TOLERANCE AS AN ACT OF LOVE: 
A BUBERIAN READING OF MEDEA AND HER CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on interpersonal relations of the protagonist Medea in the novel Medea and Her Children (1996) by Lyudmila Ulitskaya. Owing to its protagonist of mixed identities and diversity among its characters, Medea and Her Children serves as an excellent material for a discussion of the importance of tolerance within, above all, Russian society. This article examines Medea’s modes of existence in accordance with Martin Buber’s philosophical concept of relation and love. The aim is to see how Medea attains her existential authenticity through establishing relation with her world. Pertaining to Buber’s theory, this article demonstrates how approaching others with an attitude distinct to an I-You relation brings forth a tolerant stance from a person. This research uses literature study as the technique to collect the data and descriptive analysis as the method. Initially exploring the nature of the relationships between Medea and three of her relatives; Georgii, Nike, and Alexandra, then identifying the love shown by Medea in accordance with Buber’s concept, this article ultimately argues that Medea’s tolerance is an act of love, thus functions as her attainment of existential authenticity.

KEYWORDS: Buber; existentialism; I and Thou; tolerance; Ulitskaya

INTRODUCTION

Starting her literary career with Sonechka in 1992, Lyudmila Ulitskaya has become one of the most read authors in Russia. Her writings are considered a continuation of Tolstoy’s and Dostoyevsky’s realism. Медея и Её Дети (Medea i Ee Deti) “Medea and Her Children” (hereinafter referred to as Medea i Ee Deti) is Ulitskaya’s second work, published in 1996 and immediately nominated in the 1997 Booker Prize. Albeit not the foremost work of Ulitskaya’s, Медея и Её Дети has its own appeals. The protagonist, Medea Georgievna Sinoply Mendez, was the last pure-blooded Greek descendant living in Crimea with relatives from various Russian ethnic minorities sprawling all over Russia.

Reflecting on its title and the name of the protagonist in this novel, it’s hard not to think of another Medea that is much older and rather notorious. The story of Medea in Greek mythology has been retold by many ancient Greek poets and has also been the subject of plays and novels adapted by modern writers. Not only was Medea the daughter of Aeëtes, King of Colchis, she was
Circe’s niece, and granddaughter of Helios. Classical literature portraying the story of Medea includes Hesiod’s *Theogony*, *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, and *Medea*, a tragedy by Euripides. Medea’s story focuses on her relationship with Jason, the leader of the Argonauts. After Eros made her fall in love with Jason, Medea helped Jason get the golden fleece from Aeëtes using her magical power and escape from Colchis. The story of Medea was a tragedy involving many murders committed by the main character herself.

Published in the post-Soviet era, *Медея и Её Дети* has motherhood and kinship among its other themes and is overflowing with female characters, making it notable to researches on women’s fiction as a part of Russian literature. The theme of motherhood in this novel accentuates a contradiction as the protagonist Medea was a childless figure as much as she was motherly. Although the main characters bore the same name, the story and characterization of Medea in this novel took a rather contrasting path from the story of Medea in Greek mythology. Owing to its striking resemblance to the classic work, and the fact that the protagonist is a matriarch, *Медея и Её Дети* is more often analysed using classical concepts (such as Gnosticism) and gender-based paradigms.

As the central character in the novel, Medea lived alone in her family house. And, as the title suggests, the story centred upon Medea who received her family—her *children*, albeit not her *biological* children—every year in her house. Told in the span of the twentieth century, this novel did not neglect the major events in Russia, especially regarding war and revolution. However, the war did not actively present itself. Telling war as part of events that occurred in the lifetime of Medea, this novel still puts Medea as the driving force of the story. In this regard, this story embodies existential notion of favoring individual experiences.

