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# Beautiful and Desired: The Types of Female Images in the Social Text by Serhiy Zhadan

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**Abstract:** The article explores the gallery of female characters in the social architecture by Serhiy Zhadan, represented both in his poetry and prose. It has been identified that the philosophic category of a ‘human being’ is an entity, specified through the range of subcategories: “an adult”, “a child”, “a boy”, “a girl”, “a man”, “a woman”, “an old man”, “an old woman”. Two distinct starts – ‘the man’ and the “woman” – and their sociocultural roles in the printed matter by Serhiy Zhadan have been identified and analyzed. It has been proved that the texts by the author are invariably marked by the presence of a gallery of women appearing as a moment in the destiny of the man and serving as an explicit sexual object. The prevailing social roles of the woman within the body of writings from 2008 up to 2019 are the following: a hooker, somebody’s girlfriend desired either by a protagonist or by the lyrical hero, an older woman of experience, an explicit sexual object, a drunk fast woman, women as the source of problems and men’s failures, an under-age looking adult. The components of the female image comprise the manner of dress, hair, make-up, accessories, shoes, perfumes, weight. The oxymoron embodied in the triad “women-church-alcohol” or “priest-women-laughter” takes place. The uncovered wintry nature is associated with the female nudity. The author’s texts sometimes fall into Boccaccio’s mockery and Chaucerian ridicule of religion. Within the European chronotope prostitution and pornography are depicted as a rudiment of the past and is viewed as a profession type, whereas in the Ukrainian context it is portrayed as an inseparable part of the home sociography. Throughout the analyzed poetry and prose it is impossible to find a single image of a respectable woman. Social text by Serghiy Zhadan brings the mixture of characters from the combined epochs – the Soviet times, the 1990s, the present. The author ridicules social extremes and the confusion of the social architecture produced by the rapid change of the epochs: Perestroika, the dark criminal 90s, the noughties.

**Keywords:** Genderology, Female Anthropology, Feminology, Social Architecture, Sociocultural Role

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## 1. Problem Statement

The term ‘gender’ gets widespread circulation in the West after it was introduced by the American psychoanalyst, Doctor of Psychiatry R. Stoller in 1968. In 1975 the American researcher Ning Koch proposed the term ‘feminology’. At the end of 1980s and in the 1990s along with feminology and andrology, genderology is being formalized into a separate science. The concept of gender enters literary criticism gradually. The impetus

to gender literary criticism formation is linked to gender investigations in linguistics focusing on the differentiation of female and male speech. The differentiation theory belongs to R. Lakoff, going back to his work “*Languages and Woman’s Place*” (1975), and dwells on the theory of two cultures – the male and female ones respectively [1].

The literary criticism of the XXIst century is marked by sharpened interest of the researchers towards the gender issues. There comes the realization that the philosophic category of a

‘human being’ is a too abstract entity, unless specified through the range of subcategories: “an adult”, “a child”, “a boy”, “a girl”, “a man”, “a woman”, “an old man”, “an old woman”, etc. As a result, the abstract anthropology falls backwards, giving its way to gender studies, that within the human science sees two distinct starts – ‘the man’ and the “woman” [2].

In Ukrainian literary criticism of the recent years Tetiana Trohymenko (2017) defines seven types of women indigenous to the contemporary texts. They are a woman-victim, a woman-protector of the family, a woman-fighter, a feminist in the historical surroundings, a self-made bitch, a ‘warm-with-coffee-woman’, a woman and anti-terrorist operation [9]. Interestingly, the mentioned female types are singled out in exclusively female texts. On the other hand, Kateryna Otkovych (2010) in the traditional and modern context identifies such female archetypes as ‘woman-mother’, ‘woman-warrior’ and woman-protector’ [15].

