

THE STRUCTURE OF THE “YAKUTIA” CONCEPT IN THE WRITINGS OF V.G. KOROLENKO

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ABSTRACT

The structure of the “Yakutia” concept based on the material of Korolenko’s short stories “Sokolinet” (“The Falconer”), “Moroz” (“Frost”), “At-Davan”, “Ogon’ki” (“Lights”), “Posledniy luch” (“The Last Ray”), “Gosudarevy yamshchiki” (“Sovereign’s coachmen”), “Feodaly” (“Feudal Lords”) is determined using the methods of the key words analyses. The results of the research verify the hypothesis that Yakutia is depicted as the country of cold, winter and night in the writer’s works.

Keywords: a concept, V.G. Korolenko, Yakutia, a mythological country of the dead.

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In Russian classical literature of the XIXth century Siberia and especially Yakutia are regarded as a god-for-saken and hateful place, it is a place where a person can be transferred only by force or, in other words, a prison without any walls. V.I. Tjupa in his article “The Siberian Intertext of Russian Literature” notices that Siberia in Russian cultural consciousness has gained characteristics and features of the mythological country of the dead (Tjupa, 2009: 254). “In Russian classical literature the chronotypical image of Siberia is represented as the country of cold-winter-night (moon), i.e. death from a mythological point of view. Although three summer months are predominantly very hot behind the Urals, in the Siberian literary sceneries summer and sun are usually ignored, as a rule” (Tjupa, 2009: 255).

The same attributes of the country of the dead are mentioned by V.G. Korolenko in his story “Sokolinets” (1885). The story begins with describing Yakut yurt and then Yakut “deadening” frost is depicted. The narrator is deeply held by his sad thoughts and he is upset as he is so extremely far away from his native places. All around him is grey, cold and impenetrable fog: “It is bitter **cold** and **creepy**... The night has hidden grasped by terror, sharp and intensive **horror**” [Korolenko 1971; v.1; 174]. Yakut frost has such epithet as “**deadly**” and Yakutia in winter is seen by the narrator as a kingdom of death in that: “... sorrow...whispers realistically these terrible fateful words: “forever...in this coffin, forever!..” (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 173).

The influence of the cold that deforms a person’s nature is described in detail by the author in his story “Frost” (“Winter”) (1901). One of the story’s main characters, Ivan Radionovitch Sokolsky states that a long staying outside in bitter cold causes the person’s conscience freezing. Sokolsky is the head of a prospecting party. His portrait description is rather interesting: “He was a large man, with a weather-beaten face, a mane of partly blanched hair, and features which seemed frozen hard, so difficult was it for them to express any emotion; his feelings were as safely hidden from sight under this impenetrable countenance as a river current under the fettering ice” (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 392). Sokolsky can be an example of a man whose appearance is determined due to the northern severe climate. He told a story that had happened with him and his companion, an exiled Pole Ignatovich in this land of ice. One day Sokolsky found for his friend a position of a superintendent of a warehouse of materials at the diggings and they started their way together.

Once they saw two ducks which were stragglers. The migrating flock had gone and the birds were left to perish on the freezing river. Ignatovich tried to catch them, one of the ducks dived, and it was sucked under the ice by the current, the other one was caught but died on their way to the station. Sokolsky pictures a dreadful cold when “birds lagged in their flight, flapped their wings convulsively,

and dropped to the ground; **bears, half frozen** in their dens, came out, lean, scared, and wicked. Squirrel hunters had to desist for fear of the angry beasts..." (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 397). After that the author describes their winter staying outside and the impact of the frosty weather on a human being: "We, too, began to feel the cold. You know what it means, don't you? When breath fails you, when, every time you blink, fine threads of ice form between your lashes, when **the cold steals under your clothing, under your skin, into your muscles, bores into your bones**, into the marrow of them, as the saying aptly expresses it. ... You begin to **shiver**, deep down in your inside, a piercing, disagreeable, nay, **humiliating feeling**. You arrive at a station-house; it is midnight before you get really warm, and, when you start in the morning, you feel that something has gone out of you; you begin to suffer sooner than you did the day before, and you are still colder when you reach your night's lodging. Your spirits flag, your **impressions are dulled, people become objects of dislike**. You even **loathe yourself**. You end by muffling up as closely as possible, settling down as comfortably as you can, and moving, **even thinking, as little as possible**; you instinctively avoid the least expenditure of energy. And there you sit, gradually stiffening, only **wondering, with a vague fear**, when there will be an end of these **terrible** 40-50 versts relays..." (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 397- 398).

