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Life as a Miracle in Jostein Gaarder's Works

Bestseller, which refers to the product with a high selling rate, at a glance may seem from the marketing sphere, rather than from literature, has become some kind of challenge for modern readers. In the modern literary processes it is an indicator for orientation, in some cases, it may even give a direction to the formation of a literary taste, and what is more it is to put it in other words a "green light" for modern readers to get interested in a particular text. Needless to outline, that becoming a bestseller depends on various components, but one of the most important determinants is for the author to become popular, one of those, whose "texts readers are waiting for and occasionally read it" [Ninidze, 2008:4]. In this regard, *Sophie's World* by the Norwegian writer Jostein Gaarder, published in 1991 became an international bestseller. A number of critics suggest that he will be among the laureates of the Nobel Prize in the future; but it should be noted that even nowadays Jostein Gaarder is the winner of many prestigious literary awards: 1990 - Norwegian Critics Prize for *Kabalmysteriet (The Solitaire Mystery)*; 1993 – Norwegian Booksellers' Prize for *Through a Glass, Darkly*; 1994 – Deutscher Jugendliteraturpreis for *Sophie's World*; 1995 – Premio Bancarella for *Il Mondo di Sofia*, the Italian translation of *Sophie's World*; 2004 – the Willy-Brandt Award in Oslo; 2005 - The Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav, etc.

Not long ago, some students, who were working on a student project for a TV program "A non-mechanical orange", asked me to choose one title from the two works, which would later become the subject for discussion at the TV programme. The proposed novels were *The Wild Ass's Skin* by Balzac and *The Orange Girl*, Gaarder's another bestseller. To be honest, for me it seemed a rhetorical question, but as far as these students would have been the main participants and moreover it was their project, my suggestion was to choose in accordance to what was more relevant for them and the discussion as well. To my surprise, *The Orange Girl* was chosen. That was when I decided to re-read the text and to find answers to the question, why the students chose it over *The Wild Ass's Skin*. It should be mentioned, that in 2014 the Georgian readers named it among one of the books that should be read during one's lifetime. It was published within the framework of the series: "Another 49 books to read in one's lifetime" (The translation was done by David Akriani).

The first thing that strikes the reader about Gaarder and his works is the fact that the novel takes into account the modern life, along with its accelerated rhythm and in this context the reader's "impatience" due to lack of time: events are rather dynamical, to be subjective, some episodes create illusions that some kind of installation principle was that what we were dealing with; the narrative techniques used by the author, is very close to the cinematic vision. This is somewhat of a threat to the superficiality of a literary work, however, the author manages to escape from this "threat" and have a cordial, provoking, intense dialogue with the readers through such emotional stimulus, which can be shared both by the reader and the characters.

Neither the subject of child-father relationship, nor getting a letter from the deceased father is new in literature. Nor should it be a coincidence that the hero of the novel, at the key moment, as if superficially, uses Shakespeare and his character's words and paraphrases it: "*With him to be or not to be: That is the question!*", but it is a very distant reminiscence and discussing why the author alluded to Shakespeare is another subject, which will take us too far. In Gaarder's favour it should be noted that the literary technique, which he used in this case to provide original artistic interpretations, is rather worthy: Children's carriage, which stored the letter from the past, whose part was George's character as well.

By the message the characters gets a chance, which he thought to have lost - to restore relationship with his dead father, which is very fragmented and which he only vaguely remembers. If we consider that the author of the text was a teacher of philosophy and his first literary experience was taking part in a compilation of a course-book on philosophy and theology, of course, here is no coincidence that his character gets the message from the past while he is 15 years old, or to say in other words, when he is about to transform into adolescence, when people search for more questions and often and often resist the world around them. In an interview Gaarder explains that this stage is rather important in the development of a person: "*13-14 years old teenagers create themselves when the ability to astonishment develops into conclusions and thinking ability,*" Perhaps that is the answer to the question, why are the characters in his works often teenagers.

The novel develops in two parallel times and space. On the one hand, Ian Olaf's letter is a message into the future, "*he writes to the twelve or fourteen years old Georg - a boy that my father has not meet, and that, probably may have never been introduced*", on the other hand, it is, a letter from the past into the "accelerated" time in which the boy considers his father's computer as an anachronism and a museum exponent.

Thus, independent of the composition the second story unfolds, "the story within the story": The author uses the method of retrospection – he puts both the characters and the reader back to the past, when the foundation was laid to the current events which occur in the present. The story-telling occurs on two layers - on the one hand, it is a dialogue with the past and on the other hand - the future with "*...You may not remember anything from Georg's time, which was my time as well,*" - writes Ian Olaf's characters and here is also an allegory to the Danish Prince trying to restore time.

How he manages to restore harmony, determine his place, to answer his own and past questions and what role does the letter received from the father play in this process arises interest in the readers.

