

Émigré Writers - The Case of National Identity

Abstract: The world community today lives in a period of minimization of frontiers, when the concept of time and space acquires an all but conditional meaning, while globalization appears to us as the most urgent and frequently quoted term. If we pass under review the history of literary discourse from the Early Classical period to present-day literary, we shall become convinced that it constantly changes its attitude to the concept of “frontier”. And the dynamic trend of this change is undeniable expansion. Émigré writers are very sensitive to the term of ‘Frontier’. The fiction of émigré writers, unlike the writers that work in their national environment, is created beyond their national frontiers. Some of them are intend to change an artistic language. Is this an attempt to change self-identity or just an effort to make own fiction widely “readable”? To what extent does the linguistic model or geographical location alone determine the writer’s national identity? Does a writer turn into one of a different nationality along with changing the linguistic model or environment?

Key words: globalization, frontier, émigré writers, problem of identity.

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Today, having encompassed the political, social and cultural spheres of life, globalization has taken the shape of the central problem of various scholarly debates. At authoritative gatherings of scholars we are often turning to the questions: how can we understand the meaning of cultural boundaries? May we introduce the term “literature without frontiers”, or what does “without frontiers” imply? Is “National novel” avoided and etc.?

The term itself – “frontier” sounds a little bit scary: what is better, to have it or not? Where does the Golden Cross lie?

If we pass under review the history of literary discourse from the Early Classical period to present-day literary, we shall become convinced that it constantly changes its attitude to the concept of “frontier”. And the dynamic trend of this change is undeniable expansion.

If in the normative and rhetorical classical epoch the “concept of frontier” was observed rigorously enough for typological conceptualization of literature, as well as of literary system, the situation was changed in Middle Ages. The trend of expansion of the frontiers of literary discourse received a strong impulse: the interpretative strategy of allegorical exegetics was manifested in the methodology of invariant reading of the bible; this obviously outlined a broad context of the European Christian world as the scene of action. But the process was evident not only within the general European Christian society, but outside its boundaries as well. Through translation communications it became available at different geographical, cultural and social systems, which rendered the boundaries of national literatures appreciably flexible.

The notion of “literary frontier” waned further in the Renaissance period, when literature gradually shifted to the crossroad of different aesthetic, historical, cultural and social changes. The

Renaissance discourse, extended on European scale, and national literatures, flourishing under various historical models, became valuably involved in the cultural concept of the Renaissance.

The ongoing process of enlargement of cultural and literary borders was very properly regulated by Romantic poetics. Literary school of Romanticism implemented almost revolutionary innovations in the understanding of cultural and literary frontiers. Except the main concepts, in the depth of matured Romanticism one of Romanticism's key ideas and most enduring legacies - the assertion of nationalism, as one of a central theme of Romantic art and philosophy, was chiefly activated. Alongside the interest towards the Individualism, Imagination, Mythology, Religion, Folklore, Nature and etc., European Romanticism was focused on the development of national consciousness: nationalism as one of the key vehicles of European Romanticism became the main theme of Romantic authors in different countries. The accentuation of the importance of local customs and traditions was an important approach which would redraw the map of Europe and lead to unite the literature of different countries under the umbrella of Romanticism. It was a very effective effort to set cultural frontiers under the condition of their enlargement, in other words, a valuable collaboration of national literatures with an international literary process.

Cultural strategy of the post-romantic period supported this initiative: literary discourse, in general, was conceptualized as a permanently-developing system, depending on a broad spectrum of historical and cultural context. The process of conceptual getting close of various national literatures, on condition of preserving their cultural identity, was in evidence.

But quite an interesting stage for broadening or, contrary, narrowing literary process came out in 20th century. The most important gain of this epoch was the creation of general literary streams - variety of numerous Modernistic and Avant-garde schools, - as well as of broad-spectrum humanitarian research space. However, 20th century was marked by the huge diversity of political regimes, armed conflicts and wars too... If we bear in mind the inherent aspiration of literature to intellectual and representative freedom, we may form a clear idea of the contradiction that arises in conditions of a totalitarian regime between the artistic text and the actual context. The primary feature of any kind of totalitarianism as enforced rule is creation of ideological dictatorship, forming of clichés and their implementation. This obviously restricts considerably the frame of literary freedom. The term “frontier” gains a fatal meaning here, connected with another term - “Émigré”, so much bonded with escape, mostly forced one, and nostalgia.

A great number of writers became the victims of the ongoing process of emigration occurring in the 20th century. They fled (some of them voluntarily, but most of them -forcedly) from Bolshevism, Fascism, Communism, Socialism and some other types of regimes so that they could watch unbearable processes from the distance, reveal the truth and direct the attention of the world's intellectual forces towards the criminal dictatorships.

Emigration goes like a red line along the 20 century history, which is notorious for both long and short regimes and dictatorships. Emigrants formed different groups and societies including literary associations to fight against the dictators because of who they had to abandon their mother lands forever. Their weapon was a pen and their writings were full of deep pain, sorrow, and nostalgia mixed with protest and disappointment.

The concept of “frontier” was changed. World was no more divided into national and international cultural models, so well penetrating into each other, but rather hostile formations, antagonistic to each other by means of freedom.

