

## Representations of Russian Women

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WHAT DO YOU THINK OF when I say 'Russian women'? If I were to write down everything that popped up in my mind, I would begin with

1. socialist realist women in scarves on tractors
2. heavily made-up girls in expensive coats in the metro
3. babushkas in a row on a bench.

Each of these stereotypes has its own history and political message. The socialist realist picture tells us about the komsomolka-ideal: she has a short haircut, wears plain clothes and no make-up. She was emancipated automatically by the Revolution in 1917, and now spends her days cheerfully participating in *subbotniks*. She is modest, severe and simple. This was the prevailing official ideal during the Soviet period, and for schoolchildren it was even a rule: teachers would examine the older girls' faces in order to find traces of makeup (Azhgikhina & Goscilo 1996, 99).

No wonder women started reacting against this ideal. When the climate warmed up a bit after Stalin's death, women showed up in applications of triumphant bright colours. The colouring was not an invention of their own, though, but a result of the poor quality of the cosmetics manufactured in the Soviet Union. In the 70s, the state economy improved because of oil export, and it could afford a limited import of East European consumer goods, including cosmetics.

The acquisition of these items became an important part of Soviet women's lives. The underlining of one's femininity developed into a sign of protest against the 'emancipated' way of life that had been forced upon them: a life that consisted of a full-time work obligation plus complete responsibility for domestic work. The heavily made up girl from the metro I recalled above probably uses cosmetics not primarily to attract men, but as a signal of resistance to the unwieldy burden of everyday life.

When the Soviet Union started to wither away, the komsomolka-ideal *lost* its very last scraps of influence on women's appearance. In connection with the introduction of market economy, it was replaced by an intense exploitation of the female body in public spaces: in advertisements, in newspaper articles, on the theatre stage, in 'sauna-clubs' (Azhgikhina & Goscilo 1996, 113). The only ones to be genuinely upset by this exposition were the babushkas, the grannies of the war generation. They used to be the unchallenged guardians of Soviet morality, uninhibitedly passing judgements on how young women should appear in public (Azhgikhina & Goscilo 1996, 116). During the Soviet period, a young woman had better *listen* to the well-wishing advice of the babushka, otherwise she was in danger of getting into trouble at work (*especially* if she shared babushka's communal apartment—the babushkas were great squealers).<sup>1</sup> But with the disappearance of the party rule, young women ceased to pay attention to babushka's instructions, as they were repeatedly given evidence that modesty did not work anymore.

In this article, I will take my starting *point* from a fourth way of representing Russian women, that has become more and more frequent in Western media during the last decade: as 'Prostitutes taking over the Western market' or 'Women marrying Western men for money'. This representation is of course easy to deconstruct into just another rhetorical device used in the ideological war that still goes on between East and West. But the figure of the travelling woman of questionable repute turns up in Russia as well, for example in contemporary literature. This travelling woman has become a repository of a range of cultural meanings, most of them dealing with the moral state of Russia (Goscilo 1995, 78) and the introduction of the market economy (Clark 1993, 191). In this article, I will demonstrate how

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<sup>1</sup> See Boym 1994, 149.

this subject is treated by a female author, Vera Kalasnikova, in her short story 'Nostal'gija'. Kalasnikova does not present her heroine as an entirely positive character, rather the contrary. But evidently, she fails to portray her protagonist with sufficient disgust: when the story was reviewed she was accused of glorifying her heroine. I will offer you my interpretation of Kalasnikova's story and contrast it to the reviewer's. With the help of Larissa Lissyutkina, I will explain the gap between the two interpretations as an indicator of a social conflict between men and women in Russia. But now over to the fourth way of representing Russian women,

4. the travelling dealer in her own body.

