



Womanhood in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The White Guard*

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ABSTRACT

A woman act as a moral compass and a sounding board for partners, friends and family. Many critics considered *The White Guard* as a record of civil war in Russia over the city of Kiev, with little attention paid to the supportive roles women play in the novel toward the hero. This study therefore examines the roles women play in Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard* over the survival of Alexei Turbin in two phases. The paper adopts literary narrative analysis while Cultural feminism is used as theoretical framework for analysis. Cultural feminism attributes to superior virtues in women. What women share, in this perspective, provides a basis for unity, solidarity and shared identity. The novel is purposely selected for its content on the selflessness and sacrifice of women. This paper reveals important roles women play. Julia in *The White Guard* risks her own life in order to rescue injured Alexei, Elena also offers her marriage as sacrifice to resuscitate Alexei. Julia Reiss and Elena Turbin are very dear to Alexei Turbin. They are abandoned by their husbands. Julia is a complete stranger to Alexei, but in contrast, Elena is his relative. Both women demonstrate courage and commitment to serve humanity.

Keywords: Womanhood, selflessness, sacrifice commitment, humanity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mikhail Afanas'evich Bulgakov was born in Kiev on May 3, 1891, into the family of an assistant professor at the Kiev Theological Academy, A.I. Bulgakov, according to Konchakovska, K, et al (1998). Mikhail was one of seven children, From 1901 to 1904, Mikhail attended the First Kiev Gymnasium. After graduation, Bulgakov entered the Medical Faculty of St. Vladimir University, which he finished with special commendation. He became a physician at the Kiev Military Hospital. After serving as a surgeon at Chernovtsy hospital, he was appointed provincial physician to Smolensk province. In 1918, Mikhail Bulgakov returned to Kiev where he opened a private practice at his home at no. 13 Andreyevsky Descent. Here he experienced the dreadful years of the Russian Civil War and witnessed ten coups. Several times successive governments drafted the young doctor into their service. In 1919, he was drafted by the White Army, again as an army physician and then transferred to the Northern Caucasus. Bulgakov's began writing the story about the Civil War in Ukraine in 1923, which he published in the journal *Rossiia* under the title *The White Guard* (1926).



At the request of Moscow Art Theater (MKHAT), Bulgakov wrote on the basis of this story the play *The Days of the Turbins* (1926), which was staged on the stage of MKHAT with great success. The novel is based on the experience of a young medical doctor Alexei Turbin during a civil war in Kiev. Alexei enlist in an army regiment as a volunteer to defend the city of Kiev from impending attack. Kiev suddenly is besieged by external force which is much more powerful than its existing defence. Alexei Turbin is caught between crossfire. The badge on the fur of his cap portrays him as an enemy to the invading army (Petlyura's troops), and he is pursued. While running for his dear life, Alexei sustains gunshot wound. Julia Reiss, a female resident in the neighbourhood calls the attention of Alexei, and provides him a temporary shelter and assistance, by which those chasing him loose his trail. Alexei is rescued by the timely intervention of Julia Reiss. This study examines two phases of survival moments of Alexei Turbin involving two women that are very dear to him.

