



Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University Journal.  
Philological Sciences. Vol. 1 (96)

Вісник Житомирського державного  
університету імені Івана Франка.  
Філологічні науки. Вип. 1 (96)

ISSN (Print): 2663-7642  
ISSN (Online): 2707-4463

УДК 821.161.2

DOI 10.35433/philology.1 (96).2022.34-41

**FEMALE RECEPTION OF PRISON EXPERIENCE (A CASE STUDY: THE NOVEL  
"ROSES BEHIND THE BARS. CONFESSION ABOUT THE WOMEN'S PRISON"  
BY IRYNA AHAPIEIEVA)**

**O. O. Yurchuk\***

*A prison issue within literary female reception is exotic for Ukrainian literature. Therefore, the novel "Roses behind the Bars. Confession of a women's prison" by Iryna Ahapieieva is a conceptually new artistic and receptive model of prison experience. The author chooses the art form that we have seen in the texts of Ukrainian modernists before, such as confession (thought, appeal, stream of consciousness). But we have exclusively female space manifested by the specifics of the female body, female psychology and female language.*

*In the study under analysis the main ideas will focus on two key discourses: "prison" and "prison – female corporality". In both cases the article will deal with a traumatic experience of imprisonment directly or indirectly marked by the human body.*

*From the novel we learn that, on the one hand, the Ukrainian prison operates on the principles of other European penal institutions. It is hierarchical and is based on what the French thinker Michel Foucault calls the "art of distribution". Its basic principles are secrecy, discipline, controlled activity, order and so on. On the other hand, the Ukrainian prison built on the principle that remains a mystery to the main character. It is the principle of body torture that is not standardized but serves as a prison reality by default.*

*In the novel the prison appears as a monstrous metaphor for the world that has not lost its sadistic desire to punish mainly the human body. However, the novel by Iryna Ahapieieva is a text not only about prison but also about a trauma. That's why one sees a post-traumatic letter letting the author reflect on / recollect (textualize) the trauma thus getting rid of it.*

**Keywords:** *a female letter, marginality, female prison prose, post-traumatic writing, corporality.*

\* Doctor of Philology (Ukrainian Literature), Associate Professor  
(Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University)  
yurchuk1980@ukr.net  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2028-9211

## ЖІНОЧА РЕЦЕПЦІЯ ТЮРЕМНОГО ДОСВІДУ (ЗА РОМАНОМ ІРИНИ АГАПЄВОЇ "ТРОЯНДИ ЗА КОЛЮЧКОЮ. СПОВІДЬ ПРО ЖІНОЧУ ТЮРМУ")

Юрчук О. О.

*В'язнична тема в художній жіночій рецепції екзотична для української літератури. Тому роман Ірини Агапєєвої "Троянди за колючкою. Сповідь про жіночу тюрму" є концептуально новою художньою рецептивною моделлю тюремного досвіду. Авторка обирає художню форму, що ми її бачили попередньо в текстах українських модерністок, – сповідь (думка, звернення, потік свідомості), але перед нами вже винятково жіночий простір, що оприявленний специфікою жіночого тіла, жіночої психології, жіночої мови.*

*У пропонованій студії основні думки будуть фокусуватися навколо двох наріжних дискурсів: "тюрма" та "тюрма – жіноча тілесність". В обох випадках буде йти мова про травматичний досвід несвободи, що безпосередньо або опосередковано маркований людською тілесністю.*

*З роману дізнаємося, що, з одного боку, українська тюрма діє за принципами й інших європейських, і не тільки, карних установ. Вона ієрархічна й має підґрунтям те, що французький мислитель Мішель Фуко називає "мистецтвом розподілу", базисними для неї є закритість, дисципліна, контрольована діяльність, розпорядок тощо. З іншого боку, українська в'язниця, побудована й на принципі, який так і залишається загадкою для головної героїні, – це принцип збиткування (тортур) над тілом, що нічим не унормований, але є тюремною реальністю за замовчуванням.*

*У романі тюрма постає як монструозна метафора світу, що так і не позбувся садистського бажання карати насамперед тіло людини. Однак твір Ірини Агапєєвої – це твір не тільки про тюрму, а й про травму, а отже, перед нами посттравматичне письмо, що дає змогу авторці відрефлексувати / пригадати (текстуалізувати) травму, тим самим звільнитися від неї.*

