

CULTURAL CODE OF THE UKRAINIAN NATION REFLECTED IN THE LANGUAGE AS THE MAIN SOURCE OF IMAGERY IN THE LITERARY WORKS BY OL'HA KOBYLIANS'KA

As S. Urban rightly admits, out of more than 500 definitions of 'culture' the most suitable is to define it as a set of codes. These codes consist of underlying conventions, beliefs and values. Their usage enables a group of people to communicate within this system. It therefore distinguishes the members of the group from the environment and enables them to define themselves; non-members are not able to use the code. The way we refer to the codes of a system creates identity. Our identity shows what we are, and what we are not. Thus, the culture itself presupposes how people perform and find their own expression in different religions, languages, and ethnic groups¹.

Ol'ha Kobylians'ka's works represent the quintessence of the Ukrainian spirit in a number of ways. First of all one should point out, that her writings do not challenge the basic principles of religion, inherent to the traditional Ukrainian culture. Once Ol'ha Kobylians'ka acknowledged: „If I had to stay in prison for an indefinite period of time and if I was allowed to take only three books with me, I would take: the Gospel, because it alone gives the human soul, in whatever condition it is, consolation and balance <...>”². She also admitted: „I like the holy books very much, and I find in them far more pearls of wisdom than in the new literature <...>”³.

The Ukrainian people, and Ol'ha Kobylians'ka is no exception, have always been characterized by their deep faith in the God Almighty, and that typical feature is reflected in the treasury of the Ukrainian language. „Without the God one cannot step over the threshold, but with his guidance one can easily go over the sea” («Без Бога – ні до порога, а з ним – хоч за море»), – people often said

¹ S. Urban, *Cross-Cultural Negotiation: Ireland-Germany*, Munchen 2005, p. 3.

² О. Кобилянська, *Огрівай, сонце...: Збірка малої прози; укр. та нім. Мовами*, Чернівці 2011, p. 305.

³ О. Кобилянська, *Твори*, в 5 т., т. 5, Київ 1963, p. 526.

in ancient times. Or: „If the God helps, everything will be all right” («Як Бог допоможе, то все буде гоже»).

„Although I am a little bit of an atheist, – Ol’ha Kobylans’ka once wrote, – but I still adhere to certain things very strictly, like to the ancient holidays – Easter and Christmas – I love and revere them very much”⁴.

Easter and Christmas are the two most important religious holidays out of The Great 12 Holidays in the Ukrainian Calendar, and the Ukrainian language mirrors that fact. For greetings on Christmas, Epiphany the Ukrainians traditionally use a number of standardized „formulas”, fixed in the language. Easter Christian greeting „The Christ resurrected! He resurrected indeed!” comes from the Easter troparion (short prayer verse). The words: „Christ is born – glorify, Christ from heaven – meet, Christ on Earth – cheer up” originate from the katabasia of Christmas morning.

Katabasia is singing of an ode by left and right choirs descending from their stalls and singing in the middle of the church. It’s interesting that the Ukrainian word „Katabasia” («катавасія») in its second meaning denotes „mess, fuss and confusion”. It came into everyday usage from the jargon of seminarians. Such polyphonic singing, conducted on the go, was sometimes perceived by them and members of congregation as somewhat disordered, devoid of inner harmony and clarity. That’s why the word „katabasia” in Ukrainian also means „incomprehensible fuss” and „confusion”.

Ol’ha Kobylans’ka’s inspiration, often taken from her beloved mother Mariya and the family reveals traditional Ukrainian values that always had a great impact on Ol’ha’s literary choices. The Ukrainians traditionally treat their parents with the deepest respect and love. The old proverb goes: „Honor your Father and the God, and you will be accepted everywhere” (Шануй батька й Бога, буде тобі усюди дорога). Many Ukrainian folk songs are dedicated to mothers. „There is no flower more colorful than the poppy, there is no relative closer than the mother,” («Нема цвіту цвітнішого, як маківка, нема роду ріднішого, як матінка») – says national folklore. It has long been said that „He who has a mother, is not rough around the edges and has hot smooth, glossy hair (symbol of proper nutrition and general well-being)” («У кого ненька, у того й голівка гладенька»). Such a respectful attitude to the Woman, the Mother is inherent to the Ukrainian culture.