The first phase is the selfless role Julia plays in his rescue, while the second phase focus on the sacrifice Elena (Alexei's sister) makes toward his recovery from typhor and gunshot wound. Julia's and Elena's actions correspond with the opinion of Levkoff, (2012) states that being a woman is a state of mind and a commitment to social action. A woman act as a moral compass and a sounding board for partners, friends and family. Women believe in standing up for what's right. This is done simply because they are a moral influence on the base elements of society. In addition, Crue, (2005) adds that instead of viewing women as nervous, hysterical, and biologically weak specimens easily subdued and dominated by male force, strong emotion, and male rationality, real womanhood offer women a vision of themselves as biologically equal to men, rationally as well as emotionally and in many cases markedly superior. Real Womanhood encourages strenuous exercise and activities. In addition, Underwood, (1985) states that western women, like their eastern sisters, organized their lives around domesticity and piety, and then used those concepts to expand their spheres. In doing so, women saw themselves as strong and capable. Julia Reiss and Elena Turbin are in the league of these women.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Searts, (2017) nationalist uprisings of various kinds are vying for power all over Russia, with the Bolshevik Reds, the Conservative and Monarchist Whites, the Anarchist Blacks and the Peasant Greens. Hanging over Kiev, is the threat posed by Petlyura and his vengeful Ukrainian peasant army who are in the process of encircling the city. The warmth to be found in the home of the Turbins are their touching familial love and kindness to others. The Turbins are a fixed point in the novel. Bulgakov interrelates their story with that of a host of minor characters, each of which serve to illuminate different facets of both the story and of the writer. Bulgakov describes the collective cognitive dissonance caused by the sudden disintegration of a whole way of life. This kind of societal collapse is of course unimaginable. Abdelhadi, (2017) enumerates the major themes that are conveyed in the novel which are revealed through different components of piece of literature itself, wherein most of them are symbolically presented. The atmosphere is cold, icy feelings, the snow is everywhere, and its prevalence chills everything around. The weather is a strong symbol purposefully used by the novelist to represent a pain so extreme of the Russian anguished society by the time, or it is the author's intention to symbolize the agony in this fashion. Someone or something is dying and delivering soul, it is but the Tsar's system collapsing after years of ambivalence. The Bolsheviks take the ground and kill the beast, but it is a beast killed by another monster-like fellow.



The window is among the outstanding factors that literature had torn from the human analysis of his environment, and its relation with the interpretation of the fiction prose. So, windows, doors, walls, ceilings are to be considered as the fences that prevent the brain from pouring out of the skull, if so to ascertain, the hedges that keep the state of delirium and insanity locked outside. Hellebust, (2013) opines that *The White Guard* presents itself as a novel of emotions, not ideas. It rank characters by the moral rectitude of their deeds. Bulgakov's bourgeois ethics are class-bound in theory only: the standard of decency by which he judges his characters is more universal than some Soviet critics have admitted.

The reader sees the war through the eyes of the Turbin family, and thus feels the basic conflict in terms of stability versus change: on one hand fear and uncertainty of the war-torn present; on the other the Turbins desperate back-to-the-womb longing for the moribund world in which they grew up. The first pole of this opposition is adequately covered by the word "chaos"; yet, for the second, уют (comfort) refers not only to those purely physical comforts – such as food and protection from the elements – that are menaced by the war. It also refers more generally to the culture and prejudices whose common possession gives members of a social stratum the security of a shared identity. Meek, (2005) found the genius of *The White Guard* in its honesty to all sides, in the world of treachery, doubt and rumour which Bulgakov captures so perfectly. It's common to have wicked characters of whose wickedness only the reader is aware. In *The White Guard*, it is the Reds punishing Kiev.

3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The paper adopted textual analysis as method of data collection, while cultural feminism is applied as the theoretical framework. Wolff, (2007) asserts that Cultural feminism seeks to understand women's social locations in society by concentrating on gender differences between women and men. This type of feminism focuses on the liberation of women through individual change, the recognition and creation of "women-centered" culture, and the redefinition of femininity and masculinity. According to Lewis, (2019) cultural feminism emphasizes the distinctive and superior virtues in women. What women share, in this perspective, provides a basis for "sisterhood," or unity, solidarity and shared identity. Thus, cultural feminism also encourages building a shared women's culture.

Cultural feminist argues, that caring, cooperation, and egalitarianism would make a better world. The three main aspects of cultural feminism that are critiqued by other kinds of feminism have been essentialism (the idea that male and female differences are part of the essence of male and female), separatism, and the idea of a feminist vanguard, building the new culture rather than transforming the existing one through political and other challenges. While a radical feminist might critique the traditional family as being an institution of patriarchy, a cultural feminist might work to transform the family by focusing on the nurturing and caring that a woman-centered family can provide in life.

4. FINDINGS:

Julia Alexandrovna Reiss

Julia Reiss lives alone in the city of Kiev. Her husband left for an undisclosed destination. Alexei Turbin is heading towards the museum to see what is going even at a distance. He is spotted by Petlyura's troops as the badge on his fur cap easily reveals his true identity as an officer (enemy).



