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**THE HISTORY OF THE READER AS “MENTAL ODYSSEY”:
CULTURAL MODELS OF SELF-DETERMINATION
IN THE NARRATIVE BY A.S. BYATT
“THE DJINN IN THE NIGHTINGALE’S EYE”***

SUMMARY. The article concerns the problem of the reader's description in literature. The issue of shaping a tradition of the reader's artistic portrayal is to be discussed. The specificity of the reader's image is compared through studying medieval and modern literature.

KEY WORDS. Self-determination plot, the reader's image, A. Byatt, literature about the reader, character-reader.

The plot, concerning self determination, is quite popular in the modern belles-lettres style. Meanwhile the issue of self determination is often solved by looking for the cultural schemes, which could help a character realize his existential demands. The modern literature puts the reader in the place of such a character who hopes to fulfill his life story, trying out the strategies which were stated in the book.

The portrayal of such a character has been traditional since the medieval times in Europe. We can witness it, for instance, in *Confessions* by Augustine of Hippo (in the Eighth book, in which Augustine reads the Holy Scripture and ends up being a Christian), *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (in the part of Francesca de Rimini's confession, which perished the soul while quoting a bookish kiss), *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes, and *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. We will remind the reader that Cervantes's main character, basing on bookish bravery, tried to change the unjust world just like in the book he had read. During the play Shakespeare's character was constantly searching for a text, which could possibly solve the problems he was contemplating about. Hamlet referred to this issue, for example, in the byplay of greeting the actors, when he recollected the approval of taking the revenge for the father's death in *Aeneid* by Vergil. It took place in the set piece of Priam's execution, which was fulfilled by Pyrrhus. It is fascinating that Hamlet was always searching for the true bookish demeanor — despite the fact that even in the beginning of the drama he seemed to be really skeptical about a similar intention (“Words, words, words” he answered to Polonius concerning his reading).

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We should underline that in the medieval literature the portrayal of the main character as a person who acts according to the quotes (so called quote oriented behavior) did not presuppose the issue of self determination as it was a tradition. According to it, the reader undergoes the imperative impact from literature; he has to learn a valuable lesson [1], which was traditionally meant to be the main function of literature. That is why the medieval literature was aimed at having an impact on the reader's life, about “benefits and damage made by literature”, which was oriented on people of that time at “achieving self justification for the church” (V. I. Tyupa).

However we should highlight that the stories of the Late Renaissance readers — Hamlet and Don Quixote — already started to destroy “the clerical allness” (L. Batkin) of traditionalism. Don Quixote blamed the courtly literature in the end of the novel for becoming the source of illusions, in spite of the fact, that its plot concerned Christian values. Though Hamlet referred to the Holy Scriptures, trying to avoid willful evil (according to N. Mikeladze's point of view), he turned the sacral Christian text into one of his bookish demeanors. Meanwhile he was considering the possibility of basing his demeanors *on other pieces of writing*, for example, on *Hieronimo* by Thomas Kyd [2], or on an ancient novel about Orestes — Euripides or Aeschylus [3], or *Aeneid* by Vergil. However, despite the fact that the quotation of the traditional novels was not a success or was even disappointment in its realization, the reader's portrayal was based on a main character's self justification for the “ready” truth. It is possible that only Hamlet came across the issue of self determination.

The modern literature has another mental basis and it reflects the relations between a human and literature differently. As a rule, the modern literature is connected with the realization of a personal project (not a ready one, legitimated determination in a culture as in literature, which is oriented to a normative type of mentality). It can be a project of “metaphysical thinking” (F. Nietzsche), of life interpretation, of changing in life content, experiment or adventure, of communicating with another person, of self esteem, searching for a reason to live or self determination. The latter is depicted in such pieces of modern writing as the novels *A Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* by A.S. Byatt (1994), *The Reader* by Schlink (1995), *The Hours* by Cunningham (1998), *Blue Angel* by F. Prose (2002), *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fawler (2004) and others.

We will dwell upon the description of this type, concerning reader's reference to literature in the novel *A Djinn in the Nightingale's Eye* written by A.S. Byatt. In accordance with this idea, the main character of the novel goes through the stages, which are similar to the stages in human's mentality. These are consequent stages of normative, divergent and convergent spirituality [1, 4]; each of them has its unique way of a person's self realization. Normative spirituality “breeds role motivation of the behavior”, which is triggered by “bothering about the issue of fitting in” [1; 18]. Divergent mentality is the act of self esteem in other person's world and it often happens at someone else's expense, and convergent mentality is observed through — ““an agreement dialogue” (M. Bahtin) with the others”, the dialogue, in which “the value of “me” is based on positive evaluation of “the other people”” [1; 18-19].

The stages in the main character's life change on the basis of apprehension of the cultural schemes, which were conveyed in literature and language, folk.

Not coincidentally, the character who is searching for new existential basis was a professional reader, doctor of philology, Gillian Perholt.

