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## The Prose about the Chechen War by V. Makanin

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*This article considers the urgent problem of literary genre analysis of the modern prose. Under the conditions of overall distrust to an open word, archaic models and plot structures provide a modern writer with an opportunity to speak about the most important matters, avoiding pathos, rhetoric and didactics. The article studies the works by V. Makanin about the Chechen war based on intuition and movement of free thought of the writer developing in parable forms. Modern parable is a reaction to the word closed in the literary field, on literocentricity; it displays artistic expression in a broader context returning ethical and didactic components to the word. The use of parables leads to almost unlimited opportunities of multi-level reading, it activates the living, intellectual and spiritual experience of the reader to the utmost.*

*Keywords: contemporary prose, genre, V. Makanin, parable, Chechen War.*

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V. Makanin is a recognized classic of modern literature. If in the early 1980s, critics saw his main advantage in the analysis of social reality (A. Bocharov, V. Bondarenko, N. Ivanova), the articles of the 1990s focus on other areas – existential orientation of his work (L. Anninskii, A. Genis, A. Latynina, M. Lipovetskii, A. Nemzer, I. Rodnianskaia). According to the Internet data in June 1999, Makanin was ranked first by a number of critical reviews devoted to him. Twice his works were awarded the most prestigious prizes: Booker (“Table covered with cloth and with a decanter in the middle”, 1993) and the Pushkin Prize (“Underground, or the Hero of Our

Time”, 1999). The story “Laz” (1992) is certainly included in the anthology of the best works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

According to philologists (T. Klimova, S. Perevalova, T. Churliaeva), Makanin’s prose is different from the known genre models, relying on intuition and the movement of the free thought of the writer unfolding in the forms of metaphorical parables. Indeed, the parable as a way to model the world and reflect it identifies all of Makanin’s prose, beginning in the 1970s and till the present day (from the novel “Kliucharev and Alimushkin” (1970), through the “Voices” (1980) to the “Letter A” (2000), etc).

In this regard, Makanin's works about the Chechen war, "The Caucasian captive" (1995) and "Asan" (2008) are of particular interest. Both texts have provoked an impassioned debate. Let us recall on the article by P. Basinskii "Playing peevers on the blood of another" and a devastating review by V. Toporov "Asan wants blood". Some critics have considered the text to be false and even dead; indications of the author's mistakes and inaccuracies.

Of course, journalism gives a much more organic understanding of the war in Chechnya, for example "The call sign: Cobra: notes of the special operation troop officer" by E. Abdullaev (1997), "My War: Chechen Diary of the Trench General" by G. Troshev (2001), a journalistic investigation by A. Politkovskaia "The Second Chechen war" (2002). The Chechen War literature also includes stories and novels of the participants of the events: "Alkhan Yurt" by A. Babchenko, "Cigarette smell" by Z. Prilepin. Major works include novels "Thirst" by Andrei Gelasimov, "Walking in the night" by Alexander Prokhanov, "Pathology" by Zakhar Prilepin. But what place does a parable take in the framework of this sharp and hot topic?

Makanin's story "Caucasian captive" was published in the May issue of *Novy mir* in 1995. Its moral and philosophical sense is immediately emphasized by polemical beginning: The soldiers, most likely, did not know that beauty will save the world, but what beauty really is they both knew (5, p. 449). But if Dostoevsky spoke of "invariable need for a higher ideal of beauty", then in Makanin's work heroes do not need the beauty, it "frightens" them and "makes them alert". In the mind of a man of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of "the beauty of the world" is substituted by the "beauty of the area", that is ethical is rejected by the aesthetic.

The action of the story "The Caucasian captive" takes place at unindicated time, in an

unknown war. The plot of the story is simple: two army trucks are ambushed in a narrow ravine, gunmen demand repayment; soldiers Rubakhin and Vovka are sent for reinforcements and return back empty-handed. Statics and dead-end of the situation is outlined by the first sentence of the final part: No changes. The whole story consists of 6 parts, designated by the author in Arabic numerals; each of the parts, in turn, is divided into thematic fragments introducing the reader either a situation or the inner world of the character. Contrast dialogic way to connect these fragments gives the narration cinematographic, and at the same time, reflective and analytical features.

