



Contemporary Soviet Women Writers

BY SIGRID MCLAUGHLIN

We may safely assert that the knowledge that men can acquire of women... is wretchedly imperfect and superficial and will always be so until women themselves have told all that they have to tell.

— John Stuart Mill

Most Soviet women who write would shudder at the label I have given them in this title: women writers. If this is so, clearly, the context in which they write must be quite different from ours. Indeed, it is. The term “woman writer” is derogatory. The renowned contemporary Soviet literary critic, Natalya Ivanova, subsumes under it a preoccupation with women’s concerns — stories of failed and of happy female lives, weddings, divorces, betrayals — and narrowness of outlook, triviality, coquettishness, and fastidiousness. Of the most visible contemporary women authors, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya feels that women’s prose implies superfluous ornateness or decorativeness. She sees herself as writing in the “male manner,” which means to her, a focus on the essentials of plot and character. Women’s writing to Tatyana Tolstaya is any superficial work with a philistine outlook, it is “the confusion of daily routine with life, a saccharine quality, beauty smacking of a fancy goods store, and the author’s mercantile psychology.” Others feel similarly.¹

A number of factors in the Russian and Soviet cultural tradition prompted this negative attitude to women’s writing. In fact, one can hardly speak of the existence of a woman’s tradition in Russian literature. Up to and throughout the 19th century it was men who created literary models of womanhood and defined femininity. Men’s image of a woman was that of a being subject to different laws than men — a being with inborn and superior qualities against which the male hero was measured and defined. Femininity, motherliness, and self-sacrifice became synonymous. The pressure to live up to superior ethical standards, and to adhere to the limiting roles men created for women, made self-disclosure in a mode other than autobiography and poetry almost psychologically impossible during the 19th century.² Women’s

inadequate education was an additional stricture. There is no Russian Jane Austen, George Eliot, no Bronte sisters, no Madame de Stael. While ma(i)nstream writers were grappling with philosophical, ethical and social issues, the few women who did write fiction dealt with the little segment of life accessible to them: high society, marriage, love, children, the bedroom, and household management. At the turn of the century sexual emancipation became an additional theme that entered women’s fiction, soon stigmatized as libertine, narcissistic, and sentimental. Not surprisingly, later women writers whose lives had changed fundamentally felt little kinship with their predecessors. During the Soviet period, an equivalent kind of women’s trivializing fiction seemed to revive after Stalin’s death as a reaction to the depersonalized, mellifluous literature glorifying Party and state and written in compliance with the doctrine of socialist realism. Thus, women writers’ allergic reaction to being placed in this category is understandable. Yet this reaction also points to another latent issue.

In pre-revolutionary as well as Soviet times, the woman who aspired to write was in a double bind.³ On the one hand, her identity as a woman removed her from the mainstream of culture and invited her to go against the maxims of convention placed on the rendering of female life in fiction. This meant deconstructing the male discourse and finding her own. Even if she succeeded, mainstream critics would condemn her to marginality, seeing her sensibility and her truth as deviations from some obvious male truth, and the encoding of her experience as inferior. On the other hand, she could pursue resembling the mainstream. She could force her experience into the straightjacket of the traditional male canon, and produce new traditional versions of female life. Competing with those who set the terms, her place in the literary

pantheon would again be in the rear.

By and large, Soviet women writers have chosen the second option, believing that the desiderata of fiction are universal constructs, and hoping to be good enough to reach the front ranks of the pantheon. Thus, critic Ivanova argues that women's prose shouldn't be differentiated from prose in general because there is only good and bad prose, both written by men as well as women. And Petrushevskaya, similarly, contends that the writer in the process of creating is "another being," namely "he (sic) is genderless." "If he (sic) defends his sex he is in trouble. He must be a man and a woman, and a child, and a rooster, and the sun."⁴ Therefore women writers have oriented themselves on the best male authors of the Russian and to some extent West European tradition — often Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gogol,

solved. Censorship barred access to Western feminist literature and to the writings of Alexandra Kollontai, their own feminist. And lastly, a deeply patriarchal and conservative mentality effectively helped to keep women in inferior positions, although equal rights were officially granted in all spheres of life. Thus, it is no surprise that women are only a small minority in the male-dominated Soviet literary establishment. The organs of the Writers' Union and the editorial boards of publishing houses and journals are in the hands of men. Women writers, thus, have had to meet male criteria of literary value, having internalized them has been almost a *sine qua non* for getting published, not to speak of being successful.