The images created by mass-media produce the impression that women from the NIS are currently invading Western countries, in order to exchange their beauty, sexuality or femininity for hard currency and/or citizenship and the social welfare benefits associated with it. The editor of the Russian edition of *Playboy*, interviewed in the American publication *Russian Life Magazine*, worries about the consequences: If before they talked about brain drain, now you can talk about "flesh drain" (*The 'awesome force'...* 1998). In the West, state officials worry even more, and enormous resources are spent in order to fight the criminal aspects of this phenomenon—the illegal trafficking in women's bodies. In 1997 an international conference was organized in Moscow, with Western assistance, on the subject 'Sales of NIS Women Abroad for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation'. According to the *Russian Life Magazine* (1998, 22) 'the conference revealed that "cheap, undemanding and submissive" Russian girls beat out "colleagues" from Africa and Latin America in popularity among exploitative traders'. The exchange going on within the framework of marriage is more difficult to control: Swedish authorities see themselves limited to means like forcing visa applicants from Russia to vow not to get married during their stay in the country.<sup>2</sup> There is no reason for suspecting the mass-media for having invented

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that I remembered the vow from my own encounter with the visa application procedure. When I checked it out, it turned out that I was wrong in theory, but right in practice: the form does not require you to promise anything, but there is a question that reads 'Do you plan to get married during your stay in Sweden ?' Any anxious applicant will interpret this question as 'Just try to say "yes" ! You will not get your visa'. So, in practice you are forced to promise.

the story about the women-travellers. But the way this story is presented conjures up a scenario, where a huge amount of poor and probably infected women come to the countries of Western Europe, in order to corrupt the 'purity'<sup>3</sup> of these societies. The fear of this imagined wave of women combines with the fear of Eastern organized crime, and produces an exaggerated discourse that explains all evils with foreign influence.<sup>3</sup> Thus, one way to interpret my fourth representation is to see it as a product of the ancient human wish to declare everything we do not approve of to be somebody else's problem.

But what happens when this subject is discussed in Russia? Here, the same women are portrayed in a different, but by no means more flattering way. Those women who, for one reason or another, marry a Westerner are a chief target for those (men) eager to find Post-Soviet 'traitors of the motherland'. Larissa Lissyutkina (1993, 285) has in her reading of progressive Russian literature found that the cliché of the female traitor is persistently projected onto women. She mentions V. Aksenov's *Island of Crimea* (1981) as an example. Helena Goscilo (1995, 78f) adds Vladimir Kunin's novella *Intergirl* (*Inter-devocka*, 1988) and Viktor Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* (*Russkaja krasa-vica*, 1990) to the list of male derogatory images of Russian women going abroad. Lissyutkina interprets this imagery as having more than purely literary roots. She describes the relationship between women and men in contemporary Russia as one of social conflict. Lissyutkina (1993, 285) writes:

In the aftermath of the great experiment in the creation of "the new man," the male factory worker and the female collective farmer have come down from the movie screen and from the pedestal, bashed each other over the head with the hammer and sickle, and ended in divorce. The worker whiles away his days in alcoholism, the collective farmer her nights near the "Intourist" hotel, and both are sure that they have ruined each other's life.

The scientific worth of this allegory of the Russian people, portraying them as drunkards and whores, is of course hard to prove. All the same, in my reading of Russian contemporary literature I have found indications that the fact that women go abroad actually gives rise to social conflict, and that this conflict can be traced in literary discourse.

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<sup>3</sup> See Sampson 1998, 181, on organized crime.

In 1998 Vera Kalašnikova published a short story titled 'Nostal'gija' in the St Petersburg literary journal *Zvezda*. The main protagonist, Polina, is presented as an *intelligentka*, that is a member of the *intelligentsia*. She is in her early thirties, good looking and enterprising. The storyline is organized around her different attempts at getting married to a German. In the beginning of the novella she has almost succeeded, but unfortunately Manfred commits suicide and she is forced to proceed with her struggle, but now on German soil. Polina does not question the moral appropriateness of her own behaviour, but has a lot to say about the moral qualities of the people she meets. She is a PhD student of German literature and is writing her dissertation on the 19th-century poet Hölderlin.