However, the main mystery of the text, the main provocation is the orange girl, which for one of them is a mysterious beautiful creature, beloved people, afterwards a wife and mother of his child, and for the 15-year-old Georg she is the mother, in whom only after his father's message does he find "mystery signs" and, most importantly, finds a common space for mother-son relationship, which is only theirs and at the same time connected to their common past.

The text of this passage – the orange girl's story is a typical tale paradigm: There is a mysterious beauty and the young man chasing her, there are signs and indications, which is inconceivable without any tale exposition, is a mythologized symbol - orange – which has a

metaphorical sense, as it should be in a true tale and that this mystical history of connecting link and, most importantly, poses the answer to the question: What is the message, the subtext of it, which at first glance, seems a naively narrated, sentimental, lovely story. The usage of orange symbols is not a mere accident - it is also connected to mythology where in the Roman, Chinese, later, the Christian symbolism it is related to purity and love, marriage.

The author does not avoid this similarity, on the contrary, on several occasions pointed out characters of different fairy-tales: Prince, Princess, Cinderella, the crystal shoe and explains why he is captured by this world, and advises Georg: *“Spontaneous feeling of the nature can be found in folk tradition, as well as the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Read, they say, Georg, read the Icelandic Sagas, Greek and Norwegian myths, the Old Testament. See the world, Georg, See it before it becomes too crowded with physics and chemistry”* [Gaarder 2014: 109].

The Orange girl's is a mysterious creature from the surreal world for Ian Olaf, whose appearance and disappearance becomes a new source for his inspiration. The girl seems to be inviting him to the magic world gently, quietly; nurturing the young man's imagination, or rather along with him creates the fairy space in which they themselves are the main characters. Each meeting with the orange girl raises more questions than answers for Ian Olaf. However, no matter where he seeks his orange girl in the Oslo and the Seville neighborhood, no matter how much disappointment he suffers due to the mysterious girl, it's still natural, the real, the real life for Gaarder's character, for whom this country "immediately" is associated with the magical world: *“I myself am a scientist and I do not deny any science. But, at the same time, I know the world of mystical, almost abnormal vision. I have never allowed Newton or Darwin to ignore the brightness of the mysterious life”* [Gaarder 2014: 110].

Maybe it was in this context that a new symbol arises in the novel: a link between the 15-year-old Georg's time and “the joint time” of the 3.5 year old Georg and his father - the Hubble telescope sent to the space orbit in 1990, which, in fact, turns out to be another character in the novel. From the very first lines Ian Olaf recalls a telescope and from this time Georg has a question whether there is a relation between this story and Georg's successfully performed task. This is one of those unexpected connections and questions that readers have from the very beginning. *“Literary works, as well as fine art, more or less, is characterized as somewhat closed. They express a micro, which is peculiar to the principles (in particular, a certain temporal and spatial structure). The author's position is more or less clearly expressed through his literary work”* [Lomidze, 2007: 37-38]. Perhaps that this position underscores the desire of the juxtaposition of the “overcrowded world of physics and chemistry” - the Hubble telescope, converts the author to a metaphysical space: the characters calls it “the world's eye”, which might aid the mankind to find an answer to the question: "What is this a fairy tale, where we live and are we given such small amount of time? .. Maybe there, in the galaxies beyond there is an answer, what a person itself is... but there is no exclusion that this could be a mental or intellectual riddle, which should be solved within us” [Gaarder 2014: 121].

At first glance, what may be in common between the Hubble Space Telescope and the Stone Age?! *“The first preparatory work aimed at the Hubble telescope was carried out in the Stone Age. Or maybe not: in essence, the earliest preparation began a few seconds after the Big*

Bang and the creation of space-time.” In terms of conditionality, the world is a unity of regularity and each of us is part of this regularity. For Gaarder the whole world "is deliberately conceived" and in this “deliberate conviction” if we analyse our existence, we discover that the world has long been preparing for a particular time and a particular place for our appearances, and if so, what kind of dreary it may seem at some point of our life, no matter from which reflection we suffer, life is already the largest justification, a chance, a win. Perhaps, it is one of the main concerns of the readers, while dealing with this novel.

