



The political laboratory in the works of Romain Gary

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ABSTRACT

Modern French writer of Russian extraction Romain Gary, is the only writer in the history of French literature to have won the Prix Goncourt twice, a successful statesman, famous diplomat, secretary and counsellor of the French embassy in Sofia and Berne, consul-general in Los Angeles, a military pilot of air squadron *Lorraine*, Resistance member during the Second World War, Commander of Legion of Honour, Charles de Gaulle's friend, literary mystifier of the XX century and essayist. In his novels *A European Education*, *Tulip*, *Promise at Dawn*, *Europe*, *The Dance of Genghis Cohn*, *Charge d'âme*, *Star eaters*, *Roots of the sky*, *Lady L.*, *Enchanters*, *Anguish of king Solomon*, *Les Cerfs-volants* and in other books Romain Gary wrote about war, concentration camps, fascist occupation, post-war confusion, extremism, struggle of superpowers for spheres of influence, nuclear matter, dangerous for mankind, terrorism, problems of racial discrimination. Today his works and lifestyle are exposed to repeated analysis: contemporaries try to understand the riddle of his literary mystification with tragic demise. He referred himself to discriminated minority: at the age of 14 he came to France with his mother and it was hard for him to fit into French society as well as for majority of emigrants; they lived in dire poverty.

Romain Gary's personal experience was his political and linguistic laboratory. Recently the problem of immigration has been the centre of attention of politicians, sociologists and public figures; this proves topicality and scientific novelty of this research. We deal with literary phenomenon going beyond artistic creativity and defying political system of France and its elite. To escape strong attack and outbreak of public indignation Romain Gary published his novels under the pseudonym. He wrote under many pseudonyms including: *Shatan Bogat*, *Fosco Sinibaldi*, *Emile Ajar*, even *Romain Gary*. His real name was Romain Kacew. His novel *The Life Before Us* is analysed in this



article for the first time: it has never been considered in the context of political and historical reality before. Modern France, described by R. Gary in his novel, offers a fruitful material for politicians and historians. Theoretical and practical significance of this research is in the possibility of using its propositions in courses in history, diplomacy and in special courses in literature and civilization of France.

Key words: modern France, modern French, immigration policy, student, education.

1. INTRODUCTION

R. Gary understood socio-political function of fiction. In his death note *The Life and Death of Emile Ajar* the writer owned up in literary mystification. He expresses his opinion about the purpose of literature and his books, when the world persistently puts a question if fiction can play a significant role in today's society: *suppose, my books will be of great importance for a new generation, four novels written under the pseudonym Emile Ajar being among them* (Gary, 1991, p 1).

As is seen, the death note *The Life and Death of Emile Ajar* was addressed to future generations, not to his contemporaries. R. Gary knew that immigration policy in France infringing on the rights of the majority had always been liberal and government had lost control over it. It must be admitted that R. Gary showed unprecedented courage revealing in his novel *The Life Before Us* many vices of France: negative social tendencies and phenomena as well as problems of immigrants, criminality and prostitution, contact of the police and the underworld etc. R. Gary realized that France stood on the brink of a political precipice and foresaw that reality was getting ready to throw down a challenge with horrific consequences. Disguised under the appearance of a child, whose speech is full of street slang, drug slang and thieves' argot, the writer recognized the irreversibility of the changes that had taken place under the impact of mass immigration, including immigrants from countries in the Muslim cultural area. R. Gary skillfully painted in bright colours *outcast members* of a French marginal social group. Having met with democratic French élite, 14-year-old Arab being carried away by telling about his hard life, announces that as soon as he adult is he will be able to become a terrorist, with hijacking and taking people hostage, in order to demand something: *Now I can't tell you exactly, what I'll demand, because I haven't had special training* (Gary, 1991, p 327). A sentence upon French society is passed from



child's own lips. Writer's contemporaries couldn't believe at that time, that terrorists would appear in France; they admired his style, child's unusual language, his psychological character. 42 years later this book became oracular. The novel *The Life Before Us* is in tune with our time: mystical revelation, calling shocking phenomena of real France by their proper names is one of the most important aspects of our study, that haven't been studied before.

2. METHODS

Materials for the work are new conditions for the research. They have been created this year thanks to approbation of new approaches to comprehension and analysis of keys of *linguistic and political laboratory* of Romain Gary at International theoretical and practical conference *Transnational and regional adaptation of child migrants: current practice and models of socio-cultural and psycho-pedagogical integration* of III International forum on teacher education in KFU (Галимова, 2017). On the basis of innovative methods of fiction study it is noted fairly that interpretation of facts from the life of writer-immigrant is a valuable stage in studying writer's works, and makes it possible to provide his works with *additional meanings* (Хабибуллина, 2017). The novel *The Life Before Us* – is one of the best examples of political literature. Politician's intuition, diplomat's projection and writer's warning have the same aims. Probably, with the lapse of time linguistics for scientific methods improvement will introduce into scientific practice political laboratory of R. Gary because literary critics and politicians are able to appreciate potential of realist novel. Fiction begins to play increasing role in modern society, when writer-politician can *express his thoughts* or *call things by their right names*. Literary background of R. Gary and valuable contribution to literature account for foreignness *étranger* in French literature and different cultures blending *métissage*. Speaking about his identity R. Gary says: *Does my foreignness assimilate to French literature? Future generation is to answer this question, not critics* (Gary, 1974, 258). Today the term *identity* is widely-spread in the science of our country, thanks to western influence, one should admit. Scientific interest to this term is due to modern socio-political challenges: crisis of foreign projects of global culture and multiculturalism, growth of interethnic and interconfessional conflicts