This novel puts Medea as an individual who connected the other characters. At the same time, the title of this novel alludes a significance of the relationship between Medea and other figures, namely her children. Cooper (1999) said that for the Existentialist, the self is not a hermetically sealed ‘pure ego’, but an embodied engagement in a world where, necessarily, it is alongside others. Medea was someone with a mixed identity. She was a Greek descent who bore a Spanish name, believed in Orthodoxy, and was Russian by nationality. The focus in this article is how Medea achieved its existence through the relationships she built with her world, especially with her children. This article will demonstrate Medea’s existence by exploring Medea’s interpersonal relations with her world in accordance with Martin Buber (1878-1965)’s conceptual framework on human relations.

The main corpus to be examined in this research is the novel *Медея и Её Дети* by Lyudmila Ulitskaya and the philosophical work of Martin Buber *I and Thou*. The writing of this article uses descriptive analysis methods and literature study techniques. Sugiyono (2009: 38) described the descriptive analysis method as a method that serves to describe or give an overview of the object under study through data or samples that have been collected as they are without analyzing and making conclusions that are applicable to the public. The literature study technique is related to theoretical studies and other references, namely scientific literature, relating to the problem under study (Sugiyono, 2009: 291).

A deep reading of the novel *Медея и Её Дети* (1996) by Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, and several other books by Buberian scholars will assist the process of analyzing story elements such as characters, characterizations, settings, and motives of the
characters’ actions, followed by sorting out the elements that will be used to achieve the purpose of this study in reference to the theory.

This article is organized into four sections. The first part is an introduction consisting of background, literature review, method, and systematic writing. The second part contains an explanation of the theoretical basis used in analyzing Medea’s relationship with her world. The third part contains the research findings, while the fourth part is the conclusion of the study.

In writing this article, I used several researches as a reference for information and knowledge. Having a main character that was both a Greek and named Medea, researches on Медея и Её Дети often discusses the intertextuality between the novel and stories originating from Greek mythology. The Gnostic Code in the novel by L. Ulitskaya « Медея и Её Дети » (2012) by Natalia V. Kovtun, for instance, demonstrated a parallel between the characters in this novel with the characters that can be found in the Greek mythology. Medea herself was paralleled to Penelope—Odyssey’s wife—who was depicted as a faithful wife despite being separated from husband for seven years.

In addition to its association with mythology and classical thought, Medea i Ee Deti also became the the subject of research which confirms it as a work that illustrates the problems that exist in Russian society. Benjamin Sutcliffe in Liudmila Ulitskaia’s Literature of Tolerance (2009) discusses this novel among other Ulitskaya works that show Ulitskaya’s attitude towards cultural diversity in Russian society. A diverse community, as seen by Ulitskaya, is what make life meaningful.

The next research is a dissertation of Edward David Kiner (Ohio State University) entitled Martin Buber’s Existentialism and its Implications for Education (1968). This dissertation explored Martin Buber’s thoughts through his works. Kiner’s discussion of Buber’s philosophy departing from I and You and Buber’s position in existentialism is related to this article.

**BUBER’S EXISTENTIALISM**

Martin Buber’s existentialism is rooted in relationships. His thought can be found in his work Ich und Du (1922)—translated into English into I and Thou— which was considered a classic among existentialist schools for its particular approach to depicting relations between man and his God (Crowell, 2012: 65). Ich und Du was first translated into English by Ronald Gregor Smith in 1937 under the title I and Thou. Walter Kaufmann (1921-80) in 1970 published a brand new translation which rendered Ich und Du into I and You, emphasizing on the argument that Thou in contemporary English was too archaic and often used in formal setting to equate the colloquial German word Du. The reference of I and Thou in this article refers to the English title of Martin Buber’s work, as was used by Kaufmann in his translation. Martin Buber classified man’s modes of existence into two, that is man as I in I-It or an I-You relation. These primary words, as he described the two terms, couldn’t be set apart. I-It and I-You represent a man as he would engage beings outside himself.

In I-It mode, a man see the Other—which is not only another human being, but can also be animals, nature, and inanimate stuff—as objects; the Other only exists according to the needs of I. The I-It mode represents a utilitarian relationship. I experienced and analyzed a part of It and did
not see it in its wholeness. I-It does not make room for the Other to appear as a subject. The Other is objectified by I. Thus, the I-It relation is a subject-object relationship.

