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Freedom and Identity in Guy Gavriel Kay's Novel Tigana

Abstract: *The article examines the ideas of freedom and identity in the novel "Tigana," which is dedicated to the problem of human choice and free will. Freedom and the pursuit of one's identity are seen in the story as an indispensable part of man's quest for memory. The book is an epic fantasy that touches on postcolonial issues as it tries to present the voices of forcibly exiled people, the struggle for the return to the roots, to heritage, and language used as a means of oppression. One of its main points is sacrifice as a path to freedom. However, this novel shows that deciding what is evil and good is not easy, and things are not always what they seem at first glance; rather, it depends on the point of view. The novel is examined against the backdrop of the work of a genre classic like Tolkien, highlighting the intertwining of mythology, legends, and history in an amalgam alloy in which we find allusions to the present and messages for the future.*

Keywords: *freedom; identity; Tigana; history; fantasy.*

Can you imagine a world without your country and roots? A world with no memory of your homeland, a world in which you have no identity, no home, no roots, and you are the only one who remembers your culture, traditions, country, and language. This is the world of Tigana, the novel by Guy Gavriel Kay. The book we will discuss is part of the so-called epic fantasy genre. In the field of fantasy, eras are measured before or after Tolkien. In his essay "On Fairy-Stories", Tolkien defines fantasy as "*an act of imaginative creation which strives to have both the 'inner consistency of reality' and the strangeness Faërie¹, in order to explore reality in some deeper way*". (Tolkien, 1947, p. 138-139) This is certainly true in high fantasy, with its autonomous, secondary worlds. It has a specific application to Kay's novel, as it is influenced by his work with Christopher Tolkien on J. R. R. Tolkien's post-

¹ In this term Tolkien includes not only fairies, but anything magical and all fantastical elements of a story, this is explained in detail in the quoted essay "On Fairy-stories".

humously published novels and stories. But another thing Tolkien mentions in his letters is how some literary critics try to "protect" literature from various forms of nonsense (such as fantasy) by "hanging" it in a frame. (Carpenter, 1981)

In this sense, in his novel, as a follower of Tolkien, Kai advocates his ideas that fantasy should not only not be underestimated as literature, but that it explores reality more deeply and discovers its truths, no less significant than those of so-called "serious literature."

Tigana is an epic fantasy that, although set in a fantasy world, touches on issues related to real-life postcolonialism as it attempts to represent the voices of forcibly exiled people, the struggle for heritage, and language used as a tool of oppression. In this novel, Kai manages to raise critical real-world issues, significant for many postcolonial authors, in whose "stories of migrants, refugees, residents of former colonies" become "the terrain of the new world literature" (See Личева 2019, p. 23)

It is known that for centuries, the canon of world literature has included mainly Western European literature. In this regard, Gayatri Spivak expresses her concern that for centuries, the literature of the rest of the world has been marginalized in this way (Spivak 2023, 39). In "The Death of a Discipline", Spivak argues that comparative studies can only be revived by including depoliticized regional studies, and that it is necessary to turn our attention to the literatures and languages of regions such as Asia, to avoid Eurocentrism. Thus, by applying a decentralized approach, "hearing" the voices of migrants and residents of former colonies, we can see the fruitful overcoming of borders for contemporary literature, the new possibilities for reading beyond the stereotypical. Epic fantasy has the most striving for freedom and imagination, faith, madness, strange images, and strange cultures, sometimes so numerous that the reader needs maps and notes to remember all the actions, characters, countries, and customs. And there is no shortage of maps in these novels.

The common denominator of epic stories, which generally have a wide range of themes, is that they aim to keep the reader in suspense and tell interesting stories with freedom-loving heroes, all of which take place in vast worlds. This is probably one of the reasons why epic fantasy is quite significant in volume – it depicts entire universes. If the story is worth it, and the writer tells it masterfully, the reader finds himself in a vast world that swallows him up, and having memorized strange names, cultures, and events, he does not want to leave it.

The reader of *Tigana* finds himself in such a vast world, a world in which there are monsters and adventures, losses and slavery, but more importantly, this world does not speak of prison bars, but of the pursuit of freedom. And here we can recall the words of the writer Tolkien, whom Kay follows: fantasy is an escape from prison, a choice to talk about other topics, not prison bars. ("On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien 1947).

Perhaps the Canadian writer's philosophical education influenced the questions in the epic fantasy he creates, because a central question in Kay's fantasy world is free will.

