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Self-determination of Youth and Traditional Moral Values: the Role of Russian Literature

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Abstract

The article aims to prove the assumption that along with the known approaches to encouraging cultural diversity in education (critical, pluralistic, acculturation), a new methodological approach should be defined – that of forming the culturally-oriented world-view on the basis of personal self-determination in the traditional moral values, as represented in the national culture. The authors present their own definition of traditional moral values and analyse the way they are reflected in the classical Russian literature. The authors present the results of a field study designed to determine whether this reflective tradition is followed or interrupted in the modern Russian prose in the end of XXth – beginning of XXIst centuries.

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1. Introduction

Rapidly developing globalization processes result in the emergence of the issues of individual multicultural development that bring about the realisation of conceptual equality of various cultures, as well as the necessity to rescue different cultures with their unique representations, the value of the life experience interpreted through the lens of cultures around the world.

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On the basis of the studies of non-Russian experts, we can distinguish between at least three major approaches to the upbringing of the youth on the basis of the cultural diversity: the critical approach, the pluralistic approach and the cultural assimilation approach (Kalantzis et al., 1991; Megill, 2005; Hutton, 2003; Schmitt, 2008, etc.)

We argue that along with the aforementioned approaches, there is an approach which presupposes the formation of the multicultural world-view based on personal self-determination within the framework of the traditional moral values represented in the national culture (Kostyukova, 2002; Kostyukova, Petrova, 2001; Sklyarova, 2006, etc.). The authors of these studies concur with the assumption that the only person capable of respecting and appreciating other cultures is the one who knows and loves his native culture.

2. Literature as a clue to the values behind the society

2.1. Traditional moral values and classical Russian literature

Traditional moral values are, first of all, the initial values that were chosen by a certain people in the course of its history and formed its culture and traditions. Secondly, these are the values that form the basis of the people's lifestyle. They are represented in the language and customs of the people and they create the basic archetypes of the national world-view. Thirdly, these are values that make a certain national culture unique (different from the other cultures) (Kostyukova, 2002). In the Russian tradition, the moral values are, first of all, related to the thousand-year-old Russian culture. Perception, emotional experience and knowledge of this culture make an individual a true representative, defender, successor and member of his or her national culture. In this respect, the classical Russian literature crucially affects the formation of a cultured person of the Russian nationality.

The classical Russian literature is based on high moral standards and aspires to the eternal harmony between the person, the world and God. It raises global issues of the philosophical understanding of the world. The mission of the classical Russian literature was to nourish the spiritual aspirations of the human soul. The writer Valentin Rasputin brilliantly interpreted this mission of the classical Russian literature in his speech on the 4th of May 2000 during the final ceremony of the Literature Award named after A. I. Solzhenitsyn: «There were bells ringing and handbells singing from the pages of the books, the epic movement of life was always vivid in them... and the sunsets above our motherland were so beautiful that any human soul was full of tears of joy and delight. The literature was not blind and noticed every success of the evil, but to renounce the good was as inconceivable for that literature as for the prayer to renounce God» (Rasputin, 1990).

In the classical Russian literature there is no hero who values only himself. Onegin, Pechorin, Bazarov, prince Bolkonsky were painfully finding their destinies, the right places for them in the world. The mission of the classical Russian literature is brilliantly expressed by A. Pushkin in his poem «Prophet»: «Fire with the word the hearts of men...» (Pushkin, 1979). This was the mission of L. Tolstoy, F. Dostoyevsky, A. Ostrovsky and other Russian writers. It was adopted by the best representatives of the Soviet literature. M. Sholokhov defended the Soviet writers, accused of writing at the command of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, by arguing that these accusations are lies, asserting that Soviet writers were creating only at the command of their hearts. Russian literature expresses in its delicate fiction the vast cognitive, emotional, esthetic and spiritual experience – the eternal values that should be cherished by the humankind for the ages to come. These values, the moral standards, the aspiration to the good, justice, honour, dignity, charity, humanism are important both for the world society and for every person. The classical Russian literature always depicted life as it was, but its aim was also to present life as it should be, to portray the «positively beautiful individual» (Dostoyevsky, 1866). The process of active literary creation was supported by the rich and expressive Russian language. The Word was the most important and significant tool for Russian writers, the beginning of creation, as it is in the Holy Bible: «In the beginning was the Word...».

