



WOMEN IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

This study is based on women in Russian Literature, the status of women in socio-historical dimensions set out in the important characteristics of women concerned with the structure and processes through a very old history of the twentieth century until about the time it takes place. This study, in a sense, become the spiritual culture of the living conditions of our sovereignty and become worthy update to the way the world is accustomed. In this era of literary meanings of women's experience with the innovation and monism is portrayed in literature and also a pioneer in women's studies and literary personalities.

Key Words: Women, Russian Literature, Female Characters in Russian Literature, The Male Russian Writers, The Female Russian Writers.

Özet

Rus edebiyatında kadın konulu bu çalışma, kadının sosyo-tarihi boyutları içindeki statüsünden yola çıkarak, kadının önemli karakteristik yapısını konu alıp çok eski tarihi süreçlerden geçerek yirminci yüzyıla kadar olan zamanı konu alır. Bu çalışma, bir anlamda, eskiden yeniye, kültürleşmiş ruhani egemenlikten ve güncelleşmiş yaşam koşullarından günümüzün layık dünyasına doğru bir yol alıştır. Bu devir edebi anlamda yaşanan yenilikçiliğin ve tekçiliğiyle birlikte kadının edebiyattaki resmedilişi olmamış, aynı zamanda kadının da edebi çalışmalardaki öncü kişiliğinin çağı olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kadınlar, Rus Edebiyatı, Rus Edebiyatındaki Kadın Karakterler, Rus Erkek Yazarlar, Rus Kadın Yazarlar.

Any survey of female characters in Russian literature urges the researcher to delve into the past literature mainly to the seminal work of medieval Russian letters, the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*. Even though the *Slovo* was composed at the dawn of Russian literature, its depiction of Yaroslavna already displays many features that would become inherent to the centuries-long procession of female characters in Russian literature to be documented and analyzed in this study. Indeed, in Russian literature images of women often had a depth and resonance that eclipsed their male counterparts, in spite of the men's clearly dominant social status off the printed page. It is a tradition of sensitive psychological portraiture that began with women of profound strength and endurance such as *Slovo's* Yaroslavna and Feodosiia Morozova, the heroine of *Povest' o boyarine Morozovoi*, as well as many other medieval female characters who would become part and parcel of Russian hagiography. This tradition goes all the way to the portrayal of the wife of Archpriest Avvakum and even to Karamzin's Liza, the only significant female character of the eighteenth century.

This study aims to take a comprehensive approach to women in Russian literature, with socio-historical status of women in general as a backdrop to a survey of significant individual characters from the medieval period up to the twentieth century. It is a story of transition from medieval to modern, from ecclesiastical dominance of cultural and everyday life to the secular world of today.¹ It was also an era of great literary novelty and originality,² a period of radical innovation not only in the portrayal of women in literature, but also women's activity in creating literary works as well.

Women began their journey through Russian literature from a position of inferiority caused mainly by the monopolistic authority of the Orthodox Church on all literary activity, a condition which was to taint the depiction of women in literature from the tenth to eighteenth centuries. The early medieval period saw little more

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¹ See J.H. Billington (1966). *The Icon and the Axe*, New York: Knopf.

² See Dmitri Likhachev, *Velikii put'*: *Stanovlenie russkoi literatury XI-XVII vekov*, Moscow, 1987, pp.185-230; V.Terras (1991). *A History of Russian Literature*, New Heaven: Yale University Press, pp.85-114.

than images of the Virgin Mary and stereotypical witches. This is especially evident in the “Tale of Igor’s Campaign”³ and “The Life and Death of Grand Prince Dmitrii Donskoi”.⁴ The Church’s dominance over literary production fostered distrust toward women countered only by a few images to be found in folkloric traditions.

However, for women in medieval Russian literature, inferior social status and ecclesiastical mistrust co-existed with worshipful adoration and respect. Russian hagiography is endowed with many positive portraits of women, many of which are undocumented because of their local origin. The above-mentioned character of Feodosiia Morozova, a famous Old Believer heroine from “Povest’ o boyarine Morozovi,”⁵ is a testament of courage and martyrdom, typical of the genre. Another woman portrayed in this manner is the Archpriest Avvakum’s wife Markovna,⁶ who is not merely depicted as Avvakum’s wife, but also a significant personage in her own time and an influence on future Russian writers.

For the most part, however, seventeenth-century Russian literature was dominated by misogynist attitudes, and female characters were abused, humiliated and insulted in keeping with the teachings of the period’s most infamous literary monument of misogyny, the “Domostroi,” or “Household Management.”

