

The Theme of Freedom in Maria Arbatova's Drama

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to analyze Maria Arbatova's earlier works, in particular, her dramas in the period between 1979 and 1994. Special emphasis in those works is given to the topic of internal freedom. The following research methods shall be reasonably chosen and applied to analyze the said subject: analysis methods for humanistic materials intended to determine the range of problems touched on in the texts, and the sociologic method intended to factor in social contexts and determine the rate of their impact on the final form of the text. Reading her texts, we can track the evolution of the writer's ideology. Her first plays are dedicated to the issue of women achieving their internal freedom, which perfectly matches the feminist ideology emerging in the USSR. In her works, Arbatova expands her sphere of consideration, looking into the issues of freedom and emigrants' identity, along with different takes on the issue of freedom after the disintegration of the Soviet Union as seen by different generations. Multifaceted representation of freedom in Arbatova's drama gravitates towards humanistic personalism. This is why the leitmotif of the article is reflection on the heroes' identity in the context of their quest for a stable baseline and an ever-present perspective in the so-called "liquid modernity".

Keywords: Arbatova, freedom, Arbatova's drama, feminist discourse, USSR.

Dramatic works by Maria Arbatova include 14 plays written from 1979 to 1994. This was a period of sweeping changes in Russia, which started with the last years of Brezhnev's rule and Perestroika, and ended with the stage of system transformation. Political and economic changes characteristic of that period materially affected living conditions of the Russian people and their inner world, as they had to search for their identities in an environment that was lacking dictates of the monolith party and tentacles of their "motherly" state. From the social and cultural point of view, the collapse of the Soviet Union meant "loss of identification at the individual and group level, as well as at the level of society in general" (Ionin, 1995: 3). Because of excessive new signs and symbols, people had to independently define and redefine existing standards and terms. However, one of the most important matters was attitude to freedom. Whereas external freedom, which they hadn't had before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, became a fact (opening the borders, free choice of work and residence, political pluralism), internal freedom, the so-called "initial self-consciousness fact" (Krapiec, 1974: 255) required reconsideration.

The issue of freedom is dominant in Arbatova's drama. The author known for her work on defense of women's rights (Kowalska, 2014: 148) transferred the theme of emancipation of the fair sex to the grounds of literature. Analysis of her literary works allows us to conclude that with the course of time and the relevant systematic changes, the writer's take on freedom evolved. The hallmark of her early dramatic works: *Equation with Two Knowns* (1982), *Viktoria Vasilieva As Seen by Outsiders* (1985), *Dreams on the Shore of Dnepr* (1987), is a focus on the inner world of women at existential crossroads, full of moral and spiritual dilemmas. Looking for a road to freedom, her heroines challenge the stereotypes of

female happiness. In the face of ambiguous circumstances, these women remain brave and independent. In her later plays: *Drang nach Vesten* (1992), *On the Road to Ourselves* (1992), *An Experimental Interview on the Theme of Freedom* (1993), *The Taking of Bastille* (1994), women remain in the spotlight, but the theme of freedom takes up a wider perspective. The author presented people living through a critical moment, who had ceased putting faith in all the values they used to adhere to, but hadn't yet found any new reference points. The emigration issue that for many Russians became a ticket to the world of long-wished freedom comes to the fore. In this case, the context of the way should be read not only as physical travel over a distance, but a journey to one's inner world. This is the matter of breaking one's inner boundaries and comprehending that the search for paths towards freedom should start from looking into one's own soul. Emigration is also related to the still pertinent issue of the Russia & West cognitive scheme. The author busts the myth of the free West. She demonstrates that in many respects freedom offered in the West is bad for people. Moreover, for her heroines, still fighting with the Soviet heritage, it has become a burden which caused their de-individuation. In her latest works, Maria Arbatova speculates on generation-to-generation differences as regards the concept of freedom. This way, she touches on the still up-to-date father-son conflict.