The fiction of Soviet women writers of the last twenty-five years shares a number

ing. Most women yearn for a man, any man, because, as author Viktoria Tokareva put it in a personal interview, an "unattached" (literally "lordless" — *beskhoznyaya*) woman is a tragedy. In order to catch and keep a man, women are obsessed with being feminine, which is stereotypically defined as looking pretty, being well-dressed, well-groomed, unassertive, accommodating, and agreeable. At the same time, left with few illusions about men, they are at times indifferent and cynical. Heterosexual relations tend to be portrayed as unfulfilling and antagonistic. Men are frequently portrayed as apathetic and remote, insensitive and irresponsible, unfaithful and egoistic. Both women and men adhere to traditional conceptions of gender roles.

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Nabokov, Pasternak, but also Thomas Mann, Proust, Marquez. To them, focusing on women's problems is too narrow ("men suffer too") and so is writing for a female audience. Instead, like their male predecessors, they aspire to "universality" and want to express a "humanistic orientation." Unaware of the double-bind, they are not seeking to express their experience in non-traditional form, or to write what so far cannot be written. Nor are they interested in furthering the cause of emancipation by what we would call consciousness raising in fiction. Emancipation, which they understand as right to equal education and employment, is considered achieved and, at that, a very mixed blessing. Didn't it, after all, settle them with the double burden? And feminism, to them, is the outlook of extremists, unhappy outsiders, troublemakers, or ethical nihilists.

Such attitudes are, of course, not at all surprising given the social context in which Soviet women have lived. Until Gorbachev's ascent, state propaganda portrayed the problems of emancipation as

of characteristic thematic and stylistic traits. The heroines are usually urban women — most women authors live in cities — who fulfill familial, social and professional roles and belong to different age groups and a wide range of occupations and social backgrounds. Thus, the principle dilemmas confronting the heroine — the struggle to survive the multiple duties and claims on her time and energy while searching for the straw of personal happiness that makes the struggle worthwhile — have been pictured in a great variety of contexts.

Often, the family is less than nuclear. The man is absent, and the unwed mother, widow, or divorcee raises her child alone, sacrificing her personal life. Motherhood is still the ultimate role for a woman, and the woman most frequently is a mother-nurturer to her men, children and friends before all else. Yet, some fictional heroines are single/married, childless career women. Some fret in this position, others are at peace with their lives, assertive in their pursuits, and no longer self-sacrific-

expanding rapidly, and that increasingly less glamorous aspects of women's lives enter literature. If women used to be predominantly self-sacrificing, maternal, moralistic, and sexless, they are shown to be increasingly self-indulgent, opportunistic, ruthless, selfish, deceptive, manipulative, pragmatic, materialistic, and occasionally aware of their sexuality. Significant areas of life are just beginning to enter Soviet women's fiction:⁵ prostitution, women's alcoholism, women's health, infant care, poverty, violence, and child abuse. But lesbianism, women's experiences in labour camps, crime, rape, the nature of female and male sexuality, drug addiction, mental illness, undergoing an abortion are still taboo areas, as far as I can tell from my reading.

Women authors usually use a third-person narrative voice, often of a limited viewpoint, to render predominantly women's experiences of reality. The prose is realistic, following 19th century conventions. Stylistic differences are subtle or absent, so that some works are virtually

interchangeable, which makes for considerable monotony. Descriptions are abundant, and often the plot line is thin. Understatement and other varieties of irony produce the detachment or critical distancing essential for clarifying the authorial point of view. Female authors favour the short form, the story or the novella. There is little stylistic or narrative experimentation except occasional displacement of chronology.

Of the numerous women writers, I would like to introduce, firstly, the oldest and most established living authors, Natalya Baranskaya and I. Grekova, both born about a decade before the Revolution of 1917. The former's *A Week Like Any Other*, 1969, was immediately translated into English and interpreted as an important feminist piece in the West.⁶ The novella outlines a week in the life of a

and affect psychology and temperament. By biology, then, the female is nurturing, caretaking, and selfless. Thus, Grekova, in a recent interview, conceded that women showed fewer creative achievements because of "their special psychological and neurological make-up...and their enslavement to problems of love, marriage, and the family."

