

CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN WOMEN WRITERS:
REJECTING DEFINITION IN LITERARY REBELLION

A Senior Honors Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary Russian Women Writers: Rejecting Definition in
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Russia's women have had a difficult time finding a voice in literature until as recently as the 1980s. With this new voice, many women writers have countered the widespread gender assumptions inherent in patriarchal Russian culture. This essay explores how four contemporary Russian women authors— Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, Tatyana Tolstaya, and Ludmila Ulitskaya— challenge binary gender stereotypes, particularly those concerning women. Each author has uniquely rejected a prescribed definition of 'woman' in her prose, and together the four authors form a literary rebellion against stereotypical notions of femininity.

DEDICATION

To my family—
Mom, Dad, and Rob,
Grandparents,
Aunts, Uncles,
and Cousins
—everyone,
thank you
for helping me become myself.

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My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Elisabeth Rich, my advisor, for her guidance, knowledge, time, tips, and for interesting me in Russia's women writers in the first place. Thank you for first introducing me to Ludmila Ulitskaya's prose. And thank you for everything you have done to assist me in this research. I appreciate it all very much.

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INTRODUCTION¹

Since the period of *glasnost* began in the mid-1980s, Russian women have enjoyed increasing freedoms particularly in literary expression. Before this point in time, very few women writers had gained recognition for their works. However, with the decrease in censorship and the enhanced liberties since *glasnost*, several contemporary female authors have become well-known and even have earned critical acclaim in Russia. Such a feat is quite impressive, especially when one considers Russia's patriarchal cultural tradition. Among these women, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, Tatyana Tolstaya, and Ludmila Ulitskaya are the most prominent authors. Each writer's literary merit has warranted her translation into several other languages, including English. An examination of the texts by these writers necessarily reveals several aspects of Russian culture; gender is one such aspect that permeates Russia's cultural consciousness today. With consideration for Adele Barker's observation that "seeing [texts] as cultural artifacts is important, because it allows us access to the interplay between ideology, the construction of national, cultural and gender identity, and the consumption of ideology" (54), this essay aims to investigate ideas of gender presented by each author under examination.

¹ This thesis follows the style and format of the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing*.

This exploration of Russia's current women writers will concentrate primarily on the authors' approaches to 'gendered binarisms'—oppositional conceptions of male and female—through its analysis of representations of women, motherhood, and femininity (as defined by each author) in these authors' works. The ultimate goal for this essay is the determination of whether these women writers have imbibed and regurgitated their culture's essentialist notions of femininity and/or maternity, subverted them by challenging such conventions, or found a new way to confront these ideas by working outside of the confines of such a framework. Beginning with an examination of the literary context of women's writing, followed by an exploration of Russian ideas of femininity and motherhood, this discourse will then address each of the women writers and her works. Petrushevskaya is discussed first primarily because she is the most established, controversial, and well-known of these female authors; additionally, she began writing before the period known as *glasnost*. Nina Sadur also began writing before *glasnost*, but is considerably less prominent than Petrushevskaya, particularly on the international front. She is better known for her drama, but her prose is nevertheless significant, particularly for its 'alternative' style. Tatyana Tolstaya is perhaps as well-known as Petrushevskaya, particularly in the United States, where she has spent much time living, teaching, and writing (for such publications as *The New York Review of Books*). Her mastery of language is extremely unique and certainly contributes to her success as a writer; although she is more prominent

than Sadur, Tolstaya did not begin writing until around the time of *glasnost*, and therefore is discussed after Sadur in this essay. Although Ludmila Ulitskaya won the Russian Booker prize in 2001, fewer critical examinations of her work have been performed. This lack may certainly be due to the fact that she did not begin writing in earnest until after *glasnost*; additionally, her prose is far more traditionally structured than that of Tolstaya and Sadur, or even Petrushevskaya. Nonetheless, she has received some attention from those primary scholars within the field of feminist Russian literary criticism (particularly in Russia and other European nations), and many of her works are more widely available than those by Sadur. Ulitskaya certainly merits examination, and this discourse focuses much of its attention on her, for the reasons that her works have as yet been minimally scrutinized by critics, and because she examines in-depth those issues of gender on which the author of this essay has chosen to primarily focus.

CHAPTER I

LITERATURE & WOMEN AUTHORS

Glasnost and the Contemporary Russian Literary Field

Current Russian literature owes much to both Soviet repression and the subsequent policies of *glasnost* ('openness') begun in 1985 by Gorbachev. Russian fiction of the late-1980s, finally freed from the severe censorship of the Soviet era, was "quick to explore in some detail many of the defects" (Goscilo, *Glasnost* xxii) of Russia's past. Russian literature since *glasnost* has seen an explosion of works that incorporate the many taboos of former years. Coupled with this freedom from censorship came the difficult transition to a capitalist market beginning in 1991. An influx of 'popular' fiction into the market, and a significant rise in demand for this work seriously worried authors and critics alike—Russia was proclaimed to be in the midst of a "'crisis' in literature" (Adlam 1) ideologically, structurally, and thematically. The heightened awareness of the Russian literary world to this crisis "manifested itself in aesthetic terms" (3) and gave birth to a body of literature, termed *drugaiia literatura*—"alternative' or 'other' literature" (3)—that appalled some critics, one of whom described it as "'an utter slap in the face of public taste'" (qtd. in Adlam 4). *Drugaiia literatura* emphasized the "disintegration of the... notion of the social role of literature" (8) through its "insouciant taboo-breaking" (6). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this "taboo-breaking" feature of 'alternative' literature,

as Barbara Heldt observes, often “denigrates women in the spirit of bold, innovatory freedom”(qtd. in Adlam 19). Such misogynistic tendencies may certainly be what scholar Helena Goscilo had in mind when she suggested that “post-Soviet culture is more Soviet than post-” (*Dehexing* 32) in regard to Russia’s cultural attitudes toward gender. However, many critics praised those (predominantly male) writers of ‘alternative literature’ for their adoption of “anti-mimetic, experimental modes... ‘baroque ornamentation’ and refusal of functionalism” (Adlam 6), and “hyperbolization of... the excessive... [and] triviality and degeneracy” (20). Curiously, many of these same critics had previously denounced women’s writing for its supposed “‘moral insignificance’” (qtd. in Adlam 20), “ornamentation... whimsy... and degeneracy” (20). The literature of Russia, in the words of Vyacheslav Ivanov—Chairman of the Jury of the Russian Novel Booker Prize in 1993—had “paused for a moment to take stock” (229), so that it might both contemplate its past oppression, and carve out a new future—an ‘alternative’ future—for itself. It is within this context of *glasnost*, literary “crisis,” economic change, and the development of ‘alternative’ literature that many Russian women were first able to find a voice in literature.

“Women’s Literature”: Invective or Identification?

With the changes of *glasnost* came “‘the search by the contemporary woman for her place in life’” (qtd. in Zekulin 33) and her place in literature. Within Russian

literature, “it has generally been men who have defined the canon, themes and style” (Marsh, “Image” 22); men too have dominated Russian literary criticism. Given these factors and the misogynistic disposition of the Russian culture, it is hardly astonishing that *zhenskaia literatura*—‘women’s literature’—has been frequently stigmatized as a “derogatory, subordinated category” (Adlam 16) of low-quality literature. Critics habitually maintain that “feminine prose guarantees basic formulaic banalities” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 76) and is marked by a singular focus on the “petty mundanity of ‘the everyday’ (*byt*)” (Adlam 16). Those unfamiliar with the cultural context of Russian women’s literature may be surprised that the term ‘women’s literature’ has been disparaged so far as to become a “negative epithet” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 17) for ‘bad literature’; Tatyana Tolstaya evidences this idea in her “revealing comment that men also write such ‘women’s prose’” (16). Indeed, most women writers, particularly those of the older generation, dissociate themselves from the term, insisting rather that gender does not affect their authorship (76). However, Russian society and these women authors themselves “at every [other] turn underscore their Otherness” (16). The writers are not alone in this contradictory supposition; critics too have “vehemently asserted the extraneousness of gender to artistic production” (71) while simultaneously discussing women’s literature “as an identifiably distinct entity” (72). The author of this essay, while fully acknowledging the problems associated with the use of a term rejected by several of the writers under analysis, regards this issue as primarily a matter of

cultural difference. Therefore, this discourse will refer to texts by female authors as 'women's literature' (and other such terms), of course implying *none* of the pejorative connotations associated therewith in Russia. Justification for discussing women's literature as an entity unto itself derives precisely from evidence that these women writers—and the society within which they create their works—highlight women's experience as a form of separate, 'other' experience. As such, 'women's literature,' will be conceived as an identification of a body of literature rather than as an invective term.

Current Ideas about Gender

Any study of *gender* within the context of literature necessitates an understanding of the term itself. Gender, "as a social institution... is one of the major ways that human beings organize their lives" (Lorber 42) and is distinctly different from sex, which is biological. Additionally, one's gender—interacting with factors such as ethnicity, class, sexuality, and race—acts as a means of distinguishing people from others (Taylor et al 1). While many people take gender for granted—usually presuming it to be due to genetics or biology (if indeed they think about it at all)—gender is, in reality, learned from others. People "have to be taught to be masculine or feminine" (Lorber 46) from an early age. Thus, mothers teach their daughters how to sit 'like a lady,' put on makeup, or dress prettily, while fathers teach their sons how to be tough 'like a man,' use tools, or play sports. Mannerisms, interests, and even colors (pink,

blue) are associated with different genders. Gender affects one's interactions with others at both the individual and the societal level. People describe themselves and others based on their (apparent) gender. Gender is "*pervasive... part of every feature of social life and individual identity*" (Taylor et al 2).

Feminist Literary Criticism

Due to gender's ubiquity, feminist readers of literature "ask, among other questions, how the text represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference" (Belsey and Moore 1) in order to further the political cause of feminism. The feminist movement—varied in concepts and approaches though it may be—generally aims to change the predominant system of patriarchy in society. Within the field of literary criticism, "the feminist reader... regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change" (1). Since the emergence of feminism as a major socio-political force in the 1960s, feminist literary scholarship has developed a sundry collection of critical approaches to literary analysis, several of which will be discussed here.