The I-You relation, by contrast, sees the Other as a subject. In this relation, I give room for the Other to appear as a whole subject. Hence, a relation between subject and subject. Buber called this an encounter. The characteristics associated with this relation are openness, directness, mutuality, and presence (Friedman, 2002: xii). The meeting takes place when humans are present and make room for the Other to also be present with their whole being. In the meeting, I opened himself to You and vice versa. Furthermore, at the meeting, I not only interacted with a part of You, but with his whole being. Therefore, if in the I-It relation the Other only exists as an object for I, then in the I-You relation both become equal subjects.

Buber stated that “through You someone becomes I.” To be able to engage in I-You relation, humans must realize that they are dealing with You. He must first break free from prejudice and approach the Other by becoming himself fully. In this case, I became an existing being. In contrast to I-It relations that do not give room for others to become their own subjects, in I-You relations a human can achieve his existence because in I-You there is the presence of a whole being. Humans are in reciprocal relationships that open up new possibilities from meeting people. You in I-You is a subject like I.

Furthermore, Buber described the meeting as love. The love he meant here is not love in a general sense. According to Buber’s insight, love is not a feeling that humans have, but “humans are surrounded by love.” Also, love is an “obligation from I to You.” As I want to enter a meeting, You also prepares to do the same. I’s acceptance of You is what Buber meant as love.

In I-It mode, I only observe and is separate from It. On the contrary, in I-You mode, I is approaching and becoming one with It. The important thing to note in Buber’s ideas is that in German, Du is a second-person pronoun whose use is specifically reserved for the people closest to the speaker. The implication is that the use of the term Du shows a close bond between two people.

Buber’s ideas show that humans are not isolated and independent objects. Humans able to know their existence because of the existence of the Other and the wholeness of a human being is through a relationship that is woven with other beings (Friedman, 2002: 106). However, in the end it is not other beings that determine whether humans attain their existence, rather how humans engage themselves when interacting with other beings. As the discussion of existentialism cannot rule out the existence of other beings, and because the existence of others always exists, humans’ attitudes toward others is what determine their existence. Thus, for humans to reach their complete being, they must be willing to enter the reciprocal relationship of I-You with other beings.

**MEDEA’S RELATIONS**

In reading this novel, I first explored the ways Medea relating to some of her relatives; Georgii—for the common ground they shared, particularly their love of Crimea; Alexandra—for she was the first of her ‘children’ and the bond they shared as sisters; and Nike—for the character itself is a mirror image of Alexandra.
Medea-Georgii

Georgii was the nephew of Medea from her brother, Fyodor, and also her best friend, Elena. Georgii was married to Zoyka and both of them had two children, Artyom and Sashka. In late April the summer of 1976, Georgii and Artyom arrived at Medea’s house ahead of other family members.

Медея и Георгий сидели в свете керосиновой лампы и радовались друг другу. У них было много общего: оба были подвижны, легки на ногу, ценили приятные мелочи и не терпели вмешательства в их внутреннюю жизнь. (Улицкая, 1996: 15)

Medaja i Georgij sideli v svete kerosinovoj lampy i radovalis' drug drugu. U nih bylo mnogo obshhego: oba byli podvizhny, legki na nogu, cenili priyatnye melochi i ne terpeli vmeshatel'stva v ih vnutrennjuju zhizn'.

Medea and Georgii were sitting in the light of the oil lamp and enjoying each other’s company. They had a lot in common: both were agile, quick on their feet, appreciated small pleasures, and brooked no interference in their private lives.

Georgii and Artyom only arrived a few days earlier than Nike, Masha, and their children, but it was evident that both Georgii and Medea had enjoyed the days filled only by the two of them. The quote above shows both the presence and directness that characterize the I-You relation. Little things like enjoying each other’s presence indicate not only comfort between the two, but also acceptance of each other’s existence.

Georgii identified himself several times with Medea. It was at Medea’s house that he really felt comfortable and at home. He—and also other family members—did not consider themselves strangers when he was at Medea’s house, as was also supported by the views of local residents who regarded members of Medea’s family as part of the village’s scenery.

