

Tetiana GREBENIUK, Тетяна ГРЕБЕНІЮК

University of Warsaw, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0003-1910-5411
e-mail: t.grebeniuk@uw.edu.pl

The Story of Liberation from Fear in Oksana Zabuzhko's Fiction

Abstract

In the fiction by Oksana Zabuzhko, one of the most well-known contemporary Ukrainian writers, trauma manifests itself through characters' state of fear that hinders both their individual self-actualization, decolonization of Ukraine and gaining the political agency by Ukrainian people. Approaching Zabuzhko's fiction as an author's hypertext we can trace the unfolding of the cross-cutting plot of the protagonists' fight with the totalitarian system that uses fear to paralyze them. The development of this plot reflects gradual changes in Ukrainians' mindset since the 1980s until now, from representation of fear as permanent society's state (in the short story *Sister, Sister*) to observation that the post-Maidan generation does not experience this fear anymore (in the story *No Entry to the Performance Hall after the Third Bell*). The aim of this article is to analyze the forms of artistic representation of Oksana Zabuzhko's plot of liberation from the totalitarian fear in different periods of her creative life.

Keywords: Oksana Zabuzhko, trauma, state of fear, cross-cutting plot, postmemory, premediation.

Oksana Zabuzhko, one of the most well-known contemporary Ukrainian writers, actively and consistently promotes in her works the idea of working through the historical traumas of Ukrainians as a necessary condition for decolonization and proving political agency of Ukraine. In Zabuzhko's fiction, trauma manifests itself through fear that hinders the character's self-actualization as well as (to some extent) the process of decolonization of Ukraine.

In Zabuzhko's works, the state of fear is often the driver of action or the cause of inaction of the characters. Despite the fact that in the emotional structure of personality, fear can perform a useful, protective function, in the writer's fiction it is mostly a destructive emotion. It is realized both at the personal level and as a collective background emotional state.

Approaching Zabuzhko's fiction as an integral author's text we can trace the unfolding of the cross-cutting plot of the protagonists' fight with the totalitarian system that tries to paralyze them with this inherited irrational fear. The writer's development of this plot reflects gradual changes in Ukrainians' mindset since the 1980s until now. The aim of this study is to analyze the forms of artistic representation of Oksana Zabuzhko's plot of liberation from the fear of totalitarian oppression in different periods of her creative life.

Before delving into the analysis of the fictional material (largely based on the facts of the writer's own biography), let us clarify the meaning of the emotion of fear for the system of totalitarianism and the correlation between the phenomena of fear and freedom as contextual antonyms in the political conditions of totalitarianism.

Hannah Arendt, in her work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, considers terror¹ as the essence of totalitarian rule. Under totalitarian terror, the law does not work, and victim and aggressor can easily change places, because this regime neglects any 'parts' for the sake of the 'whole': "It substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as if their plurality has disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions."² Moreover, despite this strong bonding, in totalitarian systems, each individual is fundamentally isolated. Arendt sees isolation as the beginning of terror, a fertile ground for its development.

Due to the lack of a logical explanation of the reasons of violence, any defense mechanisms lose their relevance, including fear, which originally emerged as an instinctive form of self-preservation:³ "Under totalitarian conditions, fear is probably more widespread than ever before; but fear has lost its practical utility when actions guided by it can no longer help to avoid the dangers man fears."⁴ According to Hannah Arendt, the phenomena that can be opposed to terror, thus overcoming fear, are individual freedom and unity of free people who are able to overcome the isolation of a totalitarian society and go beyond totalitarianism.

However, the internalization of the totalitarian regime's ideas can be an obstacle when gaining a state of freedom, because, as Ana Martinjak Ratej states, "totalitarian terror is not only external, it is internal. Totalitarian ideology is designed to prepare human beings to allow totalitarian ideological logics to replace his/her own logical thinking and undermine his/her internal freedom, therefore, creating

¹ Judging by the context of the work, among the numerous definitions of the word 'terror,' the researcher uses this one: "violence committed by a person, group, or government in order to frighten people and achieve a political goal" (*The Britannica Dictionary*, <http://surl.li/tnoorn>).

² H. Arendt, N. May, *The origins of totalitarianism*, Cleveland and New York 1958, p. 465.

³ From now on, under 'fear' I mean "an unpleasant emotion or thought that you have when you are frightened or worried by something dangerous, painful, or bad that is happening or might happen" (*Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fear>).