In its early stages, feminist literary criticism focused exclusively on texts by women writers, and asserted the relationship between literature and "the culture of which it forms a part" (Belsey and Moore 2) and defined writing as a "cultural rather than a purely individual phenomenon" (2). Scholar Elaine

Showalter coined the term *gynocritics* to describe “the study of woman as writer” (Belsey and Moore 6); as a rule, women performed such studies. Psychoanalysis significantly influenced the criticism, though in various ways. While some critics, such as Kate Millett, used Freud’s misogynistic theories to exemplify the victimization of women by patriarchal systems, other scholars found evidence that “victims of patriarchy [were] in a position to strike back” (Belsey and Moore 6) in psychoanalysis. French feminism drew substantial inspiration from psychoanalysis, particularly acknowledging ideas of sexual difference purported by Freud and Lacan. Noted French scholar Hélène Cixous advocated the use of *écriture féminine*, or ‘womanspeak,’ in feminist critical theory. Cixous also highlighted the prevalence of oppositional binarisms in societal thought-processes, which Dale Spender revealed to assert “the supremacy of one group over another” (Belsey and Moore 4). Another coeval literary theory of the time was structuralism, a movement that did not pertain solely to feminist criticism. Structuralism “shifted the emphasis away from the author to the text” (Still and Worton 3) and left little room for consideration of the context in which the reader interprets the supposedly autonomous text. Throughout the early developments of feminist literary criticism, specifically with regard to psychoanalysis and gynocritics, these major theories presupposed a naturalist view—that gender differences between men and women were innate, “outside culture” (Belsey and Moore 2), not socially constructed.

The developments of post-structuralism and postmodernism seriously called into question the essentialist view that “behaviors of men and women are rooted in biological and genetic factors” (Taylor et al 38). While postmodernism cast doubt upon “the very possibility of absolute knowledge or universal meaning” (Belsey and Moore 14), it also countered the structuralist “insistence on the text’s autonomy” (Still and Worton 3)—and thus, distance from contextual influence—by emphasizing the importance of “truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture” (Hutcheon 108). Post-structuralism supported the postmodern notion of truth’s plurality, and further sustained the idea that narrative “meanings are cultural and learned” (Belsey and Moore 8). Feminist literary critics adopted several methods of post-structuralist and postmodern criticism, and continued to draw insight from other discursive theories. Post-colonialism’s theory of *marginalization* impacted many feminist critics who employed the concept “to make explicit the gendered concerns of women writers” (Barker 52) marginalized by “the dominant literary establishment” (52). Other issues feminist criticism encountered were “critical race studies” (Varma 232) and “queer theory” (Schoene 283). These discourses expanded and helped solidify the perception of gender as a social construction that “interacts with race... and sexuality” (Taylor et al 1)—closely resembling gender theory of today. Within this more recent period of feminist criticism’s development, connections between textuality and sexuality generated much feminist

discourse; many critics have posited that “theories of textual production and reception can help us to analyze the construction and interpretation of ‘femininity’” (Still and Worton 20). Another significant, recent contribution to the field of feminist literary analysis is what Lynne Pearce refers to as the “cult of ‘the body’” (8), otherwise known as body criticism. In 2004, Pearce suggested that this concept of *writing the body* could be “‘the mother of all metaphors’” (125) after which “nothing will even be as big” (125) for feminist criticism. Throughout its revolution, feminist literary criticism has become—as Gill Plain and Susan Sellers elaborated in 2007—“characterized by an extensive cross-fertilization of ideas” (211). Today, theories of postmodernism, post-structuralism, and post-colonialism, gender, race, and queerness, textuality, and *writing the body* combine, diverge, influence, cooperate, and dispute to form a multi-faceted portrait of feminist literary discourse.

This essay aims not to be feminist in its approach to the texts it addresses; that is to say, it does not necessarily aspire to further the political cause of feminism through its interpretation. However, the author has been influenced by gender theory and the notion of gendered binarism, both of which have emerged from feminist discourses. Additionally, many scholars who have provided valuable insight have certainly drawn on ideas developed by feminist literary criticism, and for these reasons a background of this body of analysis has been included

within the text, so as to further develop the reader's sense of the context of discussion.

CHAPTER II

IMAGES & IDEAS OF RUSSIAN WOMEN

Russian Femininity

Scholar Rosalind Marsh has observed that the “literary representation of Russian women possesses an influence transcending the world of literature, exerting a profound impact on the way in which women have been, and still are, regarded in Russian society” (Introduction x). Many current perceptions of Russian women are based on Soviet “hieroglyphics [that] continue to glyph along” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 32); such notions conflate womanhood with a variety of “conventional, often misogynistic images of women” (Marsh, Introduction xiv) that are found in “classic models” (xiv) of literature. Women are often portrayed as “object, ‘immanence,’ ‘nature,’ passivity, or death” (Marsh, “Image” 8), as marked by “powerlessness and unremarkable, predictably generic nature” (4), as “an enigma which men must unravel” (11), as possessing “feminine attributes of maternity, nurture, modesty, and self-sacrifice” (Goscilo and Lanoux, Introduction 6), as equated with the Russian nation, with its “traits of irrationality, passion, enigma, submissiveness, and suffering” (9), as “savior, survivor, and arbiter of the mess left by generations of ‘superfluous men’” (Emerson 5), as naturally “endowed... with the traits of nurturing, softness, compliance, and patience... gentleness, sensitivity, maternal instincts, and the capacity to love” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 10), as characterized by a “mystical faith,

irrational passion, and unique expansiveness (the cliché of the broad Russian soul)" (58), and as an "Ideal and Sign" (Marsh, "Image" 8) of a standard of perfection. Such invariable troping of 'the Russian woman' has inescapably led to the adoption of such notions of womanhood by many Russian women themselves, and many have "insist[ed] that women must retain their 'femininity'" (Goscilo, *Balancing* xix) in today's society. Additionally, as Helena Goscilo observes, "the majority of Russian women perpetuate the binary opposition of male versus female" (*Balancing* xxi) through their plenary estimation of what Goscilo terms "the Sacred Purpose that tradition has legislated... Motherhood" (xx).

The 'Maternity Complex' in Russian Society

Messages being sent by many men and women in contemporary Russia seem to be unified on one premise: "that a woman completely realize[s] her essence and her destiny only through motherhood" (Goscilo, *Dehexing*, 10). Just as Mikhail Gorbachev "vowed to liberate women by enabling their retreat into their proper domestic domain, where they could fulfill their preordained roles of mothers" (35), so too have well-known women writers declared that "'a woman should primarily love, care [for], and cherish her own family'" (qtd. in Goscilo, *Dehexing* 5) and that "'a woman without a family is without a master, like a stray animal'" (5). Likewise, women's magazines emphasize motherhood as "woman's fundamental function and her chief predestination" (36). The primary basis for

these beliefs stems from several sources, including the Russian concept of nation ('Mother Russia'), the treatment of mothers in literature, and a perceived demographic crisis of the Russian people that has been maintained since the 1960s.

The concept of 'Mother Russia' finds its roots in "prehistoric love and artifacts, folktales, and literature... reinforced in medieval Russian by the widespread veneration of Mat' Syra Zemlia (Moist Mother earth)" (Goscilo and Lanoux, Introduction 3). Troped as an "amorphous, sacred, essential, life-giving force" (4), the idealized 'Mother Russia' "is widespread in masculine twentieth-century Russian literature" (Marsh, "Image" 19), and is embodied by the *matryoshka* (known as 'nesting dolls'), "the national folk symbol of fertility" (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 33). The image of 'Mother Russia' carries "positive connotations of beauty, care, compassion, and courage in protecting her children" (Zaitseva 48). In the Soviet era, mothers were awarded medals for having at least five children; the title "Heroine Mother" was conferred upon women who bore ten or more children (Coser 425). It is this conceptualization and idealization of the feminine 'Mother Russia' that creates an expectation of women to take on the positive qualities of the great 'Mother Russia' herself.

Within Russian literature, as previously noted, 'Mother Russia' is idealized; so too is the mother figure (March, "Image" 19). Indeed, "single or childless

women" (15) become "figures of fun or objects of pity" (15) in the literary worlds portrayed by the 'classic' canon of Russian literature. Furthermore, the "'new woman'" (18) (an emancipated, intellectual woman) in such literature has been depicted as a mother who fulfills her role of maternity in an "unsatisfactory" (18) manner. Within women's writing, Helena Goscilo has observed a "cult of maternity and self-sacrifice" (*Dehexing* 18). In such cases, the Soviet ideology's "highly valorized mission of building the nation's future" (Goscilo, *Balancing* xx) has clearly been imbibed and (mis)taken for truth by women authors who have furthered the ideology that women's ultimate purpose for life lays in their capacity as mothers.

Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing throughout the 1990s, the Soviet government perceived a "'demographic crisis' in the European regions of the Soviet Union" (Rivkin-Fish 152) that has significantly impacted both literary and cultural views about Russian women. The Soviet government increased the dissemination of propaganda in order to "promote the status of motherhood" (156); such ideology depicted "women's concerns and perceived obstacles to childbearing as at best misguided and at worst morally corrupt" (156). Women who did not have more children for the sake of the nation were seen as "selfish" (156) and as forsaking their "'most important biological and social function'" (qtd. in Rivkin-Fish 157). Throughout the 1980s, "sex-role socialization courses" (157) were instituted in high schools to teach children to "embrace traditional

stereotypes about women's and men's characters and societal roles" (157). Since 1992, when the population of Russia began to decline (and has since continued), discourse on this 'crisis' has reached a fever pitch, making "urgent, if not hysterical claims that the Russian people have already begun the process of dying out" (158). Thus, motherhood has become an even more significant issue to the Russian people, and has bolstered the "popular belief" (Goscilo, *Balancing* xx-xxi) in motherhood as women's "'natural biological function'" (xxi).