As it appears from everything mentioned above, Arbatova's drama touches on a wide specter of freedom-related issues. First of all, it is worth noting that Maria Arbatova is believed to be a pioneer of the Russian feminist dramaturgy of the late 20th century (Kislova, 2013: 82). From the very beginning, the writer focused on women and their psychological, social, and moral problems. Tatiana Rowieńska claims that the author has persistently violated the social taboo, piecing together a woman's psychological drama by public exposition of its core (2003: 89). These were some lessons of femininity, involving discovery of feminine identity through confronting gender stereotypes and cultural patterns typical of the Soviet society. Making use of her experience and closely observing reality, Arbatova presents the mechanisms operating in female minds. The heroines of her dramas are usually financially independent, self-reliant, and strong. However, their stable financial standing doesn't accord with their emotional instability and spiritual quest. Realizing their potential in professional and scientific fields, fulfilling their obligations toward children and husbands, they feel existentially void – because of identity loss and zero prospects for self-realization. That's why the author depicts her heroines at critical points in their lives when they have to make important choices. A gifted opera singer Viktoria Vasilieva abandons her promising career and plans to move away to the Siberian wilderness. Elena from *Dreams on the Shore of Dnepr* is fighting an inner battle caused by marital crisis. A similar motif of unhappy marriage impels the heroine of Part 1 of the *Drang nach Vesten* play to move abroad. Margarita (*An Experimental Interview on the Theme of Freedom*) looks into her mental condition and understands that her unhappy relationships are caused by her longing for a man who has emigrated. These prima facie trivial vicissitudes of life constitute the heroines' identities, helping them to see their real wishes and make choices on the way to internal harmony. Conflicts they go through reveal the nature of free will as a human personality. Inner struggle experienced by the heroines and their action against the situation can be considered as manifestation of freedom, resulting from the mere fact of the existence of mind (Krapiec, 1974: 218). Its consequence is free choice-making. Self-analysis ushers them to acknowledge that they are really unhappy, yet

free to act and strong enough to turn the tide. As Larisa Kislova reasonably states, “They take the liberty of protesting against age-old traditions, bust customary relation stereotypes, and destroy illusory structures built by generations of women putting their face into happy utopia” (2013: 82).

Viktoria decides to abandon her career and leave town because of her unhappy marriage and unsatisfactory emotional relationships. However, in fact the heroine flees from a certain style of life and omnipresent patterns that make her exist in defiance of herself and her vision of her role on earth: “...if I don’t get away from here, I will be lost in labels and tags. My own masks will consume me²⁰” (Arbatova, 2008: 254). The heroine’s real ‘self’ is replaced with an imagined ‘self’, reflecting expectations of other people (Fromm, 1993: 196-197). The woman tries to break the vicious cycle of terms and meanings to recover her lost self-identity. Having recognized that they live ‘automatically’, people can break free from ‘outsiders’, specified in the title of the play, who expect her to live in accordance with a certain pattern. The play’s finale doesn’t give a simple answer as to what future Viktoria will choose. Her airplane tickets, a symbol of her so-much desired freedom, get lost in the fuss. Thus, the ulterior meaning of the play is revealed: people can’t run away from themselves; they can’t lead a life guided by ‘outsiders’. A journey should start with looking into your inner world, with finding your true ‘self’.

It is remarkable that the heroines of Arbatova’s plays know the secret of happiness, but don’t become happy. Complicated emotional relations, which question their independence, bar them from complete self-fulfillment. With a certain emotional instability, the heroine of *Dreams on the Shore of Dnepr* considers the choice between loyalty to her husband and a doubtful future with her lover. Margarita decides to abandon her previous relationships in favor of a brief encounter with a man she’s loved for many years. Elena from *On the Road to Ourselves* hastily leaves Yevgeny, diving into the vague future with a person she has only occasionally met. The skill of easy breaking up and going with the stream seems to substitute freedom for them. However, conflicts with her partners and her emotional instability should be considered as expression of the woman’s internal struggle with herself. This is why the heroines of plays by Arbatova remain bound even when they feel free. This means their personal understanding of freedom is opposed to the relations they build with people around them. Afraid of losing their personal integrity and personality, they establish boundaries that restrict their intimacy with men: “There’re three stages of freedom: freedom ‘for something’, freedom ‘from something’, and freedom ‘as oppression of others’. I want to live through the ‘freedom for’ stage²¹” (Arbatova. 2008: 671). Lilith’s position offers a personalistic approach to human freedom, which attempts to be superior to arguments of followers of determinism and indeterminism. This way, the right to freedom can only be restricted by another person. A person is capable of self-piloting, self-limiting, internal and external development – all of that, without causing any harm to the wider public (Kowalczyk, 1994: 170). Arbatova’s heroines with extensive internal freedom are eager to realize their potential FOR similarly free people

²⁰ «... если я не уйду отсюда, я растворюсь в ярлыках, этикетках. Меня съедят мои маски».

