

## Tatar Woman's Existential Concerns in Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*

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Submission date: 10.06.2023  
Acceptance date : 31.03.2023  
Publication date : 10.04.2023

**Ex  
PROFESSO**

*Volume 08 / Issue 01 / Year 2023*

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### *Abstract*

Guzel Yakhina has a significant interest in the social impact of Russian woman emancipation. She emphasizes the need to rethink Tatar women's existential concerns. Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* depicts a Tatar woman's feminist experience, as she tries to make her presence felt in Tatar patriarchal society. From psychoanalytic and feminist viewpoints, this paper examines Zuleikha's yearning for self-recognition and projects her battle against men's habit of thought, the oppressive behaviours and Tatar women submissiveness. Findings show that Tatar women's existential concerns bolster Zuleikha's forceful behavior and urge transgressing Tatar patriarchal norms and conventions.

**Keywords:** existential concerns; feminist experience; Patriarchal Society; Women Emancipation; Zuleikha.

Url de la revue :  
<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484>

## INTRODUCTION

Any national literature is, to some extent, a reflection of its people's collective: myths, aspirations, national victories and tragedies, contemporary ideologies, historical understanding, and linguistic traditions. It also helps shaping the future, since it is, in a true sense, a generative of fresh meaning. This is also true for Russian literature; Russian novels is regarded as a kind of genetic code for anticipating, not only specific outcomes or actual facts, but celebrate the mutual interdependence of the anthropological, historio-sophical and existentialist models in Russian culture , Elena A. Takho-Godi argue :

*Examination of such topics of Russian literary works as the aesthetics of Nature, views on space and time, utopian ideas, philosophy of history and artistic anthropology led to the conclusion about mutual interdependence of the anthropological and historiosophical models in Russian culture as a whole. This work also showed that the main features of the image of the future, such as orientation towards values, alternative character, universality, cosmic sense of existence. (198)*

Soviet literature remains vibrant and produced numerous works of lasting values. The debate for the uniqueness of early Soviet writers' works may be seen as an analogy for how modern writers have decided to acknowledge their influence. They present their work in different ways to articulate their chosen aesthetic genre. The profoundly altered connection between Russian writers and the state was inevitably dictated by the tremendous historical and social changes, but number of Russian writer call for decolonising modern literature from Soviet writing; Yakhina said in an interview with Andrew Roth ( The Guardian):

*"I think that we are still processing our past and it will take a long time. Thirty years ago, when the Soviet Union had just collapsed, we thought that we could leave everything behind and move into the new, bright future. But we're still working our way through the past."*

In the midst of patriarchal injustices, *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* is the novel which daringly deals with Tatar women metamorphosis, existential rights assertion, and voicing to the voiceless. The force of Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* is emerged from the author's portrayal of Zuleikha's enthusiasm outburst handled during her struggle to survive. Yakhina's literary prowess is manifested in her careful examination of Zuleikha's feminist experiences. Guzel Yakhina attempts to reflect Tatar women contemporary experiences and realities; women, who forge their ways from the non-conformity of their new status, persevere with gender inequality, exile and war. Zuleikha is a peasant Tatar woman, whose husband was died while fighting the Soviet Union. She was exiled to Siberia and left in a geographically remote area with few sources. Zuleikha had to endure and survive in the face of hardship and have an understanding to life realities, and forged a new path and purpose.

Guzel Shamilevna Yakhina was born in 1977 from middle-class family lived in Kazan (Russia). In 1999, she studied foreign languages (English and German) at the University of Kazan. Yakhina moved to Moscow to complete a course in screenwriting at the Moscow Film School. Written by a little-known writer, *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, was first published by AST

<sup>1</sup>. The novel was reprinted many times, and translated into over thirty languages. Yakhina won a number of international literary prizes including the 'Iasnaia Poliana' , 'Bol'shaia kniga' awards in 2015 and the French journal Transfuge's literary award in 2017. (Maguire and Langen, 2021: 81)