⁴ H. Arendt, N. May, *The origins of totalitarianism*, Cleveland and New York 1958, p. 467.

internal terror over him/her.”⁵ The way to better ‘implant’ the principles of totalitarianism in the mind of an individual is to present him/her with internal and external enemies, whose existence and the need to fight them justify totalitarian methods of government.⁶

When an individual chooses a line of behavior in a totalitarian society (i.e., the choice between integration into Arendt’s ‘One Man of gigantic dimensions’ and personal freedom, which implies the ability to associate with similarly internally free individuals), the family environment is extremely important. In fact, it is here, in the family, that the individual’s resistance to this ‘internal terror’ is laid.

When it comes to the formation of Oksana Zabuzhko’s personality, the importance of her family in laying the foundations for her resiliency to the regime cannot be overstated. Her parents, Ukrainian philologists by profession, made every effort to raise their daughter to be a well-rounded and independent-minded person. In 1949, her father, Stefan Zabuzhko, was sentenced to exile to Siberia and was able to return to Ukraine only thanks to an amnesty after Stalin’s death. But all his life he, and later his family, were under the surveillance of Soviet secret services. In particular, Oksana Zabuzhko describes how the family’s apartment was searched in her short story *Sister, Sister*, based on her own memories of two searches at the Zabuzhko family’s flat in the autumn of 1965.

The repressive authorities tried to incriminate Stefan with new, non-existent crimes, deprived him of his teaching position at the Kyiv Pedagogical Institute of Foreign Languages (he was eventually forced to work in a low-skilled job at a *Bolshevik* factory). Both of the writer’s parents were scholars and wrote candidate dissertations but were ‘from above’ deprived of the opportunity to defend themselves. All these attacks of the totalitarian regime on the closest people, carefully analyzed by the writer, became a ‘vaccination’ for her against accepting the totalitarian regime, and later appeared in her texts.

Reflecting in her autobiographical story *The Gurnik Code* on why the atmosphere of fear is not too vivid in her childhood memories, the writer realizes that despite the constant presence of fear in her family life, the Zabuzhko family ‘did not live by it’: “It was life as it should be – love, joy, in-born work.”⁷ The inner freedom and independence of thought instilled in her family (along with a clear awareness of her own national identity) made it possible for Oksana Zabuzhko to realize another ‘anti-totalitarian’ trait, according to Arendt, the ability to recognize people who are close to her in spirit. The writer calls this skill a ‘glimpse of light’ in the darkness of her five student years, recalling how “students and teachers, not knowing any-

⁵ A. Martinjak Ratej, *Apocalyptic Elements and Fear in Totalitarian Regimes* [in:] *Disputatio philosophica: International Journal on Philosophy and Religion*, No. 14.1, 2012, p. 55.

⁶ C. Robin, *Fear: The history of a political idea*. Oxford 2004, p. 12.

⁷ І. Гурнік, О. Забужко, *Ієрихонські трубачі. Код Гурніка*. Переклад: Стефан Забужко, Київ 2019, pp

thing about each other, recognized ‘their own’, those who think, only through one look, a word, a non-standard reaction.”⁸

Therefore, given Zabuzhko’s biography, it is quite natural that the plot of escaping the zone of totalitarian fear was extremely relevant for the writer, both at the individual and national level of its implementation. And the dynamics of representation of this plot in the writer’s works very accurately reflects all stages of the post-totalitarian development of Ukrainian society.

In Zabuzhko’s early fantastic tale *The Book of Genesis. Chapter Four* (created back in the days of late totalitarianism, in the 1980s), fear is shown as a permanent state of the residents of Eden, shown exactly like Arendt’s ‘One Man of gigantic dimensions’ having special unifying rituals and completely deprived of personal space.

However, the only inhabitant of Eden, endowed with the rudiments of inner freedom and able to unite people around him through creativity (singing and playing the guitar), nevertheless becomes part of the general mass.

The main plot of Oksana Zabuzhko’s short story *Sister, Sister* (1992) is the family struggle against fear and, in the end, the protagonist’s personal victory over it in the future. The work is autobiographical, and its importance for the author herself is emphasized by the fact that its title gave rise to the title of a collection of her works published in 2003. The first work is centered on the five-year-old girl Darka’s loss of her unborn sister as a result of the totalitarian regime’s repressive interference in her family’s private life. Darka’s mother loses the battle against the paralyzing fear of totalitarian repression. Under the pressure of persistent interrogations, searches and total surveillance of the dissident father’s family, the mother terminates the desired pregnancy because she decides that she would not manage to ‘shield’ her two children from the murderous clutches of the system. Although the narrator of the work is Darka, who is now an adult, the fear shown in the work, which is hyperbolized to the point of all-encompassing horror, is experienced not by her, but by her mother, Natalka, and her unborn sister.