Many of Grekova's works reflect the lot of women her age who lived through the deprivations of World War II and its aftermath — poverty, hunger, overcrowding, and the absence of men. She captures the dynamics of the suffocatingly close relationships of the one-parent family, the overnurturing, the over-empowering, and the psychological and social consequences of such parenting ("Summer in the City"). Or she refers to the guilt of a mother who put her children second

eddy is absent from her works. Humour and lightness prevail, although lasting love between the sexes seems elusive, and a resigned and at times cynical accommodation is the norm. Men are usually dominated by women, at times wronged by them, but often weak, boring, and zapless. Her most recent story of 1989, "The First Attempt," reflects the new openness to formerly taboo themes, such as cruelty, nakedness, and sexuality. A child observes how her mother gradually drowns a rat; the heroine cures a man's psychologically caused impotence; and the narrator, reminiscing about "her love" on an expedition, relates losing her brassiere and being shamed. An admirer of Chekhov, she sees herself as his follower in themes and methods.

The two most exciting women writing short prose today are Petrushevskaya and

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young Soviet wife, mother, and professional, worn to shreds by the taxing demands of her roles. But it does not occur to the heroine to look for causes of her depression outside herself. Baranskaya, however, had no feminist critique of patriarchy or of society in mind. Her purpose was to capture the rich and difficult life of a typical Soviet woman, she said in an interview. This is also the intent of her other works: two volumes of stories and a book of memoirs.

Like Baranskaya, I. Grekova (penname for E. Ventsel) is a professional and single mother whose husband perished in World War II. A reputable mathematician, Grekova came to writing later in her career. Mature women and single mothers in a dominantly male professional environment or in communal living situations are her typical heroines. Resourceful, strong-willed, dependable, asexual, courageous, self-sacrificing, these women fit the Soviet gender stereotype which is based on the commonly held belief that character traits are biologically derived

to her career in a story, "The Lady's Hairdresser," that established her as a master at reproducing linguistic idiosyncrasies and jargon, as well as the fragmentariness of interior monologue and dialogue. Unlike other women writers, Grekova also wrote longer fictional works, among which the most acclaimed is *The Ship of Widows*, 1984.

Over a generation younger than Baranskaya and Grekova, Viktoria Tokareva captures the different mentality and outlook of women entirely formed by the Soviet experience. In search for happiness, which they often equate with falling in love or finding a man, they are self-confident, strong, and manipulative. They use their sex as well as their head to acquire power, status and consumer goods, at worst, and to get essential services and scarce goods, at best. The image that epitomizes their kind is "a tank covered with flowers" from Tokareva's story "A Long Day," 1986. It is not unusual for her heroines to feel secure as professionals and as mistresses of married men. Trag-

Tolstaya. Their stories violate existing paradigms, offer a new field of vision, and tell a different story of their culture than men. Both break down stereotyped images of women — and not only women — thus undermining the rendering of female experience in fiction. Yet they do so without what we could call "feminist consciousness."

More known as a playwright than an author of short fiction, Petrushevskaya published her first collection of "monologues" and third-person stories, *Immortal Love* only this year. Set in urban environments, these "incidents" and anecdotes, this "folklore within the confines of an apartment house," as she calls her short prose elsewhere, tell of existence in the midst of catastrophe. She catches her heroines at their most vulnerable moments, when they try to clutch at what seems the essence of happiness: a husband, a child, an apartment, and an income above poverty level. But usually they don't succeed and end up single, in one room, with an insufficient income,

and in the grips of desperate loneliness intensified by the material difficulties of Soviet life. Critics often reacted to her portrayal of extreme situations and the ugly side of life — child abuse, homelessness, alcoholism, poverty, traumatic marriages, violence, divorce, prostitution, miscarriages, addictive love, suicide — with repulsion. She was reproached for morbidity, for painting everything black. This was reason enough to forbid publication of her prose for decades.

Her stories shock through the concise, unemotional tone, the understatement, with which her narrator relates the most cruel events. "...I told him about my daughter, and he told me about his baby which they cut up during a Caesarean delivery and so he didn't get born; and I told him..." ("Words"). She de-romanticizes images or clichés which are still fetishes, applying them to situations that are perversions of the image. Is it immortal love if a husband fetches his wife who deserted him seven years earlier from an insane asylum, or if a wife is addicted to pursuing another man who does not love her, and doing so escapes from her own disabled child, husband, and mother?

Petrushevskaya's narrative language resembles *skaz*, an oral narration full of colloquialisms, stylistic incongruities, primitive, vulgar, substandard or sometimes hyper-correct phrases mastered so well by her predecessor Zoshchenko. Coming from all walks of life, her characters use language that discloses their personality, level of education, and social class. Her new field of vision that violates existing patterns of seeing women and their lives, combined with her ability to linguistically embody this new perspective, mark her significance as a woman's author.