The novel *Tigana* was published in 1990. *Publisher's Weekly* described it as "a brilliant and complex portrayal of good and evil" and by *USA Today* as "a boldly organized, intelligently articulated romance." (Kay, 1990) The book was nominated for the Mythopoetic Fantasy Award, World Fantasy Award, and the Aurora Prize in 1991.

Tigana is notable for its richness of character and scenes, and especially its realism of situation and action. In it, Kay deliberately sets himself complex philosophical problems to solve. Tolkien and Kay consider the issue of freedom and free will, but their conclusions differ. Tolkien's novels always point back to some sovereign will or plan for the universe, free will being how that plan is carried out, which is why many readers doubt whether free will is a possibility for Tolkien's characters at all.

For Kay, victory can only be won through sacrifice. Therefore, the highest form of human choice, free will, comes from sacrifice. Kay shows that predestination arises from repetition and that no further repetitions follow once a pattern has been broken. According to the writer, the structures of myth in its various guises, such as archetypes, names, connotations, and plot lines, can be seen as forms of predestination and fate, but they need not be, and they do not exclude freedom and free will. The choices one makes, made with free will and resulting from mastered freedom, determine the character and the story's destination.

Kay draws heavily on mythological, legendary, and historical sources in his fantasy novels. For this writer, myth is of paramount importance. His earlier, highly acclaimed Fionavar trilogy (*Fionavar Tapestry: The Summer Tree; The Wandering Fire; The Darkest Road*) worked with many myths, openly drawing on a wide range of easily recognizable sources to create a truly innovative reinterpretation of the archetypal battle between the forces of Light and Darkness.

Tigana represents a new direction in Kay's work. It reads like a richly embroidered historical novel, full of character and detail, but it is set in a world the reader does not know. It is a world where magic works, with a different cosmology, religions, songs, arts, crafts, and myths. The author has presented them all with an intensity of imagination and skill that rivals Tolkien's. Kay surprises his readers with his willingness to kill off the main characters, even the most attractive ones, and this also gives realism to what could otherwise be an airy fantasy.

Since the book has not been translated into Bulgarian, here we will outline its plot: The world of *Tigana* is a world with its own geography, religion, politics, and social systems. It is a highly developed pre-technological civilization whose inhabitants interact by sea and land: they trade in cloth, wine, spices, and more. All this is reflected in a complex social structure that is reminiscent of that of Renaissance Italy. Due to its geographical shape, the divided peninsula, known as the Palm, is under the power of two wizard rulers. One of them, Brandin, to avenge the death of his son, magically erases the name and memory of a beautiful province, Tigana, and its inhabitants move to other parts of the peninsula due to oppression and the lack of any freedoms. Their main objective becomes the movement for freedom and the desire to overthrow their oppressors.

The fantasy novel tells us of the struggle of a world caught up in conquests and wars, and how the entire peninsula survives, despite the dispute over land and power between the two wizard kings, Brandin of Igrat and Alberico d'Astibar. *Tigana* is a text that refuses to offer the traditionally clear division between good and evil. It speaks of the struggle for identity and freedom in the face of brutal violence.

Kay reproduces the sentence structure, atmosphere, and style of nineteenth-century romance. Yet he rejects today's fantasy stories' cozy confidences and obvious patterns to focus on strange ideas about political, social, and sexual power, especially in the arts. The novel is known to take much of its world and setting from Renaissance Italy, which, while not unique, is undoubtedly fresh and different here. *Tigana* is a work about the nature of power. There are power struggles between nations, the various religious orders dedicated to the three deities of the Triad, the women of Brandin's harem competing for court favors, and factions at all levels.

The first epigraph to *Tigana*, from Canto XVII of Dante's *Paradiso*, speaking of Dante's exile, reinforces the book's Florentine connec-

tion and emphasis on power. The text adopts Dante's philosophical position of belief in free will, adapting the idea that a rational person can make a conscious choice that has meaning for all eternity. In *Tigana*, this exile extends to the entire province. King Brandin's curse effectively places the province on the threshold of Dante's *Inferno*. The inhabitants of Tigana who have survived must live without identity, in a vicious circle in time. This results from the knowledge that no one else remembers their homeland.

The connection with Italy in the novel is not accidental because *Tigana* was born in Tuscany, Italy. Even the name of the novel, "Tigana," sounds reminiscent of Tuscany, one of the most important centers of the Italian Renaissance. In addition, wine appears everywhere in the story - green, blue, and black, and a key holiday is the Feast of the Vine. Tuscany is known for its winemaking. Brandin, on the other hand, is a cultural despot whose island court resembles the most brilliant of the twelfth-century European courts, that of the Sicilian King Roger II at the strategically located seaport of Palermo; home, at the time, to scholars, philosophers, and artists from the European and Arab worlds.