Собственно, каждое утро она повязывала шаль перед зеркалом, но видела только складку материи, щеку, воротник платья. Сегодня же — это было как-то связано с приездом Георгия — она вдруг увидела свое лицо и удивилась ему. (Улицкая, 1996: 16)

Sobstvenno, kazhdoe utro ona povjazyvala shal' pered zerkalom, no videla toliko skladku materii, shheku, vorotnik plat'ja. Segodnja zhe — jeto bylo kak-to svjaszno s priezdom Georgija — ona vdrug uvidela svoe lico i udivilas' emu.

Of course, she tied her shawl in front of the mirror every morning but saw only a fold of cloth, a cheek, the collar of her dress. Today, however—and this was somehow connected with Georgii’s arrival—she suddenly saw her own face and was surprised by it.

The fragment of text above demonstrated that between Medea and Georgii there was mutuality. Along with Georgii favouring his relationship with Medea, Georgii’s presence also helped Medea
realizing her own self. This proves that for both of them, the relationship they established helped them exist.

_Medea-Alexandra_

Since her parents’ simultaneous deaths in the fall of 1916, Medea filled the maternal role left by her mother. In the absence of her older siblings — some going to war, some living with their uncles and aunts — Medea became the figure who cared for and took care of Alexandra, her younger sister, and their two younger brothers. Medea and Alexandra were particularly close compared to Medea’s rather cold relationships with her younger brothers.

Struggling with the need to survive in the midst of wars that come and go, Medea set out to have Alexandra in a good place. She made sure Alexandra got a job and was made a decent living.

Medea made no attempt to pry into her sister’s personal life, and was only glad that she had a good job where she was not ill treated and, indeed, on the contrary, spoiled.

One of the significant things in the relationship between Medea and Alexandra is that they possessed quite opposing traits, as stated in the following quote:

_Medea was deeply convinced that frivolity led to unhappiness, and had no inkling that levity can equally well lead to happiness or, for that matter, lead nowhere at all. From childhood,
however, Alexandra behaved exactly as her wayward heart dictated, and Medea could never understand waywardness, whims, urgent desire, caprice, or passion.

It was this difference in nature that eventually led to their rupture. The rift was started in the summer of 1946 when Alexandra and Medea’s husband, Samuel, were having an affair. True to her nature, Alexandra wasn’t the least bothered by the affair. In Medea’s memory, however, the summer of 1946 marked the time they were closest as sisters. They had just met again after the war, during which Alexandra had stayed in Moscow and Medea in her village. It was only thirteen years later—a year following Samuel’s passing, after learning about the affair between Alexandra and Samuel, that Medea stopped talking to her sister.

Several times in the book Medea stated that her old wound have not yet healed. The sorrow felt by Medea is an indication that Medea had established an I-You relation with Alexandra. This is because only in an I-You relation can one open oneself to another.

Entering an I-You relation means accepting the Other as they are. Medea’s Apollonian nature did not prevent her from accepting Alexandra’s opposite, rather Dionysian, nature. However, this also meant that Medea opened herself to the possibility of getting harmed by someone else, as was evident in this case from Alexandra. Therefore, the sadness in Medea further confirms that Medea had been willing to open herself to other beings.

**Medea-Nike**

Nike was the last child of Medea’s younger sister, Alexandra. Like other Medea relatives, Nike also has a good relationship with Medea and she has the highest regards towards Medea.

Medeя налила кофе в грубую керамическую чашку, из которой пила уже лет пятнадцать. Чашка была тяжелой и несхожей. Это был подарок племянницы Ники, [...] ишершавая, слишком декоративная для ежедневного пользования, она почему-то полюбилась Медее, и Ника по сей день гордилась, что угостила тетке. (Улицкая, 1996: 27)

*Medeja nalila kofe v grubuju keramicheskuyu chashku, iz kotoroj pila uzhe let p'atnadcat'. Chashka byla tjazheloy i nesklochnoy. Jeto byl podarok plemjannicy Niki, [...] shershavaja, slishkom dekorativnaya dlja ezhevdennogo pol'zovaniya, ona pochemu-to pol'zobilas' Medee, i Nika po sej den' gordilas', chto ugodila tetke.*

Medea poured the coffee into a crude china cup she had been drinking out of for the past fifteen years. It was a heavy, clumsy cup, a present from her niece Nike, [...] its surface was rough and it was too ornate for everyday use, but for some reason Medea had taken to it and to this day Nike was proud to have pleased her aunt so much.