²¹ «Существуют три стадии свободы: свобода «от чего-то», свобода «для чего-то» и свобода «как подавление окружающего». Я хочу жить на стадии «свобода для».

that are close to them: "I need to break free to solve common problems"²² (Arbatova, 2008: 703). Only that kind of relation can guarantee respect of human dignity and inherent rights.

An attempt to establish interpersonal relations of that kind seems doomed to fail, because, as Elena states, "We have different extents of internal freedom. In your model of love, there are two slaves, in mine, there are two masters. We speak different languages. You enter the space of my freedom and inculcate the dictatorship of love there"²³ (Arbatova, 2008: 589). The heroines attempt to remain integral through fleeing from relations where their internal freedom is endangered. Paradoxically, they seek salvation in new relations that bring hope for inviolacy of their selves. This is a way of protecting their self-identity by eliminating obstacles on the way to self-realization and by further reunion with the world through love. In a way, it is a dependence on intimacy with men that leaves the heroines of the plays without any chances of reaching internal harmony. Svetlana Goncharova-Grabovskaya notes: "Full freedom turns into loneliness, otherness and independence appear to be hindrances on the way to happiness. They don't act like others or they build their lives in accordance with some ideals only they are aware about, suffering from being alone in the crowd, and yet keeping true to their mission" (2003: 39).

The heroines of Arbatova's plays demonstrate a new aspect of feminism, which is different from the Western concepts. It stands to reason, because "the Western version of feminism, at least the one that reached Russia in the 90s, simply couldn't work in the Post-Soviet space" (Kuźmina, 2007: 292). Female characters from Maria Arbatova's plays are independent persons, certain about their internal freedom. This is the foundation they use to build a new model of man-woman relations, which are based on partnership and equality. When their personal integrity is endangered, they aren't afraid of radical changes. They're aware that it is necessary to make choices and daringly try to fulfil themselves on the way to happiness. However, the heroines don't symbolize liberation of women from male domination. On the contrary, falling into dependence on love relations, they don't fit into typical patterns of classical feminism. Arbatova's dramaturgy breaks the previous literary formulas referring to women, emphasizing women's demand for self-fulfillment based on the integral value of internal freedom.

The topic of internal freedom found a new dimension in the pieces written by Arbatova after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. For many Russians, the falling of the iron curtain became a pass to freedom, which they expected to try out in the West. In her plays, Maria Arbatova busts the myth of the free West. Yevgeny, the hero of *On the Road to Ourselves*, keeps in touch with a Dutch family to study the secrets of anthroposophy. He is surprised by their complete dissociation, lack of empathy and emotional ties. They live for display and are believed to be an exemplary family, but in their house an emotionally cold atmosphere prevails. Anita's marriage has long been in decline, which the marrieds choose to overlook. Their drug-addicted grandson roams the world. Their daughter Elena is more interested in self-fulfillment than in her own children. This is how her mother comments on her behavior: "Your

²² «Я должна стать свободной для того, чтобы решить общие проблемы».

²³ «У нас разная степень внутренней свободы. В твоей модели любви присутствуют два раба, в моей - два господина. Мы говорим на разных языках. Тыходишь в пространство моей свободы и устраиваешь там диктатуру любви».

freedom is freedom from everything! From goodness, from principles, from responsibility!”²⁴ (Arbatova, 2008: 583). This quotation is a direct reference to the thoughts of Isaiah Berlin that he shared in his lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1969). Anita’s reproach is a warning about negative freedom that doesn’t have any limitations. Freedom ‘from something’ should be extended with freedom ‘for something’, while choice options should serve for the benefit of people (Kowalczyk, 1994: 168). Such a critical attitude to negative freedom, observable in Arbatova’s plays, results from her acceptance of the concept supported by personalists, who defend responsible and “conditioned” freedom (Czarkowski, 1987: 3). Experience of emigrants in Maria Arbatova’s works confirms that the Western model of liberty destroys individuality, leads to confusion and dissolution of the ego. Zygmunt Bauman put it like this: “Paddling only your own canoe heralds painful emotional discord and the stings of uncertainty, whereas the load of responsibility [...] predicts paralyzing fear of risks and failures without any rights for appeal or compensation” (2006: 31). For a Russian brought up within the Soviet system, this type of freedom can become a burden, causing him or her to lose personal identity. Emigration causes an opposition of consistent views and unfamiliar concepts, provoking a search for a new place in the new reality. It is remarkable that Arbatova’s heroes see their life abroad as a failure, and their self-identification issues put them in a losing position. In Arbatova’s dramaturgy, Russian emigrants can’t answer the question: Who am I? Thus, their departure from the country is often seen as an escape from themselves. The heroine of Part 1 of *Drang nach Westen* abandons Russia low-spirited because of her family issues: “I have to leave to liberate myself from you, to become a person without this second-rate complex”²⁵ (Arbatova, 2008: 515). Unhappy marriage is also a reason for Yevgeny, the hero of *On the Road to Ourselves*, to leave Russia. Being abroad, the hero experiences lots of disappointments and can’t stop looking for his place on earth: “I’m not just an emigrant. I’m a traveller. I came to look for my place in the world”²⁶ (Arbatova, 2008: 569).