During one of such relays when both Sokolsky and his companion were very cold and half frozen they passed by a lonely dark "spot in that white world", a man sitting at the roadside on a stump before a fire. It seemed to Sokolsky that the figure stirred but he did not turn his head and, moreover, did not even look that way. Besides, when a post-station driver ("yamstchik" in Russian) turned to the passengers and started to explain them the matter the driver's words seemed to be only detached sounds "like the tinkle of clashing icicles" and those words were meaningless.

At last only in a warm shelter near the fire Sokolsky and Ignatovich realized what really had happened. They understood that they had refused to help a person, who was in need, in great trouble; they had ignored a frozen and dying man. Then Sokolsky remembered a legendary story told by mediaeval travelers of polar countries. The legend stated that words spoken in midwinter froze and stayed frozen, as little icicles, awaiting the return of the warm weather. At that moment the driver's words which had been ignored before in the frosty weather "were thawed" and made him suffer the pangs of conscience. Ignatovich was especially worried about the matter and he said: "**Conscience is frozen!**.. Oh, yes, of course, it is always so. Let the body's temperature drop two degrees, and conscience straightway freezes. A natural law. But care personal comforts and vile pharisaic hypocrisy, those do not freeze, oh no! ... Oh, vile! Contemptible!" (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 403].

Ignatovich's crying about the murder of the frozen man made the host of the station gather post-station drivers. The host evidently did not understand what it was all about, so he had called all coachmen in, thinking there really were murderers to be secured. Sokolsky had explained everything about the matter and asked to help them to find the man but there was no evidence of any enthusiasm in coachmen's eyes. Nobody wanted to leave warm cabins as there was a snowstorm called by local people "a siver". The weather was pitiless: "The wind was **violent**, and so cold that it burned you... Below, a so-called 'ground storm' was racing along. Do you know what that is? It is this: the wind lifts the dry snow from the ground and carries it straight in your face, in one even, continuous sheet. It is not a snow-storm, but worse than any snow-storm". Sokolsky offered despairingly money to the coachmen and the praepostor, taken pity, tried to find a person whose turn it was to go. After long and ineffectual disputes the praepostor gave in; he refused to take money and agreed to go searching "anyhow, turn or no turn". Suddenly it was found out that Ignatovich without waiting the results of coachmen's decision had already left the place and gone in some unknown direction. In despite of severe drifting snow Sokolsky and the praepostor had been looking for the frozen man they had seen before on the road all night, and finally they managed to find him early in the morning. Sokolsky recollects: "He had a fire, but it had gone out long before... He had probably fallen asleep. However, his eyes were open and there was frost on the pupils" (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 409).

Unfortunately, Ignatovich who left the cabin intending to rescue the man by himself started in the opposite direction and froze to death. Thus, he "wanted to chastise in his own person the vile human nature, which allows conscience to freeze to death if the body's temperature sinks to two degrees. In him the romantic idealist sentenced and executed the materialist..." (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 410). Even the malign environment could not kill the humanity in that human being.

The metaphor "frost – frozen life" is often met in the writings of Korolenko ("Chudnaya" ("The Strange One"), "Makar's Dream", "Sokolinets", "At-Davan"), but it is not usually revealed itself as a separate image. In the story "Frost" it is discovered in the series of direct comparisons: the river, animals, men are frozen and even conscience is frozen as well. A symbolic image of frost helps the writer to express his thoughts that it is impossible to live with "frozen" conscience as a person is always responsible for sufferings of the others. Malign circumstances tend to a real understanding of the value of all that is alive, they provoke sympathy to all that is vital, and they raise humanity.

The attitude of V.G. Korolenko toward the Lena River is specific. For local people the Lena is a beloved and foster "mother" but the writer's view is focused on

its other features. The favorite Korolenko's river is the Vetluga, the river of his native place, and its image is described in the story "The River Plays" ("Reka Igraet") (1891). The gleeful title of the work is itself emotionally illuminated. Comparing the author's characteristics of two different rivers, given in Yakut short stories, the contrast becomes extremely evident: the Vetluga with its "gay" and "verdant" banks and friendly murmur is "sweet" and "playful"; on the contrary, the gloomy Lena fighting the ice with her "dark" waves and "dull water" ("At-Davan" (1892), "Lights" (1900), "The Last Ray" (1901), "Frost" (1901)).

The Lena has some negative connotations in the writer's memory. For instance, in the story "At-Davan", the following picture can be seen: the great infuriated Lena River is frozen, it has «disgorged in her battle against the bitter Siberian frost»; a pothouse "in the light of two tallow candles" with ice instead windows; and the sound of cracking ice as "loud as a cannon shot".