In many ways, Nike is a mirror image of Alexandra. In the main story line of summer 1976, Nike and a man named Butonov had an affair that also involved another relative of Medea’s—
Masha. Hence, the relationship itself also became a mirror image of the affair between Alexandra and Samuel thirty years earlier.

Other than with Butonov, Nike also established several relationships with different men—a fact that was also known by Medea, although she meddled in none of them. Instead, Medea’s only response was praying for Nike.

Medea’s constant stance towards Nike and her other “children” proved that Medea did not regard them as only a part of the whole. Medea posited her “children” as subjects in their own lives. This demonstrated Medea as an I in relation to You and accepting the whole being of You.

**Medea and Her Children**

Since the beginning, Medea had been depicted as a significant figure. Medea had been taking care of her younger siblings since her parents died when she was sixteen. The issue often mentioned in this novel is quite an irony; that despite taking care of her family all her life, even became a figure respected by them, none of them were her biological children. The ‘children’ referred in the title were in fact the extensive members of Medea’s family.

*Cspustja mnogo let bezdetnaja Medeja sobirala v svoem dome v Krymu mnogochislennyh plemjannikov i vnuchatyh plemjannikov, vela za nimi svoe tihoe nenauchnoe nabljudenie. (Улицкая, 1996: 4)*

*Spustja mnogo let bezdetnaja Medeja sobirala v svoem dome v Krymu mnogochislennyh plemjannikov i vnuchatyh plemjannikov, vela za nimi svoe tihoe nenauchnoe nabljudenie.*

Many years later the childless Medea would gather her numerous nephews and nieces, grandnephews and grandnieces together in her Crimean home and subject them to quiet, unscientific observation.

By establishing the members of Medea’s family as her ‘children,’ it would appear that even though she did not have the opportunity to experience motherhood in an organic sense, she did not sink into a state of non-existence. Medea actually managed to achieve her existence through the I-You relation that she built with her ‘children’, which was evident through her relationships with Georgii, Nike, and Alexandra.

Medea, basically had a natural talent for observation, was known to observe many events in the lives of her family members. At first glance this appears as a representation of an I-It relation; an I experiencing It. As Buber also stated, it was possible to have a You as an It. However, the impact of the existed I-You relation will remain.

In her relationship with her children, Medea did not view them according to her needs or their functions in her life. She never forced her will on her children. To each of her children, Medea observed and evaluated their characters, but let them fulfil their own potentials. Medea provided space for her children to be the subject. The following excerpt displayed Medea’s respects towards her children.
— Мне нравится это последнее поколение детей. И эти двое, и Ревазик Томочкин, и Бригита, и Васенька. — [Медея]
— Да разве не все одинаковые? — изумилась Ника. — Разве эти чем-нибудь отличаются от Кати с Артом или от нас маленьких?
— Когда-то поколения считали по тридцатилетиям, теперь, я думаю, каждые десять лет они меняются. Вот эти — Катя, Артем, Шушиньбылизены и Софика — очень целеустремленные. Деловые люди будут. А эта мелочь — нежная, любвеобильная, у них все отношения, эмоции... (Улицкая, 1996: 58)

“I like this latest generation of children. These two, and Tom’s little Revaz, and Brigita, and Vaska.” —[Medea]
“But aren’t they all the same?” Nike asked in surprise. “Are these really any different from Katya and Artyom, or from us when we were little?”
“There was a time when generations were counted thirty years apart, but now I think they change every decade. Katya, Artyom, Shusha’s twins, and Sofiko—they are very purposeful. They will be businesspeople. But these little ones are so tender, so full of love, for them relationships are everything, emotions . . .”