This is a theme that Gaarder throughout his literary career returns several times. These questions are posed in the novel "Sophie's World", as well as in the 1990 published novel “The Solitaire Mystery” which brought the writer recognition and popularity, he asks the characters a queer question: whether he can imagine how many ancestors he had, how far the goes, and he answers this question himself: *“Actually all of your ancestors have grown up and had children -- even during the worst natural disasters, even when the child mortality rate was enormous. Of course, a lot of them have suffered from illness, but they've always pulled through. In a way, you have been a millimeter from death billions of times, Hans Thomas. Your life on this planet has been threatened by insects, wild animals, meteorites, lightning, sickness, war, floods, fires, poisoning, and attempted murders. In the battle of Stikelstad alone you were injured hundreds of times. Because you must have had ancestors on both sides -- yes, really you were fighting against yourself and your chances of being born a thousand years later. You know, the same goes for the last world war. If Grandpa had been shot by good Norwegians during the occupation, then neither you nor I would have been born. The point is, this happened billion of times through history. Each time an arrow rained through the air, your chances of being born have been reduced to the minimum.”*

He continued: "I am talking about one long chain of coincidences. In fact, that chain goes right back to the first living cell, which divided in two, and from there gave birth to everything growing and sprouting on this planet today. The chance of my chain not being broken at one time or another during three or four billion years is so little it is almost inconceivable. But I have pulled through, you know. Damned right, I have. In return, I appreciate how fantastically lucky I am to be able to experience this planet this planet together with you. I realize how lucky every single little crawling insect on this planet is.” [Gaarder 2014: 241].

This extensive excerpt is needed to demonstrate how deep, unexpected, philosophical and, at the same time, naïve Gaarder can be. He seems to try his readers to search their, where everything is already clear and known. This excerpt clearly demonstrates the writer’s extraordinary ability: lightly and even a little naively interestingly talk about the most difficult; “tempt” the reader into interaction with themselves.

This passage is an intertextual dialogue with “the orange girls” and it is not a mere accident that after decades the author still regards, that “Life is one huge lottery where only the winning tickets are visible.”

“Gaarder in his books describes the amazing world that is simultaneously also ours - that is quite mundane, familiar, and at the same time realistic and very amazing, in the literal and figurative sense of this word... Gaarder’s world - this is life as a miracle! Life as a romantic adventure! Life as a philosophical riddle! The synthesis of all this creates an incredible, unique

experience, - odours and colorfulness, - bright airy joyfulness!" [Lomouri 2014: 6] - a more precise description, perhaps, is hard to find. Gaarder's definition of life is to perceive it as a miracle, as a reward, justification - the convention, where Gaarder's characters are settled and where they along with the readers "discover" that the life in this world itself is miracle of miracles, and this is the largest part of all of us. The world itself is a party, and we are its guests, despite the fact that like the famous fairy tale character, we know it will not be never-ending.

Still, this is what is associated with the main question, which the past sends to the future: *"Imagine that you were on the threshold of this fairytale, sometime billions of years ago when everything was created. And you were able to choose whether you wanted to be born to a life on this planet at some point. You wouldn't know when you were going to be born, nor how long you'd live for, but at any event it wouldn't be more than a few years. All you'd know was that, if you chose to come into the world at some point, you'd also have to leave it again one day and go away from everything. What would you have chosen, if there had been some higher power that had gave you the choice? Perhaps we can imagine some sort of cosmic fairy in this great, strange fairytale. What you have chosen to live a life on earth at some point, whether short or long, in a hundred thousand or a hundred million years? Or would you have refused to join in the game because you didn't like the rules?"* [Gaarder 2014: 135].

Although Ian Olaf's characters while asking this question is skeptical: "I was tempted by the orange girl, the idea of love, and having a child", but if we take these things into consideration, perhaps, this is a rhetorical question for Gaarder, who believes that a serious stage in relationship a person should start by finding one's self as a tiny part of the whole world.

I. Lotman in his article "About Art" notes that frame in an artistic work is one of the most important components of composition - the beginning of the text and the end. According to the epochs or the aesthetic requirements the accents can be repositioned from time to time as well, but: "...The encoding function of the text lies in the beginning, while the plot- mythological at the end" [Lotman 1998: 211]. The final part is the component of the composition in Gaarder's work, preparing in advance, leading the reader step by step, but, it seems, that he still does not trust the reader's interpretation and to tell the main message of the work. Therefore, the last pages of the text is devoted to the answers of Georg to Ian Olaf's question, which does not add anything to the work; Perhaps, quite on the contrary, "frees" the reader from a very valuable and pleasant obligation of understanding the content themselves. Maybe the reason for this is that this text may appear equally interesting to teenagers as well as adults, who are "better trained", as well as newbies: "I am not against when youngsters call me writer, but I do not think that my books are created for them. A good book for children or teenagers - it is a good book for adults, because all people have "inner teenager" living inside them. Unfortunately, there is no feedback here and a good novel for an adult is not a good children's book" [Interview].

"The Orange girl" is a text that is both a bit sad and hopeful at the same time, it is a text, where the reader discovers that the **we** reflect the overloaded, so to say "pregnant" series of events, which penetrates deeply into the human life, in which he once again can meditate about one's own capabilities in this eternal world given that the *"probability bounds of the universe have*

been overcome regarding the existence of it.” Gaarder’s literary works are those texts, in which readers find thought, hope, dream, comfort, even entertainment, or even something among many other things.

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