Ol’ha Kobylans’ka last novel *The Apostle of the Mob* reveals the author’s genuine admiration for Christmas. A decorated Christmas tree, festive meals, gifts, merry-making within the close family circle became symbols of family well-being and true, infinite happiness. The way the author admires Christmas and winter holidays also speaks volumes about her Ukrainian origin.

⁴ О. Кобилянська, *Твори*, в 5 т., т. 5, Київ 1963, р. 404–405.

Millions of people all over the world rejoice because of Jesus' birth and hold this very religious holiday very dear. But the celebrations of Christmas in Ukraine had always been unique in their own way, and even the Ukrainian language preserved quite a number of festive realia. First of all one should say that indeed the merry season in our country cannot be imagined without a Christmas tree, and therefore the decorated fir-tree/pine/spruce became synonymous to the merry-making. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the expressions in Ukrainian like „let's go to the Christmas tree” or „let's invite guests to the Christmas tree” mean the party and the holiday itself.

The very idea that the New Year is a family holiday can be explained by the fact that when the holiday is celebrated, the Christmas fasting is still in progress. During the Christmas Lent, lavish celebrations and parties are not thrown and the Ukrainians never invite guests for the so-called „empty yushka”, i.e. soup without any meat.

Descriptions of Ukrainian Christian traditions are combined with pre-Christian celebrations in many respects. St. Basil's Day or New Year's Day (Old Style) was preceded by the celebration of Malanka, which originates from pre-Christian custom. Therefore, the festivities on January 13 and 14, came to be known as „Malanka and St. Basil's”. The reddish pancakes baked on Malanka (January 13) symbolize the red sun. While kneading the dough, housewives usually say: „Let everything grow in the New Year like the pancakes grow on yeast.”

When Ukrainians celebrate the New Year's Day (Old Style) on January 14, the food on the table is always delicious and rich. Our ancestors believed that the louder and the happier the celebration is, the healthier and richer people will be in the new-coming year. That is why the Eve of the New Year (Old Style) is called „The good evening, the abundant evening” («Добрий вечір, щедрий вечір»). Many meat dishes are prepared for St. Basil's Eve, but **kutia** (a ceremonial grain dish with sweet gravy) remains the main treat, as on Christmas Eve. On the Abundant Evening, kutia is also called abundant. It is cooked from grain, honey and poppy seeds, which have symbolic meanings of the rebirth of the living. Grain means resurrection, honey stands for happy and healthy life, and poppy seeds symbolize great wealth in the family.

It should also be noted that in old days dishes were often cooked with pricey seasonings and spices. It is hard to imagine now, but at that time goods like salt and pepper were very expensive. The Ukrainian language preserved that fact with the popular saying: „In poverty, but still with the pepper” («При злиднях, та ще й з перцем»). This means that people who lived from hand to mouth still believed it possible and necessary to buy „luxury” goods they could easily do without.

If an item of tableware is broken by accident, it's believed to be a sign of good luck. The pieces are still called «черепки» (small skulls). The thing is that

the Scythians, who in ancient times lived on the territory of modern Ukraine, used the skulls of their enemies instead of dishes and cups. When the skull was broken, its fragments were called „remnants of the skull” or just „small skulls” („черепки”). The word is still in the every-day use⁵.

Ukrainian Christmas carols glorify the birth of Jesus Christ, while the festive songs sung on St. Basil’s Eve (shchedryvkas) are the best wishes sung to good people with the promise of health and prosperity throughout the year. But sometimes a shchedryvka can also be a carol.

For example, people around the world know and love a Christmas song called „Carol of the Bells”. Its music was written by a famous Ukrainian composer Mykola Leontovych, and the lyrics belong to Peter Vilhovsky. „Carol of the Bells” is based on the Ukrainian shchedryvka „Shchedryk”, which won millions of human hearts all over the world. Professional and amateur choirs of English-speaking countries perform this iconic piece for Christmas holidays. It is interesting that Mykola Leontovych worked on his musical masterpiece almost all his life. To Peter Vilhovsky, the music resembled the melody of numerous bells, which was reflected both in the title of the Christmas song in English and in its text.