## 2. The Analysis of the Main Studies and Publications

Female anthropology within the poetics of individual authors is a productive direction in the contemporary literary studies. Within the semantic-cognitive analysis the concept WOMAN Serhiy Zhadan’s writings as a leading representative of contemporary Ukrainian literature was explored by Z. Popova and I. Sternin. Zh. Tomashevskya investigates the components of the female images (skin, hair, eyes, fingers, body, legs, dress, makeup, accessories, odour), metaphors that constitute the figurative field of the concept, and identifies the prevailing female prototypes in the poetry by the author (Iryna, Nataha, Ursula, the Virgin Mary, mother Teresa, Mary Magdalene), studies the characters adopted from the Slavic and ancient mythological discourse (the Siren, the Witch, the Amazon, the Muse, the Mermaid) [3]. At the same time, the philosophy behind the female images and the place of the woman in Serhiy Zhadan’s male world have been overlooked, and the sociocultural role of the women in the poetic world of the author hasn’t been retraced.

## 3. Statement of the Task

The aim of the article is to explore the gallery of female images manifested both in prose and poetry by Serhiy Zhadan as the brightest contemporary representative of the Ukrainian literature.

## 4. Presentation of the Main Material

The anthropology by Serhiy Zhadan is prevailingly male anthropology. In his writings the woman exists only as a moment in the destiny of the man as an explicit sexual object: «він хоче її, вона йому подобається, і друзям його теж подобається» (*liter.transl.* he wants her, he likes her, and his friends like her as well – *T.S.*) [4]; «Поряд із директором, на

*синьому, грубо пофарбованому табуреті, сиділа велика цицькаста санітарка»* (*liter.transl.* Next to the director, on a blue, crudely painted stool, there sat a big-titted nurse – *T.S.*) [5]; «Навпроти неї сиділи дві пухкі тітки в тісних гарячих сукнях із важкими завивками на голові» (*liter.transl.* Two chubby women were sitting in tight hot dresses and with heavy curls on their heads were sitting opposite her – *T.S.*) [5]. The social roles given to women are not exactly diverse. Serhiy Zhadan’s women are the ones of low social responsibility: «я не знала, від кого саме завагітніла, не зовсім зручно було» (*liter.transl.* I didn't know from whom exactly I got pregnant, it wasn't very embarrassing – *T.S.*) [4]; drunk fast women: «Після другої пляшки їй стало погано <...> вона вмивалась, була мокра і змучена і дозволила себе цілувати» (*liter.transl.* After the second bottle she felt sick <...> she washed herself, she was wet and tired and let herself to be kissed – *T.S.*) [4]; or unpretentious women of experience: «Жінка з меншими претензіями і більши досвідом» (*liter.transl.* A woman with fewer claims and more experience – *T.S.*) [4], «Потім я умав, що життя і складається із таких речей, з цих умілих, пристрасних рухів старших жінок, які робили нас дорослими, навчали, як могли, любові» (*liter.transl.* Then I knew that life consists of such things, of these skillful, passionate movements of the older women who were turning us into adults, teaching us love at their best – *T.S.*) [5].

Prostitution and pornography are leitmotical and go through the numerous texts by the author: «Раптом шлях мені заступає жінка. // Легкої поведінки» (*liter.transl.* Suddenly a woman stands in my way. // A woman of pleasure – *T.S.*) [6]; «І ким ти хочеш стати? <...> Проституткою, – розсміялась Катя» (*liter.transl.* And what do you want to be? <...> A prostitute, – laughed Katya – *T.S.*) [5]; «і проститутки – добрі, як сестри» (*liter.transl.* and prostitutes – are kind like sisters – *T.S.*) [6]; «юні обірані королі // борделів і пивняків. // І важке життя не мало кінця, // плутане, як роман, // і проституток гарячі серця розігрівали туман» (*liter.transl.* young ragged kings // of brothels and taverns. // And the hard life had no end, // being confused like in a novel, // and the hot hearts of the prostitutes were warming the fog – *T.S.*) [6]; «розтирала якимись французькими парфумами старечі ноги і забирила у нього з рук порнографічні журнали» (*liter.transl.* she was rubbing the old man’s legs with some French perfume and was trying to take pornographic magazines from his hands – *T.S.*) [5]; «Він був листоношою в Амстердамі, // слухав аббу, сидів на трамі, // дивився порно у вихідні» (*liter.transl.* He was a postman in Amsterdam, // was listening to Abba, was getting on the tram, // was watching porn on the weekends – *T.S.*) [6]. Prostitution is embedded in Zhadan’s native society, flourishes in his everyday reality, having turned into its natural part: «Він довео свариться з касирами, пасажирями, продавцями крадених годинників, закликаючи у свідки вокзальних алкоголиків і проституток. Проститутки на його боці» (*liter.transl.* For a long time he quarrels with the cashiers, passengers, sellers of the stolen watches, calling station drunkards and prostitutes as witnesses. The prostitutes are on

