewish values are defined by the character as inexpressive, alien and deceptive; in contrast to them, “Troyanker is identified with the communist future, the embodiment of which was the image of her daughter little Octobrist” (in the text – *dytyncha* (child), the Tryanker’s daughter was only a year old at that time. – S. Zh.).

But the embodiment of communistic ideals in an invention forces to doubt concerning own feelings of Troyanker. A strange feature of the “Evening” poem from the point of view of adherents of the autobiographical character of Troyanker’s lyrics is the fact that her lyrical character addresses the son whom the poetess didn’t have. Y. Petrovsky-Shtern (2018: 212) treats it as an element of “self-emancipation”: “Troyanker changes a gender of the child, pointing to a male body as the catalyst of the literary writing”. However, it seems that the son becomes a marker of estranging her own voice from the voice of the “new woman”, for whom the importance of motherhood is lost before the previous “rebellion fires” (which also were not in Troyanker’s life), so she predicts: “I will carry you to the orphanage. / Days in smoke and gases will buzz. / I am small but a part of the whole / and I will go to the Red Army ...” (Troyanker, 2009: 78). In other verse the lyrical character, who is a front telephonist, also has a son, who is a chekist (an agent of the Cheka). In the verse “Letter” by T. Kardynalovska, mother of two daughters; her son died at the age of three months, the Bolshevik son also appears. Most likely, the son in these verses is not a “catalyst of literary writing”, but a response to the militaristic needs of the time – “whispering” of the “new woman”.

Therefore the surprised critic’s (Kapustianski in Petrovsky-Shtern, 2018: 212) question: “Why boy, but not Olenka?” has a simple answer: because she would never send Olenka (the name of Troyanker’s daughter) to orphanage. As well as she could not leave her daughter with the father, when she married for the second time.

On the contrary, the verses “My Father Drove Me Away and Cursed Me” and “The First Victory” reproduce the direct poetess’s impressions of motherhood and the real name of the daughter appearing in them becomes the marker of “true”. The first one tells the individual story of the family conflict because of a mixed marriage, which stumbling block is not the stranger son-in-law, but the granddaughter, unlike the Jew: “And Olenka has blue eyes/ and fair-white hair./ What will my girl answer/the sensitive question of ‘nation?’” (Troyanker, 2009: 80) The identity of the child with family disturbs the woman, despite efforts of the authorities to destroy this identification.

“The First Victory” glorifies the mother’s feelings and affirms the first “getting up” on the feet as an event; moreover, it calls it “the triumph of victory”. If we recall that in the male texts the act, the first made decision becomes the event in the child’s life, then we can estimate the differences of the women’s art world.

Thus, we state an interesting feature of R. Troyanker’s art world: the boundary between personal, real experience, and ideological construction also reinforces different gender roles: the lyrical character demonstrates the feminine behaviour in the verses about the daughter and the masculine one in the verses about the invented son.

The poems “On the Tenth Anniversary” and “The Birth of the Poet” are also of particular interest. The first one is in fact defence of the mother’s feelings before

“the new women”: the lyrical character can’t go to the festive meeting at the plant where she has to make the report because her child is sick and needs care that leads the character into the conflict with the collective’s expectations:

I know – Zina from Kofok will say, “‘You see, your own is the dearest!’ and the smile on lips will lay down / And it will be clear to everyone following:/They will say: ‘What a Bolshevik is she! – / There are only words, but in fact she is not!’ / The child has spots on the face ... / Zina doesn’t know the word ‘mother’” (Troyanker, 2009: 81-82).

This pressure of “new women” demonstrates the real problem of that time, which has remained beyond the male literature attention: despite the new legislation guaranteeing the broad rights to women, ideological practice brings these achievements to naught. And women have to defend their right to be a mother.

The poem “The Birth of the Poet” is an example of an escape from the influence of social constructs for the sake of self-realization. The birth of the poet (in the text – the poetess) occurs at the time of liberation from social roles, even when it concerns the most desirable of them.

The lyrical character suffers the pangs of remorse because her poems are born during the illness of her daughter, but she does not renounce it, asserting her right to art writing. The fact that this theme is not accidental to Troyanker is confirmed also by the poem “The Night Talk”, where the lyrical character addresses Mephistopheles in search of happiness. She wants to combine motherhood and family with literary work and the fact that she appeals to the devil for the help, demonstrates disbelief in a possibility of such combination in the real world. It seems that Troyanker was aware or in any case felt the pressure of the patriarchal and new ideas that prevented literary writing and publishing, prevented to tell her own word until she completely succumbed to them, having created the collection of patriotic lyrics during World War II.

Conclusion

As a result, we can identify a number of features of children’s images in women’s texts. N. Zabyla and R. Troyanker glorify their maternity, approving it as a meaningful choice. Their texts significantly discord with the propagandized ideas of the child as the new person saved from the heritage of traditions (e.g. Troyanker’s character worries about the future identity of her daughter Olenka); the child as the hope of the society (N. Zabyla sees continuation of her own femininity in her new-born daughter); the child alienated from the mother (the characters refuse new connections for the sake of the child); the depersonalized child as the embodiment of the desirable future (both poetesses express their own experience in the lyrics, marking it with the real names of their children). The propagated condemnation of “blind motherhood” is embodied in the conflict between the personal and the public, which colours the motives of the child’s illness or death. Thus, the analysed texts recorded the real women’s experience of motherhood, which does not correspond to the ideological constructs relayed by the Soviet literature and media.

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