**Ключові слова:** жіноче письмо, маргінальність, жіноча в'язнична проза, посттравматичне письмо, тілесність.

**Introduction.** It is impossible to start a conversation about an artistic reception of female prison experience without touching upon the marginal problem, which, according to Solomiia Pavlychko, "is debated by almost all humanities and social sciences: philosophy, anthropology, history, literature, sociology, psychology and others" [5: 611]. This is a double marginality in the context of female prison prose. Until recently, a binomial "woman and literature" ("female prose", "female poetry", "female drama") was perceived as something specific without claiming to universality. It was a marker of male experience. The thematic range of female prose also determined a marginal status of women's writing. What should a woman write about? Probably about her life but it's not easy here either. The patriarchal tradition expected from women's writing rank is associated with the incarnation of a morally perfect object, whose vocation was to become the guardian of the family

or the whole nation in the future. Everything beyond this rank was taboo. It mainly deals with the female body and the range of problems around it (sex, sexual violence, pregnancy, menstruation, etc.). In this regard, the issue of women's imprisonment or women and prison is also marginal. Thus, women writers referred to the "prison experience", but exclusively as a man's prerogative (for example, the unfinished story of Larysa Kosach "A mistake. Thoughts of the arrested", the story by Olha Kobylianska "Letter of a sentenced to death soldier to his wife"). Oksana Zabuzhko reflecting on the specifics of the women's camp memoirs makes a reasonable assumption that there were moral standards of the female body that did not allow women prisoners to leave candid female testimonies about the Gulag: "... as far as sexual exploitation situations are concerned, all the memoirs of former female prisoners are unanimously full of omissions, ellipses and litotes..." [4: 157].

**Analysis of basic research and publications.**

Historically, women's research has provided the theoretical discourse for the study of female writing (V. Aheieva, A. Bila, T. Hundorova, O. Zabuzhko, N. Zborovska, L. Tarnashynska, L. Taran, R. Kharchuk, S. Filonenko). L. Demska, I. Zhylenko, O. Zabuzhko, Ye. Kononenko, S. Maidanska, M. Matios, H. Pahutiak, H. Tarasiuk present their axiological and existential experience praxeologically.

**The purpose and tasks of the article.** In the proposed study we will focus on two major modes: "prison" and "prison as the female body". In both cases, it will be a traumatic experience of imprisonment, directly or indirectly marked by the human body.

**The object of the study** is the novel "Roses behind the Bars. Confession about a Women's Prison" by Iryna Ahapieieva. Let us note that the prison issue is not sudden for Iryna Ahapieieva. The author decided to tell readers about the life of women in prison referring to her own biography: "I was imprisoned in Simferopol (1999). Prior to that, I studied at the institute planning to become a philologist. But then my life changed dramatically. My brother and I were accused of a crime causing bodily harm to the officials of the Organized Crime Control Department" [2]. This event changed Iryna's life because after being released from prison, she gave up her dream of philological education and obtained a law degree. Although philology remains a part of her life, nowadays she is the author of a number of fiction books.

**Presentation of the main research material.**

In his work "Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison" Michel Foucault comes to the unoptimistic conclusion comprehending the history of criminal justice institutions "... in the modern mechanisms of criminal justice there remains a "torture basis" – a basis that has not yet been finally broken despite the fact that it is increasingly

surrounded by a criminal system of non-corporeal nature" [6 : 26]. The philosopher mainly bases his statements on the historical and analytical analysis of the Western European penitentiary system. A close look at the institution of the Ukrainian prison provokes not even pessimism but cognitive dissonance and doubts that this is possible today, here and now. But the testimony of the novel protagonist (we understand the author's thoughts) leaves no room for doubt. In the novel "Roses behind the Bars. Confession about a Women's Prison" the Ukrainian prison appears as a monstrous metaphor for the world that has not lost its sadistic desire to punish the human body primarily.

From the novel we find out that, on the one hand, the Ukrainian prison operates on the principles of other European penal institutions. It is hierarchical and is based on what the French thinker calls "the art of distribution" being characterized by secrecy, discipline, controlled activity, order, and so on. Michel Foucault notes: "The prison network of society provides both real captivity of the body and its stay under constant surveillance..." [6: 444]. Is there a place for torture in this process? No. On the other hand, the Ukrainian prison is built on the principle that remains a mystery to the protagonist. This is the principle of harm (torture) to the body that is not standardized being a reality prison by default: "My imprisonment began a week ago. I was first taken to the local police department. The absolutely inhumane conditions I found myself in seemed unreal. Nothing was adapted for more than three hours. They held me for three days since no one was responsible for a number of reasons that were not clear to me then or now. Humane civilized society remained outside these walls" [1: 8].