The 'demographic crisis,' traditional literary treatment of motherhood, and the image of 'Mother Russia' have combined to create what Helena Goscilo deems a "'maternity complex' [with] the tenacious hold of a boa constrictor on women's thinking" (*Balancing*, xxi) in Russia today. Rosalind Marsh observes "In both Russian culture and the media, the childless or infertile woman is generally seen in negative terms, as a defective being, inferior to the single mother" ("Image" 16). Unmistakably, Russian culture continues to perceive motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment for woman, that which marks her as *true* woman, the definition of her femininity.

CHAPTER III

LUDMILLA PETRUSHEVSKAYA

Biographical Note

Although she began writing in 1968, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya was unable to publish all but five of her short stories between that time and 1974, at which point her “prose voice fell silent” (Dalton-Brown 3). For the next eight years, Petrushevskaya was “effectively ostracized in publishing circles” (Adlam 72) and received no critical attention for her prose until the publication of her story “Our Circle” (also known as “Our Crowd”) in 1985. During this period from 1974 to 1985 she did, however, gain a substantial reputation for her plays, despite their being “largely performed outside of mainstream theaters” (Dalton-Brown 4), if they were ever performed at all. However, in the era of *glasnost* Petrushevskaya found success. Her collection of stories *Immortal Love* was published in 1988. The author increasingly gained critical acclaim for her works, winning the Pushkin prize; and in 1992 her novel *The Time: Night* was short-listed for the Russian Booker prize. Widely considered the most prominent of Russia’s contemporary women writers, Petrushevskaya has been the topic of more than one hundred articles and her works have warranted translation into several different languages (Dalton-Brown 3-4).

Discussion of Works

Petrushevskaya's works are characterized by what premier scholar Helena Goscilo terms an "atmosphere of relentless, irreparable despair" (*Dehexing* 97) whose methods, according to Natal'ia Ivanova, are "the grotesque, hyperbole, and the fantastic" (22). Other critics term her works "blackly comic, horrifyingly farcical" (Dalton-Brown 5) and "bleak" (Marsh, "Image" 28), "having nothing uplifting to say" (Barker 53), and leaving the reader "feeling confused and somewhat perturbed" (Katz 188). Such hopelessness "jolts the reader from complacency" (McLaughlin 98) with everyday life and, according to the author herself, serves a purpose. Petrushevskaya insists that her reader should "'realize what miserable creatures these people [her characters] are... feel sorry for them... recognize yourself in them [and then]... discover how to live differently... to remain humane under all circumstances'" (qtd. in McLaughlin 98). Within her texts, however, Petrushevskaya does not communicate this "'task'" (98) she has assigned her readers. She prevents her narrators from moralizing, thus leaving her readers "to their own devices" (Katz 193) to determine an opinion of her characters and the situations in which they struggle.

Maternity in Petrushevskaya's Texts

It is within this setting of "morbid humor and shocking grotesquerie" (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 18) that Petrushevskaya examines concepts of motherhood/family

life, and to a lesser extent, gender. In her texts, maternity is neither the ultimate fulfillment for women, nor the supreme nurturing role, as motherhood is purported by Russian society. On both accounts, the author rather “sees the maternal bond as a great myth which needs to be shattered” (Katz 54). This discourse on maternity in Petrushevskaya will begin with an examination of the writer’s presentation of motherhood as non-fulfillment, then follow with a discussion of her concept of mothers as non-nurturing.

In her examination of Petrushevskaya as a woman writing within the new “tradition of infringement” (117) in Russian literature, Carol Adlam observes that the “‘plan’ or model of family promoted by the Soviet state is the object of repeated critical scrutiny in Petrushevskaya’s tales” (91). Motherhood, simply, is unfulfilling for women characters in these stories; “without exception” (92) Adlam notes, Petrushevskaya’s female characters reveal the Soviet ‘plan’ to be unattainable. It merely “perpetuates misery through the generations” (92) for mothers and children alike. Petrushevskaya often depicts women as being saddled with the sole responsibility for the children. In such instances, these women’s “only purpose in life, love of their children, claims their full attention, but at the same time leads them into isolation” (Katz 190). This idea holds true in Petrushevskaya’s story “Another Land,” in which a woman who has been left by her husband turns to alcoholism to get through each day. The single mother “lives hidden away from everyone in a one-room apartment

with her child" (80), a daughter, whom the mother takes to kindergarten every morning. Petrushevskaya highlights the seclusion of this woman's existence in her repetition of the question, "who knows what it's like for her" (80), and of the idea that "who knows why, who knows where" (82), "nobody knows" (81), "not a soul in the world knows" (81) about the mother's life. Given that "Another Land" is hardly three short pages long, such reiteration is highly significant. Further emphasis on the mother's isolation is evident in her anonymity; she is merely "woman," "mother," or "she" (80-81) throughout the story. Petrushevskaya ends her tale by again accentuating the mother's loneliness, writing that she would "do better never to wake at all" (82) rather than return to the solitudinous existence she currently leads.

A similar exploration of the connection between motherhood and isolation can be found in another of Petrushevskaya's stories, entitled "A Case of Virgin Birth," in which a mother of a now-adult son longs for intimacy with him. Throughout the son's childhood his mother had "pined for her own family... and couldn't wait for her son to grow up a bit so that she could get even closer to him" (19). She even manifests this yearning for a bond with her son by telling him that she had borne him as a virgin, and that "it was her son who'd made her a woman" (18). Now that he is an adult, his mother continues to long for closeness with him, although she often suppresses this in a "customary tension" (24); however, when her son does occasionally share part

of his life with her, she is full of “glee” (17) and “overjoyed” (17). However, it is clear that the mother remains, for the most part, isolated from her son. As does the mother in “Another Land,” the mother in “A Case of Virgin Birth” also remains anonymous, and any reference to her, too, is merely as “mother,” “she” (17-27), and in two instances, “Mummy” (25-26). Petrushevskaya again paints the portrait of a woman who finds isolation rather than self-fulfillment in the Soviet-ideologized “Sacred Purpose” (Goscilo, *Balancing* xx) that is maternity.

In the preceding story, not only does Petrushevskaya emphasize the loneliness of a woman as a mother, but she also incorporates another factor into the mix: selfishness. As Sally Dalton-Brown suggests in her examination of the stories “Immortal Love,” “Xenia’s Daughter,” “This Little Girl,” and “A Case of Virgin Birth,” Petrushevskaya portrays “the paradox of motherhood, based on the idea of self-sacrifice, and yet... in truth encompassing a deep selfishness, a desire to perpetuate the self, an animal desire to ‘suck the other’s life’ and so survive” (54). Helena Goscilo also identifies the harmful aspect of motherhood presented by the author. Goscilo recognizes that the image of maternity has become “an inimical and destructive force” (*Dehexing* 42) in Petrushevskaya’s novel, *The Time: Night*. Home, the sphere of the mother, is always a “fabled refuge... a claustrophobic environment of spiritual laceration, sadistic exposure, and ceaseless emotional vampirism” (129) (emphasis added).

Clearly, Petrushevskaya's mother characters are neither nurturing nor self-sacrificing, and yet some of these characters appear to have "a strange nobility" (56) about them, as Sally Dalton-Brown notes of the mother in "Pania's Poor Heart". Pania, who wants an abortion because she already has three children and a sick husband for whom she cares, is old, does not have money, and has a heart condition (a symbol for her hard-heartedness), nonetheless is "surely not to be condemned for this" (Dalton-Brown 55) by Petrushevskaya. Dalton-Brown acknowledges that another mother with similar "nobility" (56) is the narrator of "Our Circle," who beats her son in the presence of her circle of friends so that they will "surround him with attention... romantically loving Alyosha" ("Our Circle" 347) once the narrator dies. The narrator sees that "it's better that way—for everyone" (348), especially her son, who would otherwise "have wandered from one orphanage to another" (347) following her imminent death. Although some of Petrushevskaya's mothers are selfish and harmful, and few are nurturing, others are simply forced by circumstances to "be cruel to be kind" (Dalton-Brown 56). In presenting these varied aspects of maternity, Petrushevskaya undermines traditional ideas of maternity, and instead "suggests that this 'public,' acceptable, and sanitized interpretation of the life of a woman with children should be counterbalanced by the private story of a struggle for survival" (57).

Such struggling mothers are ubiquitous in Petrushevskaya's works. As discussed previously, the alcoholic mother of "Another Land" endeavors merely to get through each day. The mother-to-be, Lena, in Petrushevskaya's story, "The Violin," toils to retain "her majestic poise, her mysteriousness" (65), while in the hospital, despite being pregnant and without help from friends, family, or the baby's father. As Lena leaves the hospital it becomes obvious that her daily struggles will only intensify after the birth of her child; her ward-mates discuss such problems as "what she was going to do with her future child, and whether she could count on any help at all from that engineer [the father of Lena's baby]" (65) and how she can "somehow or other get herself on her feet" (66). In "Clarissa's Story," a young, once abused, divorced mother wrestles regularly with worries such as "how to dispose of the child each day" (87); on vacation she grapples with how to "discard all her recent anxieties as a preoccupied single mother" (88) in order to enjoy herself. In "Xenia's Daughter" a prostitute and mother had labored to prevent her daughter from following in her footsteps, and now mentally struggles, "weeping and smoking, swollen-eyed all the time because everything, but everything was over now, all her hopes had come crashing down" (96). The mother in "A Case of Virgin Birth" strove when she was "still so young" (27) to make ends meet; in order to do so she had to board her son at a kindergarten during the week. Now she wrestles with the memory of this experience, remembering it "over and over again, and punished herself for it"

(27); she also struggles to be close to her son, who feels “terribly threatened” (17) when she makes this effort. In the story “Waterloo Bridge,” Granny Olya, “the last soul of all, herself forgotten by everyone, rejected, abused, a mere rag, a doormat” (121), and mother to her “geographer-daughter” (113), struggles to bring meaning to her life by becoming a “strict high priestess” (119) of the film *Waterloo Bridge*. In such works that subvert conventional notions of mothers as nurturing and self-sacrificing, rather emphasizing the struggles associated with this mode of thinking, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya has “radically dismantled” (Katz 190) the idea that “the successful self-realization of women” (190) lies in motherhood. However, in her habitually non-moralizing fashion, Petrushevskaya lets her readers develop their own methods for discovering “‘how to live differently’” (qtd. in McLaughlin 98).

