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A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes: Agency, Ideology, and the Paradox of Soviet Emancipation

Tasmia Khanum

Lecturer in English, University of Education Lahore, Attock Campus

Email: tasmia.khanum@ue.edu.pk

Adeela Naheed

MPhil Scholar in Linguistics, Air University Islamabad

Email: naheedadeela543@gmail.com

Qurat ul Ain Sajjad

Student BS English, University of Education Lahore, Attock Campus

Email: quratulainsajjad587@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study applies **Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)** to Guzel Yakhina's *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, examining how language constructs gender, power, and ideology within both Tatar patriarchal society and the Soviet Gulag system. Through the analysis of **speech acts, expressive syntax, and linguoculturemes**, the research traces Zuleikha's transformation from a silenced, submissive woman embedded in traditional Tatar ethno-religious structures to a more assertive figure shaped by Soviet universalist ideology. While the Gulag environment enables her development of agency through survival, labor, and self-expression, the study also identifies a paradox: her discursive empowerment coincides with the erosion of her Tatar-Islamic identity. The findings support decolonial feminist critiques suggesting that the novel frames Zuleikha's "emancipation" as contingent on assimilation into Soviet secular modernity, thereby reinforcing imperial narratives that equate cultural abandonment with liberation. This FCDA highlights the text's dual function portraying personal awakening while implicitly validating Soviet hegemonic ideology.

Keywords: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis, Agency, Patriarchy, Soviet Universalism, Linguoculturemes, Speech Acts, Expressive Syntax, Decolonial Feminism

Introduction: Setting Up the Discussion and Research Questions Putting Guzel Yakhina and Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes in Context

Guzel Yakhina's first book, *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* (2015), quickly became a major literary event in Russia, selling well and being translated into other languages (Tabarovsky, 2019). The story is about Zuleikha, a young Tatar woman whose life is turned upside down by the Soviet campaigns of collectivization and raskulachivaniye (dekulakization) in the early 1930s (Wikipedia, 2023; Guliyev, 2020). The novel tells the story of a woman's journey of self-discovery after she is forced to leave her home in a harsh Siberian settlement. She goes from being a passive, subservient wife to a woman who finds "new strength and her own role," no longer "defined and used by men" (McAlpine, 2019). The powerful alternate title, *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, sums up this dramatic awakening by showing how she is facing both pain and beauty at the same time. The novel has sparked a lot of criticism, especially from academics and cultural figures in Tatarstan (Al-Gailani, 2022), even though it does a good job of showing the effects of



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Soviet repression. Critics assert that beneath the facade of an engaging personal narrative, the work may unintentionally endorse modern Russian (neo-)imperialist discourses and advocate for Soviet universalism (Al-Gailani, 2022). A central point of disagreement is the representation of Zuleikha's 'emancipation,' which is arguably illustrated as inextricable from the obliteration of her conventional cultural and religious identity (Al-Gailani, 2022). This tension—the intricate convergence of gendered emancipation, cultural erosion, and state ideology—renders the text an imperative focus for thorough critical analysis.

Establishing Parameters: FCDA as an Instrument for Literary Criticism

This study utilizes Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to elucidate the complexities of female agency within a historically and ideologically charged context. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) asserts that language is not a neutral vehicle for depicting reality but a dynamic social practice that both mirrors and actively shapes social structures (Fairclough, 1989). FCDA, an enhancement of this methodology, examines the establishment, maintenance, and perpetuation of gender asymmetries and power dynamics through discursive practices (Raza & Zulfiqar, 2023). FCDA transcends previous feminist methodologies that solely concentrated on identifying "images of women" or categorizing content as 'sexist' or 'anti-sexist' (Sunderland, 2004); it investigates the systemic ideological frameworks inherent in a narrative's dialogue, structure, and rhetorical decisions. This research aims to ascertain the discursive cost of Zuleikha's transition by systematically linking the analysis of textual features (linguistic choices), discursive processes (interpersonal dynamics), and the overarching social context (power structures and history) (Fairclough, 1989). The primary contention is that an exhaustive critical examination of Zuleikha's discourse—encompassing her silences, verbal assertions, and the trajectory of her cultural language markers—is imperative for comprehending the novel's ideological position regarding gender, ethnicity, and Soviet state authority.