Her story starts with the emotional crises about gender identity: this character does not want to stay a woman and, moreover, she considers that every woman has a similar desire. It is interesting that the issue of gender self identity comes to the surface when she already had everything a woman strived for and disappointed in it. It did not happen because of her children who had moved away and left England and not because of her husband who ran away with a young lover; in reality she did not have a heavy heart and did not feel betrayed, but she was happy to feel free: "She felt herself expand of her own life" [5; 148]. Thinking about the wrong perceptions which were often life changing, the character considered it to be connected to the image of a dependant woman, created in the medieval times in the story about Griselda.

Gillian pays attention to the fact that Griselda, managing to overcome various challenges which had to test her patience, deserved to be praised not only by the cruel husband, but by the authors who referred to this plot — Giovanni Boccaccio and Geoffrey Chaucer. However, we should underline that Boccaccio's and Chaucer's interpretations of the story differed. For Boccaccio her patience was a symbol of courage, while Chaucer was not that precise, he obviously respected her actions, but he was skeptical about her lingering that long, he wrote the following lines in the epilogue to *The Clerk's Tale*:

Griselda's dead, and dead is her patience,
In Italy both lie buried, says the tale;
For which I cry in open audience,
That no man be so hardy as to assail
His own wife's patience, in a hope to find
Griselda, for 'tis certain he shall fail! [6; 385].

Making a report on a symposium, Gillian referred to Chaucer's interpretation of Griselda's story. However she did not pay any attention to his uncertainty: she is interested only in the plot. To her mind, this plot presupposed that a man shaped woman's fate and, she concluded this situation in the phrase: "All the stories about women in belles-lettres — are stories about Griselda" [5; 153].

Being distressed for the fact that she was involved in creating that image of women's fatality, Gillian denies the gender scheme, which was portrayed in the legend about Griselda. The ground of this scheme was traditional indulgence, which was crucial for women in Gillian's opinion.

The conflict of this scheme made this character project another situation, but according to well known pieces of writing again: about woman-djinn love as stated in eastern tales. The second part of the story was fantastic, describing the relations between the character of this story and a djinn. In this aberration a man appeared the one to have patience — the djinn, being released, had to obey his mistress. This was the opposite situation to Griselda's story: the woman ruled, even though it could happen for a while, when she had three wishes to fulfill.

Both situations (the case with the medieval times in Europe, which set the canon of women's patience and the one being portrayed in eastern tales, which allows any women's wishes to be fulfilled), obviously, reflect different types of self comprehension. These are the types which are typical for different stages of mentality. Evidently, Gillian unconsciously followed the medieval scheme and the excuse of such

behavior was in following the rules of the society — in accordance with “the necessity values vector”, which was typical for ordinary mentality [1; 18]. According to the eastern folk variant, women’s behavior was based on “the freedom of self-realization” (as stated by V. I. Tyupa, characterizing the “lonely consciousness” mentality [1; 18]), while this freedom had to be closely connected to captivity of a man.

However, in the end of the tale the mistress decided to set the djinn free without making the third wish. By doing that, she breaks the scheme of a mistress, the scheme of asserting.

It is stated in the tale that the character did not mean to project fantastic reality, which is opposite to the Griselda’s: the djinn appeared accidentally when she opened an ancient bottle, which she bought in a souvenir shop. The border line between the reality and an imaginary world was not clear: everything connected with djinn was not a dream or her fantasy. However (it is one of possible interpretations) the main character could project such a situation on purpose, which allowed men and women to be “equal subjects” (V. I. Tyupa). Gillian put up under these conditions with her gender, in which she had been disappointed, because she connected it with the great possibility of the wrong, role existence. The world of eastern tales represents fantasy expansion, in our interpretation it becomes a metaphor of active self-realization, the fulfillment of “the dream about yourself” (M. Bahtin).

In this case the main character builds the self determination plot by differentiating between various cultural schemes on the basis of the typical triad “thesis — antithesis — fusion”. Denying the heroic Griselda’s scheme of a patient and enduring wife, the main character portrays the antithetic scheme — the scheme of a mistress, but she still does not find it an ideal way of existence. As a result of such different cultural schemes coming together (self denial in front of a man and taming him), the convergent point of view can be formed — the point of view, supporting “the limitation of self freedom for letting another person being free” [4; 15], supporting the idea of agreement with someone, because he has another subjective reality. Actually, the main character of the novel fulfills a “mental Odyssey”: denying the thematic performance (as a traditional norm) and overcoming the trial of divergent self realization, she fulfills that “agreement dialogue” (M. Bahtin) with another person, who is presupposed to be a condition of self realization itself in the convergent culture. The fulfillment of this project in the novel is depicted having huge “intertextual competence” as its condition; it can be achieved by “acute and scholarly” reading, like Byatt later characterized it in her late novel about a philologist, *Possession: A Romance*.

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