This is by no means a coincidence: it provides the author with a great opportunity to mirror the complicated cultural exchange between Germany and Russia that has taken place during the last two centuries. The German romanticists were of extremely great importance for the Russian culture of the last century. The romanticists gave the Russian intelligentsia the tools for self-understanding when they proclaimed the superiority of ideas over material, the superiority of the genius over the mob. The intelligentsia thought of itself as the bearer of the spiritual heritage of Russian culture. It defined itself in opposition, not to the people, which was sanctified, but to the lower bracket of urban dwellers, in French *petite bourgeoisie*, in Russian *mescanstvo*. According to Svetlana Boym (1994, 67), the cultural war between the intelligentsia and the *mescanstvo* informs all of modern intellectual history. Another crucial opposition is that between spirituality (*duchovnost'*) and banality (*poslost'*). *Duchovnost'* was perceived of as being the source of all the great works of Russian culture. Therefore, 'culture' (*kul'tura*) was not a neutral word, but was taken in a very idealized sense. It denoted a pure, timeless space, beyond experience.<sup>4</sup> This space was constantly threatened by *poslost'*. The intelligentsia used this word in order to describe a world-view oriented towards material gain, unethical behaviour, particularly with respect to sexuality (Boym 1994, 44). But not all sexuality would fit into the concept of *poslost'*, only that which has a separate and autonomous sphere of existence—separate from love, religion, and social

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<sup>4</sup> Clark 1993,194. Clark writes about the perceptions which inform Soviet cultural journalism, but her formulations are true for the 19th century intelligentsia as well.

preoccupations. If we return to the heroine of our short story, we see that Polina, as a representative of the educated social strata, identifies with the value system of the Russian intelligentsia. She knows the value of High Arts :

Сальвадор Дали - не просто гений, это был архигений, почти полубог, владевший рисунком и цветом, как Рембрандт, как все гиганты Возрождения<sup>5</sup>

and despises people with a poor spiritual life:

их [немцев] одиночество, как она теперь знала, прекрасно компенсируется пивом, сосисками и путешествиями<sup>6</sup>

When Polina has arrived in Germany, she tries to interpret the surrounding world through the lenses of her knowledge about German culture:

Садилась поближе к воде и смотрела на Зибен-Гебирге, силясь представить себе Зигфрида с его волшебным Нотунгом, Брунгильду и карлика Миме.<sup>7</sup>

But in spite of these efforts, the reader soon begins to suspect Polina for not being genuinely interested in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, or in German culture as a whole: the descriptions of more material things are much more dominant in her thoughts:

Квартира Хайнца оказалась просторной, в четыре комнаты, гостиная была особенно огромной, хоть в футбол играй.<sup>8</sup>

And when she at last reflects upon Art, the interpretation she produces does not glow with sophistication:

Одна из картин изображала юношу и девушку, смотревших друг на друга такими невинными глазами, будто бы они и понятия не имели о том, как рождаются дети.<sup>9</sup>

So, who is Polina? Is she really a member of the intelligentsia? Certainly not. One of the central connotations of the word 'intelligentsia' during the 19th century was 'oppositional to the totalitarian regime'. In Soviet society such opposition was labelled 'enmity to the

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<sup>5</sup> In English (here and elsewhere my translation/K.S.) : 'Salvador Dali—he was not only a genius, he was an arch-genius, almost a demigod, who mastered drawing and colours like Rembrandt, like all the giants of the Renaissance.' (93)

<sup>6</sup> 'As she now knew, beer, sausages and travels perfectly compensated them /the Germans/ for their loneliness.' (57)

<sup>7</sup> 'She sat down close to the water and looked at Sieben-Gebirge, and tried to visualize Siegfried with his enchanted Notung, Brunhild and the dwarf Mime.' (42t)

<sup>8</sup> 'Heinz's apartment turned out to be spacious, four rooms, the sitting-room was particularly huge, you could almost play football there.' (44)

<sup>9</sup> 'One of the paintings represented a young man and a girl, who looked at each other with such innocent eyes, as if they had not got a clue about how children are born.' (44)

Soviet people', and those voicing opposition were called 'dissidents'. Polina is instead a member of the Soviet intelligentsia. It was appointed and controlled by the party elite and includes, according to the Stalin edition of *Bol'saja sovetskaja ènciklopedija*, writers, 'workers of art and culture', teachers, doctors, engineers, as well as Soviet and party functionaries, heads of state industrial and agricultural enterprises and officers and generals of the Soviet army (the latter category, obviously, also included the KGB) (Sandomirskaja 1995, 58).