The heroes of Arbatova’s drama can’t withstand the ordeal of living abroad. For most of them, staying in a strange land implies endless suffering, humiliation, and shame. They work in unskilled job positions for low wages and usually fail to assimilate the new environment. This happens not because of the emigration itself, but because of the minds of the heroes depicted. They struggle against ‘the Soviet spirit’, which they associate with slavery, poverty, and a feeling of self-deficiency. They explain that their failures are rooted in the Soviet times. Disappointed Yevgeny criticizes the former political system: “It’s my country that made me a slave”²⁷ (Arbatova, 2008: 581). Meanwhile, the road to freedom has nothing to do with crossing the boundaries of your homeland. This is the matter of breaking internal barriers and acknowledging that traveling belongs to his or her own soul (Mazurek, 2004: 215). True freedom doesn’t come from the outside. It is given to a person, and can become a gift or a curse. Emigration caused by bondage is an escape from yourself, as stated by one of the heroines: “Freedom means adulthood and the right of making decisions on your own. You’ve made the only decision to leave and avoid making any other decisions, and now you just have

²⁴ «Твоя свобода - это свобода от всего! От добра, от принципов, от ответственности!».

²⁵ «Я должна уехать, чтоб освободиться от тебя, чтоб стать человеком без комплекса второсортности».

²⁶ «Я не только эмигрант. Я путешественник. Я приехал искать себя».

²⁷ «Меня страна сделала рабом».

to survive"²⁸ (Arbatova, 2008: 712).

Different visions of freedom present one of the most important reasons for the generational conflict, which involved 'fathers', who in Arbatova's plays are associated with people of the 60s, and 'children', who grew up in the period of Perestroika and political perturbations. The first play about that, *Session in a Communal Apartment* (1990), presents the living environment of the Moscow hippies of the 70s. The young characters protest against the oppressive reality through untypical life style. They arrange illegal exhibitions of abstract art, organize street masquerades, listen to loud music and read prohibited books. They revolt against the established system, as well as the world of 'fathers', whom they accuse of loyalty and passive adoption of the rules imposed by the communist state. Recognizing the fact of enslavement by the system, they are trying to establish their own identity based on internal freedom: "You want freedom on the outside, but freedom is inside you"²⁹ (Arbatova, 2008: 429). Hippies prefer a type of protest that involves withdrawal from the social system. Life in contempt of the existing rules suggests negation of the surrounding world and demonstration of internal liberty. For the younger generation, this lack of outer and internal restrictions stood for equilibrium of their wishes and freedom to act. For hippies, manifestation of freedom was a way of protecting human dignity and attesting their identity. Final thoughts of the heroines are preceded by the fear for the fate of the generations to come, who will be looking for orienting points in the lives of their 'fathers'. The women are sure that there is no universal recipe for happiness, but the older generation is responsible for cultivating self-respect in their children and granting them the right to fight for their identity and felicity.

This theme is explored in dialogues between Margarita and Vadim Petrovich in *An Experimental Interview on the Theme of Freedom*. A journalist, Margarita accuses the previous generation of the absence of paths to reach inner harmony: "I am unhappy by beliefs. I am trying to break free, I keep rocking it, but that doesn't work. It must be genetics. Misfortune as a life standard. I want it to end with me. I don't want to have my mother's or grandmother's eyes"³⁰ (Arbatova, 2008: 631). Emotional instability of the heroine exacerbates conflict with her mother, whom she accuses of emotionlessness and indifference.