*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* is located in the crossroads of two different literary genres. Yakhina belongs to the generation of Russian women writers who did not witness Stalin's horror and, as a result, have a different perspective on era. Indeed, the historical gap allows young writers like her to reflect on their grandparents' experiences by placing them in a larger historical context. The work can also be seen as part of the New Russian Realism literary movement, which has been classified as a contemporary literary movement. Russian neorealist authors attempt to rebuild the recent past by telling the tales of those who intricate relationship between a given time's historical process and human vicissitudes. Yakhina reworks her grandmother's memories as a starting point, particularly when it comes to the Zuleikha's journey. She uses third-person narrative rather than creating an omniscient narrator. She occasionally reveals details on what the characters, particularly the protagonists, are thinking by inserting snatches of Zuleikha's stream of consciousness<sup>2</sup>. (Gigante, 2020: 37)

Yakhina emphasizes the need for examining women existential concerns by depicting Tatar women characters' contradictory change. The convergence of political, cultural, ethnic, and social contexts is involved in the portrayal of Zuleikha's journey to self-recognition. By discarding her former subservient self in favour of the free, emancipated, self-aware embracement of her current being, Zuleikha's new personality floats to the top of Guzel Yakhina's main interest. She "endorsed literature as a gender-inflected entity, featured unsubmissive female protagonists, and highlighted women's concerns; all focused on contemporary life; most relied to varying degrees on modernist techniques" (Barker and Gheith, 2009 : 301).

One of the common purposes of Russian women writers is struggle for literary freedom and emphasize on new literary perceptions of women universal issues. Yakhina's chief quest is to foreground Russian feminist stands i.e. gender equality in an increasingly male-dominant society. She struggles to impose the female's identity and eliminates the stereotypical images, which picture woman's eloquence as silence. Similarly, Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* tends to challenge the traditional portrayals of Russian reality:

*The fundamental assumptions of patriarchal ideology — the perception of woman as object, 'immanence', 'nature', passivity or death, as opposed to man as subject, 'transcendence', 'culture', activity and life, have dominated all*

*aspects of Russian social, political and cultural life. Many Russian women writers and critics too — along with western critics of Russian literature - have internalized this objectified vision. (qtd. in Marsh, 1996 :3)*

Gozel Yakhina's work has been exposed to criticism and is often accused (by its male counterpart) of being driven by emotion and lacking logic conscious views. Guzel, as her women characters, is doubly burdened by the political regimes of the country and the patriarchal persecution, as argued by Rosalind MARSH "it can be argued that, while this is undeniably true, some women writers have been unfortunate enough to suffer twice over, from both political and patriarchal persecution." (Marsh, 1996:6)

## **I. ZULEIKA OPENS HER EYES: UNEXPLORED REALM**

Yakhina's *Zuleika Opens her Eyes* relies heavily on the historical and political myths to shape Russian women consciousness. There is, in addition, a metaphysical layer which reveals itself in the story as a blurred image of mental unbalance. It becomes a thread, which glues Zuleika's destiny with that of her country. The survival instinct in a tough time is likewise prominent theme; her unerring instinct encompasses not only love for herself, but also love for her homeland. Yakhina imagines how fear and survival coexisted in a human entity. The fear can only be conquered through realizing that there is nothing worth worrying about, until the one puts his/her fears aside and faces the world with equanimity and confidence, Wilson argues:

*Fear, under any circumstances, is a disadvantage and out of place. We cannot begin to know the meaning of freedom in spiritual life until we have done with it. Until men and women learn that there is nothing about which it is worthwhile to be anxious, until they put fear aside and look forth upon the world with equanimity and confidence. (Wilson, 1903: 167)*

Overcoming fears demands rational thinking that involves avoiding gloomy thoughts about life, acknowledging doubts, and taking conscious decisions. The novel is about daringly facing the growing fears spread among Russian women for centuries.