Gender in Petrushevskaya's Texts

Outside of her texts, Petrushevskaya has offered various ideas about gender, particularly in regards to authorship. In conversations with Sigrid McLaughlin, Petrushevskaya has stated that “‘the author ignores his own personality, becomes genderless’” (99) when writing. According to Helena Goscilo, Petrushevskaya “unwittingly postulate[s] transvestite authoring” (*Dehexing* 76). In other instances, the author has referred to her own writing as being of the “‘male mode’” (16) as opposed to being associated with the ornateness of ‘women’s prose’; Goscilo asserts that it is her “unsentimental

mordant tone" (19) coupled with "flashes of grisly comedy" (19) in her prose that contribute to the general perception by Russian critics that Petrushevskaya, indeed, "*as a woman betrays and/or jettisons her inherently feminine traits... as author*" (21) and thus, writes like a man. Petrushevskaya herself underlines the "terseness" (McLaughlin 99) of her prose and identifies this feature as "its 'maleness'" (99). Regardless of Petrushevskaya's reasoning for the notions she maintains on gender with respect to writing, these views certainly merit consideration when examining the author's works in the context of gender. Petrushevskaya "refuses to be considered a feminist" (98), as most Russian women do, and she also has avoided the label of "women writer" as have many women of the older generation of Russian female writers, primarily for the term's negative associations in Russian culture (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 76). In light of these views, this discourse will now analyze the means through which Petrushevskaya presents and examines gender in her works.

Petrushevskaya has put forth the opinion that "There is no existential difference between men and women" (McLaughlin 98), and as Natal'ia Ivanova evidences, men and women are "placed by God in equality vis-à-vis life and death" (28) in Petrushevskaya's works, journeying "through life-death" (29). According to Helena Goscilo, Petrushevskaya's texts are "relatively free of gendered binarism" (*Dehexing* 19) in that they depict "both

sexes inflicting and experiencing pain in an unbroken chain of mutual abuse” (19). Carol Adlam’s analysis of Petrushevskaya’s works corroborates this viewpoint; Adlam notes that “Male protagonists are almost always without exception depicted as deeply flawed” (91) and likewise, women have “powerful, ambivalent characteristics themselves” (91). Women characters are equally as likely as men characters to be portrayed negatively by Petrushevskaya, as evidenced by Monika Katz’s assertion that “not one of her short stories contains a female figure conceived as a positive hero” (195). Thus men and women in Petrushevskaya’s texts are placed on relatively equal footing with regard to their character traits.

Despite the aforementioned equality, Petrushevskaya does reveal one difference in male and female characters within her works: presence. Adlam indicates that women “more commonly are represented in the absence of men” (91) and Katz elucidates this point, noting that “*if the women are not single, widowed or divorced, their husbands... do not even fulfill their family duties*” (190) (emphasis added). Indeed, in several of her works, including “Cycle,” “Waterloo Bridge,” “Clarissa’s Story,” “Another Land,” and “The Violin,” Petrushevskaya has almost completely omitted active male characters, merely referring to these background figures or granting them a scanty share of lines or actions in the story. In “The Violin,” Lena’s doctor merely “vanished once more whence he’d come” (63) after making small talk with her and examining

her. The former husband of the woman in "Another Land" is mentioned, but functions more as a part of the woman's background story than as anything else. In "Cycle," the two friends discuss men, but men do not factor in the plot of the story. In Petrushevskaya's novel, *The Time: Night*, men are often conspicuously absent, and "in some cases, paternity is not even conclusively established" (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 37). Although she does not imbue male characters with any more negative qualities than she does female characters, Petrushevskaya nonetheless offers a critique of men for their very absence; this absence, the author demonstrates, causes women, and mothers in particular, several hardships, such as that of Granny Olya in "Waterloo Bridge," whom is "left with nothing... no work experience, no prospect of a pension, not a ruble to call her own" (114) when her husband leaves. Without explicitly villainizing her male characters, Petrushevskaya presents (or rather, *absents*) them in a negative light.

Petrushevskaya additionally examines femininity within her works, yet "refuses to create a model" (Katz 190) of woman, rather stressing the individuality of each woman's experience. Specifically with a discussion of the story "Manya," Carol Adlam illuminates the method through which Petrushevskaya "thrusts into the foreground the degree to which the image of 'woman' is the result of commodified performative practices" (77). Adlam further clarifies the importance that this concept of performance has with

respect to Petrushevskaya's emphasis on uniqueness of experience, noting that Petrushevskaya highlights the "gap between the desired image of feminine behavior and the specificities of individual truths" (77) in several of her stories. In "Cycle," Nadya refrains from relating to her friend Tatyana the extent of her true feelings in order to seem more "interesting" (39) and less "miserable" (39); Lena maintains her pretense even when it is blatantly obvious that everyone knows of her lies in "The Violin," yet this pretense will not save her from hardship in the end (65); Galya, of "The Storyteller," is ignorant of that womanly "art of self-defense" (7), by which a woman does not tell people what is happening in her life even though "everyone in fact knows perfectly well" (7) the things she is hiding; the narrator of "Our Circle" is marked by an egregious "tactlessness" (322) and has often "spoken the truth" (316), much to the contempt of her friends. While some of these female characters do not abide by the rules of "feminine behavior" (Adlam 77), other characters do, yet in each case these rules harm (or in the case of Lena, fail to protect) the women that they aim to govern. In demonstrating the deleterious effects such standards of behavior have on individuals, Petrushevskaya effectively subverts prescribed notions of feminine conduct.

Helena Goscilo's contention that works by Petrushevskaya exist "relatively free of gendered binarism" (*Dehexing* 19) proves to be a fairly accurate assessment of Petrushevskaya's stories. Throughout her texts, Petrushevskaya

unequivocally undermines stereotypes of motherhood and womanly behavior, establishing individual experience as superior to essentialist conceptions of femininity. Additionally, Petrushevskaya avoids attributing to men any inherent, negative traits; rather, she documents what can be determined as more of a cultural phenomenon than an intrinsic masculine inclination—the absent male in Russian families. Thus, in the aforementioned aspects, Petrushevskaya issues a challenge to the naturalist view of gender—as innately present, rather than socially constructed—and deconstructs gendered binarisms that would juxtapose conceptions of the masculine and the feminine.

CHAPTER IV

NINA SADUR

Biographical Note

Similar to Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur is known for both her drama and her prose, and only achieved publication of her works after the onset of *glasnost*. Since 1990, the year in which her first series of short stories, *She Who Bears No Grudge*, was published, Sadur has published a few lengthy pieces of prose and several collections of short stories. *Witch's Tears*, a collection of short stories combined with a novella, was originally published in Russia in 1994 and has since been translated into English. This collection is the first of Sadur's to appear in English, although several of her translated short stories have appeared in anthologies of contemporary Russian literature, including issues of *Glas New Russian Writing*.

Discussion of Works

Helena Goscilo notes that Sadur "endows her macabre distillations of ominous psychic drama with intense poetic power" (*Dehexing* 79). Indeed, the world Sadur depicts is fluid, brilliant, and "emotionally-charged" (Sadur, *Witch's Tears* 1). Her work is marked by "excessive violence and folkloric-fantastic themes" (Adlam 51) that have firmly established her within the tradition of *drugaiia literatura*. Sadur's voice is as distinctive and individualized as the voices of both

Petrushevskaya and Tolstaya. Her works are highly original, disorienting, spectacular, and filled with magic, conveying a sense of life as “a startling mosaic of passion, obsession and cruelty” (Sadur, *Witch’s Tears* back cover).

Myth in Sadur’s Texts

As Helena Goscilo discerns, Sadur “preempts modern cultural myths by creating the illusion of an animistic universe seemingly predating or overpowering modern civilization” (*Dehexing* 63). In essence, Sadur creates new myths through a widespread use of folkloric and magical elements, as noted previously. Strange animals with “*monstrous roars*” (“The Wind from the Suburbs” 74), “wild, eight-legged creatures” (“Closer to Rest” 37), mysterious rings that shape people’s fate (“Rings” 21), a purse, changed into a dove that kills itself (“Witch’s Tears” 10), a wax rose that “contained the heat of life” and keeps a woman’s son alive in his portrait (“Star-Boy” 62), witches (“Witch’s Tears”), girls who experience magical “premonitions” (“Glimpses” 57), and a strange creature with a “dirty, yet human little face” (“Dear Little Red-Head” 63), are only a few of the numerous fantastical, magical components of Sadur’s myth-like tales. Another way Sadur constructs her myths is by emphasizing those elements that have a close connection with Earth and nature. In “Star-Boy,” Sadur juxtaposes the narrator’s obsession with “the burning center of the Earth, heart of magma, mother of our world, the heat of life” (45) with the narrator’s view of space as “that terrible cosmic *kaput*... just darkness, eternal

darkness" (45), filled only by "the poison of infinity" (60). Sadur thereby privileges a return to the folkloric notion of Earth as the sustenance of life. In "Closer to Rest," Sadur's repetitious images of flowers, particularly the "graveyard lilac" (36), imbues the work with a sense of nature as an escape—the "Rest" (35) indicated by the title—from "the sadness" (38) that marks the two protagonists' disconnection with life. The narrator of "Flowering" buys frozen twigs in anticipation of the "kindergarten of tiny pink flowers" (28) that soon would burst forth from them. The twigs provide the narrator with "happiness" (31) and a sense of the "beauty of the world" (28). In this story, Earth, via the twigs, is a source that brightens the life of the narrator. In "The Wind from the Suburbs," the motifs of gold and blue saturate the text, and are associated often with a natural setting, such as the snow "turning blue" (83) in the forest, the "forest creatures... with their golden eyes" (83) or the "blue above" (96) of the sky, and with "*monstrous*" (74) animals. These colors also indicate a "passion" (83) in the lynx and a "ferocity" (80) in the narrator. Nature and impassioned living are thus conjoined in the two colors. In these works, Sadur develops a notion of nature as the source for the rejuvenation of and connection with vivid life. Through their magical elements and mythical reverence for life-giving nature (Mother Earth), Sadur's stories become folkloric tales that indeed serve to "preempt" the myths of modern-day Russian cultural consciousness.