Pertaining to the tradition within Medea’s family, the character Nora portrayed it accurately. As she came from Moscow with her daughter, Nora initially wasn’t a part of Medea’s family. She had been staying with Medea’s neighbor during Georgii’s, Nike’s, and Masha’s visit in the summer of 1976. She then went on to spend a few days with Medea’s family, during which her impression of them changing gradually. Her initial impression of the family was as follows:

Всего несколько дней прошло с тех пор, как она познакомилась со всеми этими людьми, все они ей нравились, были приветливы, но непонятны, и к детям относились как-то иначе, чем она к своей дочери.
«Они слишком суровы с детьми», — думала она утром.
«Они дают им слишком много свободы», — делала она вывод днем.
«Они ужасно им потакают», — казалось ей вечером.
(Улицкая, 1996: 58)
Vsego neskol'ko dnej proshlo s teh por, kak ona poznamilitis' so vsemi jetimti ljud'mi, vse oni ej nравилися, бьли притягатель'ny, no непонятны, i k детям онислися как-to иначе, chem ona k svoей docheri.
«Oni slishkom surovы s det'ми», — dumala ona утром.
«Oni dajut im slishkom mnogo svobody», — delala ona vyvod dnem.
«Oni ужасно им potakajut», — kazalos' ej vecherom.

Only a few days had passed since she had met these people, and she liked them all; she felt drawn to them, but she couldn’t understand them, and somehow they treated their children differently from the way she treated her daughter. “They are too strict with the children,” she thought in the morning. “They give them too much freedom,” she concluded in the afternoon. “They spoil them terribly,” it struck her in the evening.

Eventually, Nora saw that the relations within Medea’s family were the kind that exist without demands. This is especially clear when she looked at the way the adults treated young children. Whilst most adults tend to underestimate young children and often unknowingly ‘demand’ these children to behave like adults, in Medea’s family, the adults posit the young as acting, feeling, living subjects. Their limitations in experience, knowledge, and abilities didn’t lessen the value of their existences. The children, in return, also did not demand anything from adults. From dispositions to arising conflicts, they were all accepted as is. This following excerpt, told from Nora’s point of view, was a blatant testament that the relationships built and maintained in Medea’s family represent an I-You relation.

«Господи, какие же нормальные человеческие отношения, никто ничего друг от друга не требует, даже дети.» (Улицкая, 1996, p. 59)

«Gospodi, kakie zhe normal'nye chelovecheskie otnoshenija, nikto nichego drug ot druga ne trebuet, dazhe deti.»

“Lord, what incredibly normal human relationships. There’s nobody demanding anything from anyone else, not even the children.”

LOVE AS ATTAINMENT OF AUTHENTICITY

The authenticity of human being is one of the most frequently discussed topics within existentialism. In a school that put forward individuals as subjects, authenticity becomes one of the defining factors of a person’s existence. Every existentialist thinker has their own definitions of what they called the attainment of authenticity. Similar to the common perception that something that is authentic is something that fulfills its nature, so is the authenticity of a human reflected from how true they are to themselves.

Each existentialist has a different subject of study which contributes to the existentialist school of thought. French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) was eminent for saying that
“existence precedes essence”. Existentialists, despite their diverse ideologies and varying views, were united with this claim. They agreed that a human being has the freedom and responsibility to create the essence of themselves. This is what distinguishes human authenticity from other beings; humans have the freedom to determine their own essence, and thus, its authenticity.

Buber’s views on the I-You relation also posit the individual as the owner of freedom and responsibility in determining their essence. For Buber, someone who achieve their authenticity are those engaging themselves in an I-You relation. In establishing such relation, human beings dwell in love.

Love according to the concept described by Buber in I and Thou is not the same as love in a general sense. Love according to Buber is between I and You. As love is felt by I, love must also reach You. For this reason, every love in this sense is the same. The love between a mother and her child will be as great as the love between a couple. Thus, love cannot exist without humans first entering the I-You relation. However, as Buber said that the I-It relation cannot be completely avoided, love is formed from the oscillation of the I-It and I-You relations. In this regard, love can indicate the achievement of one’s authenticity.