In the story "Lights" the reader gets a particular lyrical mood from the very first words, which seem to be quite trivial: "Once long ago in the dark autumn evening I used to sail across **a gloomy Siberian river**" (Korolenko, 1925: 480). However, the next lines create certain feelings of the author-narrator, the rebellious creature; his glance is fixed on the lights far away, on the lights which promise a close shelter. For the narrator these remote lights can "become closer, fighting the darkness, and sparkle, and promise, and beckon with their proximity", although his oarsman, wise and more experienced, doubts about the distance and reasonably apathetically says: "Far, far away". Finally, the narrator confesses that "life is flowing across the same **gloomy banks** but the lights are still far away" (Korolenko, 1925: 480); his romantic tendency gives him a great power as he believes these lights are near, in spite of the necessity to sail across the dark as black inks river, to row heavily in order to get to the destination. In this story the Lena is associated with stagnation, mustiness, apathy and the only effective remedy to be rescued is the glittering distant lights.

In the story "The Last Ray" the Lena is called "**a cursed slit**": "...it is like a **huge crack** in the bottom of which **the dark river** whirls, surrounded by **gloomy rocks, bluffs, rifts**. It's the place where **fogs stay** for a long time, where there is a **cold dampness** and **endless twilight**. The residents of this post-house in comparison with other local people living on the Lena's banks are amazingly sluggish, cachectic and hopelessly apathetic. **The dull hum of larches** on the mountainous ridges serves the eternal accompaniment to this sorrowful existence..." (Korolenko, 1925: 376).

The story “Frost” starts with a realistic landscape description. The writer, coming back from his Siberian exile, depicts the Lena River and the process of its gradual freezing. He almost “humanizes” the river: “... **the river angrily flung**, against the immovable masses that fettered it, such **ice cakes** as still floated freely on its open channel, beating breaches in them, smashing the ice into bits, splitting it into long, sharp needles, crushing it into snow, only impotently to retreat in the end...” (Korolenko, 1925: 388); **the desert passes of the mountainous shores** docilely reverberated **the dry crash of the breaking ice-floes and the heavy groaning of the succumbing river**” (Korolenko, 1925: 389). The river is described by Korolenko as a strong and powerful one but the frost in winter is really all-conquering.

In the story “Gosudarevy yamshchiki” (“Sovereign’s Coachmen”) (1901) Korolenko tells about his misadventures on his way back from the Yakutia exile to Russia. Thanks to the paper given him by the district police chief, the coachmen regard him as a person who intends to use their hard efforts and toil free of charge. Korolenko was astonished by poverty, downtroddenness and lawlessness of these horse carriage cabmen. They, without the right to choose naturally a place for their residence or a kind of occupation they want and without passports, were actually the State’s slaves. These people are illiterate, degenerating; they often cannot remember where their native land is. The poor coachmen depend on the kindness of the passerby, on the Yakuts who give them small pieces of land. Korolenko writes: “The Lena’s post-houses are like a spall of past centuries that was left untouched on faraway river by the period of Russian reforms; in the same way the frosty ice stays in the deep rifts...They are former “sovereign’s coachmen”, men who do a state carriage horse driver’s job for low salary. The state has to support this distant and underpopulated land. <...>Once, long ago the surveyors and officials sailed along the river looking for the places to settle, measuring the distance with their eyes from the boat. After that the men were brought from different parts of Russia and Siberia and so they were left on the bare rocks there. These poor creatures, recruited mostly by the fairy tales about “gold mountains”, cried while they were knocking their miner’s hicks to make a hole in a practically solid stone. <...>Since then they have been living here for centuries, men who are in the state service, getting the miserable payment. The ancient “post-stations” (“yams”) have disappeared everywhere and the serfdom in all its variations has gone. The only place they stay is the Lena...” (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 414- 415).

In the abstract with the title “The Post-station Dwellers”, the first sketch for the story “Sovereign’s Coachmen”, the old oarer says to the author “The Tzar has given us to the Yakuts for ever and ever. The great **sorrow** of ours. <...>what is it if