In the novel the hierarchical model of the Ukrainian prison is characterized by the following attributes: dirt, cold, inability to maintain good hygiene,

hunger. Moving the main character from place to place creates a feeling of *deja vu* because each subsequent location almost duplicates the previous one leaving her no chance to escape from this strange coordinate system. The fact is that moving through this prison looking glass she continues to wonder, but in the course of time, as if becoming part of it, she gets used to this world and starts playing by the rules.

The Simferopol regional police department reminds her a medieval prison she watched in the movies: "Premises – one and a half meters, bare plastered walls. The furniture in this room was built into the wall with wooden benches forty centimeters wide, maybe even narrower. The wall served as a back. All! There was not even a light bulb burning and blind darkness prevailed! It was a concrete well" [1: 9]. But the next location or TDC (temporary detention center) seems "a room in a cheap hotel" from a girl's perspective. In three days, a person who was pulled out of the zone of her physical comfort feels an incredible elation because there is an armored net bed, a heat pipe and light: "It's amazing how a fighting light can be raised by a dim light bulb that barely illuminates a room through a layer of dust!" [1: 13].

The pre-trial detention center becomes a test for the main character. She enters the cell where out of six three-story bunks she is looked at by "twenty pairs of eyes – dissatisfied, surprised, sleepy, indifferent..." [1: 26]. And here we see that the "art of distribution" works not only outside – different punitive institutions for different needs but also in the middle of the prison cell. Moreover, the prisoners themselves provide this hierarchy and this artistic division. The prison system hides itself, displaces its punitive nature, sublimates into the interior making possible the body torture, internal discipline (self-control), the distribution of power between prisoners. First, the main character gets to the "third floor", thus obtaining the lowest hierarchical status:

"Now I knew what horror was – to be at such a height among a crowd of people indifferent to you. Very high and very scary" [1: 29]. But the "transfer" of food, cigarettes and what not becomes her pass to the "second floor", and, consequently, raising her own status: "Here, on the second floor there was a completely different world and a different life. I ended up in the center of all entertainment, laughter, gossip and talk. The contingent was different than on the third floor where the old and disadvantaged people lived" [1: 52].

We notice how metamorphoses of human perception take place when fear and uncertainty are replaced by feelings of vital force and a kind of justice. Iryna openly claims: "I didn't want to think about what they live on up now. The world is like this – youth, wealth and luck give someone privileges, others are waiting for their turn. Did I feel sorry for them? Sometimes, however, not too often" [1: 52]. In addition, the heroine quickly becomes a part of the world unknown to her until recently. She familiarizes herself with a specific hierarchy, language. The protagonist starts using new concepts and phenomena ("monastery" – the female area of the prison, "juvenile" – cells with minors, "adult" – a prison with men). She quite consciously accepts that the cell needs a "watcher" and even sympathizes with purposeful Zhenia: "Everything was simple in the cell itself". The "watcher" was not chosen by us. She was a head office protege among those who had already been convicted. She kept order in the cell, distributed sleeping places and acted as a mediator between the prisoners and the PTDC authorities" [1: 93].

"Our Zhenia did everything gently without pressure, she made friends with everyone and everyone loved her too" [1: 94].

It is unbelievable, but a prison can be associated with "home" or own place and fit into the coordinate system "your space – someone else's space". Coming

back from the Dnipropetrovsk prison (transit), a labor colony and being not sure of her own fate, Iryna, however, rejoices: "I shone like a polished copper coin... (...) Why rejoice here? But, probably, always, at all ages a person feels something similar when coming back home. I don't know what can be called "home" at all, it's a too broad concept, too big and comprehensive. In different circumstances, it can change, everyone finds something peculiar here. For me today, here and now, my hometown and pre-trial detention center were my home" [1: 200].