In the first episode, the two soldiers are making their way through the bushes. Spatial dynamics is expressed by using verbs in the present tense. Deliberate slowness of the second episode is contrasted by the dynamics of the first. Lieutenant-colonel Gurov continues his slow bargaining with the commander of the gunmen Alibekov (they are talking about exchanging weapons for food), but dullness of words (as well as some laziness of their argument) is deceptive. In this episode, there is a constant resonance of two words-images: "exchange" and "deceit" and their correlates.

The main storyline of the "exchange" is shaded by the auxiliary one that develops simultaneously: from a neighboring house, where Vovka-strelok is hiding with a young girl, passionate whisper, silent deal is heard, and it is also about the exchange. This supplementary (in relation to the "conspiracy" of commanders) episode, in turn, is mirrored in the climax of the story: in the first case, the woman covers Vovka's mouth with her hand (a love gesture), in the second case, Rubakhin covers the mouth of the captured Caucasian boy and it is a deadly embrace. Thus, in the composition of the story we find a lot of typical Makanin's echoes, repetitions, returns: story ones, when various situations are mirrored,

intergrow into each other (mouths covered by hands, for example, or lazy bargaining), and semantic (joyful echoing of birds in the sky in the first part and random shootings in the last part similar to cranes' cry). The main philosopheme of the story – beauty – is consistently included in the pair motives: beauty – capture, memory – the call (cry), to remember – to call, exchange – deceit, thought – instinct, warmth – coldness, sensibility – sense, male – female, Eros – Thanatos.

Beauty and death in Makanin's work are constantly nearby. The four-fold repetition of the episode involving the death of Corporal Boyarkov seems to be particularly significant for the composition of the story. Thus, in the first part, having stumbled on a familiar transistor soldiers look for the body of the murdered co-officer, and hastily bury the body; the open, sunlit place demands them to be on guard. In the second episode, the sounding transistor left by Vovka on the hill again reminds Rubakhin, what a beautiful place Boyarkov had chosen to die, he remembers the image and it becomes more specific. Description of the same scene is repeated each time in a new variation. In the climax fifth part of the story this motif occurs twice: for the first time as if by the way, but with the same rhyme, death – beauty (They passed the hill, where drunk Boyarkov was buried. A wonderful, sunlit place) for the second time the parallelism of situations is shown when soldiers hastily bury the dead body of the beautiful captive (as two days before the body of the killed corporal was buried).

The theme of beauty in Makanin's story passes, as in a musical fugue, alternating in different registers, with different variations and transformations, and each new sounding is accompanied by new counterpoints. The composition of the "Caucasian captive" is as built on three identical topics that contrapuntally unite in simultaneous three-voice sounding forming

one, called in the theory of music "triple" (three-voice) theme: beauty – risk – memory; Eros – Thanatos – the call; exchange – substitution – permanence. The substitution of the notion of "the beauty of the world" with "the beauty of the area" becomes the first exchange in the series of many described by Makanin: substitution of the world with war, love with physiology, responsibility for their lives with thoughtless existence in the mass and in the stream. People cannot ignore the call of beauty disturbing them, it powerfully attracts (charms), but also punishes people who have forgotten how to listen to and serve it. This seems to be the moral lesson and the pathos of the work. Thus, poetic repetitions, proliferation of meaning due to the symbolic nature "of quotations from eternity" transform the story "The Caucasian captive" in the parable about beauty which once again does not save anyone. We deal with a parable intention to understand, reduce concepts to fixed ideological dominants and focus on the process of understanding. Compositionally, this is reflected in the open questioned final. We see not the result, but the process of forming thoughts and inviting to discussion.

A modern writer creates parable to say some things that he just cannot formulate, not because of linguistic inconsistency, but due to deeper psychoanalytic reasons. Let us say more: a modern parable in many ways is a reaction to the word closed in the literary field, to literocentricity, it displays artistic expression, "the quote from eternity", in a broader context, returning the ethical and didactic component to the word. Parable gives almost unlimited opportunities for multi-level reading, it activates the worldly, intellectual and spiritual experience of the reader.