his side – T.S.) [7]. At the same time, within the artistic pictures of the European life the social space for prostitution shrinks and is suddenly viewed as abnormality: «Проституція, як останній притулок асоціальності, як невинуватий тавро на целюлітному тілі відкритого суспільства» (*liter.transl.* Prostitution, as the last refuge of antisociality, as an indelible mark on the cellulite body of the open-minded society – T.S.) [6]. However, European towns themselves are perceived exclusively through the ‘forbidden areas’: «Ріппербан – Гамбурзький район, що цілком складається з борделів, місто в місті, притулок утіх і пристрастей. <...> Зовні все це нагадує колонію строгого режиму, яку населили проститутками» (*liter.transl.* Ripperbahn is a district of Hamburg that consists entirely of brothels, a city within a city, a haven of fun and passion. <...> From the outside, all this resembles a colony of strict regime, populated by prostitutes – T.S.) [6]. The tag of sexuality in connection to a woman has Hellenic roots, which according to Natalia Shevchuk finds its embodiment in mythology and the works by Homer [10]. Tetiana Trofymenko in her article “(Not) a bitch. (Not) Yarosvavna. (Not) a victim. How in the modern Ukrainian literature women write about women” (2019) proves that in the contemporary Ukrainian literature “there are few texts that give a positive experience of family life or maternity” [11]. On the contrary, the Ukrainian language itself uses an extensive number of phraseological units identifying a woman as a wise and caring family member, stressing her traditional female role [12]. The investigation by Olena Kutsyk “Conceptualization of women’s image in the Ukrainian and Russian Proverbs” (2015) also notices that the folklore representation of the concept of a woman includes micro-frames with both the signs “+” and “-” in the description of female behavior [12].

Zhadan, who is a master of a poetic detail, puts on his women some ‘indecent dresses’, all kinds of revealing clothes: «Були тут жінки в бюстгальтерах та спортивних штанях, з яскравим макіяжем і довгими накладними нігтями» (*liter.transl.* There were women in bras and sweatpants, with bright make-up and long fake nails – T.S.) [5]; «Була це молода жінка, фарбована в руде і одягнена в коротку чорну сукню та чорні мережеві панчохи» (*liter.transl.* It was a young woman with dyed red hair and wearing a short black dress and black fishnet stockings – T.S.) [6]. The lyrical hero doesn’t show any respect towards the female manner of dress: «Ось вона прокидається і починає одягатись, натягує на себе всі ці жіночі речі, жахливу зброю для фетишистів і підарів, жінки дивні створіння – як можна носити всі ці прикраси для трансвеститів, панчохи, сережки і кольорову білизну, нормальні люди носять х/б і ходять стросем, а жінки стросем не ходять, хіба що шахідки» (*liter.transl.* Here she wakes up and starts dressing up, she puts on all these female things, terrible harness for fetishists and ponceys, women are strange creatures – how can one wear all this transvestite jewelry, stockings, earrings and colored underwear, normal people tend to wear cotton and march, and women do not march, except for the female suicide bombers – T.S.) [7].

The topic of the woman and nudity finds its embodiment in the description of nature as well: «Це ось чорні дерева в холодних снігах, // ніби африканки на білих простиралах» (*liter.transl.* These black trees in the cold snow, // are like African women on the white sheets – T.S.) [6].