A. Chekhov noticed in one of his works that for Russian writers an individual was neither «little», nor «superfluous», nor a «clerk», nor a «petty officer» nor «Ionitch», but a Human (Chekhov, 1976). The literature indirectly provides the priceless life experience that is necessary for a young person. This literature helps to find and realise the sense of one's personal existence in the world, while assimilating the experience of the other person. The classical Russian literature has always provided the opportunity to bring up a person with regard to his/her soul, guiding the reader to moral self-determination. Russian writers, including Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Leskov and Chekhov, pondered over the human soul. They noticed that the soul is not always

healthy, that it can go through illness, suffering, numbness in the course of everyday life (see «Deaf Souls» by N. Gogol, «The Golovlyov Family» by M. Saltykov-Shchedrin, such phenomena of Russian life as the «dark kingdom», «oblomovschina», «karamazovschina»). But the most important discovery of the Russian literature is that any human soul needs love, sympathy and compassion. This devoted evangelical love is embodied by the «eternal» image of Sonechka Marmeladova from F. Dostoyevsky's novel «Crime and Punishment». Sonechka saves Raskolnikov, guiding him to the realisation of the eternal commandments «Thou shalt not murder», «Thou shalt not steal» «Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image». This is the representation of the great humanism of the Russian literature, its universal importance. «The greatness of the Russian literature consists in the elevated character of its world-view, – says Rasputin, – the Russian mind explained so much about the nature of any human's existence that it could be considered the catechism of the modern history» (Rasputin, 1990). The sense nucleus of the classical Russian literature is its ability to help people to overcome moral crises and to become tolerant, while enabling them to realise their national and cultural identity.

2.2. Traditional moral values and the modern Russian prose of the end of the XXth – beginning of the XXIst centuries: a field study.

Is the practice of basing literary creation on the traditional moral values maintained in the modern Russian prose? The literature of the end of the XXth – beginning of the XXIst centuries in its turn has a significant influence on the formation of the national identity and multiculturalism of the modern youth. Does this literature present any of the existential questions raised by Shukshin: what is going on with our lives? What are the meaning of life and the true freedom of any human? What is the value of the family?

To provide an answer to the aforementioned questions, we present the results of the study realised by a group of students of the National Research Tomsk State University. During the academic year 2013-2014 they gathered and processed the data provided by 220 university students who pursued the educational programmes «Organisation of work with the youth» and «Philology». In the course of the study the students used a number of research methods, including the analysis of the respondents' essays; questionnaire poll; selective interviewing; working with the focus-groups; incomplete phrases presented to the respondents, etc.

We should underline that the study was not aimed at treating philological issues. We aspired to present a pedagogical interpretation of the axiological significance of the modern Russian literature and its influence on the formation of the world-view and multicultural guidelines of the young generation. It has a direct influence on the upbringing of the youth, which is one of the essential objectives of the society throughout the history of humanity (the Russian word «воспитание» may be interpreted as giving us a clue to the purpose of this process, that is «moral, spiritual progress»).

In the framework of the study the young respondents were asked how often they read, what genres they prefer, whether they like the classical literature and the modern Russian prose, etc.

3. General results of the study

According to the results of our study, the most popular genres of literature are: classical literature (53% of respondents), fantasy and science fiction (40%), historical literature (27%), detective stories (27%), adventure novels (23%), popular science literature (20%), mystical literature (20%), women's fiction (26%). Among the names of the modern Russian writers the respondents mentioned Pelevin, Sorokin, Makanin, Ulitskaya, Tolstaya, Shishkin, Sokolov and others.