(Ибрагимов,2017). Russian origin, fluency in foreign languages, writing novels in English and their translation into French can become subjects of our future research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Immigration problems have long been on the periphery of political life of France; only in 1975 they came into the focus of attention of politicians, sociologists and public figures. The same year the writer's novel *The Life Before Us*, the most symbolic novel of that difficult period, is published. It was a period when France, always confident in its authority, starts to feel doubt, fear and even aversion to itself. French criticism highly appreciated the book and awarded the Prix Goncourt not to a physical person, but to the work, because the writer's real name was not known. The book is written in French argot, it shocks not only by description of immigrants' lives, but also by its language, at which linguists will have to work. Meanings and codes are hidden in the unusual language of the author and speeches of characters in the books written under the pseudonym Emile Ajar. R. Gary had written his novels in English with American argot earlier, also raising the problems in America. He translated his own books into French and presented French versions of those novels to subtle public. In author's opinion translated books were even better than books in source language, as there was opportunity to develop ideas, or adapt texts to a French reader. For example, it took him 6 weeks to write *Lady L.* in English, and 9 months for its French version in five years (Gary,1974, p254). R. Gary wrote both in English and French, often argotic: such virtuosity arouses admiration as well as distrust because sometimes obscene French expressions are parody on the language with political specificity. Hero of the novel *The Life Before Us*, an Arab boy being at a doctor and thinking about members of a marginal social group tries to sound correct from the point of view of politics, "As madam Rosa said, Dr. Katz was for general medicine, and true he received everybody: and the Jews who are everywhere, and the North-Africans **if not to call them Arabs; and black, and various diseases**" (Gary,1991, p286). In this article we'll concentrate on the novel *The Life Before Us*, in which Romain Gary touched upon a very important phenomenon: multi-ethnicity of Paris; he reconstructs the life of children of immigrants in the slums of Parisian district Belleville. The French call this district of the migrants



Vavilonville; there are the Africans, the Arabs, the Jews, the Armenians, the Greeks and others. Heroes of the novel are marginals who live in France but don't feel its traditions: a Jewess brings up prostitute's children – the Arab Mohammed, the Jew Moishe, the Vietnamese Mishel, the black Bananchik and other abandoned children without maintenance. These are children from interethnic marriages and different heterogeneous groups: prostitutes, drug addicts, criminals etc. Outskirts environment adds marginality status, because it is not under the control of authority and constitutes a potential menace. Even today this district is not safe: in 2010 demonstration of 8000 Chinese against increased number of attacks on community representatives grew into conflict; there were street fighting in Belleville, cars overturn and blocking of streets; and police had to use teargas (<https://daily.afisha.ru/archive/gorod/people/10-rayonov-s-besporiyadkami-kak-v-biryulevo-ot-severa-parizha-do-yuga-losandzhelesa/>). R. Gary subtly felt that France was degrading. XXI century is getting ready to throw down a challenge to France and the whole world, nearly every country produces its own version of war manipulating the mass media. Today reality becomes uncontrollable. R. Gary foresaw that reality would be horrible; he showed this reality in his novel: he wanted a new generation to understand. It is doubtful whether he dared to publish this book under his own name; the French would pounce upon him for shown courage. Romain Gary showed the vices of France: during occupation the French delivered the Jews to the Germans for sending them to concentration camps; negative social tendencies and phenomena as well as problems of immigrants, criminality and prostitution, contact of the police and the underworld were revealed. Literary value of this work is also worth mentioning.

4. SUMMARY

The Life Before Us was a truly pioneering work. As a rule pioneering books don't meet approval of literary critics keeping up with the times. The fact is that the writer intruded upon political problems of France; one should remember that his work is a literary phenomenon. R. Gary's contemporary, a famous French writer and literary critic Michel Tournier couldn't recognize R. Gary in Emile Ajar in due time and highly appreciated *The Life Before Us* and its author: *If you are able to replicate Ajar after that, then you'll certainly succeed. But frankly speaking I would be surprised* (Tournier, 1981, 333). The