Alexei runs to avoid being caught, and returns gunshots to those pursuing him. A woman (Julia Reiss) has been watching the pursuit called out Alexei from a narrow street:

За мной, шептала женщина, повернулась и побежала по узкой кирпичной дорожке. Турбин побежал за ней. Низкий заборчик перед самым носом, женщина проникла во вторую калиточку. Турбин задыхаясь за ней. Она захлопнула калитку (Дмитриенко, 1988:189).

Translation:

Follow me, the woman whispered as she turned and ran along the narrow brick-paved path. Alexei Turbin ran very closely after her...Stopping at a low fence the woman passed through another gate, and Alexei Turbin followed her, panting. She slammed the gate shut. (Glenny, 1987:202-3).

As soon as Alexei runs to the woman, she pushed the gate to close the wall. Alexei himself realizes that the woman saved him, as he clearly hears the footsteps of his pursuers. Alexei sustains gunshot wound on his left shoulder, which results into bleeding. His blood stained shirt is removed and the wound dressed:

Она с ножницами, тупо и мучительно въедаясь в рукав, уже обмякший и жирный от крови, распорол его и высвободила Турбина. С рубашкой справилась быстро. Весь левый рукав был густо пропитан, густо-красен и бок (Дмитриенко, 1988:191).

Translation:

With the scissors she sliced clumsily and painfully into the sleeve, already wet and sticky with blood, ripped it open and freed Alexei Turbin's arm. The shirt was quickly dealt with. The whole left sleeve and side was dark red and soaking. (Glenny, 1987:204).

As a result of the injury Alexei sustains, pain gradually sets in. His injured arm becomes heavier. Julia Reiss cares a lot about Alexei's state of health. His wound weighs him down considerably. He lost significant amount of blood. Julia nursed his injury. The woman did not give up on Alexei, even though he has become weak:

Женщина перевела его так: он стал на колени и правую руку закинул ей на плечо, тогда она помогла ему стать на слабые, дрожащие ноги и повела, поддерживая его всем телом в комнате (Дмитриенко, 1988:192).

Translation:

The woman moved him thus: he got to his knees and put his right arm round her shoulder while she helped him to stand up on his weak, trembling legs, and led him into the next room, supporting him with her whole body (Glenny, 1987:205).



She offers Alexei some brandy, which energized him. He then expresses fear of being found by assailants, but Julia reassured him of his safety.

Если бы нашли то уже были бы здесь. Тут такой лабиринт, что никто не отыщет следов. Мы пробежали три сада (Дмитриенко, 1988:193).

Translation:

If they had been going to find you they would have already be here by now. This place is such a labyrinth that no one could find our tracks. We crossed through three gardens (Glenny, 1987:206).

The attention given to Alexei by Julia is beyond his imagination. Julia is a complete stranger to him who did everything possible to rescue him from danger and revive him back to life. This woman's action is not meant as a medium to gain anything from Alexei, but rather as a gesture to serve humanity. Alexei feels obliged to express his gratitude:

Подойдите сюда... Вот что, я и не поблагодарился вас за всё, что вы сделали. Если бы не вы, меня бы, наверно. убили (Дмитриенко, 1988:194).

Translation:

Come here... Look, I haven't thanked you for everything you've done. And I don't know how to... If it hadn't been for you, I would certainly have been killed (Glenny, 1987:208).

Julia continues to cater for Alexei, until his departure for home. Alexei keeps commenting on his treatment claiming that he would never forget Julia's hospitality. and in response Julia also promised not to abandon him. Alexei eventually left. After some time he pays Julia a visit, during this occasion, he presents her a gift:

Вы не откажитесь принять это... Мне хочется, чтобы спасшая мне жизнь хоть что-нибудь на память обо мне ... это браслет моей покойной матери... Вы мне милы... Позвольте мне прийти к вам ещё (Дмитриенко, 1988:259).

Translation:

Don't refuse it... I wanted the person who saved my life to have something to remember me by...this bracelet belonged to my late mother... You are very dear to me... Please let me come and see you again (Glenny, 1987:284)

Julia protested but Alexei Turbin insisted and fastened the bracelet on her wrist. Julia also granted Alexei's request in coming to visit her again.

