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THE LENGTH OF DAYS BY VLADIMIR RAFEENKO
AND THE ISSUE OF LANGUAGE IDENTITY
IN CONTEMPORARY UKRAINIAN LITERATURE

Publishing rules, which have been changed in Ukraine after 2014, have a major influence on the publishing sector and, more widely, on literary life in Ukraine. After the introduction of limits on import of Russian books and state preferences for Ukrainian language in culture (films, books, radio and TV programs), language issue appears to be quite popular and important in discussions about self-identification among authors and everyone else involved in culture. While authors publishing in Russian as their main language and those writing in Ukrainian were previously separated and virtually existed in different worlds, today they try to cooperate on the basis of similar themes and views or become enemies because of different ideologies. Language now indicates the group to which a writer belongs, and ideology he or she would like to present in their texts. Language became not only the instrument of writing or a linguistic issue: it became a political instrument of both identification and division.

The Ukrainian situation is not unique. Language appears to be an issue in post-colonial societies in many countries all over the world. One of the examples is India, as discussed in the lecture *What is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?*¹ by Arundhati Roy, Indian English-writing author, the Man Booker Prize Laureate (for the novel *The God of Small Things*). In her lecture, Roy addresses Indian attitude to English language. She was accused of using colonialist language for describing postcolonial situation in India. She talks about English as the only language which may be common for different people from different parts of India, who use different languages for their everyday communication. She talks about English as an opportunity for the dialogue and for similar ground for understanding each other. She doesn't deny small languages

¹ Roy, A., What is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?, *Literary Hub*, 25. 7. 2018. (First part). [online: <<http://lithub.com/what-is-the-morally-appropriate-language-in-which-to-think-and-write/>>, cit. 2018-11-08].

of India (and any other small languages), her novels tell a lot about language, culture and mental diversity of India and the world. Yet she also shows how important it is to have something in common, to have the unifying language: “How many tongues does she [India – *author’s note*] have? Officially, approximately 780, only twenty-two of which are formally recognized by the Indian Constitution, while another thirty-eight are waiting to be accorded that status. Each has its own history of colonizing or being colonized. There are few pure victims and pure perpetrators. There is no national language. Not yet. Hindi and English are designated ‘official languages.’”²

She points out that the state tries to keep together India’s diverse ethnic, culture and language groups; a result of the British colonialism, English language is the best and perhaps the only possible language for the state: “India as a country, nation-state, was British idea. So, the idea of English is as good or as bad as the idea of India itself. Writing or speaking in English is not a tribute to the British Empire, [...] it is a practical solution to the circumstances created by it.”³

Ray also warns against the rise of nationalism and separation movements inside India, because they do not lead to cooperation, but instead to conflicts and misunderstandings. She suggests that “language is that most private and yet most public of things”,⁴ which has great influence on us. The society we live in decides which language or languages are more appropriate to express ourselves and to speak aloud about the issues that matter to us. Ray admits that her discussions about language suddenly became more than just her private position: “It was about language again. Not a writer’s private language, but a country’s public language, its public imagination of itself. Suddenly, things that would have been unthinkable to say in public became acceptable. Officially acceptable.”⁵

As a writer she deals with the language as an instrument for writing and expressing different situations, people and feelings. Her second novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* joins different voices from different parts of India, which actually speak different languages. Yet in the novel they all are brought together by English: “And so, in this novel of many languages, it is not only the author, but the characters themselves who swim around in an ocean of exquisite imperfection, who constantly translate for and to each other, who constantly speak across languages, and who constantly realize that people who speak the same language

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Roy, A., What is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?, *Literary Hub*, 25. 7. 2018. (Second part). [online: <<https://lithub.com/what-is-the-morally-appropriate-language-in-which-to-think-and-write/2/>>, cit. 2018-11-08].

are not necessarily the ones who understand each other best.”⁶ Actually, working and thinking about this multilanguage fiction world gives Ray the right to say that the main enemy of her novel is the idea of “one nation, one religion, one language.”⁷

The issue of diversity and freedom was also raised by a group of European authors in January 2019. They published an open letter in *The Guardian*, entitled *Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it*.⁸ The situation described in the letter is political, though the signatories are mainly novelists and philosophers from all over Europe, such as Milan Kundera, Salman Rushdie, Elfriede Jelinek, Orhan Pamuk and Bernard-Henri Lévy. They see how the right words in languages can change the attitude to the issue. They show the other, negative, side of using the term identity, mainly in populist and uncompromising manner. They appeal: “Enough of ‘building Europe’!” Let’s reconnect instead with our “national soul”! Let’s rediscover our “lost identity”!⁹ This is the agenda shared by populist forces emerging across the continent. Never mind that abstractions such as “soul” and “identity” often exist only in the mind of demagogues.

