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The Irreal World In Guzel Yakhina's Novel "The Eshalon To Samarkand"

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ABSTRACT
This article is devoted to the analysis of the irreal world in Guzel Yakhina's novel The Eshalon to Samarkand. The irreal world serves as an important artistic device in the novel, allowing for a deeper exploration of the protagonist's internal conflict and the multilayered nature of the novel's artistic world.

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Guzel Yakhina is one of the most prominent contemporary Russian writers. Her debut novel, Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes, immediately attracted the attention of literary critics, scholars, and the general readership. Yakhina's subsequent novels, My Children and The Eshalon to Samarkand, further strengthened interest in her work.

The uniqueness of Yakhina's writing lies in her engagement with historical pasts. She depicts major historical events – such as dekulakization, collectivization, political repressions, and mass famine – and explores their impact on the lives of ordinary people. Her characters are complex, vivid individuals with their own fears, hopes, and internal contradictions. Unafraid to confront harsh and painful themes, Yakhina shows how cruelty, but also resilience, compassion, and love, emerge in these circumstances.

Yakhina's third novel, The Eshalon to Samarkand, tells the story of the mass famine in the Volga region during the 1920s and its consequences, including high mortality, epidemics, instances of cannibalism, and the plight of orphaned children. The novel's thematic focus combines the national and the personal: the fate of an entire people intersects with the destiny of an individual, highlighting the acute problems of the "little person," with their aspirations and hopes during pivotal moments in the country's history. The central idea of the novel is mercy as the highest human value. At the heart of the narrative is a journey – the route from Kazan to Samarkand in a special train carrying five hundred evacuated children suffering from famine.

The artistic world of Guzel Yakhina's novel The Eshalon to Samarkand is presented as a dual-world structure. Dual-world (or dvoemirie) is a term characteristic of Romanticism, defined as "the most universal conflict in literary art, encompassing all possible binary oppositions, embodying the dual nature of the world – spiritual and material, invisible and tangible" [1, p. 1]. The principle of dual-worlds has evolved beyond Romanticism. According to E.G. Maslova, in magical realism the dual-world principle is significant: "the depiction of two artistic worlds (real and irreal), a rationalist vision of reality combined with acceptance of the logic of the supernatural as part of everyday life" [2, p. 3].

The real world in the novel portrays the mass famine of the 1930s in the Volga region, depicted through the perspectives of different characters, each struggling to survive the harsh period. One coping mechanism is retreat into an irreal world, which allows characters to endure profound emotional trauma.

The protagonist, the train chief and Soviet officer Deev, balances between two worlds: the real, with its tangible events, and the unconscious irreal world, with visions of ghosts, hallucinations, and the inner "self." The harsh reality, the sense of hopelessness, and the desolation of the desert force Deev into the irreal world, which enables him to continue his journey, seek help, and survive. This is particularly evident in the chapter "Subtraction and Addition," where extreme physical exhaustion pushes the protagonist into the irreal world of his consciousness, motivating him to persevere: "Stand up and go! Now! – I can't. While you crawl here on your stomach, the children are dying. And you are their killer, killer! Deev got up and trudged on" [4, p. 417].

The irreal world is created through temporal gaps – time passes unnoticed: "It seemed like a minute or two, but when I looked up, night had already fallen" [4, p. 417]; memory lapses: "Where am I? I don't know. What am I doing here? Searching for something. Or someone" [4, p. 417]; and cognitive blurring between past and present: "Do you remember, grandfather, the snowy winter of 1920?" [4, p. 417]. According to Paveleva, such temporal gaps and fractures "reflect the balance between real and irreal worlds and serve as an authorial device to convey the protagonist's psycho-emotional state, allowing deep insight into the psychology of a soul on the edge of life and death" [3, p. 4]. The inner "self" acts as Deev's conscience, preventing him from giving up and reminding him of his responsibility for the five hundred children.

The irreal world is also introduced when the protagonist experiences a "dream without end," a state in which boundaries between reality and irreality blur. Sleep-hallucinations, caused by prolonged exposure to the desert, generate fantastical visions – Buga and Fatima – who become Deev's interlocutors and guides. Deev mentally addresses the imaginary Buga as "grandfather," recounting his past, including the shooting of children at the station and the clandestine distribution of pea soup to starving children. The ghostly vision of Fatima helps him emerge from the frozen forest, guiding him to the edge: "Fatima smiles in agreement. But at that moment Deev notices he is not holding a woman's hand – he is grasping an old, gnarled tree" [4, p. 430]. These irreal figures form an artificial family representing father, mother, and grandfather, reinforcing Deev's sense of responsibility and allowing him to endure the grueling desert journey.

Deev's monologue-conversation with Death is a vivid example of dual-worlds in the novel, uniting the real – when he strangles Zagreyka and shoots him in the eyes, leaving him blind – and the irreal, when Deev perceives Death in Zagreyka: "One morning he opened his eyes and saw Death. And so we meet" [4, p. 440]. Hallucinations override reality in Deev's consciousness – he sees Death instead of the real child. Early in the desert journey, he struggles against the irreal, using his inner "self" to recall reality; by the journey's end, he can no longer resist the imaginary. Deev does not see Zagreyka, but Death in his face, demonstrating how real and imagined scenes intertwine: "Small, child-sized, it pressed against Deev's legs…Lips twisted like a camel's, nostrils flared. Forehead like a bat, equally wrinkled. Monstrosity" [4, p. 440]. Yet memory of the past remains intact; Deev recalls precisely those claimed by death: "Thirteen lying down, forty cholera cases, nine boys who only wanted to taste chocolate but instead received a bullet in the stomach, a hundred women burned at the collection point" [4, p. 440]. By strangling Death, Deev destroys the imaginary and returns to the real.

Throughout the novel, the protagonist painfully experiences the deaths of small children and recalls those he has killed, attempting to process this tragedy by contemplating death in its various forms: "epidemics, famine, harsh winters, extreme poverty, brutal banditry" [4, p. 84]. The most significant manifestation, however, is death in the form of a small child, due not only to the killing of nine children but also to his responsibility for the children on the train. These two events profoundly affected the protagonist's consciousness, generating fear and remorse – a terrifying nightmare that forces Deev into the irreal world.

The fictional world dissipates when Deev is rescued by Burebek, leaving no traces in his memory. Deev is astonished as he examines Zagreyka's disfigured face and laments the "impossibility of finding the guilty party" [4, p. 457], marveling at his miraculous escape from the desert.

Thus, the irreal world in the novel is reproduced through the consciousness of the protagonist, Deev – his hallucinations and visions, which, though clouding his reasoning, enable him to survive in extreme circumstances. The character of Deev is presented in a dual manner: on one hand, he is a killer (of the nine children from the chocolate wagon, people who overate pea soup, soldiers crushed by boats, elderly women

at the collection point, and many others); on the other hand, he is the savior of more than five hundred starving, orphaned children, a newborn in a red swaddle, and himself.

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