The results of the study prove that students highly appreciate the importance of the classical Russian literature for different cultures. The classical Russian literature raises the issues of the moral choice and moral search of the human soul. According to the respondents, in a short period of time – XVIII-XIX centuries Russian writers caught up with the literature of other countries and even left it behind while they were trying to define, glorify, mourn, realise and sympathise with the national character through the destinies of their protagonists, such as Pechorin, Oblomov, Bashmachkin, Tyorkin, Sotnikov and others.

However, some respondents pointed out that the Russian literature of the «Golden age» was rather ambiguous.

Every epoch observes the existence of the popular literature, apart from the literature of the sublime ideas. That is why it is hard to evaluate the contemporary literature, since we observe it in its «crude» state. «The explosive mixture of naturalism and postmodernism generally gives rise to shocking works of literature...» (here and further in the text we quote the essays of the respondents). The majority of the respondents interpret these pieces of writing as «...the response to the modern world, the attention sign». In their works Y. Mamleev and V. Sorokin present the world in a way that «makes one's hair stand on end». But the respondents fairly noticed that «the images created by the writers in the classical literature, such as Onegin and Oblomov, are based on the rule of contraries, they represent the vices of the national society, not the ideals». Nevertheless, these images are depicted with the use of a more literary, more civilized language than those of the modern Russian literature.

The overall popularity of literature resulted in the loss of its elite status. Nowadays on the Internet everyone can declare himself a writer and «throw another pile of literary and moral garbage at the reader». The demand generates the supply, that is why the general decline in the cultural level of the society generated the abundance of «pulp fiction, such as women's detective stories and uniform post-apocalyptic fantasy novels».

A significant part of the respondents believe that the modern Russian literature raises the pressing issues. It is a different matter whether it suggests any solutions to these issues. According to A. Chekhov, «an artist is to raise questions». Some pieces of writing of the modern Russian authors are interpreting the issues of personal self-determination (M. Butov «Freedom», V. Pelevin «Chapayev and Void», V. Makanin «The Underground, or a Hero of Our Time»). In «The Underground...»Makanin creates a range of images of «superfluous people», originated from the literature of the XIXth century. The author shows that the ability to repent and to realise one's guilt is reduced in today's world and every person faces his/her own choice. This idea is common to all the contemporary Russian prose. That is why modern Russian literature is full of ambiguous heroes: homeless people, thieves, murderers, perverts. The crucial issues are often exposed in the episodes of everyday life. Thus, in the novel by I. Saveliev with a symbolic title «Chase, hold, suffer and see» the author interprets the conceptualisation of death. In the novel the author depicts the hope for a better world, for a happy ending of every life. Plays and novels by D. Guryanov also encourage a dim hope for the better. He ponders over solitude and unrequited love («Silly snail», «Once in a hundred years» «Cinderella»). He presents a new interpretation of the professional issue. The endings are often open and unpredictable, thus encouraging readers to think the story over. Another example is the novel «The Mathematician» by A. Ilichevsky, where the protagonist goes through many trials, breaks up with his wife, gives up his work and idle life in the USA and is constantly thinking about the Resurrection of his ancestors. In the end he comes back to his native home to his mother. Could these be the most important «moral values» in human life?

Thus, 32% of the respondents believe that the modern Russian literature raises important issues. It reinterprets in its own way the traditions of the classical literature and presents a veiled symbolic speculation over moral values. In the contemporary literature the reader «may find some interesting and useful details. The main principle is never stop searching!».

However, a different attitude to the modern Russian literature can be observed in the results of the study. «Today there are no books that keep you under their impression for weeks, that turn your soul over, and I would love to see the literature capable of this!», – say some of the respondents. To gauge the attitude of the respondents to the modern literature we used the task where the respondents were asked to finish the following phrase: «The contemporary Russian literature is ...». Here are the examples of the obtained answers:

- «a representation of the post-modernism that is characterised by the absence of any norms or ideals, pluralism, equivocation and the absence of its proper definition, superfluous treatment of the issues. It is an unpleasant phenomenon. That is why I keep clear of this literature, full of filth, unconsciousness and homosexuality»;

- «useless and sometimes harmful waste of time. These pieces of writing can hardly be considered pleasant, educational, useful, helpful to discover new horizons, truth, high senses. That is why I don't think they are worth spending time on.»