Questions for Research (RQs)

Given the novel's themes and its divisive reception, this paper is organized around the following research questions:

RQ1 (Patriarchal Construction): In what ways is the traditional patriarchal authority in pre-exile Tatar society established discursively, especially through linguistic elements (including linguoculturemes and speech acts) that reinforce Zuleikha's submissive gender and ethnic identity?

RQ2 (Discursive Shift): What are the precise linguistic and narrative mechanisms that convey Zuleikha's cultivation of personal agency and survival strategies, and in what ways does the severity of the Gulag environment compel a reevaluation of her self-discourse?

RQ3 (Ideological Contradiction): In what ways does the narrative's portrayal of 'emancipation' align with the decolonial feminist critique that contends Zuleikha's liberation serves as a covert endorsement of Soviet universalism and cultural 'deislamization'? (Al-Gailani, 2022)

Theoretical Foundation: FCDA, Ideology, and Literary Texts Fundamental Tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Fairclough and Wodak

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged from the "critical linguistics" movement of the 1970s, distinguishing itself as a methodology centered on structural inequities, power



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imbalances, and the perpetuation of ideology (Fairclough, 1989). Prominent theorists such as Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak formulated the essential principle that social and linguistic practices are mutually constitutive—they influence one another (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). A central analytical tenet of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the intrinsic relationship among discourse, power, and ideology. Fairclough asserts that the preservation of power in modern society is progressively facilitated by nuanced ideological mechanisms (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 1989). Ideology serves as the foundation of social order, with language being the principal domain for ideological conflicts and power struggles (Fairclough, 1989; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). This framework employs the notion of hegemony, offering a theoretical framework for examining social change in the context of shifting power dynamics (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). A comprehensive Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), adhering to Fairclough's framework, must systematically incorporate three dimensions: textual analysis (formal linguistic structures), interactional analysis (the social relationships conveyed by the text), and social conditions (the historical context and power dynamics) (Fairclough, 1989).

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) in Literary Studies

FCDA applies the macro-sociological critique of CDA to specifically analyze the influence of gender on the organization of social practices and the perpetuation of power disparities (Raza & Zulfiqar, 2023; Sunderland, 2004). FCDA acknowledges that gender is a social construct, with women typically portrayed as passive, dependent, or subservient, and men linguistically linked to dominance and authority (Raza & Zulfiqar, 2023; Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024). When cultural discourse consistently employs language that restricts women to roles such as 'caregiver' and men to roles such as 'provider,' alternative gender behaviors may be regarded as socially unacceptable or deviant (Raza & Zulfiqar, 2023). Utilizing FCDA in fiction enables the critique to transcend superficial thematic analysis and examine the profound discursive frameworks that influence gender roles and affect a character's agency (Sunderland, 2004). Literary works, especially those such as *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* that address significant socio-political upheaval, are regarded as mechanisms of socialization that both reflect and sustain prevailing ideologies (Sunderland, 2004). The essential objective of this analysis is to delineate the discursive transformation of Zuleikha's identity—from a localized, religious, and patriarchal domestic environment to the secular, centralized, and hegemonic Soviet state. The methodology must ascertain whether her transition represents authentic discursive autonomy or merely the substitution of one prevailing narrative of control for another.

The Tools for Analyzing Texts

To carry out this FCDA of Zuleikha's narrative, three main linguistic and discursive tools are used to look at how her status changes:

Acts of Speech

Speech acts are the ways that characters use language to do things like ask for something, give an order, or make a statement (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024; Yule, 1996). It is important to look at how often and what kinds of speech acts Zuleikha uses in order to understand how her social status changes. Directives, which can be commands or requests, usually show who is in charge and are mostly aimed at Zuleikha in the first few



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chapters (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024). On the other hand, Assertives (statements of authority or conviction) and Commissives (promises to do something in the future) are signs of growing agency (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024; Yule, 1996). Expressives, which show how a character feels or how they see themselves, help us understand their psychological struggles (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024; Yule, 1996). To understand the change in how people talk about her awakening, it is important to keep an eye on how more people are using assertive and commissive language (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024).