Elena Vasilievna Turbin

Elena Turbin is younger to Alexei Turbin. She has been playing a motherly role to her siblings since the demise of their mother. Elena is married to a German national, Sergei Ivanovich Talberg, who left Kiev hurriedly on the verge of civil war that overwhelms the city. He attributes his departure to the safety of his life, but promised to contact Elena afterwards, but never did.



After Alexei returns home with injuries, his siblings closely monitor his state of health, which started dwindling. The gunshot wound on Alexei's left shoulder is infected. He now has typhus and fever. He requires urgent medical attention. His state of health has thrown his family into panic. Elena declares that apart from the wound, which is now typhus, his body temperature according to the column of mercury reads forty. A gray-haired professor directing his treatment, responds to Elena's questions regarding her brother's health, and announces that the patient's survival chance as "very little".

Всем хорошо известно и Елене тоже, что это означает, что надежды вовсе никакой нет и, значит Турбин умирает. После этого Елена прошла в спальню к брату и долго стояла, глядя ему в лицо и тут отлично и сама поняла, что значит, нет надежды (Дмитриенко, 1988:251).

Translation:

Everybody including Elena, knew that this meant that there was no hope at all and, therefore, that Alexei Turbin was dying. Elena had gone into her brother's room and had stood for a long time looking at his face, and from this she too understood perfectly that there really was no hope (Glenny, 1987:274).

As it becomes obvious that Alexei is gradually losing the battle for his life, a decision is taken to invite a priest, who is expected to pray for his dying soul. Elena therefore resolves to seek spiritual intervention to fortify her brother. Elena looks up at the fretted halo above the dark face (icon) and stretches out her arms whispering:

Слишком много горя сразу посылаешь, мать-заступница. Так в один год и кончишь семью. За что? Мать взяла у нас, мужа у меня нет и не будет, это я понимаю. А теперь и старшего отнимаешь. За что?...Мать-заступница, неужто ж сжалишься... Может быть, мы люди и плохие, но за что же так карать-то? (Дмитриенко, 1988:253).

Translation:

You have sent us too much sorrow. In one year you have destroyed this family. Why? You have taken our mother away from us, my husband has gone and will not come back, I know... Now you are taking away our eldest. Why?... Mother of God, intercede for us and have mercy on us... Perhaps we are sinful people, but why should we be punished like this? (Glenny, 1987:277).

Elena continues praying fervently, her forehead touching the floor and stretching out her arms. Her prayer drags on ceaselessly:

Мать-заступица, упроси его...Вон он. Что же тебе стоит? Пожалей нас. Пожалей. Идут твои дни, твой праздник. Может, что-нибудь доброе сделает он, да и тебя умоляю за грехи. Пусть Сергей не возвращается...отымаешь... Но ты не карай. Не карай. Вон он... (Дмитриенко, 1988:254).



Translation:

Holy Mother, intercede for us...He is there beside you. What would it cost you? Have mercy on us. Have mercy. Your day, the festival of the birth of your Son is approaching. If Alexei lives he will do good for others, and I will not cease to pray for forgiveness of our sins. Let Sergei not come back – take him away... But do not punish us. Do not punish us. There He is... (Glenny, 1987:278).

At this point, based on Elena's prayer request, she is not keen about the return of her husband (Sergei Ivanovich Talberg), but she prefers resuscitation of her brother (Alexei Turbin).

5. CONCLUSION

This study establishes that both Julia Reiss and Elena Turbin are very dear to Alexei Turbin. The two women have been abandoned by their husbands. Julia's husband left for an undisclosed destination without divorcing her, while Elena's husband left for Germany, his home country and claim to have been divorced with Elena, without informing her. Julia is a complete stranger to Alexei, but in contrast, Elena is his relative (sister). Julia risked her life in order to rescue Alexei, while Elena offered her marriage as sacrifice to resuscitate Alexei, who is on the verge of death. The women demonstrate courage and commitment and selflessness aimed at the well-being of Alexei, a gesture to serve humanity. The article revealed the dedication and sacrifice of women.

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