The original text of „Shchedryk”, to which all the Ukrainians are accustomed, tells about the arrival of the swallow, which would be hardly possible in severe frosts. But in ancient times, namely until the XVth century, the New Year was celebrated in March. In those days, Christmas carols began the spring cycle. Therefore, these historical facts were engraved in the Ukrainian language and are still preserved in the text of the world-famous „Schedrivka” which was later on transformed into a carol. Thus, all the magic of Christmas and New Year’s celebrations, characteristic of the Ukrainian culture in the whole and reflected in the Ukrainian language, inevitably has an impact on the works of literature written by the native speakers⁶.

Speaking about Ol’ha Kobylians’ka’s imagery, based on the typical Ukrainian landscape, as well as on natural, climatic and weather conditions, one may also say that all of them are highly influenced by the Ukrainian folk culture. And this is the main reason why we cannot find so many well-grounded similarities between the symbols created by various modernists writing, for instance, in Ukrainian and English.

The language always responds to the peculiarities of a particular climate. „We don’t have climate, we have weather”, – the English people often say about the weather conditions of their native country. Nowadays they still use the old saying: „It is raining cats and dogs”. In earlier days, when the rain was really heavy, the dead animals from the basements were washed out onto the streets. So, when

⁵ Л. Корнільева, *Таємниці засніженого Харкова*, Харків 2022, p. 78–80.

⁶ Л. Корнільева, *Таємниці засніженого Харкова*, op. cit., p. 84–87.

the English people could see the dead animals, it meant that the rain was really heavy. Thus, „It is raining cats and dogs” still means „heavy rain”.

In Ukraine snow can sometimes fall in late October, and the snowy weather lasts for six months, including even the days of March and April. This means that the Ukrainian winter with its constant changes in weather conditions can last for nearly half a year, and therefore, there is a need to describe all types of snow either falling from the skies or just blown high above the ground by the strong wind. Therefore, in the Ukrainian language there are numerous words meaning „blizzard” and „snowstorm” («хурделиця», «заметіль», «хуртовина», «завірюха», «віхола», «метелиця», «сніговиця», «буран», «пороша», «поземка»), and more than twenty other synonyms.

In English they've got „Snow/winter storm”, „Snowfall”, „Blizzard”, „White-out”, „Snow squall”, „Snow flurry”, and that's mainly it.

Britain enjoys an insular position, and for the British people it's vitally important to tell apart the „**Bank** of the river/stream/rivulet”, the „**Coastline** of the ocean”, and „**Sea-shore**”. In the Ukrainian language there is no need to do the same.

Thus, the language is a living thing that has nothing random or redundant. Ukrainian national cultural code with its reverence to the God Almighty, its utmost respect for parents, its deep interest in family matters, the origins of the nation and old customs is evident in the language all the Ukrainians share. The explicit information about the historical background of the country, its geographical location and climatic conditions is given in the language, and it always influences the creative writings of the authors who use it.

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Summary

Ukrainian modernist literature is largely known and admired for its unique imagery and themes, symbols and mythology, nonlinear narratives, stream of consciousness, writers' interest in the irrational and absurd, the variety of literary devices and forms of expression used, etc. The metatext and symbolic images created by Ukrainian authors are often analysed from the point of view of individual artistic choices, largely depending on aesthetic preferences, family and professional backgrounds, experiences, political views, etc. of every single author. At the same time the multi-faceted cultural matrix of the Ukrainian language that directly influences any writer speaking it was traditionally underrated or diminished. Reading Ol'ha Koblyans'ka's works, one may say that her artistic endeavors are deeply rooted in the traditional Ukrainian culture with its set of values and popular beliefs.

Key words: Ol'ha Koblyans'ka, Modernism, Ukraine, Ukrainian nation, cultural code, the language.