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Zuleikha, a peaceful and submissive Muslim wife, lives in a secluded Tatar village with her violent husband and authoritarian mother-in-law. She is exiled to Siberia after her husband is killed by Soviet troops. On the harrowing six-month rail journey to her exile destination perish in a harshest winter, Zuleikha has to live in the middle of nothingness and struggle in despair. Zuleikha's story shows how to turn even the most dreadful situations into opportunities for strength and victory. This fragile woman becomes strong by forgiveness, commitment, love, and truth. *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* is a based on true events about the power of the human soul.

The novel's worldwide success demonstrates the story's immense significance and appeal. It resonates with people who realize how quickly life can change and

how difficult it can be to find the inner strength to deal with the challenges encountered in the outside world. *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* installs the conviction that the consequences of domestic violence and unfulfilled motherhood trauma that Zuleikha was fully slipped into are invisible as Helene Berman et., al states:

*It is widely understood that women who are survivors of violence often experience lifelong challenges. Although the effects are particularly salient during the reproductive years, they are often invisible, only to emerge in subtle yet insidious ways, often long after the traumatic events occurred. (Berman, 2014: 1253)*

Yakhina investigates how interpersonal trauma affects Tatar women as she articulates their existential concerns, taking into consideration their racial and ethnic identities.

## **II. CONCEPTUALIZING WOMEN EXISTENTIALIST TENDENCY**

While unfairly characterized as passive being, Tatar women have to revolt against men's habit of thought that defines them as objects. Zuleikha, as per Yakhina, has stereotypically recognised by her body; the reflection of Zuleikha's image via the man's point of view had seriously taken another direction. "Ignatov turns around. The small Tatar woman is standing sideways" (Yakhina, 2017: 146); Ignatov eventually comes to accept Zuleikha's strong will to survive: "But what do you know – she survived [...] But this one's alive. Not only that, she's carrying a child. What is her soul holding onto?" (Yakhina, 2017: 163). Zuleikha's status is predetermined by same archetypal images of women in the span of history. Yakhina delves into Zuleikha's existentialist experience. She relies heavily on her survival by mastering the environment she has been put into. Her role in this respect is also referred to that of national hero. Zuleikha is an active participant in battle, and there is always a utility in each of her actions.

Nonetheless, Yakhina in the novel extends Zuleikha's gender roles beyond the traditional Russian patriarchal conventions, which stereotyped and limited women's responsibilities. Yakhina's protagonist, on the other hand, is able to redefine and reconstruct her identity in a way that the adoption of masculine characteristics does not impair her femininity. Zuleikha is, according to Ikkonikov, is an angel, representing the Soviet Woman, as he said: "The mother with the baby is for all Soviet women" (Yakhina, 2017: 321). Zuleikha's femininity neither kills nor transgresses the Russian archetypal masculinity; it does not harm; rather, it dissolves in them. Zuleikha, a female character who is a type of woman with a creative spirit, tries to see the humanity in every action or word.

Throughout the novel, Zuleikha's moving image has been painted to revolutionise Russian men's traditional perspective. Zuleikha is the quiet, the obedient, but she is the polar opposite for Gorelov: "She's a viper. Who would have thought? She looks so quiet." (Yakhina, 2017: 336) Zuleikha's hunting skills has grown as the growth of her self-confidence; she has become a cause for everyone's

envy. "You cast a spell on it or something? The others in the artel ask, half-joking, half-envious." (Yakhina, 2017: 298)

Zuleikha, for Guzel Yakhina, is a feminist protagonist whose story is "about a woman who acquires new strength. It's a novel about the metamorphosis of a woman. You can call it feminist, be my guest." (qtd. in Amos) Because she constantly positions her own identity in connection to the men in her life, Western critics may refuse to labelling *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* as a feminist work, as they suppose that defining women consciousness needs to be fully independent from that of men, they believe that: "The other consciousness is the dependent consciousness for who the essential reality is the animal type of life; that is to say, a mode of being bestowed by another entity" (Beauvoir, 1956: 64). Yakhina is unwilling to dig into Russian men, but she does with Zuleikha's intensifying self-awareness and her acute her love to Ignatov. This is a distinct type of feminism that is characterised by self-prioritization even above the needs of feminist demands; it seems like an unusual type of women in both Russian and Tatar society in particular.