Natalka, believing that in a situation of health problems and constant stress her child cannot be born normal decides to terminate her pregnancy. She feels guilty and horrified by her future actions, as if “the marble cold of the alder-covered tombstone slowly fills her, still alive, and she says with all the cold in her body to the terrified hot lump that desperately digs into her, trying to bury itself as deeply as possible: ‘I’m sorry’.”⁹ The most emotionally poignant moment in the work is when Darka imagines the horror that her unborn sister felt before the appearance of nothingness. Comparing her to Jonah in the belly of the whale, Darka painfully imagines how “fear continued to rage around her, pure fear, objectless and all-powerful, she floundered

⁸ *Український палімпсест. Оксана Забужко в розмові з Ізою Хруслінською, Хруслінською*; [пер. з польської Д. Матіяш; за ред. І. Андрусика], Київ 2014, pp. 63–64.

⁹ О. Забужко, *Сестро, сестро* [в:] Забужко О., *Після третього дзвінка вхід до зали захищається. Повісті та оповідання*, Київ 2017, pp. 145.

in the very center of it, blindly groping around in search of a safe haven, (...) but behind that fear, something else was rapidly rising – like a heavy eyelid designed to cover a desperate hot lump that did not even have a voice yet.”¹⁰

In fact, the story *Sister, Sister* is a work about the defeat of a family in the face of totalitarian fear – the defeat that became an incurable trauma for each of the family members (the father later dies prematurely from an illness acquired under constant stress). However, the narrator also writes about how hard her parents tried to raise their only daughter to be strong and independent, able to win in future battles with the murderous system. And the fact that they succeeded is already the potential for future victories that gives meaning to the struggle: “Two lives have been given to fully redeem your own. Two whole lives. But you – you slipped through, Dartsya.”¹¹

In the next work, where the theme of fear is a cross-cutting one, the novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, the love affair between two creative personalities, Oksana and Mykola, who grew up in the same conditions, is shown. Both were the children of repressed parents, and both were ‘breaking out of the cellar’ of unfulfilled talent in the face of prohibitions and total surveillance. They both absorbed an atmosphere of suffocating fear for their closest people: “Fear came early. Fear was passed on in the genes, one was to fear everyone outside the immediate family circle – anyone who expressed any degree of interest in you was in fact spying for the KGB to find out what’s really going on at home and then those bad men will come again and put Daddy in prison.”¹²

For Zabuzhko, a very important artistic task was to convey in the novel this atmosphere of total terror in which Ukrainians lived during the Soviet era – the human condition in which fear becomes the main motivation for actions. In particular, the protagonist of *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* recalls a story from her teenage years: a guy who was familiar with the literature that was banned at that time tried to establish a friendly relationship with her. In particular, he read Vynnychenko’s works and tried to discuss them with the girl. But Oksana, despite the fact that she had similar interests, pushed him away because she thought he was a provocateur assigned to her. That is, fear in this case can be seen as a factor in the character’s loneliness.

Another kind of fear of totalitarian-imperial influence, which is revealed in the novel as a driver of the protagonist’s actions, is the fear of the eradication of the Ukrainian nation, “the eternal Ukrainian curse of nonexistence.”¹³ In his essay, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” Milan Kundera very clearly states Russia’s aim to destroy the identity of neighboring peoples and absorb their states: “...nothing could be more foreign to Central Europe and its passion for variety than Russia: uniform, standardizing, centralizing, determined to transform every nation of its empire

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 140–141.

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 149.

¹² O. Zabuzhko, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, trans. Halyna Hryn, Las Vegas 2011, p. 143.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 34.

(the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, the Armenians, the Latvians, the Lithuanians, and others) into a single Russian people.”¹⁴ The fear of the disappearance of the nation with which Oksana identifies is a powerful motivation for her actions. In particular, she actively promotes Ukrainian culture, teaches, gives speeches, and eventually writes fiction (like Oksana Zabuzhko herself). Perhaps it is this component of her personality that prevents her from completely dissolving into a toxic relationship with Mykola, who, unlike her, does not fight the threat of the nation’s destruction.

Finally, Zabuzhko suggests in the novel a clearly articulated path to victory over fear: “Slavery is the state of being infected by fear. And fear kills love. And without love – children, poems, paintings – everything is pregnant with death.”¹⁵ Moreover, love is understood here quite broadly and encompasses the potential for unity as a counteraction to totalitarian threats, which Arendt writes about. The protagonist of the novel emerges victorious from the fight against fear, personified by the confrontation with her beloved, the man, ‘infected with fear’, who destroys her. Oksana is open to the future and ready to love.