Women in Sadur's Texts

Although she would not “claim that women are a central concern” (Adlam 108) in her works, Sadur’s “exclusively female central protagonists” (60) clearly evince the importance of gender in the experience of the world that Sadur presents. Helena Goscilo observes that for Sadur, a woman’s body is “the text’s physical and tropological center” (*Dehexing* 89); one can deduce from this remark that women are necessarily the “center” of the text’s focus. Sadur presents her women protagonists as characterized by various traits, including emptiness, sadness, coldness, vengefulness, passivity, nurturing capabilities, and passion. This discourse will first address the negative traits found in Sadur’s women, and then concentrate on the positive traits with which Sadur bestows her female characters.

Many of Sadur’s female characters possess various traits that are negative, such as emptiness, sadness, coldness, vengefulness, and passivity. In “The South,” Olya is “empty with sadness” (103) and inside her, the “invisible power of life kept ebbing away” (100). Olya is emptied of her identity to the point that she “did not know words” (152) and becomes “Maria” (152) to others, identifiable as Olya—her original self—only by the ring she wears on her finger. Marina and Lena, protagonists of “Closer to Rest,” are other characters marked by melancholy. Lena sometimes “feel[s] like hanging [her]self” (35), drinks to “forget this sadness, the sadness of lonely old women” (37), and often remarks

to her friend Marina about “the sadness” (38) of life and of losing her lover, Ivan. In “Flowering,” the old woman Khazina, who once was a very angry woman, “overwhelmed all... with her sadness” (30); however, “over the year’s Khazina’s sadness passed” (31) and she again becomes angry. Other women characters are not sad, but coldly unsympathetic. In an appropriately-titled story, “Cold,” such is the case for the narrator, who has no sympathy for the “imbecile” (22), Uncle Leva, freezing out in the snow, but rather is “scared and horrified” (27) by the fact that “he has work papers, and he speaks!” (27). She prefers to think of Uncle Leva as something less than human, that will “moo like he’s dying and lumber after his name” (25). Another chilly character is the narrator of “Unrequited Love”. This woman’s “coldness” (34) causes even her own husband to suggest she “be more sensitive” (34) to Aleksei Orlov, the married man whose unrequited love for the narrator “destroy[s]” (33) him. Both of these cold women are significantly innominate, as if they are not fully human enough to warrant having a name. Several other women characters, including Nadya of “Witch’s Tears” and Olga of “Glimpses,” seek revenge. Nadya wants to curse Vitka because he has “betrayed” (12) and “tortured” (12) her. Olga has “premonitions” (57) about various bad things befalling Alec, a man who has spurned her; the strange thing about these “senses” (56) of Olga’s is not only that they come true, but also that Olga is capable of “stopping” (57) them from occurring. These “premonitions” (57) are not so much the “glimpses” (54) indicated by the title as they are Olga’s deliberate interferences with Alec’s “free

will" (57). Unlike these vengeful women, other women are weak or passive, like the character Lyubka in "Rings," who lives "off the state" (21), "eats whatever you give her" (21), and continues dating Sasha, who treats her "like a whore" (15). Lyubka passively accepts whatever comes her way, a characteristic that aggravates her friend, the narrator of "Rings," on more than one occasion; however, the narrator, Lariska, also passively accepts her circumstances, such as the fact that "nothing will happen. Nothing. Never" (21) between her and Levan because of the ring he wears. Whether hollow, melancholic, frigidly unfeeling, unforgiving, or inactive, Sadur's female protagonists sustain assorted negative reactions to the world around them.

Despite the diversity of negative traits depicted in Sadur's female characters, these women do seem to have one commonality: a rather lacking sense of purpose. Empty Olya wanders by the seashore, mute, watching the water and walking for the sake of movement in the scenery around her ("The South" 158). The women in "Closer to Rest" seem to be awaiting the "Rest" (35) of the story's title; with "no will left to live" (43), they are merely passing the time. Though Nadya vengefully seeks Vitka's death in "Witch's Tears," she even questions this decision, wondering to herself, "who would she have to suffer for, swear at?" (12). Both Lyubka and Lariska "don't know what to do with [themselves]" (21) at the end of "Rings". It is perhaps this sense of near purposelessness among these women that best highlights the negativity in them. Rather than

taking active, purposeful roles, Sadur's negative female characters seem to be merely reacting to the circumstances and experiences that shape their lives. They therefore have little control over any happiness and fulfillment they might experience.

Not all of Sadur's female characters are negative, however; some women possess characteristics generally considered as positive, such as nurturing capabilities and passion. The narrator of "Flowering" exhibits a motherliness toward the twigs; she "cut[s] open [her] breast so the warmth of humanity would flow and help them blossom" (30) and she also kisses the "little mouths" (30) of the blooming flowers. In "Closer to Rest," Lena tells the "simple Russian story" (43) of Kseniya, who "saw people's pain and embraced it, she lived for everyone" (43), thus fulfilling a nurturing role. The woman who claims to be Gagarin's mother in "Star-Boy" becomes, in her view, a "mother to all the people [she's] going to save and lead to the source of life" (63). In "The South," Valya and Tonya care for Maria, they "bathe her wounds... chewed her bread so she could eat it, and she started to live again" (156). In these tales, women once again nurture and provide life to others. At other points in Sadur's stories, women are passionate. Kseniya, of the tale "Closer to Rest," wakes up one day and "started living" (43) for others; the idea that she *began to live* one day implies that before that point, Kseniya had not lived passionately. Lena, another character in "Closer to Rest," describes herself as "passionate" (39) when she

speaks of her relationship with Ivan. The narrator of “The Wind from the Suburbs” is nearly blinded by passion—symbolized by “the gold blue flooding [her] eyes” (80)—that overtakes her when she is with Dima. Although these women are passionate in their love for others, some characters are passionate in their rage. Such is the case of the narrator of “Flowering,” who, as “flashes exploded in [her] head” (31), screams at her neighbor Khazina, presumably because Khazina’s twigs will never bloom. The mother in “Star-Boy” passionately “hurl[s]” (62) the portrait of her ‘son’ Gagarin “to the floor, stamping it into stardust” (62) when she renounces him for not sharing the secret of Earth’s “life-giving center” (60). Sadur seems to provide her female characters with only a few positive reactions to the world: nurturing and passion. What is most interesting is that these reactions are often tied to each other within the same character. The narrator of “Flowering” *nurtures* her twigs and becomes *passionately defensive* of them; Kseniya really *lives* because she does *so for others*; Gagarin’s ‘mother’ *passionately* renounces her own ‘son’ to *provide life* to everyone else. Sadur imbues these passionate, nurturing women with a sense of purpose that she does not seem to grant her negative characters.

Carol Adlam astutely observes the centrality of Sadur’s works lies in her effort to “undo the solidity of the central Russian mythos” (58) that forms the basis of Russia’s cultural consciousness. As Helena Goscilo suggests, Sadur decidedly “preempts” (*Dehexing* 60) such traditions through her creation of a vivid,

powerful, alternative folklore. Furthermore, Sadur antagonizes prescriptive notions of women as perfect beings and as submissive creatures. Rather, Sadur suggests that all women are imperfect (indeed, not a single of her female characters is without her flaws), but that each can—if not transcend, at least mitigate—this problem by passionately cultivating her purpose. Through this polemic, Sadur attenuates the strength of the gendered binarism centered on the idea of active male/passive female. Be that as it may, Sadur does not undermine all gendered myths. She does little to resist that sacred myth of motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment for a woman's life. It is her purposefully nurturing characters whom Sadur casts as positive. The folktale-like nature of her stories, which stress the glory of Mother Earth's generative (and regenerative) powers, further establishes Sadur's high regard for nurturing capabilities. Thus, while Sadur combats some gender stereotypes, she firmly operates within the realm of others, subtly propagating them through her stories.

CHAPTER V

TATYANA TOLSTAYA

Biographical Note

Tatyana Tolstaya began writing in 1983, near the onset of *glasnost*; this fortunate timing allowed publication of her first collection of works, *On the Golden Porch*, by 1987. What Helena Goscilo calls Tolstaya's "meteoric" (*Glasnost* xxxiv) rise as an author is evidenced by the speed with which she was published in Russia and subsequently translated into English, a mere two years later. Tolstaya's ensuing works were a novel, *The Slynx*, and *Sleepwalker in a Fog*, a second collection of short stories. In 2007 her collection *White Walls* was published; this combined the stories of her previous collections into one volume and incorporated a few additional tales. During the 1980s and 1990s Tolstaya often lived in the United States and has lectured at several universities, including Texas A&M University (Rich 13), and was writer-in-residence at Princeton University. Tolstaya is well-known for both her prose, which has been incorporated into the curriculum of English departments in many American universities, and for her colorful opinions on various topics, including feminism, which she very openly disputes (Goscilo, *Explosive* 3). Tolstaya, who has a very strong personality, is also "vociferously opposed" (Zekulin 35) to the idea of 'women's literature'; she has both insisted on its "superficiality, philistinism, commercial psychology, and excessive sentimentality" (Boym 66) and advanced

the notion that “men also write such ‘women’s prose’” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 16), thus evidencing her notion of the term as an invective. Furthermore, she has posited “a theory of neuter or androgynous creativity” (76) akin to Petrushevskaya’s. Clearly, Tolstaya wishes to distance herself from ‘women’s literature.’ As Helena Goscilo herself admits in her book, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya’s Fiction*, Goscilo’s feminist readings of this Russian writer’s work “more often than not run counter to [Tolstaya’s own] self-commentaries and self-perceptions” (9). Nonetheless, one simply cannot discuss contemporary Russian women writers without including the highly-opinionated Tolstaya, however much she might resist her inclusion in the category.