When referring to mythological references, Kay uses a variety of mythologies – Scandinavian, Greco-Roman, and Middle Eastern. For example, the mythological basis for the Triad of the *Tigana* recalls the story of the mother goddess Ishtar's love for the young Tammuz, whose annual death is lamented to the music of flutes and whose resurrection revives the natural world.

The fragment in the third chapter of the first part, where coins are placed on the eyes of the dead man to pay the Gatekeeper at the last Gate of Morian, strongly recalls the Greek rite in which coins are placed with the dead man to pay the ferryman Charon. Similar references are constant in the novel. The name of the Gatekeeper, which comes from "Moria", on the other hand, is a toponym that leads first to the Bible, where it is mentioned twice, and also to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where Moria is the abandoned home of the dwarves. All these overlays of the meaning of the names are essential for understanding the novel's essence. The dwarves are driven from Moria just as the Tiganians were from Tigana and cherish the hope of someday returning to their Promised Land.

The author's approach to mythology is poetic. One of the instances in which Kay works directly with myth to reconstruct an archetype occurs in his use of the figure of the Fool, who plays a secondary but crucial role in *Tigana*: it is the Tiganian Prince Valentine from the

introduction of the story, disguised as a jester, who kills the dictator Brandin. Along with Shakespeare's use of the royal Jester, Kay adds the figure of the magical hunchback and connects the two with the figure of the Fool from Tarot as an indicator of a risky gamble, an unexpected solution or a turning point, and the keeper of the key to a mystery.

Although *Tigana* is not specifically a feminist book, it is certainly pro-female: its heroines are active and determine the course of events; through female images, the idea of freedom and the pursuit of one's own identity are brought out as an invariable part of the quest for memory. At the same time, in this novel, the woman is not only the family's guardian but also preserves the image of the homeland and is ready to sacrifice herself unconditionally. The writer's bias towards female images is evident.

If the male images are depicted as more contradictory and dual, the female ones are more holistic and have a unified message. This is especially clearly brought out through the image of Dianora, the heroine who is forced to live in the home of her enslaver, in the house of the one who erases the memory of her homeland. Her initial desire to kill Brandin changes when she realizes he is a wounded father, not a villain; she falls in love with him. Her image is described with much love. Through her fate, the book, the author gradually raises questions about whether the good that seems good is always so, and whether evil is absolutely evil. The novel plays with several points of view and the idea of an overall perspective. In the novel's conclusion, the reader asks himself whether the good cause is truly good or whether the hero Alessan, who tries to free his homeland to prevail over the tyrant, can be called good if he acts equally cruelly. The narrative hints that he will hardly be a better king than Brandin. The final battle of forces leaves an open ending to the novel, which provides more questions than answers. Besides the hope of returning to one's identity, of winning the freedom of the oppressed side, questions such as what one's 'identity' is come to the fore, as well as, if one has not had one's own face for too long, can one easily get it back or will it already be an old mask that only brings discomfort. Thus, this novel questions the idea of identity, which is not perceived as something once and for all given but as something 'becoming' and constantly changing.

As the novel claims, the price of freedom is a sacrifice, though sometimes, the sacrifice might seem meaningless if freedom has obtained a different shape and value.

The end of the novel, in which the forgotten song from *Tigana* appears, is both an ominous prophecy about the lives of the three characters at the end (a future ruler, a present observer, and a former wizard lord) when they spot a mermaid (*riselka*) and a warning about remembering history and finding one's own home.

*One man sees a riselka², his life forks there.
Two men see a riselka; one of them shall die.
Three men see a riselka
One is blessed, one forks, one shall die.*
(Kay 1990, p. 259)

Even when it tells stories that sound like fairy tales, this epic fantasy references the modern world with a sense of lost orientation; a book that very clearly reflects our current understanding of loss: it considers the price of power and the price of blood. Perhaps that is why the interest in this novel has been evident in recent years. The meaning of this often perceived marginal genre can be seen as an opportunity to change minds and hearts. Fantasy does not tell you that there are dragons; it tells you that they can be defeated. Both the sense of identity and the understanding of evil in this novel are concepts that change in different parts: gradually the narrative reveals to us that what we see is not always the true nature of things and that perhaps we should not only trust our eyes, but also look within ourselves to find the answers.

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² Riselka is a mermaid in the mythology of *Tigana*.