The novel "Asan" (2008) develops the theme of the war in Chechnya as part of a large genre form. The book by Vladimir Makanin has caused a lot of criticism. Responses to the book have

distributed in the range from uniquely enthusiastic (Lev Danilkin) and reserved praising (Andrei Nemzer) to deadly (Viktor Toporov) and slightly blaming (Igor Shevelev, Valerii Ivanchenko).

The issue of genre specifics of the work is quite interesting. A. Latynina thinks “it is pointless to search for realistic portrayal of war in Makanin’s novel” and defines it as “a parable about how good turns evil”, about involuntary and tragic ingratitude, about horrible connection of money and blood in this world. S. Cherednichenko argues with her, “parable is characterized by a high degree of abstraction, when the whole work becomes a holistic metaphor for reality. Heroes of the parable are archetypal, their experience is universal <...> In the novel “Asan” there are no signs of parable. Its chronotope is very specific: the second half of the 1990s, the Chechen Republic. The protagonist, Mayor Zhilin is not an abstract archetype, but a lively character with typical and individual features <...> “Asan” is not a parable, but a real novel. It has every reason to claim to be realistic”.

Indeed, Makanin’s novel has some ambivalence. On the one hand, some details are specified, recognizable characters – Dzhokhar Dudayev, Khattab – are introduced into the plot. On the other hand, there is author’s idea, myth: a two-handed god of the mountain people, Asan. The composition based on the imaginary assumption is more attractive for the writer than reality, and realistic novel is only a shell for parable.

The writer had a common goal: to express the profound mental foundations of one particular modern war and describe war as such. Trying to reach this goal, he quite precisely constructs the world of his prose, the plot, develops the characters proving the most important theorem: on the meaning of existence.

The writer tries to understand war, though he writes that “war is absurd”. The text of the

novel contains a number of definitions: “what a vile thing is this war”, “war is an inside thing”, “this or that, it’s war”, “war is a sensitive thing”, “war is fun”, “war is sometimes solemn, sensual”, “war is a fair thing ... Sometimes”, “I have <...> found an explanation of war. It is simple: the war itself is absurd ... As long as it is not over”, “war is absurd until there is no winner”.

The plot of the novel consists of a long series of commercial transactions. It begins with a bargain and finishes with a bargain, the last one in the life of Mayor Zhilin. The transition of the theater of war in the mass market place, degeneration of the common meaning of war into a private matter of profit making consolidates and symbolizes the fictional mythical image of Asan in the novel, the ancient formidable god of war that has become a modern almighty god of money. The name of the god turns into a password and a bank note, “Alexander” is reduced to “Asan”.

The focus of the novel is shifted to the theme of the person at war. Makanin brings a new hero to the literature arena. The last name of the character refers to the textbook “Prisoner of the Caucasus” by Leo Tolstoy. The story of Tolstoy’s hero is about the strength of the Russian. The person with the same name as Tolstoy’s hero is brought to our time, he serves in the army in the Caucasus. He is faced with the baseness and betrayal: storage colonels flee from Chechnya before the war. But, as his literary predecessor, he does not give up and dies not lose heart. He honestly does his job, he is not indifferent to the fate of soldiers. He does it to return back home to his house on the banks of a large Russian river, to his family, to normal life driving vehicles with fuel along dangerous paths.

In this regard, the opening scene of the novel serving as a kind of an epigraph to its parable component, is quite demonstrative. It is important for Makanin to show that Mayor

Zhilin, this powerful Sashik, and Asan, is able to neglect money interests and even to risk his life for inexperienced recruits he does not even know. During bargaining with the gunmen, Mayor does not cease to smile at himself: You're sorry for the boys. Oh, oh! .. They will lie in the grass and bushes! .. Oh, so young! .. But look honestly. They came to kill. To kill and be killed ... It's war. Sit at your warehouse, Mayor. Count your barrels of gasoline and diesel fuel ... and fuel oil... (4, p. 11)

Zhilin has many soldiers working at fuel warehouses, among them Alik and Oleg found in a forest on the way to Grozny. Shell-shocked after close explosion, they crawled into the bushes to avoid the fate of being killed by the Chechens. Now they are waiting for investigation in the commandant's office and to be charged with desertion. Zhilin decides to leave them at his warehouse, and then to send them home. But for some reason he becomes close with these two ridiculous guys. And the more trouble these crazy bring him, the more responsibility he feels for them.