Discussion of Works

Critics have often “singled out language as Tolstaya’s... inimitable creative signature” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 80). She is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a “philologist by education” (McLaughlin 202) whose distinctive literary voice may be one of the easiest to discern among those in Russian literature today. From rice porridge that resembles “a melting island of butter in the sticky Sargasso Sea... [a] buttery Atlantis” (“Date with a Bird” 117), to depression personified as “a sad sitter for a hopeless patient... holding hands” (“A Clean Sheet” 77) with those whom it affects, to the “black jaws of a telephone receiver” (“Sonya” 144), it is Tolstaya’s interesting descriptions of seemingly everyday things that evidence this distinctive voice. Her prose is marked by its “refreshing

tendencies: a more subtle or original perspective on familiar phenomenon... attentiveness to the stylistic, rather than the ideological, aspects of prose... a propensity for irony and fantasy; a postmodernist explosion of intertextuality; enriched vocabulary and a generally free approach to language" (Goscilo, *Glasnost* xxxiv). The author herself, in an interview with Elisabeth Rich, admits that her use of "hidden quotations, citations that Russians recognize but no one outside of Russia is able to recognize" (90) is pervasive in her prose. Additionally, the author uses a "deflective irony" (Goscilo, *Glasnost* xl) that serves to distance the reader "from situations which traditionally would evoke compassion" (McLaughlin 202); Tolstaya thus dissociates herself with that "'saccharine air'" (qtd. in Boym 66) with which she associates 'women's literature.' Tolstaya's elevated, skillful play with language and her ironic distancing of herself from the text engender works that "demand not lachrymose empathy but, rather, intellectual effort" (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 23), yet are a rewarding investment of the reader's time.

Gender in Tolstaya's Works

As Helena Goscilo notes, Tatyana Tolstaya has an "irrepressible enthusiasm for overthrowing clichés" (*Balancing* xxvii). Tolstaya often accomplishes her rebellion through such methods as "ironic double-voicing, literalization of stereotypes, and parodic interpretation of myth" (Goscilo, *Explosive* 82). Tolstaya literalizes the metaphor of "love as a hunt" (85) in her story "Hunting

the Woolly Mammoth,” in which the protagonist Zoya ‘hunts’ for love, finds her ‘prey’ in the form of an engineer named Vladimir, and ‘traps’ him by forcing him to marry her. While Goscilo’s comments on the short story are indeed helpful in understanding how Zoya views herself “from the perspective of the objectifying male viewer” (86) and how “satisfaction with marriage is thus equated with conspicuous consumption” (87), Goscilo pays less attention to how closely Zoya follows the “rules of the hunt” (“Hunting for the Woolly Mammoth” 60). These rules are important to the story and to Zoya, who does everything as she is supposed to in order to “drag the carcass home” (60); she keeps house for Vladimir, feeds him, takes his things to the cleaners, “no problem” (57); she avoids asking directly about his intentions, as “centuries of experience” (57) have taught her to do; she tags along on his camping trips and to visit strange artist friends; but Vladimir resorts to “dishonest, cheating methods” (60). These strict “rules” (60) are the ideological prescriptions against which Tolstaya struggles, and her emphasis that they are developed over “centuries” (57) highlights the deep inscription of such gender rules within the Russian culture. In depicting “the destructive consequences of manipulating life in accordance with internalized gender clichés” (Goscilo, *Explosive* 87), Tolstaya thus problematizes the amount of power that is normally granted to such traditional gender ‘rules.’ Rather than offering a specific solution, though, Tolstaya merely calls attention to it, and like Petrushevskaya, allows the reader to take action for him or herself.

As Helena Goscilo explicates in her book, *The Explosive World of Tatyana N. Tolstaya's Fiction*, Tolstaya again literalizes metaphors throughout her work "The Poet and the Muse". The heroine Nina literally 'gives her heart' to her lover Grisha by nailing it to his bed (89). Helena Goscilo documents the various ways in which Tolstaya again reverses gender roles, by depicting Nina as similar to "the heroes of the classic male formula" (90) and creating in Grisha the "standard feminine role of nurturer" (90); indeed, Grisha "weeps... struggles feebly, pines and whimpers" (90) as the 'typical' woman might. It is Nina's "blind adherence to iron-clad convention" (93) that ultimately destroys Grisha, but leaves her with "pure, radiant feelings" ("The Poet and the Muse" 322). Tolstaya further subverts gender roles in the text in the way in which she characterizes Nina, who "launches a cold-blooded campaign" (Goscilo, *Explosive* 88) to find 'love.' Nina expresses her 'love' as a need to own Grisha completely. She wants to "secure" ("The Poet and the Muse" 316) his love by locking him "in a trunk" (316), to "wrest Grisha from... the extraneous women who's stuck to him like barnacles" (316), to know certainly that "everything about him is all yours, yours!" (319)—that is, *hers*. Once Grisha has sold his (future) skeleton to the government, however, Nina's "love seemed to go awry" (322) since she no longer possesses him. He has become "public property... Nothing about him belonged to her anymore" (322). In this story, Tolstaya equates Nina's 'love' with ownership, reversing the traditional roles of wife 'belonging' to her

husband. Additionally, Tolstaya uses warrior imagery to describe Nina. Nina works at “destroying” (317) her enemy Lizaveta by sending “the troops” (318) to get her; she achieves a “heroine’s classical feat” (309), wearing out “seven pairs of iron boots” (318), breaking “seven iron staffs” (318) and devouring “seven kilos of iron gingerbread” (318) in an effort to defeat her nemesis; she “had fought for her personal happiness... had won her right in battle” (322). In portraying her as a warrior, Tolstaya further underscores Nina as an unfeminine character. Such a reversal of gender stereotypes indeed confirms Tolstaya’s prose as “a stylistic assault on received wisdom” (Goscilo, *Explosive* 96) of gender paradigms and exemplifies her ability to reconceptualize many “stock images and concepts neatly encapsulated in clichés” (Goscilo, *Dehexing* 22). Tatyana Tolstaya’s works thus “self-confidently demote” (69) gendered binarisms primarily through her ironic tone and through a reversed portrayal of such oppositional concepts of gender. In this way, Tolstaya alters traditional notions of femininity and masculinity promoted in Russian culture.

CHAPTER VI

LUDMILA ULITSKAYA

Biographical Note

Although Ludmila Ulitskaya spent years working in the field of genetics, she has written poetry since her days as a university student in Moscow. After quite some time, Ulitskaya left the scientific discipline, according to the editors of *Jews and Strangers* (Glas New Russian Writing vol.6), due to “some trouble with the authorities” (Perova and Tait 223), and subsequently “enjoyed a brief but successful stint managing a Jewish theater” (Goscilo, “About” 351) before she took up writing as a career only after the implementation of *glasnost*. At first writing short stories, Ulitskaya later published a novella, *Sonechka*, in 1992 and has since written several novels, including *The Funeral Party* and *Medea and Her Children*. All three of these works were short-listed for the Russian Booker prize (Perova et al, *Nine* 286). Ulitskaya eventually won the Russian Booker in 2001 for her novel *Kazus Kukotskogo* (*The Kukotsky Case*) and is popular throughout much of Europe.

Discussion of Works

Among the few scholars who have addressed Ulitskaya’s texts, Helena Goscilo and Carol Adlam have each focused almost exclusively on one aspect of Ulitskaya’s prose: her focus on the female body and female sexuality. These two scholars have even further narrowed their discussion of Ulitskaya’s works by

limiting the majority of their observations to a small number of her short stories, primarily “Gulia” and “Lialia’s House”. Although many of Ulitskaya’s works were to appear in years following these scholars’ studies, the novella *Sonechka* (1992) had been available for several years in Russia prior to publication of Goscilo’s *Dehexing Sex* (1996) and Adlam’s *Women in Russian Literature after Glasnost* (2005). In her work, Adlam has also ignored the novels *Medea and Her Children* (1996), which one might certainly consider a full-length treatise on family, femininity, motherhood, and male-female relations, *The Funeral Party* (1999), and *Women’s Lies* (2003), which explores women and femininity. Despite their neglect of much of Ulitskaya’s works, Goscilo and Adlam nevertheless present several enlightening observations about the style of Ulitskaya’s prose, female sexuality within her works, and her approach to gender platitudes.

Ulitskaya authors “structurally traditionalist prose” (Adlam 16) that is nevertheless “boldly transgressive” (113) for its confrontation of gender norms. As a female writer, Ulitskaya—unlike Tolstaya and many others among her contemporaries—has openly deemed herself “‘prepared to take the risk of being considered an old-fashioned and sentimental representative of *zhenskaia proza* [women’s prose]” (qtd. in Adlam 111). Ulitskaya aligns herself so as to dissociate her prose with the ‘alternative’ literature of the period, which she has termed “‘dehumanizing literature’... or ‘literature of dismemberment’” (qtd. in Adlam 111) for its goal of taboo-breaking. Within her traditional works

Ulitskaya “avoid[s] moralizing, rhetorical devices, and obvious dramatic effects” (Goscilo, “About” 352) and incorporates “an invariably unusual angle to her plots” (Perova and Tait, *Jews* 223). *The Observer* has praised Ulitskaya for her “delicately sensual writing, full of the joys and pitfalls of every day [life]” (qtd. in Perova et al, *Nine* 286). Perhaps what is most remarkable about Ulitskaya’s prose is her ability to “infuse compassion and understanding in narratives that simultaneously evidence her lack of illusions about mankind” (Goscilo, “About” 352). One could criticize the author neither for a ‘saccharine air’ nor for a ‘relentless, irreparable despair’ in her works; rather, Ulitskaya maintains an exceptional balance between the two through the “terseness, sly irony, precision, and direct simplicity” (352) of her prose and a “humanist tradition that neither denounces nor deifies, but attempts to understand human psychology” (Perova et al, *Nine* 1). Ludmila Ulitskaya’s work is decidedly a “fresh” (Perova and Tait, *Jews* 223) contribution to the literary scene of modern-day Russia.

