

Tatiana Komarovskaya.
Belarusan State Pedagogics University, Minsk, Belarus

Quest for Identity: What is Gained & Lost on the Way.

American feminist literature has risen as a result of the position of a woman in American society since the foundation of the colonies. Women have experienced all dangers and hardships side by side with "pioneers" and colonists, but both in politics and at home they were subordinate to husband, to governor, and to patriarch, that is to Man. This made women question the social and life roles imposed on them. In the middle of the 19th century Emily Dickinson started inquiring God about the justice of the world He created and doubted, first, His powers and, second, His very existence. At the same time Harriet Beecher Stowe expressed a different view of a woman's role in life creating, in her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, characters of darlings, home goddesses admired by their husbands, worshipped by a flock of children, loved and respected by the community, reigning seemingly without any effort over their households and simultaneously attending to the matters of faith and conscience.

Since this time two traditions of depicting the fate of a woman have started in U.S. literature: a grim revolt against the world dominated by Man, and the sentimental domestic novel which advocates family values. For a century and a half, and especially during the last 40 years, both of them have evolved, particularly the second one. The first may be traced in the works of Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Gates, Joan Didion, Erica Jong; the second one is evident in the works by Jane Smiley, Jane Hamilton, Anne Tyler, Alice McDermott, and Mary Gordon. Both trends differ in their estimation of the role of a woman in society and her destiny. One can observe a difference in the characters chosen and their delineation, in the construction of the plot and even in style: a woman's revolt against the status quo of the world she lives in is expressed by fragmented, disconnected prose, by non-linear narrative, by the interception of time, by easy wandering back and forth in time, eventually, in the form of a modernist or post-modernist narrative. The second trend is realized through realistic narrative. It has a lot in common with biography or a historical tale. It is chronological, linear, with characters created according to the laws of realist fiction. The main theme of both trends is a woman's search for identity, for her place in the world, and the consequences of this search.

From this point of view it will be very interesting to analyze some of the novels by Jane Smiley, Jane Hamilton and Margaret Atwood (1).

Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres* transplants Shakespeare's tragedy on the American soil rather accurately emphasizing the similarity of the names of the main characters to those of *King Lear* and the analogous turns of the plot. As in *King Lear*, Larry Cook, his American counterpart, the wealthiest fanner in the country, the owner of a thousand acres of fertile land, divides his farm among his three daughters - Virginia (Ginny), Rose and Caroline. The youngest and the most

beloved daughter doesn't get anything and is banned from the sight of her father. Two eldest daughters gradually turn against their father and eventually revolt against him, which causes the split in the family. Even the scene of the tempest is preserved for Larry Cook also leaves his house in downpour, if only to go to his neighbor's house. And, surely, there is the lover of both the eldest daughters. He starts with Ginny and then goes over to Rose, with Ginny's well-remembered intention to poison her sister. The novel ends with the depiction of the family's collapse, the death of some of the characters, and the frustration and living death of the others. It is a King Lear story, told by his eldest daughter, but her story is opposite of Shakespeare's interpretation of the cause of the tragedy and its characters. As it often happens in works of art based upon myths, Smiley's novel, preserving a seeming likeness to myth, opposes it, and the message of the novel is revealed by this discrepancy with the initial work of art. A contemporary American King Lear, a despot and a brute, ruins the lives and personalities of his two elder daughters, beating them cruelly for any trifle, raping them, crushing the smallest sign of will and resistance in them.

This novel based upon myth, is an interesting example of the social novel, continuing the tradition of the interpretation of the theme of land by Balzac, Zola, Steinbeck, Faulkner, Updike, Kolas. The social message of the novel is stressed by the author in her tale of the land "floating from farmer to farmer", of its expansion through crimes and meanness, of the destruction of nature which brings death into the families of the destructors.

A Thousand Acres is also a feminist novel devoted to the woman's painful search for her identity, a search which leads the heroine to loneliness and what she herself calls "an afterlife which didn't contain a future". This thought is more prominently expressed in another of Smiley's novels, *Ordinary Love*, in which the heroine trying to realize her desire to start a new life loses her husband and brings misery upon her children. The love affair which she had in her young years and which ruined her life, has resulted in her separation from her husband and her children, brought her so much frustration and made her children half orphans. Smiley stresses the fact that this affair was born not of her love or passion for the other man, but of her inner striving to start a more interesting and colorful life, to identify herself with her lover, who was a traveler and a writer. It is noteworthy that in her reminiscences of her lover a map of the world which used to hang in his study plays such an important role constantly coming to mind of the now mature heroine as a symbol of unrealized but tempting possibilities.