The lyrical hero doesn’t distinguish between women and girls [7] – they all transform into the object of desire: «На вулицях трапляються дівчатка, // Їм прагнеться кохання й алкоголю. // Ще не дозрілі, але вже принадні, // Мені вони сподобались принаймні» (*liter.transl.* I meet girls on the streets // They long for love and alcohol. // Not yet ripe, but already lovely, // At least I liked them – T.S.) [8]. Serhiy Zhadan’s characters for some unclear reason feel themselves in the center of women’s attention: «Жінки, пробігаючи, кидали на мене легкі погляди» (*liter.transl.* The women, passing by, cast light glances at me – T.S.) [5]; «спустився у долину, <...> де на нього чекали коханки ночі» (*liter.transl.* went down to the valley, <...> where the mistresses of the night were waiting for him – T.S.) [5]. Sometimes this female desire towards the lyrical character acquire some obsessive and unpleasant forms like in the poem «Фанатка» “A she-fan”: «її поцілунки // мали смак поміїв» (*liter.transl.* her kisses // tasted like slop – T.S.) [7]. “At the fringe of the epochs the traditional views on the role of the woman in both culture and literature always change”, says Bilous Natalya in her thesis “Stylistic peculiarities in modelling of female characters in the Ukrainian literature of the second half of the XIXth the beginning of the XXth centuries” (2005) [13]. Probably, Serhiy Zhadan’s woman is a product of ‘the mess of the epoch’ balancing on the fringe of traditional normality and so-called ‘freedom’, bordering with debauchery.

The male character is always the dominant one. It is he who makes decisions and controls the flow of life: «Мені було 17, їй було 14, вона мені не вірила, вона думала, що я її кину. Так воно і сталося» (*liter.transl.* I was 17, she was 14, she didn’t trust me, she thought I would leave her. And it happened so – T.S.) [4]. Raping can be viewed as a subject of pride in Serhiy Zhadan’s texts: «Коча гвалтує зоряними запашиними ночами працівниць молокозаводу, протинаючи їх потім гострим металевим предметом. Чоловіки його за це поважали, жінкам він подобався» (*liter.transl.* Kocha rapes the employees of the dairy factory during starry, fragrant nights, then impales them with a sharp metal object. Men respected him for that, women liked him – T.S.) [5].

It seems endemic to Serhiy Zhadan’s writings to shift the responsibility for promiscuity from men to women, who are compared to... horses: «І баби, мов коні, під спекою в милі // іржали до сонця в журбі і рознуці» (*liter.transl.* And the broads, like horses, under the heat in a lather // were neighing to the sun in grief and debauchery – T.S.) [8]. Even those women who turn up in churches, like in Chaucerian texts, show no trace of piety: «Жінки підходили до священника, ніжно щось йому шепотіли, той, підсміюючись, дарував їм листівки із псалмами» (*liter.transl.* Women approached the priest, whispering something to him gently, and he, laughing, was giving them the postcards with psalms – T.S.) [5]. N.P. Bedzir, retracing

female characters in the contemporary postmodern literature, determines the nature of female characters' description as "neosentimentalism", which, therefore, has nothing to do with Serhiy Zhadan's texts [14].

Women come as the source of problems and men's failures: «Баби, – фонив він, – Гера, баби, це все баби. // Які баби, – дивувався я <...> // <...> Гера, я ж усе бачу, дружище, це все вони, це вони» (*liter.transl.* Broads, – he honked, – Hiera, broads, it's all broads. // Which broads, – I wondered <...> // <...> Hiera, I can see everything, my friend, it's all them, it's them – T.S.) [5].

There comes a strong link of a woman and the betrayal: «Боявся, що дитина буде не моя. Вона таке робила, дружище, о...» (*liter.transl.* I was afraid that the child would not be mine. She was pulling such kinds of things, my friend, oh... – T.S.) [5]; «Ти цілуєш його // і разом із твоєю слиною // на його губах // зостаються // мікроби зради» (*liter.transl.* You kiss him // and along with your saliva // on his lips // there remain the germs of betrayal – T.S.) [8].