Maternity in Ulitskaya’s Texts

Motherhood in Ulitskaya’s works encompasses not only the experiences of those female characters that have physically birthed children, but also the experiences of mother figures—those women who fulfill the role usually assumed by a mother. Additionally, these women may have been mothers already to their own children, but have since adopted, fostered, or substituted as mothers for additional children. Several such figures appear in Ulitskaya’s works. In the

short story, "March 1953," Bela is Lily's grandmother; however, she assumes the role of mother towards Lily, whom Bela had "restored to health and proper plumpness" (53) after Lily's father had brought the latter, a baby who looked like "a shriveled doll" (53) to Bela. Since that point, Lily had lived with Bela and her husband, and is "reborn" (53) to these grandparents who have become her "foster parents" (53). Lily even calls Bela's father-in-law "granddad" (53) rather than 'great-granddad'—his actual relationship to her. Bela worries about Lily, consoles her, is defensive of her, and even tells her about menstruation; she thus undertakes the duties a mother generally would perform. Other mother-like characters include: Emilia Karlovna, in the short story "Zurich," who acts as both a mentor and mother to Lidia, of whom "it would not be too much to say she had brought... up with her own hands" (130); Anelya, in *Medea and Her Children*, who "had not had any children of her own" (268), yet raises her younger sister Anastasia and "adopt[s]" (268) her husband's nephew and niece, becoming their "much loved stepmother" (269); and Nike, another character in *Medea and Her Children*, who nearly adopts her younger cousin Masha after the latter is orphaned. Nike takes Masha "so completely into her heart" (164) that Nike feels herself to be "the matriarch of a large family consisting of her daughter Masha and lots of doll granddaughters" (164). Subsequently, Nike believes she has used up all of her "maternal feelings on her cousin" (164) and has few such feelings left for her own children.

Another mother figure appears in the novella *Sonechka*.² Sonya (Sonechka) is already mother to Tanya; she also adopts the “orphan” (69), eighteen-year-old Jasia, whose presence “gave Sonechka the illusion that her family had increased” (71). Even after her discovery of the affair between Jasia and her husband Robert, Sonechka cares for Jasia in a motherly way, “as if nothing had changed” (83) and calling her ““my dear”” (86). Sonya, Jasia, and Robert “seemed to be a family unit... perfectly well-adjusted” (87). Even when Robert dies, Jasia, “like a little child” (92) clings to Sonechka’s hand, since Jasia “was an orphan, and Sonya was a mother” (92); at Robert’s funeral Jasia again clings to Sonechka, “like a fledgling peeping out from under the wing of a penguin” (94). Jasia lives with Sonya, who “looked after her tenderly” (95) for several years thereafter, and in her old age Sonechka is “constantly being invited by her other daughter, Jasia” (97) to move to Paris where Jasia has relocated. Sonechka clearly acts as mother to Jasia and fulfills this role throughout the remainder of her lifetime.

² All citations for the story *Sonechka* have been taken from the version published by Glas in 1998, rather than from the version published by Schocken in 2005, although both editions were translated by Arch Tait. The two published books, both entitled *Sonechka*, have been included in this research because the other short stories published in each edition are different. Since the Glas version was published first, it was chosen as the source from which to cite for the novella *Sonechka*. The other stories by Ulitskaya that have been cited by this essay do not appear in multiple versions.

Medea, of the novel *Medea and Her Children*, is manifestly established as a mother figure simply in the title of the work; subsequent examination of Ulitskaya's text further bolsters this notion. At the young age of sixteen, Medea adopts her younger sister Alexandra and younger brothers Constantine and Dimitry after the death of their parents (31). She raises these siblings, telling Alexandra the occasional story "with some vague didactic intention" (184) and attempting to "tactfully steer [Dimitry] away from the military profession" (93) as a mother might. In a motherly fashion, Medea is also deeply troubled by the "certain coolness which developed between [her] and her younger brothers" (94) over the years. Of the three siblings she raises, Medea feels closest to Alexandra, who is "the person dearest to her" (304) even after she and Alexandra have not spoken in twenty-five years. Although she does not raise any other children, Medea can be seen mothering "dozens of small children" (240) at various points in the novel. Medea takes Nina's children "to stay with her" (148) when Nina is in the hospital; she "would often hold Vitalis on her knee... stroking his little head and sluggish neck" (241); after becoming Sergei's godmother, "for the first month of little Sergei's life, Medea vicariously experienced to the full... motherhood" (100-101); she is so experienced with children as to know "the inconsistent feel of the weight of a child's body" (240) from the newly born to the heavy ten-year-old, and she can predict "in the last summer before school" (240) whether a child will be smart or "not too bright" (240). Even her husband Samuel reflects on "the quiet stubbornness with which

she had brought up the children" (195). Without a doubt, Medea is a mother figure to all of 'her children.'

Characters who fulfill the role of mother are not the only mothers presented by Ulitskaya. Within the preponderance of mothers and mother figures in her texts resides a wide range of maternal experiences. In the case of some, motherhood is characterized by a certain amount of self-abnegation and endurance. In *Medea and Her Children*, Anelya expects "peaceful old age" (269), but is denied this because she and her husband must adopt their niece and nephew, Nina and Timur. Another woman character in this novel, whose goals go unrealized, is Medea herself, who is "betrayed by her sister, abused by fate itself, which had denied her children while the child fathered by her husband, the child that by rights was hers, had been placed in her sister's relaxed and fun-loving body" (212). Despite this blow from the sister she has raised, Medea "'stands like a rock in the midst of the sea'" (228) and continues to mother her relatives. Such dedication also appears in "The Daughter of Bokhara," in which Anya (alternatively known as Bokhara) devotes her life to her daughter Milya, who has Down's syndrome. Anya, dying of a fatal disease, gets herbs "'from a holy man'" (149) that will keep her alive, tries "with all her might to teach Milya the practicalities of life" (149), changes jobs "in order to be near her daughter and [to be] able to help her" (151), and "like a stricken artist hurrying to complete a great canvas before his death" (151) hunts (152) for a "'good husband'" (159)

who will take care of her daughter. Once she has achieved this goal, Bokhara returns to Uzbekistan “to die, so that Milya should not see her and should gradually forget her” (156). In *Medea and Her Children*, a mother, Aldona, is similarly devoted to her sons, Vitalis, who is disabled, and Donatas, her elder son who openly hates his younger brother and thus moves in with his grandmother. Aldona visits Donatas on Sundays, “with a heavy heart... leaving the little one” (238) in the morning and “with a heavy heart... in the evening” (238) she returns. She “suffered cruelly” (239) with “rocklike peasant endurance” (239) in “the eternal slavery of motherhood” (241), but does not cry or complain to others, and in short, she experiences no release. Similarly, Sonechka, in the novella by the same name, routinely “washe[s] the dishes and scour[s] the saucepans, cooking... meals [for her daughter and husband, Robert]... boil[s] up vats of laundry, blued and starched” (60) with a work ethic that reminds Robert of that of a worker “‘ant’” (61). Sonechka denies her own “devastated” (79) feelings at the loss of “seventeen years of happy marriage” (79) when she discovers the affair between her husband and Jasia. Rather than dwell on her sadness, Sonya continues to mother Jasia (as discussed above) and reflects on “what a pity it was that it was all over for her, but what a joy it was that it had happened” (88). Uncomplaining, Sonechka “plunges into blissful depths” (97) submersing herself in reading once again in a “self-negating surrender to the realm of imagination” (9). These assorted women experience in

maternity varying degrees of hardship, which they nevertheless face with fortitude.

In other instances, Ulitskaya portrays mothers who are more selfish and less devoted to their children, if indeed they show any commitment at all to them. Lily's birth mother, Shura, in "March 1953" does "on occasion come to see her" (53) but for the most part is absent from her daughter's life. In the short story "Bronka," Bronka's mother Simka, who works "energetically and tirelessly... from five in the morning till late and night" (103) in order to make more and more money, is ignorant of her daughter's life. Simka does not, "oddly enough" (105), notice Bronka's first pregnancy even when Bronka is nearly nine months along. A similarly uninvolved mother is Galina, in Ulitskaya's short story "The Orlov-Sokolovs". Galina had "never attempted to instruct Tanya and couldn't imagine where her strong character... could have come from" (201-202).

Constantly uninformed about her own daughter, she is first unaware that Tanya and her fiancé Andrey have separated, and is later "dumbfounded" (213) when Tanya returns home married to Andrey's friend, Vitka. Others among Ulitskaya's mother characters are less uninvolved than purely selfish. Such is the case of Vera, Masha's grandmother and for a period of time, foster mother, in *Medea and Her Children*. Masha had lived with her grandmother before Masha's parents had died; because of Vera's "impossible, hysterical personality" (144), Masha often called her parents to ask them to take her home.

When Masha's parents die, Vera falls into an insanity of "monstrous power" (152), which she focuses on Masha. Vera blames Masha for her parents' death, calling her a "little murderess" (154) and hounding Masha to the point that the latter attempts suicide in her sleep (159). Another vile mother appears in "The Queen of Spades" in the form of Mour, whom one might consider the quintessential example of selfishness. Mour had left her first husband and had later "sent for her immediate necessities" (92), which Ulitskaya notes, "did not include her eighteen-month-old daughter" (92), Anna. Nearly six years later Mour sends for Anna, needing her in order to meet "certain bureaucratic requirements" (93) so that she can have a larger apartment; Anna is then immediately "entrusted to the care of her second aunt" (93). Throughout her life Mour is imperious, demanding that Anna "'come to look after her'" (86) after Mour's sister, who had always "'served'" (86) her, dies. Additionally, Mour had despised Anna's husband Marek, had caused him and Anna to separate and "'forbade [Anna] to write him'" (87). Nearly everyday Mour throws her "morning's tantrum" (80); she had once "been interested in events and people as the setting for her own life... but now only she and her sundry desires remained in the center of an empty stage" (84). She is also capricious "like a pregnant woman... constantly wanting something elusive and indefinable" (78). Even after Anna's death, Mour insists of her granddaughter and great-grandchildren that "'all the same, everything shall be as I wish'" (110). In short, Mour is immensely selfish as a mother, grandmother, and even great-grandmother.

These narcissistic or otherwise distant mothers experience maternity in quite a different way than do those women who endure selflessly throughout motherhood.