В этот месяц, первый месяц жизни Сережи, она со всей полнотой пережила свое несостоявшееся материинство. Иногда ей казалось, что грудь ее наливается молоком. В Феодосию она вернулась с чувством глубокой внутренней пустоты и потери. «Молодость прошла», — догадалась Медея. (Улицкая, 1996: 72)

V jetot mesjac, pervyj mesjac zhizni Serezhi, ona so vsej polnotoj perezhila svoe nesostojavsheesja materinstvo. Inogda ej kazalos', chto grud' ee nalivaetsja molokom. V Feodosiju ona vernulas' s chuvstvom glubokoj vnuntrnej pustoty i poteri. «Molodost' proshla», — dogadalas' Medeja.

That month, the first month of little Sergei’s life, she vicariously experienced to the full the motherhood that would never be hers. Sometimes it seemed to her that her own breasts were filling with milk. She returned to Theodosia with a sense of profound inner emptiness and loss. “My youth is over,” Medea guessed.

One of the problems seen in this novel, as indicated by the fragment of the text above, is that Medea really wanted to be a mother. However, this desire collided with the fact that she did not have children. Thus, the need for the existence of others (children) was evident in Medea’s struggle.

Medea’s struggle is also representative of the concept of absurdity proposed by Albert Camus (1920-1960). According to Camus, absurdity is a state when a person’s expectations do not match the reality they’re facing. Hence, to overcome the absence of meaning in an absurd universe, humans must create the meaning of their own existence.

The solution offered by Camus is in line with the common thread that unites the existentialist schools. The only way to overcome the absurdity of life is to live authentically, that
is by embracing the fact that the way a person faces the world is a way they must seek and determine for themselves.

It is essential to note that Medea was fully aware that she wanted a child. However, she did not as much complain as she was merely acknowledging that desire. This is another point to bear in mind when trying to achieve one’s authenticity. Living an authentic life for existentialists has several implications, one of which is being honest with yourself. Medea was first honest with her wishes and expectations, but still compelled to embrace the fact that she had no children.

Medea’s way of dealing with the state of her world—the fact that she has no children—was by establishing relationships with those around her. Medea overcame her struggle by unrelentingly embracing her motherhood. She determined, through the relationships she binds with her relatives, her own essence.

Medea showed that her strength came from connecting with and dedication to others. This coincides with Buber’s initial thought that the community (in this case the family) and the self are not two different ends. Self-presence is required for the community to develop. Medea applied a genuine dialogue, in which there is acceptance and respect for other subjects. In the relationship she established with her children, Medea attained her authentic and meaningful existence.

TOLERANCE AS AN ACT OF LOVE

Tolerance is one of the themes often analyzed in Ulitskaya’s oeuvre. Sutcliffe in his article Liudmila Ulitskaia’s Literature of Tolerance (2009) said that Ulitskaya drew her attention to the issue of Otherness as an attribute given to minorities such as Jews or Tatars. This characteristic is the result of judgments given either by outsiders or by the state, based on, partially, the campaign against cosmopolitanism in the Stalin era or growing distrust towards Crimean Tatars during World War II for allegedly giving aid to the Nazis.

Love, in Buberian sense, is a relationship in which I and You share a sense of caring, respect, commitment, and responsibility. The same characteristics can be used to explain tolerance. The love that encompasses a relationship between subject and subject manifested in a willingness to compromise the nature, background, and choices of the Other. In this sense, Medea displayed such attitude very well. Aside from her relationship with her children, Medea was also willing to enter such meetings with other people.

The first chapter unraveled the meeting between Medea and Ravil Yusupov, a Tatar descendant whose family was driven from Crimea and had to settle in Kazakhstan, and poured the meeting into a letter addressed to her best friend, Elena. Later on, in the epilogue, it was indicative that Medea left her home to Ravil Yusupov. This action was based on Yusupov expressing his desire to have a house in the Crimean land. This also showed that Medea was willing to enter a relationship that eventually make a stranger as part of her family. As humans cannot deliberately order moments to exist, they can only open themselves to these opportunities and provide fertile land. Medea, when Ravil Yusupov arrived, was willing to help Yusupov regain his identity that was taken away when the Tatars were forced to leave Crimea.