The specific features of Smiley's novels as feminist novels demonstrate themselves in a psychologically exact recreation of the peculiarities of female psyche, female perception of the world, a woman's reaction to the turns of life; in the negative representation of the male characters, and the emphasis on the idea of their alienation from women and even their inborn hostility towards them. At the same time Smiley shows the dangers that a woman encounters in her search for freedom and self-realization.

Interestingly enough, *A Map of the World* becomes one of the main symbols in Jane Hamilton's novel under the same title, but the meaning of this symbol is

quite different. At first sight, this novel reminds of *A Thousand Acres* by the problems it poses and by their interpretation. But this similarity between the two novels is quite superficial, for Hamilton elaborates on another aspect of a woman's search for identity - a psychological, a moral one.

The inner plot of the book, which grows out of the heroine's reminiscences of the events of the previous summer, represents her passionate spiritual journey during a few months full of moral suffering, pain and self-denial. She blames herself for the death of her best friend's two-year-old daughter Lizzy on her farm. Alice stoically accepts her arrest on a false accusation and her three-month stay in prison, taking them as a just retribution for her sin.

The book is about her attempt to overcome self-denial and self-annihilation. From her dread of real life, which has accompanied her, she comes to accept forgiveness as the main law of her future life.

The map of the world, giving the title to this novel, plays a special, and very important, role in the evolution of the character of the heroine. Alice, a very introspective person by nature, had an unhappy childhood. She lost her mother early, and her only consolation in those times was the map of the world, which she herself painted in different colors. It gave her an illusion of a world of her own, separated from cruel reality, always providing an escape from it.

Now, having turned into a mature woman with two children and a husband whom she loves, she still can't help escaping from time to time to the world of her own, to which they have no access, though now it is the world of dance. The map of the world also plays an important role in the construction of the plot of the novel, for on that unfortunate morning when Lizzy drowned herself in the pond on Alice's farm, Alice was detained upstairs by the map of the world which she had unexpectedly found and couldn't help plunging in. So the map of the world in both the novels becomes a symbol of alluring but ruinous temptations. A woman would be happier if she stayed within the boundaries of her female fate giving herself to her husband, her children, realizing herself through love, not through hate or alienation which would lead her to self-destruction - that is the outcome of the heroines' painful search in these novels.

The social aspects of this novel are evident in society's reaction to Alice's arrest. Hostility towards her and her family, the good citizens' readiness to believe the most perverted things about her, a wife and the mother of two children, are explained by her personality. She is so unlike others; her emotional reactions seem strange to the people in the neighborhood. In addition, Alice and her husband are newcomers in this county who cannot fit into the community.

Hamilton's book asserts the importance of the solid moral basis and self-reliance for a person looking for identity in a complex world and participates in the Emersonian tradition in U.S. literature. Its message with emphasis on love and forgiveness, which alone can bring a person to peace with him/herself, together with psychological depth and elaborate analysis of the characters' inner life makes it an important contribution to feminist literature.

The political aspect of a woman's search for identity is the focus of Margaret Atwood's brilliant novel *A Handmaid's Tale*, which belongs to the genre of

dystopia. This term is «the opposite of Utopia, and applied to any alarmingly unpleasant imaginary world, usually of the projected future» (2). Not infrequently, dystopian writing contains a warning against the future in case the world accepts a totalitarian model of development. American literature of this genre continues the traditions of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984*. But it also has its own wonderful example - the novel "It Can't Happen Here" by Sinclair Lewis, the anti-totalitarian and anti-nazi message of which has been brilliantly developed by Kurt Vonnegut in his novels *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Sirens of Titan*.

Atwood's novel is a feminist variant of Orwell's *1984* in its interpretation of the future. The *1984*'s Big Brother, omnipotent and omnipresent, is transformed here into the system of Eyes, spies, not less omnipotent and omnipresent than he was. This model of the future is also distinguished by a rigid totalitarian system, expressing itself through wars in external policy and through fierce suppression of the slightest disagreement and dissent in home policy. People suffer shameful privations and live under a severe distribution system: public executions have become common practice. What is so specific about Atwood's novel is that oppression is directed against women.