The turning point in Oksana Zabuzhko’s comprehension of the fear of the totalitarian system on the Ukrainian nation is recorded in her short story *Album for Gustav* (2005), devoted to the events of the Orange Revolution.

In this work, the writer further develops the idea of the confrontation between fear and love, which she argued earlier in her novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*, and also puts forward the new idea – that inherited fear is an immunity for Ukrainians against real political threats, an ‘antidote’ that Western European nations lack. The writer puts this idea into the mouth of the Dutchman Gustav, for whose *Eastern European album* the protagonist chooses photographs he took during the Orange Revolution.

The protagonist’s inherited animal paralyzing fear arises as a manifestation of post-memory¹⁶ when he sees near the Maidan ‘silent’ cars without license plates, an attribute of the violent actions of the current government, which follows the example of the previous Soviet rulers: “...there is something bigger inside me, deeper than simple physiological fear at the sight of danger, the normal human fear that makes your muscles cramp and your mouth dry, the body’s protective reaction (...) black ‘court buses,’ night interrogations, a blinding lamp in the eyes, fingers stuck in the door, genitals crushed by a boot (...) seventy years ago, almost forty years before I was born, but somehow I knew it, recognized this feeling, deeper than fear: as if you were tied to an operating table and a mad surgeon was bringing a scalpel over you.”¹⁷ However, this fear is defeated by the power of human unity, and as a result, the colossal creative power of love comes out: “...inscriptions ‘Love

¹⁴ M. Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe* [in:] *Re:Thinking Europe: Thoughts on Europe: Past, Present and Future*, ed. by Yoei Albrecht and Mathieu Segers, Amsterdam 2016, p. 195.

¹⁵ O. Zabuzhko, *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, trans. Halyna Hryn, Las Vegas 2011, p. 34.

¹⁶ M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Post-memory* [in:] *Poetics Today*, No. 29(1), 2008, p. 103.

¹⁷ О. Забужко, *Альбом для Густава* [в:] Забужко О., Після третього дзвінка вхід до зали забороняється. Повісті та оповідання, Київ 2017, p. 342.

will win!’ appeared on the walls and cars, and it did win, who would have thought that so much love lives in all of us, one has only to free oneself from fear, to break through it like a dam, and love, which had been stifled for God knows how long, measured in meager portions only for the closest ones, spilled out in all directions like a luminous ocean, illuminating the darkest season.”¹⁸

This all-pervading love carries such a charge of energy that after the revolution, when passions have cooled down, it pulsates even in the photographs taken by the protagonist on the Maidan and is felt even by an outsider, the foreigner Gustav. Perhaps it is precisely because of this character’s distance from Ukrainian problems that Zabuzhko empowers him to voice the idea of the positive potential of collective transgenerational fear: “There is no fear in our culture, Gustav says. No memory of fear (...) We are more susceptible to manipulation than you are, he explains. We have no immunity. We cannot recognize the real threat.”¹⁹ In other words, we can say that the collective paralyzing fear, repeatedly described by Zabuzhko, in this story is first comprehended by the writer as a phenomenon of premediation,²⁰ unconscious preparation of the community for future battles and trials.

The attitude to the emotion of fear of the protagonist of Oksana Zabuzhko’s novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* is also rooted in the past, and the ‘work’ of this emotion can also be considered as premediation. The protagonist, Daryna Hoshchynska, gains readiness to resist the fear and not to obey the dictates of the authorities, as a result of her reflection on her father’s experience of fighting against the regime. Her father worked as an engineer on the construction of the Palace “Ukraine”, which surpassed the Kremlin Palace of Congresses in Moscow in its beauty, and therefore was ‘renovated,’ which meant that it was oversimplified to the level of ‘a humble provincial movie theatre.’ Daryna’s father spent his life trying to get those responsible for the ‘renovation’ punished and to restore the building to its original appearance. His struggle was not successful, and the years of forced treatment in the psychiatric clinic killed him – so the Soviet regime seems to have defeated him. But by trying to fight the regime and doing what he was most afraid of, Daryna’s father set an example for his daughter of how to deal with fear productively. The protagonist drew a parallel between her father’s attempts at a political struggle and her own diving into the sea from a height in her teenage years. After spending a whole day doing something she was terrified of, she eventually overcame her fear.