Thanks to their insistent requests, they are sent to the base together with Kolya Gusartsev. When there is a rumor that Gusartsev is killed, Zhilin is worried about his friend and two freaks. Reconstructing the circumstances of the Gusartsev's death, Mayor finds out that Alic has shot him aiming for the militant commander Akhmed Gorny. The flash in the brain of the shell-shocked boy occurred because of money passed from the hands of the Chechen to the hands of the officer. Alic had seen packs of money coming from the hands of the Chechens to the hands of the commanders, afterwards the troop fell into an ambush and people were killed. He shot into the pack of money as a source of past and future troubles and hit the Russian officer. It was an accident. Zhilin is the victim of tragic circumstances. Without parting with the boys for

whom he feels pity, he takes a step toward his own death.

In Makanin's narration there is an ancient folk motif: the death of the father from the hands of his son. Zhilin is killed by Alik, whom he saved from punishment under the same circumstances in which Kolya Gusartsev was killed, when the Chechen gives him money. After Alik's shot Zhilin manages to exclaim, "You killed me, you fool", but he will not give the boy out to the rescue officer, saying "We got shot".

The conflict of reason and sense, pragmatic logic and irrational attachment turns Zhilin into a "weak link", a foreign element in the system. Irrelevance of beauty and good at war is felt here with particular clarity. Man dies when someone is sorry for someone, gets bound, that is, wants to stay Human at war.

His new parable about how good turns evil, how money and blood are connected in this world, the author puts in a "shabby army camouflage" (A. Latynina), in domestic shell of a novel about the Chechen war, about which the writer has indirect knowledge. But this novel, like all Makanin's works, is built mainly on intuition and movement of the free thought of the artist, unfolding in parable form. The novel draws attention not with distinct answers, but paradoxical questions.

In the situation of genre thinking crisis, a paradoxical phenomenon occurs, "unready growing modernity" encourages the regeneration of story archetypes, narrative forms and their verbal decoration, polished by centuries of culture. O. Mandelstam's thoughts become real: "novel returns to the roots – to chronicle, hagiography, the great almanac". M. Epshteyn speaks of involution of the novel, B. Tiupa of productivity of protonovel forms. The modern researcher among the main directions of transformation of the novelistic word indicates the actualization of archaic forms: fable, fairy tale, utopia, parable.

In terms of total distrust to the open word, archaic models and plot structures provide the modern writer with an opportunity to talk about “the secret depth of life” avoiding pathos, rhetoric and didactics. Staying true to his artistic strategy,

Makanin continues to check the disharmony (absurdity, irrationality) of the world by algebra (strictly structured text), constantly following the path of searching the formula of life, its essence and meaning.

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## Проза В. Маканина о чеченской войне

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*Статья посвящена актуальной литературоведческой проблеме жанрового анализа современной прозы. В условиях тотального недоверия к открытому слову архаические модели и сюжетные структуры предоставляют современному писателю возможность сказать о самом главном, избегая пафоса, риторики и дидактики. В качестве объекта исследования избраны произведения В. Маканина о чеченской войне, которые строятся с опорой на интуицию и движение свободной мысли художника, развертывающейся в притчевых формах. Современная притча – реакция на замкнутое в литературном поле слово, на литературоцентричность; она выводит художественное слово в более широкий контекст, возвращая слову этическую, учительную составляющую. Притчевость предоставляет практически неограниченные возможности для многоуровневого прочтения, предельно активизирует житейский, интеллектуальный и духовный опыт читателя.*

*Ключевые слова:* современная проза, жанр, В. Маканин, притча, чеченская война.

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