In *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, Yakhina has defined woman with her own perspective. She refuses to consider the traditional views that relegate women to essentially biological sexual creature. She defines woman by their own triumphs against seemingly insuperable social odds. Zuleikha's feeling of being existent becomes visible beyond the feminist grasp. Zuleikha deftly foregrounds an existentialist tendency that allows her discreetly acknowledge her new position and better comprehends her roles in her own way (Solomon).

Zuleikha substantially differs from other women characters in a variety of ways. However, her mere presence makes the difference in men's eyes. In this regard, Yakhina has hit on what exactly has allowed Zuleikha to rake men's recognition. She has not only defined women, but also neatly delineated her parameters. In *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, Yakhina captures the limited role of Tatar women, as they never enjoy the status they deserve. Yakhina tries to create balance between the expectations which wholly exists for men and what women can do for their own and for their society as well. Zuleikha's journey reflects Yakhina view on the reality that Tatar women are now desirous for earning attention and dignity.

Zuleikha's different self- image affects positively her journey to self-esteem. At first, Yakhina depicts Zuleikha as weak Tatar woman who is suffering from a multiple physical (due to violence) and social problem (due to men's mistreatment). However, her change is surprising, as she evolves into the self-reliant, independent, and powerful woman who is able to strongly confront circumstances challenging what has been argued that: "men have an inherent psychological need to subjugate women. The root of men's compulsion to dominate women and women's minimal resistance to subjugation lies deep within the human psyche." (Wolff). During her existential maturation, Zuleikha has overcome a number of challenges which seem hard for other women to endure, as a result of her new spiritual alterations and conscience. The collapse of old gender models causes a comparable shift. Life and environment alter significantly for Zuleikha; society loses its familiar contours and



becomes a space for her independence. A Tatar woman's traditional way of life, which hasn't changed in decades, forcing her to live in alternate universes, where strength replaces her anxieties and weaknesses. Whereas her emotions create the path for her sorrow evolves into the joy of a new worldview and self-confidence.

### **III. WOMEN'S SURVIVAL INSTINCT**

Yakhina confesses that she was inspired by Soviet films about collectivization and says she doesn't mind being compared to Socialist Realism as long as readers enjoy her work. Thus, Socialist Realism is part of a larger tradition of realist representation in the service of reparative narratives which are influenced by their depiction of collective life and explicit moral judgments. Late Soviet village prose and contemporary epic historical novels in Russia, like Socialist Realism, are engaged in mending the semiotic cosmos. The Orthodox goal of individual and community redemption through suffering is an integral aspect of author's faith. (qtd. In Sadovina)

Zuleikha does not speak out the changes in her way of life. These changes started after a series of subsequent events (her husband death, her mother-in-law abandoned the ransacked house). Zuleikha was also arrested and taken to Kazan then shipped to Siberia with a crowd of people from different races and ethnicities. As the train moved further into Russia's Eastern territories, Zuleikha experienced hunger, fatigue, disease, and mistreatment. "She thought she was seeing life. It would later turn out she was seeing death" (Yakhina, 2017: 106) "And Allah, when will my journey end? Could You break it with a supreme gesture? [...] Zuleikha has been carrying a longed-for death in her pocket [...] What is this if not the answer to her ardent prayer?" (Yakhina, 2017: 151) Severely diminished in numbers, the prisoners and Zuleikha finally arrived at their destination, where they were left to fend for themselves in Siberian harsh winter. Zuleikha, however, became more guided by her motherhood instinct to survive and gave birth to her son (Iuzuf), yet to a new hope for herself to survive. In this vein, Maguire and Langen write:

*A major theme of the novel is affirmation that a kernel of hope can survive and grow even in the worst time of sorrow. The seed of hope for Zuleikha is her son, Iuzuf, conceived just before her husband's murder, whom she carries inside her throughout the debilitating journeys to Kazan' and then to Krasnoiarsk, and who is born just after the deportees arrive at their destination on the desolate banks of the Angara river. (Maguire and Langen, 2021: 84)*