This study shows how these traditional depictions of women, dominated by images of suffering saints and downtrodden servants, evolved into the more progressive female portrayals of the period of realism, against the backdrop of the social evolution of the period. It surveys female characters from the canonical Russian classics—Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov.

Pushkin’s Tatyana from Evgenii Onegin will be the central figure in this section. Although her behavior in the novel marks her as a fundamentally sentimental heroine, Tatyana’s meaning for Russian literature does not lie in any particular character trait. She is rather important as a transitional figure in a period when the static feminine images of hagiography and folk literature were evolving first into the formulaic character types of romanticism and, ultimately, into realistic portrayals of actual individuals. Particularly illustrative of the transition from the world of folk tales to contemporary romanticism is *Onegin’s* dream sequence, which combines the fantastic formula of a folk tale with the psychological probing of modern realism. Tatyana’s significance also comes from *Evgenii Onegin’s* status as an autobiographical work. She embodies both moral and creative ideals inherent to Pushkin’s own art. Yet Tatyana is neither an allusive figure nor a symbol, but a persuasive representation of an actual woman. What is more, she is depicted against the backdrop of a vast literary and social context which contributes in meaningful ways to her development. Taken in all, the figure of Tatyana represents a perfect balance of the internal and external elements of characterization. The anguish of her inner life is laid bare with the utmost simplicity, yet always in context of the unfolding cultural development of Russia, all are faithfully presented by Pushkin in a perfect balance of empathy and observation.

It examines Pushkin’s contemporary, Lermontov, who took realistic, psychologically penetrating portrayals of women a step further in his remarkable novel “A Hero of Our Time”. The novel, a psychological study with a distinct authorial presence of judgmental nature, can be credited with establishing emphasis on character rather than action. It is dominated by its complex, strong, multifaceted female characters who, are seen from many points of view, taking the psychological novel further than it had gone before in the direction of critical realism. Nearly every element of the work is aimed at the illumination of the female characters’ personalities, not only from the standpoint of content but at the formal level as well. The characters of Princess Mary and Bela are drawn by Lermontov in fundamentally realistic terms, evoking the emotional interest of the reader by virtue of their strongly individual personalities. By contrast, men in the novel embody inferior attributes such as passivity and lack of religious faith.

The study next turns to Nikolai Gogol, whose masterpieces such as “Dead Souls”, “The Nose”, and “Vij” held the mirror up to life by means of an exaggerated realism whose hallmarks are epic laughter and touches of the grotesque. With respect to his female characters, Gogol may be termed a psycho-analytical symbolist, taking the newfound realism of Pushkin and Lermontov to idiosyncratic extremes. Although Gogol had keen, discriminating powers of observation, he did not record females exactly as he saw them but refashioned them into something much more significant and unusual. Strong-willed and independent-minded, they are real people and not colossal figures. They live for the most part without hope, but their Gogolian absurdity makes their presence life-affirming as they evoke laughter. The study next turns to Turgenev, who extended the realist tradition, creating a diverse gallery of female characters. In some ways, Turgenev harked back to medieval portraits of long-suffering Russian women by emphasizing the theme of sacrifice in many of

³ See Oleg Tvorogov (1980). ‘Slovo o polku Igoreve’, *Pamiatniki literatury drevney Rusi. XII vek.* Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura.

⁴ M.A. Salmina (1981). ‘Slovo o zhitii velikogo kniazia Dmitriia Ivanovicha’, *Pamiatniki literatury drevney Rusi. XIV-seredina XV veka,* Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, pp.208-09.

⁵ A.I. Mazunin (1989). ‘Povest’ o boiaryne Morozovoi’, *Pamiatniki literatury drevnei Rusi XVII vek. Kniga vtoraiia,* Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, pp.455-84.

⁶ *Zhitie o protopope Avvakume, im samim napisannoe;* see Kenneth Brostrom (1979). *Archpriest Avvakum: The Life Written by Himself,* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

his female characters. Natalya in "Rudin" and Liza in "A Nest of Gentle Folk" both exemplify this ability to forsake earthly reward. Other female characters of Turgenev are enigmatic and enticing beauties in complete control of themselves and those around them. Zinaida in "First Love" is a particularly independent and strong woman who uses others, including her lover, for her own personal happiness. In "Torrents of Spring" and "Smoke" there are women who appear as wild, seductive love monsters, wielding power over man with their strong sexuality. A Particular scrutiny will be given to Elena from "On the Eve," a character who combines many of the above attributes to create a new type of realistic female image, clearly exhibiting both strengths and weaknesses. Similar women, with traits of independence and idealism tempered by frustration and loneliness, appear in "Asya", "Torments of Spring", and "Rudin". The mix of strengths and weaknesses achieved by Turgenev's female characters are also evident in women from "Nest of Nobility" and "On the Eve," who exhibit both a sense of freedom and elevated moral sensibility, yet remain blind too much of the world around them.