The English reader is lucky to be able to discover the youngest and most brilliant of contemporary Soviet women writers for herself: this year Knopff published Tatyana Tolstaya's first collection of short prose *On the Golden Porch* (see book review, p. 106-07). If Petrushevskaya's major device is understatement, Tolstaya achieves paradigm shifts and undermines old canons by parody. She removes the reader from situations which traditionally would evoke compassion, introspection, and a sense of personal responsibility or catharsis. Scoffing at sentimentality, empathy, and ethical involvement, she

ridicules hallowed assumptions and the clichés of tradition. Plot material and thematic motifs are important less for themselves than for the implied narrative attitude of playfulness and derision. Her preference for warped characters is part of her debunking — be it of love relationships or of traditional female dreams or concerns. The story "The Poet and the Muse" typically parodies the conventional image of Woman as source of inspiration and as object of adoration, and the myth of the benevolent power of her love. Both image and myth are still alive and well among Soviet women who, however, have a mentality that makes their attempt to live up to image and myth absurd and ridiculous. In this case a female powerhouse of a doctor realizes her romantic dream of passion and poetry by contriving to marry a compliant, weak poet. Her pragmatism, selfishness, and insensitivity kill the poet's inspiration and himself (suicide). In "Hunt for the Mammoth" heroine Zoya catches a husband for the sake of having a husband just to realize that she hates the object of her obsession. In another story a sentimental correspondence is carried out between a most ugly, but domestically virtuous woman and a man who in reality is a woman playing a prank. This trick of genius serves as a device for destroying conventional romantic expectations and associations. The heroine's self-sacrificing death affects the reader with pity, and horror, as well as laughter, because throughout the story she has been metaphorically dehumanized. Thus the entire narrative is a piece of black comedy.

The enchantment of Tolstaya's prose then, lies in her idiosyncratic manner of de-familiarizing the ordinary. Authorial manipulation of plot material, a multitude of narrative voices and points of view are narrative devices that contribute to this effect. Style — the abundance of sensual detail, and the personification of the physical world — as well as choice of character types — the elderly, children, failed existences, outsiders, and victims — complement the effect of estrangement.

As this outline might have revealed, Soviet women writers are different and similar to women authors in the West. Their context, their historical and social experiences, and their material living conditions are different. But, consciously or unconsciously, they capture the issues

that characterize female being in the modern and, to various degrees, patriarchal and male-dominated world, be it at home or at work, and in doing so they become kin to us.

¹Natalya Ivanova, "Kogda by zhizn' domashnim krugom," *Literaturnaya ucheba* (No. 4, 1986), pp. 72-74. L. Petrushevskaya, taped personal interviews 1986 and 1988. Cf. also Natalya Ilyina, "K voprosu o traditsii i novatorstve v zhanre "damskoi povsti"," *Novymir* (No. 3, 1963), pp. 224-30. Also, see Adele Barker, "Are Women Writing Women's Writing in the Soviet Union Today? Tolstaya and Grekova," *Studies in Comparative Communism* (vol. XXI, nos. 3-4, Autumn/Winter 1988), pp. 357-64; Helena Goscilo's introduction to her anthology of Soviet women writers *Balancing Acts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), and my introduction to my collection *The Image of Women in Contemporary Soviet Fiction* (London: MacMillan, 1989), for more detailed general backgrounding, for portraits of individual writers, and for bibliographical information.

²See Barbara Heldt, *Terrible Perfection. Women and Russian Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

³Nancy K. Miller, "Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *The New Feminist Criticism*, (ed) Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) pp. 356-7 refers to this situation.

⁴See note one.

⁵In 1979 a group of Soviet self-styled feminists was forced to emigrate from the USSR after having been harassed for publishing an almanac of women's writings. The most prominent, Tatyana Mamonova, published their essays and literary pieces in *Women and Russia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁶It was translated as "The Alarm Clock in the Cupboard," *Redbook* (March 1971), pp. 179-201.

⁷For English criticism of Petrushevskaya and Tolstaya, cf. the excellent articles by Adele Barker (see note 1), Helena Goscilo, "Tatiana Tolstaia's "Dome of Many-Coloured Glass": The World Refracted through Multiple Perspectives," *Slavic Review* (Summer 1988), pp. 280-90; and Nancy Condee, "Liudmila Petrushevskaja: How the Lost People Live," *Institute of Current World Affairs* (NPC-14, 1986), pp. 1-12.