The signatories are internationally distinguished figures. Most of them have chosen their identity because their origin, biography and mindset are wider and deeper than the national identity carved in stone. Salman Rushdie, similarly to Arundhati Roy, was born in India. Yet his writing is closely connected to British culture and language. He is known for his post-colonial novels, which bring together Indian and European issues. Elfriede Jelinek was born in Austria and is Austrian writer and Nobel Prize laureate, but her parents have quite a mixed identity, her mother was Romanian–German and her father was Czech Jew. In such situation the identity can’t be simple, and it is always the result of personal choice. Herta Müller, also signed the manifesto. Born in Romania with German as a mother language, she describes in her novels Romanian reality, but is supposed to be German author.

The manifesto was also signed by Milan Kundera. A native of Czechoslovakia, Kundera had to leave the country because of political reasons. In 1975, he went to France, and became French citizen in 1981. His first novels were written and published in Czech, but then he began writing in French. He forbids to translate

⁶ Roy, A., What is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?, *Literary Hub*, 25. 7. 2018. (First part). [online: <<http://lithub.com/what-is-the-morally-appropriate-language-in-which-to-think-and-write/>>, cit. 2018-11-08].

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ See: Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it, *The Guardian*. [online: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patriots-nationalist?fbclid=IwAR3dqdQXYoSRMF4Au62EVTMkRnoiY-yCCHUiOe3rfYi56kUGKW34BNcvK0Ug>>, cit. 2018-11-06].

⁹ Ibidem.

his early books from Czech language and prefers the French version for all of them. It seems that the words of one of his main characters from the novel *The Farewell Party* (Czech version was published in 1972, French in 1976) Klíma, who is leaving Czechoslovakia, are the author's words too. He says that he wants to leave everything that belongs to this country, in this country. Someone may not like this, but the character/author is able to do this and change their identities. To choose the one which is closer and more natural for them. Ukrainian translation of the novel, published in 2018, for example was made from French version of the novel, as Kundera wished. And that's the freedom, he and his colleagues are talking about in the manifesto.

But let's return to Ukraine. The post-colonial situation here leads to the definite separation of two languages, Ukrainian and Russian. This separation takes place also in works of some authors, who now decide to change their language identity. The very interesting example of it is Vladimir Rafeenko. He was born in Donetsk, but after the beginning of war in the Donbas region he had to move to Kyiv. He became famous because of his novels written in Russian. Yet his last novel *The Length of Days* was published both in Russian and in Ukrainian (as translated by Ukrainian writer Marianna Kiyanovska).¹⁰ *The Length of Days* was nominated to several literature prizes (longlist of the 2017 BBC Book Award, the 2018 Visegrad Eastern Partnership Literary Award) and was well-received by Ukrainian literary critics and public.

When comparing language identity in India and Ukraine, Ukrainian situation appears arguably simpler: Ukraine doesn't have hundreds of native tongues. Nonetheless, the conflict between the national tongue (Ukrainian) and the empire language (Russian) is very deep and does affect the process of self-determination. Rafeenko's novel manifests similar attempt to understand what is happening in the Eastern part of Ukraine and why, something that is akin to Roy's novels and articles about India. They both deal with the history trying to explain its influence on the current situation. The fact that the novel became so popular, especially after it was translated into Ukrainian, shows not only the importance of the war topic in the contemporary Ukrainian literature, but also the fact that the idea of chosen language and chosen identity presented through the language is common for Ukrainian society today. Rafeenko would be likely to agree with Roy on the idea that language (especially for a writer) is not something given once and for all. One is free to choose and change it by changing language identity. Rafeenko defines this idea at the beginning of his novel by using a quotation from Lithuanian author Tomas Venclova "nationality is no more definite by origin, it becomes the problem of individual choice". As we can see from the aforementioned manifesto that describes the situation across Europe, the thesis is not quite common yet.

¹⁰ Рафеєнко, В., *Довгі часи*, Львів 2017.

There is a suspicion that this simple truth (which seems to be common for Europeans after World War II) can now be in jeopardy. Contemporary literature is like a mirror: it tells us the facts about the society and predicts different scenarios about what may happen in the future. Ukrainian contemporary literature that talks about the Ukrainian war context and self-identification seems to be of relevance beyond Ukraine as well.

Chosen identity is also the main topic of the other war novel *Boarding School* (2017) by the acclaimed Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan. This theme also appears in some short stories by Kateryna Kalytko in her book *The Land of the Lost* (2017) that received the BBC Book Award. The historical novel *The Neat Samples of Writing from Archduke Wilhelm* (2017) by Natalka Snyadanko also addresses chosen identity. It is based on real-life story of Wilhelm of the House of Habsburg who decided to be Ukrainian politician. It's quite symptomatic that a number of most successful Ukrainian books from the last year have a single topic in common.