The true nature of Serhiy Zhadan's genderology is expressed through the comparison of women and men, with the first one based on destruction, and the second one built on the enlightenment grounds: «Жінки були схожі на чеченських снайперок» (*liter.transl.* The women resembled Chechen female snipers – T.S.) [6]; «А чоловіки були схожі на просвітителів Кирила і // Мефодія» (*liter.transl.* And the men resembled the enlighteners Cyril and // Methodius – T.S.) [6]. Men and women are being opposed in the authors writings: «Чоловіки більші довірливі, жінки – менші» (*liter.transl.* Men are more trusting, women less – T.S.) [6]. The parameters of aging are different within the sexes, and contain a hint of impropriety when it goes to females: «Через його квартиру на початку вісімдесятих пройшла вся прогресивна молодь району: хлопчики тут набували мужності, дівчатка – досвіду» (*liter. transl.* All the progressive youth of the district passed through his apartment in the early eighties: here boys were gaining courage, and girls were gaining experience – T.S.) [5]. «Найкраща жінка біла стінка» (*liter.transl.* The best woman is a white wall – T.S.) [8], says the author. On the other hand, despite a string of personal failures, the man is thought of as a socially positive figure: «Щомісяця відраховувати кошти в дитячі притулки, // ніколи не забуваючи про соціальне походження» (*liter.transl.* To monthly deduct funds to orphanages, // never forgetting about your social origin – T.S.) [6].

Sexual acts take a separate place in Serhiy Zhadan's writings, acquiring both rude and pornographic forms: «я обрівав ніготь на середньому // пальці // правої руки // справді коротко // і почав натирати її діру» (*liter.transl.* I have cut the nail on the middle // finger // of my right hand // really shortly // and started rubbing her hole – T.S.) [7]; «Білявка встигла стягнути з Кароліни светра й цілувала її темні важкі груди. <...> Коли я засинав, вони ще цілувались» (*liter.transl.* The blonde managed to pull Karolina's sweater off and was kissing her dark, heavy breasts. <...> When I was falling asleep, they were still kissing – T.S.) [5]. The descriptions of a sexual act tend to be rather detailed

[5]. The combinations of sex and philosophy, or sex and religion are endemic to the author's writing method: «Секс без контрацептивів малювався агітаторами як щось Господу неугодне, щось таке, після чого тебе відлучають від Церкви й забивають камінням на зборах партактиву» (*liter.transl.* Sex without contraceptives was depicted by the agitators as something displeasing to God, something after which you would be excommunicated from the Church and stoned at the party meetings – T.S.) [5].

However, women are not totally deprived of a share of mysticism they radiate: «Коли ти зітхаєш, жінки чешиуть волосся печалі й смутку» (*liter.transl.* When you sigh, women scratch their hair with sadness and sorrow – T.S.) [5]. Despite the deep and total sexism piercing texts of different years, the writer leaves a tiny chance for some women to have feelings and stay romantic: «Жінки, котрі тягають за собою свої скарби, одяг і прикраси, спогади і розчарування» (*liter.transl.* Women who carry with them their treasures, clothes and jewelry, memories and disappointments – T.S.) [7].

## 5. The Conclusion and Investigation Perspectives

Thus, Serhiy Zhadan's writings are touched by the presence of a gallery of women belonging to the lowest layers of the social architecture. The dominant social roles of the woman are: a prostitute, somebody's girlfriend desired either by a protagonist or by the lyrical hero, an older woman of experience, an explicit sexual object, a drunk fast woman, women as the source of problems and men's failures. The uncovered bare nature is associated with the female nudity. The author's texts tend to fall into Boccaccio's mockery and Chaucerian ridicule of religion, or the paradigm 'women and religion'. While the man is viewed through the parameters of enlightenment, the woman is measured through her sexuality, destruction and the categories of male desire. The future perspectives of the investigation we foresee in the close study of the male roles in the scope of writings by Serhiy Zhadan.

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