Opposition to educational methods employed by 'fathers', has become the typical trait of Arbatova's heroines. This matter is essential for correct understanding of *A Questionnaire for Parents* (1985). In this play, a teacher tells the parents: "You make them comfortable for yourselves! You take a consumer approach on children; in a bit, their approach to you will become the same!"³¹ (Arbatova, 2008: 203). Generally, the innovative pedagogical methods of Mr. Lastochkin stir up opposition in parents. The only person that interprets the teacher's attempts in the right way is Mrs. Smirnova: watching her sons, she draws a valid conclusion:

²⁸ «Свобода означает взрослость и право принимать самостоятельные решения. Ты принял единственное решение: уехать, чтоб больше не принимать ни одного решения, а только выживать».

²⁹ «Вам хочется свободы снаружи, а свобода - она внутри человека».

³⁰ «Я несчастна по убеждениям. И я все пытаюсь это сломать, все раскачиваю, а все не получается. Это генетическое. Несчастье как норма жизни. И я хочу, чтоб на мне это кончилось, понимаете? Чтoб у меня не были такие глаза, как у матери, как у бабушки».

³¹ «Вы делаете их удобными себе! У вас потребительское отношение к детям; еще немного, и у них к вам оно станет таким же!».

“I’d love to see them absolutely happy, but for that, I need to be happy myself”³² (Arbatova, 2008: 183). Heroines of the other plays think in a similar way. On the one hand, they accuse their parents of their own failures in life. On the other hand, they don’t aspire to repeat their parents’ mistakes, which are constant forbiddance and living up to commonly accepted patterns.

The conflict of parents and children is rooted in different visions of freedom. For the generation presented by Arbatova’s protagonists freedom is a fact. However, women get lost in its labyrinths and become desperately unhappy. People brought up within the Soviet system accept such an approach to life with great difficulty. The generations understand the concept of freedom in different ways, which is well reflected in the words of Vadim Petrovich: “For you, freedom is running naked across the Red Square. [...] This is not freedom, this is playing Blind Tim with your complexes. My freedom was in my right to self-respect, and the fact that I was a communist changed nothing”³³ (Arbatova, 2008: 630).

At the same time, it seems that both parties to the conflict fail to properly interpret the fact of liberty. Carried away with democratic liberties, the youth try to break their links with Russian heritage. On the other hand, ‘fathers’ can’t break from the Soviet past, and are thus unable to catch up with the changes of the modern world. The generational conflict is aggravated by mutual accusations and indisposition to understand arguments of the opponent. Thus, for both generations freedom becomes an ‘unfortunate gift’ (Tischner, 1996), which was metaphorically referred to by the heroine of one of the plays: “‘Taking of the Bastille’ cost us a lot, because we destroyed ourselves along with it”³⁴ (Arbatova, 2008: 704).

Multifaceted reflections on freedom in Arbatova’s dramaturgy offer considerable room for interpretation. Feminist ideas, which the author supports through her participation in the movement for women’s rights, are usually given most attention. At the same time, limiting Maria Arbatova’s work to the feminist discourse wouldn’t be correct. Valenty Pilat reasonably notices: “It has nothing to do with gender. It is the person that matters, and it is this potential of humanity that determines if someone is bad or good” (2000: 155). Freedom is both a chance and a challenge, which is the basis for self-realization. It doesn’t have any absolute character, and no one can guarantee that it will be there forever. However, despite the external circumstances, a person is entitled to fight for internal liberty. That’s why the characters of Arbatova’s plays are always on the move. They are looking for ways of self-fulfillment and self-actualization. What is meant here isn’t about covering some physical distances, but about a way to one’s own internal world: “Wherever you go, you can’t leave yourself behind”³⁵ (Arbatova, 2008: 510). The issue of boundaries of freedom is unavoidable. Comprehension of freedom gives us a chance to take steps that lead to internal harmony and peace of mind.

³² «Я хотела бы видеть их совершенно счастливыми, но для этого должна быть счастлива я сама».

³³ «Для вас свобода - это голяком по Красной площади бегать. [...] Это не свобода, это игра в жмурки со своими комплексами. А я со своими играл в другие жмурки. Моя свобода заключалась в моем праве на самоуважение, и то, что я был коммунистом, ничего на самом деле не меняло».

³⁴ «Взятие Бастилии» далось нам дорого, потому что вместе с ней мы разрушили себя».

³⁵ «Куда бы ты не поехал, ты обязательно возьмешь с собой себя».

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