Syntax

In addition to their basic functions, expressive syntactic constructions (ESCs) are very useful for showing complex cognitive intentions, like opinions, arguments, and assumptions, as well as for modeling how people interact with each other (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). Syntactic devices such as parcellation (which increases emotional impact), repetition (which indicates speaker conviction or persistence), and rhetorical questions/exclamations (which convey subjective attitudes) provide substantial insights into a character's internal world (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). For example, early representations of Zuleikha's oppressed condition probably include ellipsis in her dialogue, indicating implication, ambiguity, or repressed internal conflict (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). The transition towards agency (RQ2) necessitates a corresponding shift towards more overt, assertive repetition and structured argumentation (Kuznetsova et al., 2023).

Linguoculturemes

Linguoculturemes are words or phrases that encode ethnic and socio-cultural identity, such as kinship terms, religious figures, or names for domestic items (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). In *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes*, the use of certain Tatar words and phrases sets up a necessary cultural foundation by recreating the dynamics and traditional values of a local ethno-cultural community, especially the traditional patriarchal family structure (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). These markers are essential for expressing Zuleikha's socio-cultural identity and, importantly, for rendering the "inner levels of the story" fully accessible in their semantic context to individuals of that particular culture (Safa & Ospanova, 2022).

The Discourse of Subjugation: Zuleikha in Tatar Patriarchy (RQ1) The Linguistic Indicators of Submissiveness and Silence

The initial depiction of Zuleikha in her Tatar village context substantiates the FCDA model, illustrating how women are linguistically conditioned to embrace subordinate roles (Raza & Zulfiqar, 2023). The heroine is depicted as engaged in a struggle for self-recognition, contending with the "oppressive behaviors" and "men's habits of thought" that characterize the submissiveness of traditional Tatar women (Hou, 2017). This state of subjugation is discursively manifested in her significant absence of authority within the domestic sphere. Zuleikha's way of talking is mostly passive in the first few chapters of the story. Her identity is defined by her dependence and domestic responsibilities, rendering her the principal recipient of Directives—commands and requests that unequivocally assert the authority of her husband, Murtaza, and the unyielding control of her mother-in-law, Upyrikha (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024). Zuleikha's verbalizations seldom attain the status of Assertives; her diminished social standing is indicative of a restricted ability to convey conviction or authority (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). Any internal conflict or effort



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to articulate an opinion is frequently restricted to her internal monologue or conveyed through linguistic indicators of hesitation, such as Ellipsis, which denotes inhibited communication and internal discord (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). This enforced linguistic subordination and structural silence effectively solidify her status as an object rather than an agent within the patriarchal discourse.

Decoding Ethno-Cultural Identity: Linguoculturemes and Patriarchal Relations

The traditional patriarchal context is intricately shaped by the precise utilization of linguoculturemes (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). These linguistic markers, including Tatar words for religious figures, certain ways of addressing family members, and descriptions of the home's material culture, are strong ways of showing the religious and social expectations that were put on Zuleikha (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). The use of these cultural markers makes it clear that her identity is closely tied to her role as a Muslim woman who works within strict, traditional limits (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). The heavy use of these cultural references makes the "inner levels of the story" very personal to the Tatar ethno-cultural, religious, and social setting (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). Because of this, the language itself becomes a way to limit. The text linguistically embeds Zuleikha within her subservient role by using very specific culturemes to describe the "relationships in a traditional patriarchal family," making her ethno-cultural identity synonymous with her subjugated gender status (Safa & Ospanova, 2022).