The general works of emigrant writers are created within the double standard system: creative work continues to flow beyond the national frontiers and the case of identity becomes complicated. Writer is forced to leave the environment familiar to him to continue his creative life in conditions of an alien environment. If we bear in mind the fact that language is a means of writing, we shall readily perceive the linguistic dilemma the emigrant writer faces: one way is to continue writing in his native language (Bunin, early Nabokov, and others), another way is to change to a different language plane (later Nabokov). In the former case he risks alienating his own work to the new societal environment, opposite great unread problem (unless starting translating), but preserve the tendency of linguistic integration with his native literature. In the latter case the writer adjusts to the new societal setting, but creates a literary distance with his native literary discourse – he is facing a huge problem of self-identity.

The questions which arise here are the following:

Does a geographical location or a linguistic model determine a writer’s national identity? And if so, at what extent? After a writer leaves his country and adapts with new models of a language, is he likely to become a representative of another national literature?

Let’s turn to some examples.

Vladimir Nabokov – one of the most global authors - revealed an extremely cautious attitude to this issue. ‘There is no doubt, that Nabokov feels as tragic loss the conspiracy of history that deprived him of his native Russia, and that brought him in middle life to doing his life’s work in a language that is not that of his first dreams’, admits Herbert Gold, who interviewed Vladimir Nabokov in 1967 (*The Paris Review* 1967:2). In the period of early immigration Nabokov worked as a Russian language writer in Europe, mostly Germany, and his fiction was well-known only among the small circle of Russian language émigré society. He envied to make a huge breakthrough, but it was quite hard with Russian themes and Russian language and, also, with Ivan Bunin aside, who already obtained the fame of banished genius, continuing to write in Russian. The throne was too narrow for two of them. Nabokov decided to give another shut and from early 40-ies tried to move to another language platform. He wrote several good novels in English, but the real fame arrived later, in 50-ies, when “Lolita” was published, the first novel in which Nabokov was able not only to write a novel in English, but to explore his openness

towards the universal themes and problems, leaving the phantom of Russia behind him. That's where the questions about his national identity were raised!

In the same interview with Herbert Gold, to the question 'Do you consider yourself an American?', Nabokov replies: 'Yes, I do. I am as American as April in Arizona. The flora, the fauna, the air of the western states, is my links with Asiatic and Arctic Russia. Of course, I owe too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally involved in, say, American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane; but I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers' (The Paris Review 1967:9). Earlier, in the interview with Alfred Appel JR. (1966), Nabokov claimed: 'The art of the writer – this is his genuine passport' (Voprosy Literaturny 1988:163). His art as 'Catalogue' (Nosik 1995:537) of his roots was deeply connected with Russia and Russian literature and culture, but, luckily, contained enormous 'different other streams' (Nosik 1995:537) too. That was the source of his fame, as well as of his identity misfortune!

However... I can't help myself to add the following: maybe "Lolita" was the only text, which fully distanced him from the childhood image of Russia. The rest of Nabokov's English language novels, before and after "Lolita", were packed with Russian allusions. And, on the very end of his life he started to translate his English language fiction on Russian – it was very important for him... He "owed too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally involved in another culture". Deeply inside he was not able to cut his Russian roots.

Grigol Robaqidze – one of the most popular Georgian émigré authors – also might be a good example for our presentation. He immigrated to Germany in early 20-ies and started very successful carrier there: his first novel was published in 1927, on German language, with the foreword of Stefan Zweig. He was the first Georgian author who managed to change the language of his creative work from Georgian to German. But... Robaqidze's problem became his permanent blocking "between and betwixt" the different worlds! He could never escape Georgian themes and problems, archetypes and memories, even interiors and landscapes... Language and imagination were falling apart, which, unfortunately, became a reason for his failure in Europe. Dreaming of Georgia's liberation from Bolshevik Russia he was even involved in an artistic sympathy with Hitler, which became the reason for his longtime failure in Soviet Georgia... It is a tragic example of double standard, when talented writer and a patriot of his country becomes marginalized on both sides. That's why, on the very end of his life, he was sadly speaking about the "third shore" as a salvation... Well, today, after the Soviet regime is over, we understand his care for Georgia, and we say: Robaqidze remained Georgian writer although he was using German language, and that is the truth.

And the last example: Boris Akunin is a very famous author in Russia. His real name is Boris Chxartishvili. His family name is na usual Georgian family name, but Akunin has nothing common with Georgia. His father moved to Russia long time ago and Akunin's art was formed within the Russian reality – his is linked to Russia with his memory and imagination, he has no relations with Georgia.

We can recall some other examples as well, but maybe enough for now.

Extending the discourse, we may assume that language alone or environment, non family name, cannot be a determiner of a writer's identity. The roots of identity go deeper: the dominant determiner should rather be considered a memory, within which the writer's consciousness arises and imagination forms. Text is not only a linguistic or geographical fragment but a valuable reconstruction of national memory. It is the reconstruction of a memory that is the definer of the identity of all 20th century emigrant writers irrespective of whether their working language is foreign or native: text is considered to be a reflection of archetypes. "Frontier" in this case loses material significance, shifting to the conceptual plane.

In the modern world the meaning of "Frontier" is deeply connected with the meaning of "Globalization". Literary and cultural systems are rather more transparent and conceptually and culturally intertwined. But, even we live in the epoch of globalization, questioning the existence of a national literature as well as of national identity remains dominant: national literature retains its own individuality while it retains memory. Healthy attitude towards the Globalization creates the possibilities of mutual communication and integration of different national cultures and literatures, only on condition of preserving cultural identity: and this condition is profitable for recently working Émigré writers.

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