Here are a few extracts from the respondents' essays:

- «In the novel «Chapayev and Void» the protagonist lives simultaneously in two realms and in the end he realises that both of them were not real – «the void». Pelevin probably wanted to tell us that the reality is a dream and we all should aspire to the «Inner Mongolia». It is the rejection of the «traditional moral values».

- «I need a literature capable of inspiring, giving the light and encouragement, touching my heart and making me suffer, but not the one that slings mud at me. I would love to suffer when I realise the beauty of this work of

literature, not when it makes me feel sick. Alas, I don't like this latter kind of literature».

- «What moral values can we talk about? In my opinion, the contemporary Russian literature is the last domain where one can look for any guidelines. Long ago everything there was destroyed, mutilated and turned into God-knows-what. Lynching of the consumerism, didactic pressure of the «active civic engagement» of the author, search for new senses through the total esthetic pluralism. No more frameworks, no guidelines, no difference between the high and the low. Author bites the reality and, after chewing it, spits this mass at the reader, interspersed with his pseudophilosophy, existentialism, surrealism and a pile of other “-isms”».

Thus, we can distinguish between the two major positions of the respondents regarding the following question whether the contemporary Russian literature is based on the axiological guidelines, inherent to the traditional moral values of Russian culture? A third of the respondents agreed with this proposition, all the others provided a negative answer to the question.

Russian literature has always been an object of pride. It has always reflected the consciousness of the nation and the psychological peculiarities of the Russian people, exemplified by the attention to the matters of soul, consciousness, the smart and neat word that can both slay and resurrect, throw down to ashes or raise to heavens. Russian literary works raise ethical, esthetical and moral issues and the most important of them is the issue of the soul and the spirit, both of a person and of the whole nation.

What is the contemporary literature guilty of, according to the young subjects of our study? We can determine the following negative effects mentioned by the respondents:

1. Neglect of the moral laws. Quoting F. Dostoyevsky, we can say that «If nothing is sacred, everything is permitted» (Dostoyevsky, 1866).
2. Blind imitation of the Western culture, neglect of the national foundations and culture that has always been chaste, heroic and patriotic.
3. Imposition of the hedonistic philosophy («enjoy having fun», «no is not the right answer») that encourages considering pleasure at any cost the true meaning of life.
4. All the aforementioned negative effects provoke family crises, premarital sex, sexually transmitted diseases, one-parent families, etc.

The majority of the respondents believe that the most dangerous trait of the modern Russian society is the growing impression of the moral void, senselessness, hopelessness, momentary character of all the events. The pressing issues of the generation gap result in numerous conflicts, related to the alienation of the youth from the general society, decline of its social functions, reduced availability of education and decent workplaces for the young.

4. Conclusion

Certainly, the present study cannot pretend to provide a basis for general conclusions. The end of the XXth – the beginning of the XXIst centuries is the period of complex, sometimes tragic social changes in Russia. The concept of the «changing society» presumes both changes in social institutions and profound changes in the system of values and moral guidelines, fundamental shifts that result in renovation of various aspects of the social life.

The general positive attitude of the Russian students to the traditional representations of the moral values that we observed in this study is conditioned by the interpretation of the traditional moral values as the essential aspect of pursuing the national identity. The contemporary literature cannot exist without taking into account the origins, the foundations and the roots of the Russian cultural identity. The identity crisis gives rise to the pressing issues of personal self-determination of the youth. In the absence of generally accepted ideals, principles and norms that are to be provided by both classical and contemporary literature, a person becoming an adult cannot find his own identity. This identity crisis aggravates the issues of multicultural education.

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