The Upyrikha Figure: A Discursive Manifestation of Internalized Control

Upyrikha, the mother-in-law, is an important character because she represents the heavy burden of internalized patriarchal norms. Her portrayal frequently approaches the spectral or illusory, occasionally materializing as a ghost (Pecherskaya, 2023). This enduring, occasionally supernatural, manifestation fulfills a significant discursive function: it implies that the patriarchal limitations shaping Zuleikha's existence are not merely external regulations imposed by her husband, but are profoundly embedded and widespread psychological frameworks. Upyrikha serves as the physical and verbal embodiment of the submissiveness that Zuleikha has been conditioned to display (Pecherskaya, 2023). Even though Zuleikha is no longer physically under Upyrikha's control because she is in exile, the mother-in-law's ghostly presence remains because of a "maternal instinct" to protect the family line (Murtaza, the son) (Pecherskaya, 2023). The persistence of this spectral figure in the Siberian camp suggests that the entrenched maternal and lineage-preserving elements of traditional patriarchal discourse are significantly more robust against disruption than the more superficial facets of spousal obedience. Zuleikha's ultimate attainment of authentic agency hinges on her ability to liberate herself from the psychological dominion of this specter, reflecting her essential attainment of a new, secular identity unencumbered by the conventional familial framework.

Discursive Transformation in the Soviet Context (The Gulag as a Site of Re-inscription) (RQ2)

Ideological Conflict: The Destruction of Traditional Structures and Dekulakization

Zuleikha's forced deportation during the dekulakization campaign exemplifies a violent, state-directed transformation of the rural social and economic structure (Guliyev, 2020). The Soviet Gulag system was a way for the government to force people to work and keep them from speaking out against the government. Its main goal was to make prisoners more loyal to the state and "reeducate" them (Barnes, 2011). The goal was to make sure



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that "an individual's primary loyalty was to the state, not to their loved ones" (Lacey, 2024).

The move to the Siberian camp destroys the localized Tatar patriarchal system that kept Zuleikha down. It replaces it with the Soviet state's equally monolithic but differently organized patriarchy. Although the initial trauma necessitates a concentration on mere survival, the extreme context paradoxically fosters an environment suitable for the development of a novel form of agency. The state's foundational ideology, Soviet universalism, creates a structural opportunity—the acknowledgment of collective labor—that enables the redefinition of Zuleikha's gendered role beyond conventional ethnic and religious limitations.

Survival and Maternal Discourse: Re-negotiating Agency via Labor and Nature

The fundamental aspect of Zuleikha's developing identity is the compelling maternal drive to endure and protect her son, Murtaza (Pecherskaya, 2023). This instinct serves as an immediate, pre-ideological catalyst for agency. This new agency is not primarily expressed through political defiance or sophisticated dialogue, but through the acquisition of practical skills and the cognitive reconfiguration of her physical surroundings.

The story uses strong metaphors and bodily language to show how this change happens. The scary, life-threatening forest, which is often linked to evil spirits in traditional folklore, is turned into a "image of fertility" through language and psychology, representing the possibility of life and food (Pecherskaya, 2023). Zuleikha's successful expeditions into the taiga, yielding "fat grouse and heavy geese" (Pecherskaya, 2023), indicate a significant transformation in power relations. In the past, she was linguistically powerless in the home and social settings. However, her physical effort in the practical and somatic areas gives her immediate control over resources that are necessary for survival, which forces the group to recognize her (Pecherskaya, 2023). This successful discursive re-evaluation of nature affirms that Zuleikha attains a crucial feminist objective: agency grounded in verifiable self-sustaining action, which temporarily surpasses both conventional male authority and the prescribed roles enforced by the state.