The new totalitarian state, Gilead regime, is in a demographic crisis. As a result of abortions or women's unwillingness to have children intensified by poor environmental conditions and military experiments which have affected a lot of men, the birth rate in the country has critically deteriorated, alongside an increase of disabled newborns. So the totalitarian state directs its might against women's rights. First of all, women are deprived of the possibility to work and to have bank accounts, which makes them fully dependent upon men. Then a law is adopted according to which all second marriages or alliances are pronounced to be illegal. Men from these marriages are announced criminals and treated accordingly; children are separated from their "unworthy" mothers and transferred into the families of the childless elite; and women are turned into handmaids, that is, surrogate mothers whose task is to bear children for the barren elite. Childless women are sent away into the Colonies where they are used for work with highly toxic stuff which kills them pretty soon, or on plantations as slaves where they gradually strive to death.

The Gilead regime finds a historical precedent of this outrageous situation in the Bible, in the story of Jacob and Rachel. The Bible, which is taken dogmatically, becomes the ideological foundation of this totalitarian state.

The book brilliantly depicts a woman's wretched emotional experience under inhuman circumstances as well as the misery of her life under totalitarianism, which aims at depriving people of their individuality, even of their names. The scene is set in Cambridge, MA. The writer shows how easily a totalitarian system can be established politically even in a country with such strong democratic traditions as the U.S.A. A coup is accomplished by a gang who were claimed to be terrorists. The shooting of the Congress, the suspension of the Constitution, and the installation of the totalitarian state are justified by the need to maintain public order. The new regime is based upon racism and hatred towards Jews, and is fascist in essence. Atwood gives an insight into the psychology of people who get

accustomed to dictatorship in its most outrageous forms, including public executions. The novel shows how easily people lapse into the process of adjusting themselves to dictatorship and how easily they are deprived of their rights and made to believe any lie for the sake of everyday "stability". And then it is too late to do anything. "We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it" (3), Offred the protagonist confesses. "Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it" (4); the writer warns her readers.

The name Offred is not the heroine's real name; it is the beginning of the name of her new master to whom she now belongs. People's true names are forbidden in this totalitarian state: if you don't have a name, you don't have an identity, you don't have a memory, you are nothing, and this is exactly the aim of the regime. Offred recalls a TV interview with the mistress of a concentration camp commander which she watched in childhood. The woman claimed she had never known of the commander's atrocities: he could not be a monster. What Offred remembers particularly well about this woman is her make-up. Make-up here is a metaphor, a means of protecting a person against the harsh reality of life.

The character of the main heroine is masterfully delineated in the book. Offred is a clever, well-educated woman. She clearly understands what is going on in the country but can do nothing to alter even her own miserable position of a handmaid. Separated from her husband and from her daughter after a failed attempt to escape from the country, not knowing what has happened to them, she is torn between the desire to commit suicide, fear of torture, and the natural wish to live. She hopes against hope to reunite with her husband and daughter. She lives a miserable life of a person despised, always fearing lest she betray her true attitude towards what is happening in the country. The punishment for this mental crime can be horrible: she could be sent to the Colonies or even hanged publicly.

Offred suffers from the loss of everybody she loved, and from lack of love, for, she has no one to love, and nobody loves her. "No one dies from lack of sex, people die from lack of love" (5), she exclaims. But love is outlawed by the Gilead regime. In this respect *The Handmaid's Tale* continues the main line of "1984" - love prohibited by the despotic regime. The main theme of Atwood's book is a woman's freedom and love. Freedom is realized in love, and love means the right to free choice. The totalitarian state and a woman, despotism and love, marriage and family are opposed in this book as conflicting phenomena. The book contains a poetic eulogy to love and a woman's free choice directed at the construction of her life and her personality. In those old days when people were still free they did not always appreciate freedom: "...we used to think that everything was available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives. ...Falling in love, we said; I fell for him. We were falling women. We believed in it, this downward motion: so lovely, like flying, and yet at the same time so dire, so extreme, so unlikely. God is love, they once said, but we reversed that, and love, like heaven, was always just around the corner. ...We were waiting, always, for the incarnation. That word, made flesh" (6).

The book reveals the highest degree of alienation possible: a woman is alienated from her own body, which is used to produce children from one of the Commanders for the household in which she is put. The story is told in the name of Offred; the reader perceives the events through her poetic thinking, her excited speech full of poetic images. She cherishes the hope to get out, to escape, at least in the way of the story she is telling. Hence this tone of intimate confession in the book.