It's unbelievable but after being imprisoned, your home may seem "weird" or "strange." The main character feels not only uncomfortable among bright things, clean linen and pot flowers but also scared. We have a few conversion statements for a non-prisoner that are quite logical and understandable for a prisoner. Being in prison Iryna notes the lack of fear of this place: "People used to live within these walls and did not see anything terrible here" [1: 202]. Meanwhile open space, barred windows and even comfort scare her: "The sofa is too soft. I sat on it and sank - this feeling, contrary to expectations, was not pleasant, rather the opposite, as if hiding a threat" [1: 236].

The author comes to the rather disappointing idea that the prison is really becoming a home for former prisoners where everything is familiar and understandable while the world behind bars scares and repulses: "Now I understand why many people have committed crimes again and again – they were no longer afraid" [1: 202].

Prison evokes ambivalent feelings in the main character. She says she doesn't know a scarier place, but always compares the prison to the outside world finding common ground. It seems that the prison is a micro world built on the rules of the macro world of "free people": "... Prison is a world in miniature enclosed in one small cell ..." [1: 59]. Intuitively or through the prism of

experience Iryna verbalizes the same thing that Michel Foucault proves in his work considering a network of different institutions: army, school, prison based on a single principle of power and discipline (sic! And here the axiological dimension is not important at all when it comes to control of the person).

The story of prison in the novel "Roses behind the Bars. Confession about a Women's Prison" is mainly a story of an imprisoned female corporality when the ontological problem of the spirit is intertwined with the ontology of non-free body. Reflecting on the concept of "discipline", Michel Foucault speaks of its basic components – the art of distribution, activity control, organization of formations, the composition of forces. All this in the complex should contribute to the achievement of the goal, namely: the humility of the body ("submissive bodies") [6]. Is there a place for physical violence in this process? Unlikely. It is primarily a question of violence not against the body but over the spirit because according to the obvious rules of the "game of society" power over man and his imprisonment are hidden. All the above mentioned components constitute the immanent organization of the Ukrainian prison. However, the obvious fact cannot be omitted. It is not only a place of imprisonment but also of body torture.

The protagonist having appeared in the regional police department and moving further along the hierarchy of institutions of the punitive system, first of all suffers from intolerable conditions for human physiology. Already in the first cell, she states: "The darkness was terrible, but a person probably cannot suffer from everything at once" [1: 9]. What is it about? In the "concrete well" Iryna's body has to react to the cold at the same time ("Fingers are constantly cold, cold pierced to the bone, I was shaking" [1: 9]), hunger and thirst ("No food and water" [1: 9]), impossibility to satisfy physiological needs ("They took

me to the toilet twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. Like a dog for a walk..." [1: 9]). In addition, the girl is ashamed to voice the needs of her own body: "There were only men around and I could not tell them about my physiological problems" [1: 10].

We see that the penitentiary system first subdues the body when the failure to satisfy physiological needs and suffering from it force the human body to respond exclusively to "animal desires" leaving aside the spiritual needs. That is why it is not surprising that the lion's share of the novel is the "history" of the female body. At first, Iryna suffers from dirt, lack of minimal comfort: "A nauseating mixture of odors hit my nose: dirty bodies, cooking food and the toilet" [1: 27]. Later she has to get used to systemic punishments when her body can be locked in a metal locker ("You sit in a locker and watch someone rummaging through your things" [1: 159]) or beat ("When we came back from the walk we had to go with our hands clasped behind our backs. Turning a head was regarded as an attempt to escape and was punished by an immediate blow with a truncheon" [1: 163]).

The novel also reveals the metamorphosis of corporality when a woman loses the right to personal physiological intimacy. In this regard, it is worth talking about the female body in the sense of two dichotomies: "female body and prison as outer space" including "female body and prison as inner space". In the first case, it is a prison as an external system or a system outside the cell and it is the male world. The female body not only loses the right to intimacy but also becomes a part of the male game of harm. In the temporary detention facility Iryna realizes her physiological insecurity for the first time: "When they brought me tea in an aluminum mug covered with grease, I drank it quickly and poured water from a pipe into this mug to wash myself somehow. The guards are exclusively

men. They could open the window for food at any time admiring how you satisfy your biological needs" [1: 19].