Rafeenko sees the core issue of Eastern Ukraine to be an attempt to return to the past, to the age of Soviet Union, not even real, but formed by propaganda and nostalgia. It led to the conflict, and to the absence of self-identification. The city Z, described in the novel, is unable to return to Ukraine and its identity, but it is also unable to join Russia. It finds itself in some mystical, unreal and desperate situation – it doesn't exist. One of the characters tells the other: "This is because you, Vasyl, don't really exist! And no one who lives here exists! Instead of joining Russia [...] you have joined the Soviet Union, as you wished for all your mad life."

These words are very similar to those from the manifesto that warn against returning to the past: "Our faith is in the great idea that we inherited, which we believe to have been the one force powerful enough to lift Europe's peoples about themselves and their warring past. We believe it remains the one force today virtuous enough to ward off the new signs of totalitarianism that drag in their wake the old miseries of the dark ages."¹¹ The fictional world of the Rafeenko's novel is full of tragedy (and comedy sometimes), and it is rapidly losing itself. It can be saved, but also in very strange and mysterious way (which is full of the author's irony – he makes the Indian god Ganesha and Ukrainian Romantic author Taras Shevchenko join forces to save Donbas). The language like a code can help, but it can be also used like an instrument of propaganda. Both sides to the conflict in the novel use the characteristic propaganda statement "people just wanted to speak their native language and to pray to their gods" without thinking

¹¹ Fight for Europe – or the wreckers will destroy it, *The Guardian*. [online: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/25/fight-europe-wreckers-patriots-nationalist?fbclid=IwAR3dqQXYoSRMF4Au62EVTMkRnoiY-yCCHUiOe3rfYi56kUGKW34BNcvK0Ug>>, cit. 2018-11-06].

on what this sentence (and these concepts of language and gods) really mean to them. The sentence is used for so many times by both sides of the conflict that it loses its meaning; it's not about the language or religion, it's about policy. As Roy said, it's not a private question any more, it's country's public question. As the manifesto says it's already the imagination of demagogues.

Along the line of Roy and other European novelists, Rafeenko shows what really matters: "Ukraine is not about borders, customs, or religious background. It is not about the map of language preferences. It's not about watersheds or tectonic plates. It is about people, damn it! People and only people! They are the culture!" The language and religion should bring people together, and not draw them apart.

Rafeenko's novel is full of intertext and quotations, which reach as far as the wide Ukrainian (allusions to Zhadan, Andrukhovych and others) and world cultural context. For example, he uses the quotation by Karel Havlíček Borovský, Czech writer and 19th-century politician: "Russian people name everything Russian to be Slavic just to name everything Slavic to be Russian." Such quotes set the novel to the wider area, where language identity is only one between other identities and make readers think about language choice as about the part of more complicated personal and social identity.

Also quoting Dmytro Dontsov, deemed to be one of the key Ukrainian nationalist ideologies, Rafeenko uses his idea that expresses the differences between Ukrainian (and other non-European) and Western attitude to the issues of identity: "It's interesting that for the European man there is no difference in race, language, traditions, but the wishes and the latitude of will really matter." We can admit that such an attitude is seen like wider stage, when the language and other individual identity issues are solved and are not be discussed in such cruel way as in Ukraine or India, where they are still topical. On the other hand, however, we can see that the issue of mixed, complicated and chosen identity is also important in Europe today. The straightforward choice of one nation, one language and simple identity doesn't work, and European history shows it very well. The topic has regained currency and makes its comeback in literature.

Roy expresses similar idea: "All this to say that we live and work (and write) in a complicated land, in which nothing is or ever will be settled. Especially not the question of language. Languages."¹² Until the identity (and language identity as a part of it) is not determined, it will be the object of writing and thinking, of hesitation and attempts to explain.

¹² Roy, A., What is the Morally Appropriate Language in Which to Think and Write?, *Literary Hub*, 25. 7. 2018. (First part). [online: <<http://lithub.com/what-is-the-morally-appropriate-language-in-which-to-think-and-write/>>, cit. 2018-11-08].

ABSTRACT

***The Length of Days* by Vladimir Rafeenko and the Issue of Language Identity in Contemporary Ukrainian Literature**

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The article deals with the language question in the contemporary Ukrainian literature, which became not only the esthetic, but also the political issue. This situation is not unique in the world, for example in India the position of English language (the language of colonist) has very similar position as Russian language in Ukraine. That's why the point of view by Arundhati Roy, well-known Indian author, is presented in the article together with position of Volodymyr Rafeenko, the Ukrainian writer. His novel *The Length of Days* appeared in both Russian and Ukrainian versions, his next novel is written only in Ukrainian, although before his forced relocation to Kyiv from Donetsk in 2014 he wrote only in Russian. The novel itself is about the self-identification through language and culture codes, and that's very common theme in contemporary Ukrainian literature. The article explains why is it so important and how Ukrainian author deals with this problem.

Key words: Vladimir Rafeenko, *The Length of Days*, Ukrainian Literature, Russian Language, Ukrainian Language, Self-identification.

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