story is told on behalf of Mohammed, an Arab boy, who is in the charge of a Jewish woman, a former prostitute. This is now a sick elderly woman, owner of an illegal boardinghouse, in which children of prostitutes live at a reasonable price. The children are left to their own resources, spending time amidst declassed elements and marginal individuals. R. Gary uses device of stylized narration: a child speaks seriously while the author as if observes him from without and doesn't penetrate into his speech. R. Gary is burning to devise new words, and probably youth slang of immigrants appeared thanks to this book: the novelist put additional meaning into the words used in everyday speech of immigrants. Meaning of words put into the mouth of the child is symbolic, thus hostile attitude to drugs is manifested: *Moi, l'héroïne, je crache dessus* (gary,1991,p 312). It means *As for me, I don't give a damn about heroin*. Such emotional reaction to drugs makes reader feel drawn to this child. The language of this teenager-immigrant, 14-year old Mohammed, is raised to the level of art (Галимова, 2012,p28). R. Gary's colleagues decided to accept *Emile Ajar, the beginner*, who coloured in a new way the French literature landscape. If Romain Gary had betrayed his secret, caustic remarks of his contemporaries would have rained; they would have called the work a failure just because it adds expressiveness to the language. Something truly new in the literature is often new because it disregards old literary conditionality and previous taboo on the manner of expression; despair is keenly felt, doubt about importance of his personality, internal stress, isolation and estrangement, when a child realizes his alienation from his motherland and nation, his life isn't formed by normal lifestyle of people living in their own country, his behavior is not regulated by the status he would have if he lived in his own country as he doesn't belong to previous environment: *Elle aurait pas dû dire Mohammed, elle aurait dû dire Momo. Mohammed, ça fait cul d'Arabe en France, et moi quand on me dit ça, je me fâche. J'ai pas honte d'être arabe au contraire mais Mohammed en France, ça fait balayeur ou main-d'œuvre. Ça veut pas dire la même chose qu'un Algérien.* (gary,1991,p. 442). It means: How dared she name me Mohammed, she could just name me Momo. In France this name sounds like an Arab bottom, I am irritated each time I hear my name. I am not ashamed to be Arab, on the contrary, but Mohammed in France "means" street cleaner or unskilled labourer. It is not the same as in Algeria. The action of the novel takes place within the limits of the



scum of Parisian society: life is different here. Development of the novel is built on the description of everyday life scenes; their aim is to characterize people, who commit crimes, take drugs, change their sex, and all this is depicted in the light of a child's consciousness of an illiterate Arab boy who has grown up in such an atmosphere and has never known that everything around him can be different. Lives of many characters are dramatic, for example, madam Lola – is a character with *a tragic flaw*, because *when she throws open her outerwear she simultaneously uncovers and breast and all masculine* (Ромен Гари, 1994, p: 553). Momo compared all these adults with fairy-tale personages, deliberately misrepresenting the words, for example – *gnomesexual* - because *they aren't created by nature, they're like nothing on earth and have nothing to do with rational people*. He loved them, because in madam Rose's hour of need they helped her, *there was no way she could die*. When she died, he spent three weeks by her dead body for fear of leaving her alone. Loss of the only close friend turned out a true stress for the child; he neither drank nor ate during these three weeks that he spent in the basement. R. Gary saw positive outcome of this situation for the person in love, hope and belief. The child expresses his opinion on the problem: *All these armed characters became such people because they were not paid attention to in the childhood and each of them became a square peg in a round hole. There are too many boys to notice them all, some of them are forced to die of starvation in order to be noticed at last, and some of them assemble gangs with the same purpose* (Ромен Гари, 1994, p.544-545). Romain Gary understood as far back as at that time, how France would change. He reflected on the future generation, what they would have on their minds. Everything got jumbled in French family, when a child has neither mother nor father and when he is surrounded by ladies and gentlemen. Politics of France prevailed over common sense. The novel shocks by the characters surrounding the child.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Shocking, persistent, readable, and republished again and again *The Life Before Us* is so actual today as in 1975 when it appeared on the bookshelves in Paris. Eventually it gained a victory over time, its age-old opponent, when Momo having heard from a kind doctor Katz the words that he had *a life before him* he interpreted them as a threat. Romain Gary's works have never been examined from the point of view of politics.



Here we can try to show that writer`s imaginativeness is closely connected with his own views on politics. The notion “politics” can be supplemented with a broader sense, than just “to govern a country”. The *thrilling* book became a social document of paramount importance, where the words of a child-immigrant are the limit of political imagination. R. Gary had a talent for hearing silent words, that`s why the message of his novel is a topical issue even today, after 40 years. R. Gary showed a real life of children of immigrants that is *before them*. It`s worth mentioning that this is one of the best representatives of political literature. Politics should reckon with the opportunities of the novel and see its ability to form reality: *words can do everything, and there is no need to kill anybody..., words are the most powerful thing on earth* (Ромен Гари ,1994,p.544). Unfortunately, reality doesn`t coincide with myth of democracy and free nation. Romain Gary is a literary artist; his speech is un hypocritical: he is faithful to truth, having liberty to throw light upon the truth in his own manner.

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