Linguistic Indicators of Awakening: Transitioning from Ellipsis to Assertion

The novel's central theme—Zuleikha "opening her eyes" and becoming a woman of "new strength" (McAlpine, 2019)—necessitates a parallel transformation in her discursive practices. This transformation is evidenced by a significant alteration in her speech acts and expressive syntactic structures (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). The ongoing use of Ellipsis, which marked her initial, ambiguous, and repressed communication, progressively decreases (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). It is supplanted by linguistic attributes that signify conviction and perseverance (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). As Zuleikha takes on a recognized and useful role in the exile community, she uses more Assertives and Commissives, which show that she is in charge and committed to what she does (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024). Additionally, the use of Expressive Syntax changes: rhetorical questions and exclamations let her express her personal feelings about events, and Repetition shows how sure she is of her arguments and how hard she works to make them (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). This change in language shows a new way that people interact with each other. Her newly acquired capacity to articulate intricate cognitive intentions—argument, opinion, and conviction—evidently signifies a substantial enhancement in her psychological and social status within the new community (Kuznetsova et al., 2023).



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FCDA and Ideological Critique: De-Islamization versus Emancipation (RQ3) The Intersection of Gender, Religion, and Imperialism: A Study of Soviet Universalism

Although Zuleikha's attainment of an assertive voice (RQ2) may be regarded as a personal feminist triumph, a comprehensive FCDA must situate this success within the broader Soviet ideological framework, which critics contend the novel tacitly supports (Al-Gailani, 2022). The decolonial feminist critique contests the prevailing narrative that Zuleikha's authentic liberation can only be achieved beyond her established ethnic and religious context.

Soviet policies, such as dekulakization and the coercive enforcement of Soviet universalism, were implemented without regard for the cultural or religious 'lifeways' of Central Asian populations, violently dismantling traditional structures in favor of centralized ideological control (Guliyev, 2020). Critics note that the novel overlooks the detrimental effects of Soviet universalism on ethnic and religious distinctiveness (Al-Gailani, 2022). The narrative posits that state-sanctioned violence and turmoil are essential for Zuleikha's personal advancement, potentially legitimizing the obliteration of non-Russian cultural institutions as a prerequisite for 'modernity' or 'progress' (Al-Gailani, 2022).

The Critique of 'Emancipation' via Secularization

The most compelling argument from decolonial feminist scholarship is that the novel deliberately presents the protagonist's 'deislamization' as her 'emancipation' (Al-Gailani, 2022). This interpretation posits that the narrative intentionally frames traditional Islamic and Tatar cultural identity as a regressive impediment that Zuleikha must transcend to evolve into a contemporary, productive, and autonomous Soviet citizen (Al-Gailani, 2022).

The FCDA framework offers the linguistic substantiation for this purported cultural obliteration. As Zuleikha's assertive and authoritative discourse intensifies (RQ2), there is a concomitant reduction in the prominence and frequency of the Tatar linguoculturemes and religious references that previously represented her ethnic identity (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). The absence of these particular cultural markers in her language indicates a "harm to the intimacy of the unique world perception of the main character" (Safa & Ospanova, 2022) intrinsic to the text. The vocabulary that once characterized her ethnic and religious identity is largely forsaken, suggesting that her newly adopted voice is linguistically detached from her original cultural foundations and instead integrates into the secular, Russian-centric, state-sanctioned conventions of the collective (Al-Gailani, 2022).

This linguistic pattern supports the ideological function that critics have pointed out: the story uses Zuleikha's fight against gender oppression to implicitly support a certain colonial outcome. The narrative, by portraying the abandonment of traditional culture as a beneficial and essential path to self-discovery, inadvertently reinforces the dominant Soviet discourse, which frequently regarded non-Russian, non-secular identities as fundamentally regressive (Al-Gailani, 2022).

Reclaiming Non-Russian Subjectivity: Counter-discourses

The negative reviews of Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes show the bigger fight for non-Russian subjectivity in the former USSR (Al-Gailani, 2022) Yakhina's novel stands in contrast to the writings of authors from historically marginalized communities, like the Crimean



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Tatars, who intentionally employ literature to reclaim cultural heritage and articulate voices silenced by decades of exile and state oppression (Kyiv Independent, 2023). These counter-discourses affirm that the preservation of cultural identity constitutes a significant political act, inherently connected to the integrity of language and narrative expression.