The writer stresses that the despotic regime always acts through a small part of those whom it oppresses. The opposition of "I" and "The Other" in this novel is not realized through Man as the Other, or the despotic regime in general, but through a group of women who first provide the ideological foundation for the regime, and then supervise its realization. It is through their agency that women's oppression is exercised. It helps to ensure their domineering position. Atwood shows the Gilead regime as a regime born of the extremities of the feminist movement, the reverse side of feminism, of which Offred's mother was an active part. Thus, the heroine addresses her mother, "Mother. You wanted a woman's culture. Now there is one... It's not what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies" (7). Ironically, Offred's mother is one of the first to be sent to the Colonies as an Unwoman, a special category of women who have the lowest social status in the country. The readers see for themselves that the totalitarian system inevitably affects people's moral values. The victory of a despotic regime reveals itself not so much in executions, arrests, or suppression of all forms of dissent but in the shift of moral values which takes place in society. This is one of the main ideas of Atwood's novel.

This idea finds its culmination in the last scene of the book which describes a kind of scientific symposium. 150 years later historians find the Handmaid's recorded tale and organize a symposium to discuss her story and the epoch. They justify the Gilead regime because it was "under a good deal of pressure" and say that their task is "not to censure, but to understand". The tragic fate of a concrete person, thousands of people killed or tortured to death by the regime don't move them because this great shift of moral values has taken root: the state is more important than individuals! The fact that this scene of a mocked symposium closely follows the end of the heroine's tale when she gets into the Eye's van not knowing if that is her end "or else the light", an escape, makes this thought especially prominent.

The fragmentary composition of the book is most suitable for the author's intentions as it conveys the heroine's tale of her life in which there is no present but fear, where the past is ever present, where the lack of events is compensated by Offred's meditations on the present and the past. The predominance of the chapters entitled "Night" in the book as well as the very fact that the most important events take place at night stress the idea of the book - that of life at night, night of the totalitarian regime.

From the very beginning feminist literature has had a very subjective character determined by the peculiarities of a woman's emotional life, by her concentration on her feelings and experience. Contemporary women writers have

affected the literary process in the U.S.A. in a number of complex ways. They challenge the established canons and explore the structured systems of oppression, be it a totalitarian regime or the prison of domesticity. They emphasize that the private is also political.

Maternal love is one of the main concepts which feminist prose is analysing. The investigation of the phenomenon of maternal love and its role in the upbringing of daughters is at the base of T. Morrison's novel "Sula".

In 1974 Alice Walker spelled out the logical conclusions of the promoter stance, being less historical and more overtly mythologizing. Walker wrote that the mother, as a model of strength and creativity, and the mother-daughter relationship, as a symbol of the biological and spiritual bond between all women, represented a force of almost mythic power for black women. Through reverence for and identification with the mother, black women can gain insight into themselves, form alliances with each other, and place themselves in an uninterrupted historical continuum of womanly, maternal strength. In the essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens", Walker writes that although black women have been called "Matriarchs", 'Superwomen', and 'Mean and Evil Bitches', "their true strength is not malignant, but rather lies in the simple ability to maintain an inner core of creativity in the face of unbelievable oppression"[8]. Walker's main thought is that strong African American mothers pass an invaluable legacy to their daughters: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength-in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" [9].

Toni Morrison's book "Sula" written at the time when these ideas were being formed in the black feminist movement, is basically their artistic representation, though the author's purpose is to investigate the opposite situation: what happens to young women in their quest for identity when their mothers are not up to this high moral task, do not show that spiritual and moral strength that they could bequest to their daughters.

But maternal love plays no less role, and its absence is as harmful for the upbringing of white girls. Mary Gordon's novel "Men and Angels" investigates the influence of maternal love (or its absence) on the formation of a woman's personality. Laura, the heroine of the novel, has always been neglected and despised by her mother. As a young girl, she finds consolation in the Bible. She assures herself she is the Chosen of the Lord, and her Mission on Earth is to teach people that all love and attachments are nothing, one should serve the Spirit and be Saved this way. Anne, another heroine of the novel, is looking for a nurse for her two children and hires Laura for that purpose. Being extremely kind-hearted by nature, she tries to suppress her dislike for Laura. Laura is really very unlovable. She has never been loved by anybody and can't inspire this feeling. But Laura loves Anne with all her heart and, true to her concept of reality, sees her Mission in Saving Anne, and dreams Anne loves her as well. When Anne finds out Laura has endangered the lives of her children by neglect, she sacks Laura and the latter, in disappointment and despair, commits suicide in her house in the most dreadful way.