The life and mores of the Soviet intelligentsia must therefore necessarily differ from the ones of its 19th-century predecessors. After the revolution, people from the lower social strata were appointed to high positions on account of party loyalty. The infamous *nivelirovka* took place: the mixing of social classes that led to a uniform society. The way of life of the *mescanstvo* was the one best suited for survival and it became ubiquitous. When you belong to the Soviet intelligentsia, you are surrounded by *mescanstvo*, because the strategies of *mescanstvo* are the ones that work best in Soviet and Post-Soviet society.

Polina is raised in an educational system where scientific critical thought is limited to the counting of 'marxometres'<sup>10</sup> in texts, she has received her knowledge about Germany from teachers who were never abroad, and she has certainly noticed, or even experienced on her own skin, that there is an alternative way of career planning for girls: sleeping with your boss.<sup>11</sup> But the ideal of the intelligentsia is still alive, and the cultural elite is painfully aware of the discrepancy between their moral values and the values practised in everyday life. Kalasnikova notices this discrepancy, but her protagonist Polina certainly does not. Polina commits all the mortal sins of *pošlost'* and *mescanstvo* : if she is not able to apprehend Art in any profound way, she is definitely capable of appreciating more material things, such as food:

Заказывала себе французский луковый суп, здесь он был какой-то особенный, с поджаристыми гренками, и сыр не плавал хлопьями, а светился в желтой пленке.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> i.e. facts that could be used to underline the truth of Marx' theses

<sup>11</sup> On sexual harassment in the Soviet Union/Russia, see Boym 1994, 280; Bridger 1996, 178; Lempert 1994, section xiv.xiv

<sup>12</sup> 'She ordered French onion soup, this restaurant served it in a special way, with crispy pieces of toast, and the cheese did not float as flakes, but gleamed in a yellow film.' (42)

Her language becomes almost poetical when speaking about onion soup ('the cheese [...] gleamed in a yellow film'), but she uses much more down-to-earth expressions when speaking about art ('as if they had not got a clue about how children are born", cf citation above). Her sexuality certainly has no connections to love, religion, and social preoccupations—she uses it solely in order to reach her own goals, i.e. pure *poslost'*. But nevertheless, Polina does not hesitate to repeat the rhetoric of the 19th-century intelligentsia in her critique of the Western middle class. The 19th-century travelling philosopher Aleksandr Herzen claimed for example that the middle-class ideals in Western Europe consisted of 'a piece of chicken in the cabbage soup of every little man' (Boym 1994, 68). Polina echoes his statement in her disapproving description cited above, that Germans can do well with no more in their lives than sausages, beer and travels. But the narrative gives evidence that Polina herself is certainly not prepared to live by spiritual means alone and that she is as passionately engaged in the struggle for a piece of chicken as are the Germans.

Kalasnikova allows her rather petit bourgeois protagonist to use the rhetoric of the 19th-century intelligentsia in order to highlight a crucial conflict in Soviet and Post-Soviet reality: the conflict that arises when the German-inspired ideals of the 19th-century Russian intelligentsia are declared and subscribed to by the Soviet intelligentsia, but *mescanstvo* becomes the way of life preferred. In my opinion, Kalasnikovas short story is a satire, where certain contemporary Soviet/Russian traits are being mildly ridiculed.

Now the time has come to present the indications of social conflict between men and women that I mentioned above. When Kalasnikova's short story was reviewed in *Novyj mir*, it was made a laughingstock by the reviewer, Sergej Kostyrko. He does not see any difference between the world view of the author and that of her protagonist:

Только не подумайте, что Вера Калашникова пишет сатирическое повествование о - скажем помягче - предприимчивой авантюристке. «Ностальгия» -это повесть о горькой, можно даже сказать, трагической доле нашей интеллигентной современницы. Под пером Калашниковой Полина - натура одухотворенная, возвышенная.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> 'But do not think that Vera Kalasnikova is writing a satirical narrative about—to put it mildly—an enterprising adventuress. 'Nostal'gija is a story about the bitter, you could even say tragic fate of our intellectual contemporary. From Kalasnikova's way of writing, we understand that Polina is an inspired, elevated creature.' (Kostyrko 1999, 204)

In my opinion, only Polina sees herself as 'inspired' and 'elevated', Kalasnikova does not. But Kostyrko has no problems in equating the author with her literary constructs. To reinforce his critique of the short story he ends his review with an ironic reflection on the behaviour of his 'intellectual female compatriots':