The study turns next to the female characters of Lev Tolstoy, who created full-blooded, realistic female characters, yet saw women in a primarily socio-historical context. Tolstoy's female characters often bear a fatalistic quality; their lives are determined by their social status and the author's theological tenets. For Tolstoy, the woman's primary role in the family as a wife and mother determines her place in the larger society as well. Thus there is an overall sense of deterministic fate that overtakes Tolstoy's women in works such as "Anna Karenina", "War and Peace", and "The Kreutzer Sonata" What is more, Tolstoy, unlike Chekhov and Turgenev, downplayed his female characters' sexuality, being fundamentally more conservative than his two great contemporaries on the question of female emancipation. Overall, Tolstoy treats his female characters more as a scholar than an author would, using them as vehicles for his philosophical opinions.

The tendency to use female characters to express or embody competing ideas is also present in the work of Dostoevsky, whose "Crime and Punishment" and "The Idiot" are treated next by this study. Dostoevsky's female characters in both novels hold deep cultural, religious, philosophical and mystical beliefs. They struggle, in large part, with the temptations and rapaciousness of the bourgeois world that threaten their rich inner life. This study will also address criticisms made against Dostoevsky that his heroines are not consistent or true to life, drawing largely upon the character of Nastasya Filippovna, one of the truthful, strong and tragic heroines in all of Russian literature.

Anton Chekhov's approach to his female characters was entirely different from Tolstoy's or Dostoevsky's. Far from using women as sounding boards for various philosophical or political views, or depicting them in terms of political or social struggle, he occupied himself with the everyday hopelessness and pointlessness of women's life in many short stories and plays of the period from 1892 to 1904. His women often have great enthusiasm but are trapped by their circumstances, as are Masha from: "Three Sisters" and Katya from "A Boring Story". Chekhov was a masterful chronicler of everyday life with its marriages, love affairs, broken families, adultery, and so on. In the course of narration, these stories about various women, especially their lack of education, without being explicitly didactic.

As with Turgenev, there are a great variety of women in Chekhov's gallery of characters, including the first portrayal of a truly independent woman ("Kursistka") as well as weak, helpless women in need of their husband's money and affection ("The Woman in the Cottage" and "Darling"). A frequent type of woman appearing in Chekhov's stories is the petit-bourgeois wife and housekeeper, the fulfillment of society's demand for the perfect woman ("Ivanov" and "Pink-Stocking"). In other stories Chekhov shows women as victims of society selling their bodies for money ("The Chorus Girl", "The Station Master", "The Shooting Party").

Chekhov was also capable of portraying strong, active, idealistic women, as he did in "The Betrothed". Many of his female characters struggle for independence, as in "Ariadne",

"A Nervous Breakdown", "The Party", "A Dreary Story", "Women", "Volodya Senior and Volodya Junior", "A Woman's Kingdom" and "Anna on the Neck". Yet, even though independence, strength and idealism are valued traits for Chekhov, the hopes and dreams of his female characters often come to naught. Chekhov's women are more often than not left unfulfilled, whether due to external factors such as the cruelty and corruption of bourgeois society, or the simple passage of time, often the ultimate ravager of hopes in Chekhov's drama. The struggle between dreams of a better life and the constraints of society is the focus for Chekhov's social realism, which made for a more sensitively-drawn, varied gallery of female characters than any Russian writer had yet achieved.

It also focuses exclusively on female characters in the work of female authors. The authors to be studied are Karolina Pavlova, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zinaida Gippius. The first woman author studied is poet and prose writer Karolina Pavlova. Her work shows an evolution in attitude from distrust of the feminine to a confidence in her own genius that transcends traditional forms of celebration of femininity in poetry. Her novel "A Double Life" will be singled out as exemplary of Pavlova's deep sympathy with all women and stance of protest against woman's fate.