Another notable feature of the work is the attitude of a former representative of the punitive authorities, Bukhalov, to totalitarian fear. Having been brought up by

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 349.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 351.

²⁰ i.e., ‘schemata for new experience and its representation’ by the media that circulate in a given society, according to: A. Erll, *Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the “Indian Mutiny”* [in:] *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, ed. by Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, Berlin, New York 2009, p.111.

the Soviet system, he sees fear as the pillar of statehood: “How can you live without fear? Everything will fall apart – you can see how it is falling apart (...) The whole state collapsed as soon as they stopped being scared.”²¹ Although, he notes that a world without fear is exactly what he personally wanted for his daughter.

And finally, the work that testifies to the final victory of the Ukrainian nation over fear (indelible, however, for the generation that grew up in the post-soviet Ukraine) is the story *No Entry to the Performance Hall after the Third Bell* (2017), which takes place already during the Russian-Ukrainian war. The protagonist of this work, Olha, who was born and raised in the soviet and post-soviet Ukraine, constantly experiences the fear associated with the war. In this novel, fear is also a background theme, but here it is naturally linked to the threats of war.

Olga and her husband react with acute compassion to the events of the war, to the deaths and suffering of people, but they are shown as a couple who are removed from direct participation in the defense of the state, just good people who support army, donate for its needs but, in fact, are afraid to plunge too deeply into the pain of the present, to become part of it: “neither of them would have admitted it out loud before, but amidst all the terrible, piercing news and rumors, and Olha’s sobs over the photos of the dead, and the incessant, subcutaneous fear that was always there (...), they were both secretly celebrating – celebrating that they had a daughter, not a son: that no wave of mobilization, no matter how many more would come, would ever, ever bring them a call to their home.”²²

Representatives of the younger generation are shown in a completely different light – Olga’s daughter Ulianka and her beloved Andrij, who went to war as a volunteer and returned with an amputated hand. Eventually Olha feels happy and relieved to see that this is a new generation of Ukrainians, unfamiliar with the burden of totalitarian fear: “What they will never understand, and I will not explain to them, is what it means to live in fear. To live with fear as if it were a family member. They don’t have fear, these children, she thought with an unbearable, profitable tenderness – somehow simultaneously about Ulianka and, in the background, through her, about Andrij Nazarenko, and about some other invisible children, many, many who suddenly ceased to be children. When something frightens them, they do not run away, they go towards it. They take their weapons and go to the front. They are not afraid to live; and to die if they have to: they already know that this is also part of life.”²³

It can be said that the overarching plot of the struggle of an individual and the entire Ukrainian nation against totalitarian fear is resolved by the contemporary moment. It is resolved by the realization that fear has been defeated. In *The Ukrainian Palimpsest*, Oksana Zabuzhko draws a line under the centenary (or even

²¹ О. Забужко, Музей покинутих секретів, Київ 2010, р. 780.

²² О. Забужко О. Після третього дзвінка вхід до зали забороняється [в:] Забужко О., Після третього дзвінка вхід до зали забороняється. Повісті та оповідання, Київ 2017, р. 374.

²³ Ibidem, p. 412.

three hundred years, according to the logic of her essay *The Longest Journey*) efforts of Ukrainians to gain full independence, both legal and inner: “That’s why I look at the younger generation with joy and hope – they no longer have this sense of inferiority, the need to apologize for who they are. Even if these young people are deprived of the full consciousness of historical memory, they no longer have this genetic fear of being Ukrainian. In contrast to what happened among my peers in the 70s of the last century.”²⁴

Having traced the development in Oksana Zabuzhko’s fiction of the overarching plot of an individual’s struggle against the paralyzing fear of the totalitarian system, we can conclude that this struggle ends in the victory of a free individual and a united nation over the totalitarian past. The writer’s fictional world shows a gradual transition from the disharmonious state of inherited fear and despair to openness to the future, faith in oneself based on ‘connectivity’ to the inexhaustible saving energy of human communities – gender, family, nation. No wonder that in the final scene of the novel *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets*, a future child’s image appears, through which the connection of times is articulated, and Ulianka and Andriy in the story *No Entry to the Performance Hall after the Third Bell*, despite the uncertainty of wartime, decide to create a family.

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²⁴ Український палімпсест. Оксана Забужко в розмові з Ізою Хруслінською, Хруслінською; [пер. з польської Д. Матіяш; за ред І. Андрусяка], Київ 2014, р. 71.

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Tetiana Grebeniuk – Doctor of Philology, Professor, Visiting Professor at Warsaw University, Institute of Ukrainian Studies.