Zuleikha's utopian life embodies these dynamic changes. On another level, it has a more specific metaphorical meaning, which cements the mythological significance of Zuleikha and the other prisoners' journey. The use of metaphor is a literary habit for Russian writers as Ismailov argues:

*Russian writers love metaphor. It's easy to see why. During the Soviet era, Leonid Brezhnev's clique found itself failing to change the world, and began to*

*change the words instead – renaming places, recreating history, creating new simulacra, and all to make people believe that they were living in a perfect socialist world. Writers opposing the regime responded by creating a coded literature, full of hints, allusions and metaphors, leaving perceptive readers to find the real meaning between the lines. (Ismailov, 2015 : 77)*

The birds traverse highly metaphorical places searching, love, knowledge, indifference and unity. Like the birds in the Tatar legend, the novel's characters of various ethnic and class backgrounds are brought together by hunger and cold and held together by a sense of common hope and purpose. Zuleikha "knows that spring will come, the trees will burst with young greener. To the contrary: she feels herself part of a big and strong world, like a drop in an evergreen sea." (Yakhina, 2017: 298-299)

*Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* is about seeking redemption from evil. Zuleikha does not achieve redemption through communicating her trauma; she seeks to learn how to survive in dystopian life. "The book approaches the traumatic aspects of Soviet history through the prism of redemption; it seems to suggest that while not everyone survives the camps, the experiences in the camps can be overcome and even lead to personal growth" (111); writes Anisimova. Yakhina's realistic view in *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* removes any idealism in a society governed by an intolerant and murderous ideology.

## CONCLUSION

The fundamental contribution of Yakhina Gozel to the contemporary Russian literature is said to be in the construction of an original narrative framework that straddles – as has been demonstrated above – many literary genres, and, most all, the heroine's depth and complex psychological fabric. Zuleikha is a complex character who is both fragile and strong. Yakhina depicts her as a simple woman, a victim of a primitive culture in which she lives as an automaton, then as a subjugated and obedient prisoner.

In a number of images, Zuleikha is struggling with the arcane rules of Tatar society. The image of the silent women who appears to be moved by an uncontrollable force which the author places at the start of the novel shows an utter indifference to danger, but with the same bravery, Zuleikha demonstrates that she has to protect, help, or show empathy to others in need. In other words, she lets her existential instincts to guide her.

Zuleikha, in fact, passively accepts occurrences only as long as she lacks the mental and cultural tools to comprehend them. She leaps back in shock at the intrusion of history into her peasant life and pushes her to open her eyes. Despite her naivety, Zuleikha demonstrates that she is prepared to learn from her mistakes, adapt to changing circumstances, and survive persistently.

Yakhina depicts Zuleikha's journey in a variety of ways, all of which are entangled in a web of multilayered representations. In the core of Zuleikha's existentialist concerns resides a green-eyed monster of women's wills which blatantly deny life most complicated arrangement of persecution. Yet, as one of the



main characters in Yakhina Guzel's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, Zuleikha addresses women who genuinely try to destroy the borders that keep the oppressive social and political conditions alive and speaks of all women who have suffered as a result of the patriarchal prejudices imposed on them. Yakhina gives the anecdotal Zuleikha epic a voice that reverberates not only around Tatar community but around the world.

<sup>1</sup> AST Publishers is a well-known name in the Russian book industry. It publishes in a variety of genres, including: fiction, nonfiction, early learning, preschool, leisure books, and encyclopedias.

<sup>2</sup> The constant flow of ideas and awareness is referred to as stream of consciousness, also known as Interior monologue. It's a type of narration that tries to convey the character's mental process in writing, either through loose interior monologues or in relation with his or her actions.

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**TO QUOTE THE AUTHOR :**

BEN ABDERREZAK Abdelnacer, BEN AMOR Souhila, (2023), « Tahar woman's existential concerns in Guzel Yakhina's Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes», Ex Professo, V08, N01, pp. 92- 101, Url :<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484>