The tolerance shown by Medea was evident as a form of love coming from the I-You relation. Medea i Ee Deti emphasized the importance of a relationship within a family and
tolerance amongst people with different backgrounds. This tolerance could be achieved in love, which could only be achieved in the ability of humans to enter the world of I-You. Thus, the tolerance that Medea constantly presented to those who were and were not members of her family, became Medea’s act of love as well as her attainment of authenticity.

Medea demonstrated no fear and did not objectify the people she encountered. She opened herself to those who were willing to do the same thing. This implies that Medea always tried to approach others as You. In return, connecting with Medea allowed the others to get out of their alienation from the world and define themselves as part of Medea’s family. An action which in itself can be seen as depriving someone of their individuality instead became liberating given the fact that albeit not blood-related, they were willing to be part of the Sinoply family.

Ultimately, Medea also wondered why it was her house—both her childhood home and the house that she now lived in—that became such a destination for many people from various places. Through an analysis of Medea’s relations with three of her family members, it appears that the question posed by Medea has the same implications as the relations in the explanation above. Through her relationships with others, with her relatives, and with other acquaintances, Medea attained her existence. In return, Medea’s relatives found their existence through their relationship with Medea. This small community that originated from the Sinoply family provided spaces for its members to exist. As they became part of each other, their existences helped each other to fully exist. The love in which Medea and her family dwelled on became her attainment of authenticity.

CONCLUSION

In an interview with Hungarian Literature Online, Ulitskaya (2009) stated that her writing, indeed, reflects her personality and unique composition. Later on, another interview with PEN America revealed that her sincere interest was in the fates of those who exist on the fringes of society; or what she had called ‘little people’ (Ulitskaya, 2011). Put together with the noticeable theme of tolerance in her ouvre as was discussed in Sutcliffe’s 2009 article, we can infer that Ulitskaya has always been, through her works, promoting awareness and consciousness towards the marginal and their experience.

According to Buber, it is through relations that someone could exist. Existential problem found amongst marginalized people, so it seems, occurred as they struggle to exist, both before the majority and the state. In Medea i Ee Deti, Medea’s attainment of authenticity demonstrated accordance to the subjective nature of the act of overcoming existential issues. Medea i Ee Deti represented family as a community in which its members could exist. This was faithfully demonstrated by Medea who, despite her childlessness, was unmistakably a mother figure to her relatives. The act itself was in accordance with the unifying notion within existentialism—that Medea, existed without a child of her own, decided on her own ‘essence’. Medea achieved her authentic self through the relationships she built with her relatives. It is an act of involving one’s self to community. This is necessary as to be able to say that we are different from others means knowing who we are; to realize the existence of others, we must first be aware of our own existence.

The tolerance Medea incorporated into her life in itself became an act of love based on the I-You relation. Her tolerant stance was made possible because she treated the other person as You.
Medea stood before the Other as a subject, a manner which according to Buber requires the willingness to accept them as they are. Further, Medea’s act of bequeathing her family house to Yusupov encouraged inclusivity. The attempt to include Yusupov, a victim of social exclusion, who at the moment was still perceived as an outsider was a crucial act in implementing tolerance and acceptance within the community. The love and tolerance shown by Medea in Medea i ee deti confirmed the concept of fulfillment of existential self through relationships as was suggested by Buber.

Buber’s philosophical approach provides new insight into the tolerant stance Ulitskaya deemed important to apply in present day Russian society. Within a society culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse like those in Russia, conflict of interest and prejudice between one group and another would be everyday challenges. Buber’s approach, thus, proves to be useful when it comes to nurturing established relationships and forming a new one. The diversity within Russian society calls for a tolerant standpoint and social inclusion that will eventually give spaces for its members to co-exist. Whether in establishing a relationship with the Other, or achieving the authentic self, the key to surviving this crisis is acting on our own conscience.

REFERENCES