not captivity? Just think, whose these tillages are, whose the best meadows are and whose the pastures are. This land is all for the Yakuts. Our livestock go feeding with Yakut one only on sufferance ... Sometimes we buy a cartload of hay for twenty roubles. What is it if not a sorrow? And to go – where do we go? All we can make for living is driving a horse carriage, but today the fee has made us suffer. They see the need, so they reduce the fee. Is it not **captivity**? E-eh!” (Korolenko, 1946: p.2: 363-365). In despite of unbearable living conditions, the coachmen are depicted as people who get used to such difficult life circumstances. The only man who tries to get his freedom with all his might, Mikesha, is regarded by everyone as a madman. The author sympathizes with Mikesha as this man has got a strong desire of liberty and it supports the mood of the author who is finally coming back from his hateful exile. Mikesha asks about Saint Petersburg, about the edge of the Earth and about the possibility to watch the Tzar. Following his mood, Korolenko, “unexpectedly for himself fell into talk. It seemed that the mountains surrounding us, moved apart and I looked into far away behind them and nearly unconsciously tried to let this naïve post driver peek there too. (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 420). Having noticed that the author admires the Lena’s rocks, Mikesha is sincerely surprised and tells his point of view: “No! It’s nice in this World. It’s nice behind these mountains... And we here ... why do we live for? We only keep watch over a motley boundary post ... A motley boundary post, grey stone and dark forest...” (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 421). Mikesha is sure that it’s worth living there, behind the mountains but not here, on this side of the Earth. The motif of homelessness and longing for freedom is essential in the story.

In the chapter “Mikesha” a story about the tragic destiny of the “uniat” Ostrovskiy, the victim of mean treatment of the Yakuts and coachmen, dependent on the Yakuts, is told. Ostrovskiy was not warned that the given to him land was perfect for rye germination; however it was useless as rye had never ripened on it. Several years of hard labour gave him nothing but poverty and his wife died of scurvy. The prototype of Ostrovskiy is the Pole Skupchinskiy who is mentioned in the author’s “Jounal” (“Dnevnik”) (Korolenko, 1925: 30-31). In his “Journal” Korolenko is more laconic in the descriptions of this dramatic event and he didn’t explain the background of the story. Ostrovskiy is one more unhappy person among the humiliated and insulted people. In this case, Ostrovskiy is embittered by his misfortune and he does not tend to be patient and he does not seek forgiveness so he burns his yurt and goes to work in the mines.

The motif of banishment can be discerned in this story. Siberia is regarded by the coachmen as the hateful place to live and their yearning for the Motherland is deep.

The events as they happened on Korolenko's way back from the Yakutia exile are described by the author in his story "Feudal Lords" (1904). This story, the last one of Siberia, has not drawn the attention of the researchers to a great extent. However, the rare for the narrator world – the world of the people who grow rich at the expense of gold, the world of prospecting mining head residence is represented here. The first view of the residence has aroused the writer's memories of the civilized world. He writes: "A well-lighted two-storey building has become closer. Through the windows' curtains the dancing silhouettes streaked like the Chinese shades... The indistinct sounds of the band were heard... And behind – is the cold muddled darkness in which the mountainous slopes, dark rifts, **the deep bed of the freezing river, coldness, snowstorm and the desert** are peeped..."

Only the person, who has been thrown far aside any culture for several long years, can understand that after this period a simple lamppost with a burning oil lamp, lightening the street, is seen as a wonderful masterpiece... And how magically an inelaborate band sounds behind the lighted windows..." (Korolenko, 1971: v.1: 452)

The author was very impressed by that scene; moreover, it was a horrifying contrast to what he had watched during his journey. He met the coachmen who had been waiting for the debacle finishing for two weeks. All that time peopled stayed into a wide hole made in the cold land; their faces were sullen and exhausted. It seemed to Korolenko that he had finally understood the real meaning of the word "yam" and it was clear for him then how "the state post-station service" began. The narrator, being a witness, depicts that scene as fantastic and gloomy one, like it was taken from the XVIth century. In this story a considerable contrast between the luxurious life in the residence and dreary living conditions of the coachmen is illuminated by Korolenko. He remembers "**the cold muddled darkness**", "dark rifts", "coldness, snowstorm and the desert".

Thus, on the basis of analyzed stories the following key words connected with the "Yakutia" concept can be pointed out. *The inner world*: creepy, horror sorrow; humiliating shivering; dulled impressions; people become objects of dislike; you loathe yourself; thinking, as little as possible; wondering, with a vague fear; frozen conscience.

Winter: bitter cold; a dreadful Yakut frost; bears, half frozen; the cold steals under your clothing, under your skin, into your muscles, bores into your bones; coldness, snowstorm and the desert; the cold muddled darkness.

The Lena River: a dull Siberian river; gloomy banks; a cursed slit; a huge crack; dark water; gloomy rocks, bluffs, rifts; the place where fogs stay; a cold dampness; endless twilight; the dull hum of larches; the river angrily flung ice cakes; the desert passes; the dry crash of the breaking ice-floes; the heavy groaning of the succumbing river; the deep bed of the freezing river.

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