Several of Ulitskaya's mother and mother figures are far less straightforward than those self-sacrificial or egocentric women she has otherwise presented. In *Medea and Her Children*, Nora—a mother and an outside spectator of Medea's family—is confused by the other mothers and mother figures in this family because those women “apportioned part of their lives to their children but not all of it” (82). Nike's maternal skills in particular impress Nora, because Nike almost “absentmindedly” (76) stops her daughters from whining or arguing with her, but she also “doesn't think twice about screwing up her beautiful face” (86) for the children's entertainment. Nike herself feels that most of “her maternal feelings” (164) had been used up on her orphaned cousin Masha, and the former “never felt for her own children a comparable all-consuming love” (164) as she had for the latter. Nevertheless, in her approach to motherhood, Nike seems to be balanced, and in this aspect takes after her own mother, Alexandra. Alexandra certainly loves and cares for her children, but continues to have her own “various brilliant liaisons” (136) until she surpasses the age of fifty, at which point she decides to settle down with a cabinet-maker named Ivan Isaevich. Masha, too, is a rather ambiguous mother in *Medea and Her Children*. Although she is a stay-at-home mother who cares for her son Alik,

“dancing attendance on him” (265) when he is sick, she nevertheless becomes consumed by her passion for her lover Butonov and on one occasion “had quite forgotten about” (275) the children whom she had dropped off at their grandparents’ house three days earlier. Masha feels a mixture of guilt and happiness when she leaves her family for ““ten minutes”” (288) to be with Butonov and subsequently returns many hours later. These women attempt to adopt a model of motherhood that provides both loving care for their children but also a modicum of happiness for the mothers themselves. Ulitskaya thus presents maternity as encompassing a variety of experiences; motherhood can be seen as a burden to be countenanced, as another opportunity for selfishness, or as something perhaps between these two extremes. Ulitskaya’s dissimilar illustrations of sacrificial, selfish, and somewhat balanced mothers thus serve to subvert prescribed cultural notions of maternity. Her portrayal does not subscribe to the “cult of maternity and self-sacrifice” (*Dehexing* 18) described by Helena Goscilo. Neither does Ulitskaya submit to Petrushevskaya’s understanding of “the maternal bond as a great myth” (Katz 54). Rather, Ulitskaya develops a unique perspective on motherhood predicated essentially on individual experience.

Gendered Binarism in Ulitskaya’s Texts

Helena Goscilo highlights Ulitskaya’s “skill in avoiding bathos and the formulas of gender stereotype” (*Dehexing* 99) in her discussion of Ulitskaya’s short story,

“A Chosen People”. While this remark may be true of the text in question, it can certainly not be applied across the board to Ulitskaya’s works. Rather than denying the existence of (or ‘avoiding’) such stereotypes, or creating characters who are either completely antithetical or completely in accordance with gender ‘norms,’ Ulitskaya makes use of presupposed ideas of gender to describe her characters. Indeed, throughout her texts, Ulitskaya actually presents her reader with a variety of gender assumptions. She refers to several womanly traits including: those “special womanly eyes” (*Sonechka* 17) and that “keen feminine eye” (*Medea* 137) that help women to find a man; “that feminine sexuality which is so paradoxically generous to those who take from it and so destructively cruel to those who give” (*Sonechka* 15); the “feminine music of the body” (59); a “terribly domesticated... feminine way of organizing everyday life... curtains... little vases... rugs” (“Women’s Lies” 265); “girlish chatter” (*Medea* 17); letters that are “girlish and confidential... devoted to dreams and presentiments” 219); “that weakness so unbecoming in a man, for his behaving like a high-strung lady” (*Medea*, 190); and to the “sweet ad-libbing fibbing of a woman—blameless, shameless, innocent of guile” (“Women’s Lies” 238). Additionally, Ulitskaya comments on several manly traits, including: “masculine assertiveness” (“Zurich” 133); “masculine pride” (“The Orlov-Sokolovs” 198); punches made “like a man with the fist clenched” (“March 1953” 60); “a scowling fearlessness and inflexible stubbornness... unambiguously masculine... evident manliness... strong, steady, and confident” (*Medea* 17); “the typical male’s self-

absorption in the life taking place deep within himself" (132); a "benevolent and professional masculine examination from the crown of her head down to her ankle" (58) that the "connoisseur" (58) makes of a woman's body; and "forthrightness... complete lack of possessiveness... 'a male psychology... [fear] of getting stuck in a long affair, in obligations, in marriage'" (272). Ulitskaya does not avoid the use of gender stereotypes; however, she debilitates their power in a rather inventive and effective manner.

Ulitskaya uses such tropes as cited above to characterize both women and men in her texts, but she blends within individual characters an array of qualities that draw on different notions of femininity and masculinity. Several female characters fulfill the role of the 'typical' woman, characterized by "traits of irrationality, passion, enigma, submissiveness, and suffering" (Goscilo and Lanoux, Introduction 9) and "gentleness, sensitivity, maternal instincts, and the capacity to love" (Goscilo, *Dehexing*, 10). These characters include Nina, in *The Funeral Party*, who appears at first to be "a silly woman, stuck-up and capricious" (28) but subsequently is seen as "merely simple-minded, and psychologically unbalanced too; inertia alternated with hysteria" (28). In either description, Nina is certainly irrational. She is also marked by an "infinite helplessness" (28), a "peculiar idiocy" (96), and is "'so weak'" (128) that she can't survive without her husband Alik, and after his death she sits with a "bright, distracted look... how Ophelia must have looked" (121). Another

'typical' woman, this one characterized particularly by her 'submissiveness' and 'maternal instincts' is Anya, in "The Daughter of Bokhara," who when young, is beautiful and modest (134). She has "never raised her deferential eyes" (138) to her father-in-law, and she is very protective of her Down's syndrome daughter Milya, appearing to be "quite unaware of her daughter's deficiency" (142).

Other particularly feminine characters in Ulitskaya's texts include Sonechka, who becomes "quite [a] practical housewife" (*Sonechka* 44), Jasia, whose "mouth seemed to be begging for protection" (*Sonechka*, 55) and whose body moves as if to "feminine music" (59), Anna of "The Queen of Spades" who is "conscientious" (96) and cares for her mother, Mour, out of "'duty'" (103) and pity for the latter, who is a "'monster, [a] demon of egoism'" (103), and Vera, who in "Dauntless Women of the Russian Steppe" insists in "her visceral feminine wisdom" (238) that, "if you love someone, you *do* forgive them everything" (234). These women, whether maternal, self-sacrificing, irrational, or weak, meet the qualifications of the 'typical' woman, albeit in various ways.

Ulitskaya also creates women who do not solely embody 'womanly' qualities, rather incorporating some masculine traits into their psyches. Irina, in contrast to Nina in *The Funeral Party*, is marked by traits of strength, "a practical mind" (35), and "pride, which had grown" (128) over the years. Despite her display of those characteristics which Ulitskaya has associated with 'masculinity,' Irina is not presented as 'manly.' She is "stunning" (4) and "beautiful" (153), and is

maternal towards her “little girl” (137), the fifteen-year-old Maika, for whom Irina would often “hurry from the other side of town so that... [Maika] could bury her head in her shoulder and fall asleep” (153). Irina thus adopts some ‘masculine’ qualities while retaining a certain degree of femininity. Nike is another character who does this. In *Medea and Her Children*, Nike describes herself as possessing a “‘male psychology’” (272), and like the “strapping young man” (147) Butonov, measures sexual satisfaction “in centimeters, minutes, hours, the level of hormones in the blood” (280). However, Nike is also associated with a feminine capacity for “pedagogical” (84) and “culinary” (84) tasks, and her ability for seduction is described as being as “fine as lace, invisible but palpable, like the smell of a pie fresh from the oven” (132)—images evoking ‘womanly’ dress and the ‘womanly’ activity of cooking. A third example of a character in whom Ulitskaya amalgamates feminine and masculine traits appears in Tanya, from the story “The Orlov-Sokolovs”. Tanya possesses both a “strength of mind...[and an] independent manner” (201) and is “so bold, so unabashed” (202) that she often surprises her own mother. After she breaks off her relationship with Andrey and marries Vitya (an act prompted mainly by revenge), she refuses Andrey’s insistent requests for her to leave Vitya and return to him. These characteristics align with such ‘masculine’ traits of confidence and stubbornness, but Tanya also possesses ‘feminine’ tendencies; she would often submit to Andrey, letting him take the postgraduate position (209), “giving in” (210) on the telephone by speaking first, and “again” (218)

giving in by speaking first after the reunion of their “one flesh” (218). As in the case of both Irina and Nike, Tanya exhibits qualities normally associated with both men and women. Ulitskaya thus presents her protagonists as different concoctions of traits and would-be stereotypes. She imagines characters that are remarkable primarily for their individuality. Ulitskaya’s highly individualized portrayal of gender both echoes her approach to motherhood and challenges essentialist ideology. In essence, Ulitskaya uses and abuses gender stereotypes to impress on her reader the unique humanity in every person.

CONCLUSION

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, Tatyana Tolstaya, and Ludmila Ulitskaya confront gendered binarisms and essentialist notions of femininity within their works, yet each employs manifestly distinctive methods in doing so. While Petrushevskaya predominantly centers her attention on the isolation and struggles associated with maternity, thereby challenging its exalted status within Russian culture, Ulitskaya asseverates the significance of individuated experience in motherhood. Petrushevskaya dismantles the stereotype of maternity as life-fulfilling, and instead necessitates individual storytelling as an alternative to presupposed notions of motherhood and femininity. Sadur, who does not impugn accepted perceptions of motherhood, nonetheless recasts femininity in recreated myths. Tolstaya, by regendering her characters through role-reversals, questions clichéd notions of femininity and gender rules. Ulitskaya entreaties her reader to appreciate the uniqueness of each of her characters with respect to both gender and motherhood, and blends varying feminine and masculine traits among her protagonists to question exclusive definitions of gender and inherent sexual difference. Each writer confounds, to varying degrees, the naturalist idea of 'woman' presented by her culture. While Sadur works outside the framework of gendered binarism, Petrushevskaya and Tolstaya subvert it through direct opposition to it, and Ulitskaya molds the framework to her own use, effectively eliminating binary oppositions of gender

and establishing individualized truths. Together, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nina Sadur, Tatyana Tolstaya, and Ludmila Ulitskaya comprise a literary rebellion in which each author uniquely rejects definitive conceptualizations of womanhood and femininity.

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