Я действительно никогда не мог до конца понять утонченность душевного устройства некоторых своих интеллигентных соотечественниц. С тупым недоумением наблюдал я, как стремительно возрастало чувство их собственного достоинства, когда, спешно выйдя замуж за подвернувшегося иностранца и слегка пожив в европах, приезжали они домой продемонстрировать свою новую, по-европейски свободолюбивую повадку [...] мне непонятно, зачем брак по расчету, то есть обыкновенную куплю-продажу, припудривать гражданским пафосом.<sup>14</sup>

The logic of the above cited passage can be formulated as 'if you decide to engage in the dirty business of fictive marriage, you should at least be ashamed of it, and not try to boast about your new, unjustly acquired experiences'. From the subject of fictive marriage, he jumps directly to the matter of prostitution:

Кроме того, у меня, видимо, какой-то недостаток патриотизма: я не чувствую законной национальной гордости, читая в газетах о том, что спрос на русских женщин не только в Турции, но и в Германии, Англии и даже во Франции по-прежнему высокий и цены держатся очень даже приличные [...] Теперь же, получив из рук глубоко уважаемого мною журнала «Звезда» повесть Калашниковой, я обретаю возможность осознать свои заблуждения и избавиться от агрессивного мужского шовинизма. Но, чувствуя, не получается. Закоستنел.<sup>15</sup>

As this jump is not further explained, I conclude that Kostyrko shares the opinions of those feminists who argue that prostitution may also occur within the framework of marriage, when 'a woman contracts to sell her sexual and other services to an individual man in exchange for economic security and/or protection from other

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<sup>14</sup> 'I have indeed never been able completely to understand the refinement of the spiritual makeup of some of my intellectual female compatriots. I watched with dull perplexity how their feeling of self-respect swiftly increased, when having hurriedly married any old foreigner who came along and lived for a while in Europe, they returned home to demonstrate their new, European freedom-loving habits [...] I do not understand, why marriage by calculation, that is the usual buy-and-sell thing, should be powdered with civic pathos.' (*ibid.*, 204t)

<sup>15</sup> 'Furthermore, I am obviously lacking in patriotism: I do not feel any lawful national pride when I read in the newspapers that the demand for Russian women, not only in Turkey, but also in Germany, England and even in France, is still as high as ever and that the prices remain at a very decent level [...] Now, when my deeply respected journal *Zvezda* provides me with Kalasnikova's story, I find the opportunity to become aware of my delusion and get rid of my aggressive male chauvinism. But I feel that I do not manage. My brains are too stiff.' (*ibid.*, 205)

men'.<sup>16</sup> But Kostyrko does not share the feminist concern for the women involved. Instead he interprets Kalasnikova's short story as an advocacy for a woman's right to use marriage, or to prostitute herself, in order to promote her own enterprises, and becomes horrified by the thought. For some reason he also supposes this to be a part of the feminist agenda, cf his ironic statement 'I find the opportunity to [...] get rid of my aggressive male chauvinism', a citation from feminist discourse.

If we unfold Kostyrko's irony about his lack of 'lawful national pride', we find the tender spot Kalasnikova has touched: the hurt national pride of Russian men. The thought of 'our women' selling themselves to the previous enemy, *buržuj*, is evidently too much for the most enlightened critic. The spot is obviously so tender that Kostyrko in the clouds of his pain fails to remember basic hermeneutical knowledge about distinctions between author and protagonists. He is also blocked from any reflection on *why* women have to use their bodies in commercial exchange, and what power structure lies behind this phenomenon.

In his review, Kostyrko reproduces the image of the female traitor as introduced above by Lissyutkina. This way of representing Russian women carries a political significance, as do the other four representations I have already discussed. If in the West the image of 'The travelling dealer in her own body' was built on xenophobia, the same thing could be said about 'the female traitor'-figure in Russia. But if, in the first case, women were represented as a 'threat', then in the second they are pictured as 'property' of which we are being deprived by the enemy. Neither representation has anything to say about Russian women's own experiences. This is good to have in mind, when being exposed to these and similar representations.

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<sup>16</sup> See Bridger 1996, 174, 208, about so called 'undercover prostitution'.

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