A completely different mode of expression fills the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, which presents the reader with fragmentary utterance of nameless women, poetry of hints and emotional secrecy. Akhmatova's characters struggle to make sense of lived experiences by an almost detached self-observation. Her heroines seldom speak their feelings, expressing themselves most often through movements and gestures. In poems such as "Evening", "Rosary", and "White Flock", they proceed through a series of variations on the theme of unhappiness in love, invested with depths of meaning beyond superficial drama. Akhmatova's obliqueness and subtlety often make it hard to pin down her female characters' inner feelings.

Female characters are an essential part of the spiritual world of the next female poet to be examined, Marina Tsvetaeva. Her "Remeslo" and "Posle Rossii" are examined, with emphasis on their female characters' sense of magic and poetry and the pervasive allusiveness of Tsvetaeva's verse, with its many literary and cultural references.

Female characters' relationship to God occupies a central role in the work of the next major female poet to be examined, Zinaida Gippius. Her works "He is White" and "There is No Return" stand among the most curious of the twentieth-century literary documents, with a striking depth of psychological insight and individuality of style. In "There is No Return" the female protagonists, Garisha and Nadya, are participants in the Russo-Japanese war who lose all contact with external reality after their return from the war. Their fate demonstrates the idea that the human mind can not be cured or made whole, nor even can communicate, without faith in God. Gippius herself studied a number of women she knew in order to depict her characters more vividly and realistically, but this study is also examine the extent to which Gippius' characters and their longings reflect the author's own personality.

It is center on the destiny of the so-called 'fallen woman', a significant character type that illustrates many of the salient social, psychological, and artistic notions about women that have guided the great Russian writers in creating their female characters.

Three of the most elaborate and significant representatives of this type are studied: Ostrovsky's Katerina in "The Storm", the title character in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and Pasternak's Lara in *Doctor Zhivago*.

Alexander Ostrovsky's talent for painting realistic pictures of Russian life found its great subject in the struggles and suffering of Katerina. The fate of Ostrovsky's heroine -a dreamy, beautiful young woman crushed by her cruel surroundings- enabled the author to dramatize moral and social problems of the time. "The Thunderstorm" was agreed upon as Ostrovsky's masterpiece, largely because it introduced a fresh, full-blooded female character with significant ambitions that clash with the wills of those around her. Katerina, called by one Russian critic "a sunbeam in the realm of darkness", is ruined in the despotic family life of sixteenth-century Russia amid the merchants of the Volga town where she is fated to live. The author was hailed as a brilliant social psychologist, placing penetrating psychological realism above the conventional dominance of plot on the stage.

"Fallen woman" examine here is Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, another full-blooded creation of high realism whose fate nevertheless follows a predetermined path delimited by the philosophical ideas of the author. Tolstoy's fundamental belief that God's judgment inexorably determines every human's ultimate reward or punishment foredooms Anna to suicide and Kitty and Dolly to salvation. Anna, Vronsky, and Karenin all respond differently to the test of values presented by Anna's adultery because they are each limited by factors of heredity, education and environment which limit their moral choices. Because of this moral determinism, Tolstoy's tragedy unfolds with a cruel, logical consistency, as each character acts in accordance with his or her own limitations. Anna, however, is more victimized by her culture and society than her male counterparts and is more sensitive to social restriction in her quest for personal meaning. Neither Karenin nor Vronsky have the inner strength to respond to her emotional intensity, so Anna is completely trapped by the limitations of those around her. When she gives up the outside factors that structure her existence and is shut off from her son, her friends, and her protective social status (however corrupt and hypocritical Tolstoy shows this society to be) all she can do is live for love alone. This proves to be a fatal choice, since Varonski's selfish coldness seals off this final refuge as well, making Anna a fallen woman with death as her only recourse.

If Ostrovsky's Katerina illustrated the need for social reform and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina dramatized the necessity for an unwavering moral sense, Pasternak's Lara from *Doctor Zhivago* offered a more refined, ambiguous variant of the realist heroine with a larger meaning: fallen woman as poetic symbol. Pasternak's Lara is a human being with human temptations, but also a deeply symbolic figure, a kind of stream that flows through and merges with the novel as an embodiment of suffering and joy. However, the happiness, joy, and unconcern which express inner freedom for other heroines are not granted to Lara without an undercurrent of doubt, suspicion, and even physical privation. Although she is also a symbol of purity, her humanity leads her into the temptations of involvement with older, powerful man willing to spend time and money for her. This involvement leads to torments of self-accusation upon the realization that she is a 'fallen woman'. Yet the novel ends on a

hopeful note. Lara's fate, unlike Katerina's or Anna Karenina's, is ambiguous and mysterious, in keeping with Pasternak's poetic view of life.

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