In the second case, it is a prison as an internal system or a female cell. The toilet is the biggest challenge for a girl as well as the fact that she has to satisfy her needs in public: "Trying not to show my embarrassment I went to the toilet on inflexible legs. I was accompanied by millions of eyes" [1:30]. By the way, it is the needs of the body becoming the reason for the creation of unique rituals that must be strictly observed by every prisoner. This inevitability is motivated by the lack of physiological intimacy and the need to adapt to the biological needs of the people around. The main character states: "Visiting the toilet was probably the biggest inconvenience. There was even a whole ritual. First, the person had to say out loud that he/she was going there so that no one would eat at that moment... (...). It was necessary to burn newspapers while sitting in the toilet, so that the smell would not kill the inhabitants of the cell" [1: 43].

The issue of food can be regarded as a separate topic. At first, food is not an urgent need for Iryna. Only after getting from the regional department to the temporary detention facility (TDF) she realizes that she has not eaten for three days: "Tea played a bad joke on me – it whetted my appetite. While I was suffering from the cold in the regional department, I could not think of anything but heat. Excitement and cigarettes had quenched my hunger and it became clear that the last time I ate was three days ago" [1: 13]. In the course of time, food, its quality and quantity become an important attribute of a prisoner's life. After receiving the first food package Iryna not only stopped starving ("Food! I finally had food" [1: 50]) but also changed her "social status" in the cell ("Zhenia immediately decided to move me to the second floor looking at my "income". And on the bunks above her (she slept on the first) that had just

become vacant. It made me a privileged person" [1: 51]).

The difference in nutrition also reveals the hierarchy of the system itself. Being on the "kasachka" (not real prison), Iryna even enjoys good food. She describes the first and second courses in a detailed way and repeatedly emphasizes "and it was delicious". It is dissonant to realize that the prisoners themselves are starving in the camp: "Quality food is only on the "kasachka" because we can tell that we saw the famine with our own eyes" [1: 174].

The novel by Iryna Ahapchieva deals not only with food in prison but also relevant eating disorders when the process of eating either signals a psychological problem or becomes a kind of sublimation. On the one hand, the protagonist does not understand how you can eat prison food, on the other hand, she notices that for some people such poor-quality food becomes a sense replacing everything else. Such women were nicknamed "banderlohs" in prison. Iryna notes that these women are greedy, they do not smarten themselves up: "Food lovers did not like to wash, keep up their appearance and fight for their fate" [1: 55].

Although she sincerely admits herself that appreciating the good food that Zhenia cooks, she tends to eat all the time: "We always wanted to eat. Since there was nothing to do, snacks were a rather common occurrence. Every hour I wanted to chew something just out of boredom. That's why we were constantly drinking tea with crackers" [1: 58].

The last chapter of the novel is important in the context of the modified female body. Having left alone at home the protagonist begins to notice the metamorphoses that have occurred with her appearance. What looked normal and adequate in prison takes on monstrous forms outside. Only fresh air allows you to feel the stench of clothes, poorly washed body: "Here outdoors I smelled my clothes. The old smell of cigarettes

penetrated the fabric, hair and skin" [1: 236].

Hygiene products seem unusual (hot water, soap, shampoo, cream jars). Reflection in the mirror forces Iryna to distinguish two identities – a lost woman ("I'm not used to being a woman!" [1: 237]) and a prisoner ("In the mirror I saw myself in full growth for the first time in a year. Stupid clothes do not sit well on a thin body, too pale skin like a real convict has" [1: 237]). External changes themselves provoke the main character to think about the phenomenon of human freedom. From her perspective, freedom is primarily connected with the body but not with the spirit. Freedom acquires an axiological dimension when the body's independent activity is possible without supervision including movement, touch, taste, smell, physical fatigue, comfort or discomfort. In this context Iryna states: "There is land and grass out there, you can go to the forest and freeze there well, get a lot of mosquito bites and wet your feet in a dirty puddle. Every time I feel discomfort, I can enjoy it and be happy" [1: 238].

**Conclusions and research prospects.** So, the novel "Roses behind the Bars. Confession about the Women's Prison" is the first attempt to comprehend women's imprisonment within a literary form in Ukrainian literature. The story uniqueness is that the author tells readers about a life of women in prison referring to her own experience. In the novel the prison appears as a monstrous metaphor of the world that has not lost its sadistic desire to punish the human body first. The novel by Iryna Ahapchieva is a text not only about prison but also trauma. Therefore, we observe a post-traumatic letter that enables the author to reflect / recollect (textualize) trauma getting rid of it.

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Стаття надійшла до редколегії: 23.05.2022

Схвалено до друку: 26.08.2022