There are three mothers in the novel who serve the author's purpose to ana-

lyse the phenomenon of maternal love. Laura's mother is a mean nonentity who killed her own daughter by her hatred. For Anne who married because, first and foremost, she wanted "to reinvent family life", children are most important, her love for them knows no limits. With the personality of the third mother, Caroline, the second important theme is introduced in the novel, that is intellectual life of a woman and the possibility for her to realize herself in the frames of family life. Two lines of the plot develop this theme in the novel: Anne's story who had brilliantly graduated from Harvard but devoted herself since then to children and family life, and Caroline Watson's story, who left her four-year-old boy to realize herself as a painter. She succeeded in her work, she drew wonderful pictures, but her son whom she had never tried to understand became a drunkard and committed suicide at 28.

One of the main themes of the book is the theme of Art and its connection to life. Studying Caroline's life and work for the organization of the painter's exhibition, Anne is struck by the fact that all the pictures of Caroline who had never known family life and had never loved her son praised maternal love and family virtues. Anne is bewildered by this strange sublimation of maternal love exposing itself only in art.

The construction of the novel reminds of a triple mirror, which doesn't produce a direct reflection. Anne's and Laura's stories are basically alike (both of them suffered from the deficiency of maternal love as children), but get quite different development in the novel. Anne, this central part of this triple mirror system, is as eager to realize herself as Caroline, but would never do it at the cost of her children's happiness or comfort. At the end of the novel Anne having got over the dread of Laura's suicide in her house, suffering from the thought that this tragedy has deprived her children of childhood and she can't help them, comes to the conclusion which is Mary Gordon's conclusion as well. Yes, there can be various expositions of maternal love, from complete indifference to the feeling which killed children actually or spiritually. "And there was the other part of mother love: it was not all of life. ... and it was a tremendous mercy. For there was so little you could do for them, even if you spent every moment with them ... You gave them life, you loved them, then you opened them to the world. You could never protect them; so you left them to themselves. That was the mercy that you could turn from them to something else, something ... they couldn't be a part of [10]. And Anne decides to devote herself to studying Caroline Watson's work.

So Mary Gordon who belongs to the less radical direction in the U.S. feminist literature suggests this most balanced solution to the problem of the realization of women.

The change of gender stereotype of behaviour takes place in many works of feminist writers, for example, in J. Smiley's novel "A Thousand Acres" and T. Morrison's "Sula".

The search for identity of the heroines of T. Morrison's novel "Sula" is based to a large extent on the change of gender stereotype of behaviour. In childhood irresolute and sensitive Sula is dependent upon a stronger and more unscrupulous Nell. In their youth a change of gender stereotypes occurs within this pair: Sula,

having lost support in mother's love, trust in herself, assumes a masculine stereotype of behaviour, and Nell becomes more and more feminized, taking the role of a loving tender wife and mother. Sula, in her new gender role, destroys the life and happiness of Nell, seducing her husband. Having fallen in love, Sula becomes feminized, returns to her own gender stereotype of behaviour, which brings her to failure and death..

The end of the novel shows the strength of this binary opposition Sula-Nell. Years later, Nell comes to the understanding that all the time she has missed not her husband, but Sula, for they formed an unseparable union,, "one heart and one throat."

So the general American theme: personality against society, Man against woman, dynamic tension between individual consciousness and the social territory occupied by it finds a special realization in the feminist novel, peculiar to it.

References

1. M. Atwood is a Canadian writer, but her closeness to U.S. culture, the artistic value of her writing and the message of her world-famous novel "The Handmaid's Tale," which deals with the women's existential problems and is set in the U.S.A., makes it possible to include her novel in this analysis.

2. Baldick, Chris. The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms. Oxford-New York: OUP, 1991. P. 64.

3. Atwood M. The Handmaid's Tale - N.Y., 1985. – P.74.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid. – P.131-132.

6. Ibid. – P.292-293.

7. Ibid. – P.164.

8. Walker A. In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose- N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1984.- P. 237.

9. Ibid.-P. 243.

10. Gordon M. Men and Angels. N.Y.,1985. – P.400.

Комаровская Татьяна Евгеньевна. Доктор филологических наук, профессор, зав. кафедрой русской и зарубежной литературы БГПУ им. М.Танка. Фулбрайтовский ученый университета штата Массачусетс.