The FCDA must consequently scrutinize the narrator's definitive ideological alignment. If the narrative voice structurally endorses the departure from ethnic and religious identifiers as essential 'progress,' then the narrative itself functions to validate Soviet universalism.

Zuleikha's hard-won ability to express her own cognitive intentions (her successful acquisition of an assertive voice) is ultimately limited by the ideological requirement that she first conform to the prevailing secular framework. Her discursive awakening is thus unveiled as a significant paradox: an authentic personal victory attained within an ideological framework that necessitates cultural subjugation.

Table of Comparative Summary: Changes in Discourse

Context of Discourse	Power Structure / Hegemony	Feminist CDA Focus (Ideology)	Language and Narrative Manifestation
Before Exile (Tatar Village)	Local Patriarchy (Religious/Ethnic)	Subjugation through conventional gender roles; internalized domination (represented by Upyrikha)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of Tatar linguoculturesmes (religious and kinship terms) (Safa & Ospanova, 2022) - High frequency of received Directives (commands/orders) (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024) - Recurrent Ellipsis showing silence, hesitation, and suppressed voice (Kuznetsova et al., 2023)
Exile (Siberian Settlement / Gulag)	State Patriarchy (Soviet Universalism)	Mandatory secularization; survival prioritized over ethnic or religious identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in assertive and commissive speech acts (Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024) - Use of expressive syntactic structures such as repetition and emphatic expressions (Kuznetsova et al., 2023) - Decline or erasure



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			of Tatar linguocultures (Al-Gailani, 2022; Safa & Ospanova, 2022)
Space Against Hegemony	Natural / Maternal Instinct	Agency grounded in somatic, practical action rather than social structures	- Transformation of nature metaphor: forest shifts from a symbol of fear to a resource of fertility (Pecherskaya, 2023) - Survival-driven discourse linked to hunting, motherhood, and physical resilience (Pecherskaya, 2023)

Conclusion: Re-evaluating Feminism, Agency, and Ideology in Yakhina's Narrative

This Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of *Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes* affirms the imperative to examine literary narratives of female emancipation through the stringent frameworks of power, ideology, and linguistic practice. The analysis effectively documented Zuleikha’s critical discursive transformation, illustrating her transition from a subject characterized by submissive silence and linguistic markers of constraint (Kuznetsova et al., 2023; Rzayeva & Ahmadova, 2024) to a figure employing explicit, authoritative language (Kuznetsova et al., 2023). Her agency is further substantiated by the visceral, somatic discourse of survival, evidenced by her effective cognitive and linguistic recontextualization of the natural environment from an object of fear to a source of vitality (Pecherskaya, 2023). Nonetheless, the examination of the ideological dimension (RQ3) uncovers a significant and disconcerting paradox at the core of the novel. Zuleikha's personal attainment of agency is closely associated with the diminishing prominence of her ethnic and religious identifiers, as evidenced by the corresponding decline of Tatar linguocultures in her evolving discourse (Safa & Ospanova, 2022). This significant linguistic transformation validates the decolonial feminist critique that the novel positions 'deislamization' as the primary prerequisite for 'emancipation' (Al-Gailani, 2022). Zuleikha is liberated from the local domestic violence of her patriarchal home, only to be assimilated and defined by the centralized hegemony of the Soviet state. By structurally privileging the abandonment of non-Russian identity markers as a necessary path to self-discovery, the narrative implicitly endorses the colonial initiative of Soviet universalism (Al-Gailani, 2022).

In the end, Zuleikha's journey, when looked at through FCDA, is a complicated and strong example of the ideological limits that come with any state-approved story of freedom. Although she attains a genuine and essential discursive awakening, the language she employs reinforces the subtle yet pervasive belief that authentic identity and 'modernity' necessitate the forfeiture of cultural distinction. The novel's controversy highlights the ongoing battle for control of cultural memory and identity in the post-Soviet space.



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