

Memorable Fiction: Evoking Emotions and Family Bonds in Post-Soviet Russian Women's Writing

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with women-centred prose texts of the 1990s and 2000s in Russia written by women, and focuses especially on generation narratives. By this term the author means fictional texts that explore generational relations within families, from the perspective of repressed experiences, feelings and attitudes in the Soviet period. The selected texts are interpreted as narrating and conceptualizing the consequences of patriarchal ideology for relations between mothers and daughters and for reconstructing connections between Soviet and post-Soviet by revisiting and remembering especially the gaps and discontinuities between (female) generations. The cases discussed are Liudmila Petrushevskaja's 'povest' *The Time: Night* (*Vremia noch*, 1991), Liudmila Ulitskaia's novel *Medeia i ee deti* [Medea and her Children] (1996) and Elena Chizhova's novel *Vremia zhenshchin* [The Time of Women] (2009). These novels reflect on the one hand the woman-centredness and novelty of representation in women's prose writing in the post-Soviet period. On the other hand, the author suggests that they reflect the diverse methods of representing the Soviet era and experience through generation narratives. The texts reassess the past through intimate, tactile memories and perceptions, and their narration through generational plots draws attention to the process of working through, which needs to be done in contemporary Russia. The narratives touch upon the untold stories of those who suffered in silence or hid the family secrets from the officials, in order to save the family. The narration delves into the different layers of experience and memory, conceptualizing them in the form of multiple narrative perspectives constructing different generations and traditions. In this way they convey the 'secrets' hidden in the midst of everyday life routines and give voice to the often silent resistance of women towards patriarchal and repressive ideology. The new women's prose of the 1980s–90s and the subsequent trend of women-centred narratives and generation narratives employ conceptual metaphors of *reassessing*, *revisiting* and *remembering* the cultural, experiential, and emotional aspects of the past, Soviet lives.

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KEYWORDS

emotion, generation, memory, narrative, post-Soviet women's writing, Russian women's writing

The phenomenon of new women's prose in the late Soviet and post-Soviet period has been noted, accepted and studied as one of the major literary events of that era in Russia.¹ The transformation process of society and culture was a fruitful ground for the flourishing of women's writing. Women writers and women's texts forcibly entered the literary world from the beginning of the glasnost period. At its first stages new women's prose (*novaia zhenskaia proza*) — as it was called at the time by critics and writers alike, and as it is still referred to — of the 1980s–90s depicted society and especially women's lives in quite gloomy, dark and pessimistic tones. This was the case also in other spheres of new literary groups. The main 'chord' of the new literary voices after the break-up of the Soviet regime was not a happy one. "In fact we are all on the verge of madness, because the break-up went straight through us, our lives, and our memory" — writes the literary scholar Sergei Romashko in 1997, and continues — "Where can we place decades of history, in which the happiness and pain of living people was meshed with never-ending lying, so that those who experienced all cannot tell what did happen and what didn't" (ROMASHKO 1997: 7).² Romashko refers to the official Soviet culture's falsified representations of the happy Soviet people, who lived "in the best country in the world". In hindsight it seems as if people lived, in fact, two lives: the official and unofficial. New literary groups that emerged in the public sphere in the wake of perestroika and glasnost dealt with this paradox and gap between the official and unofficial, as well as sought to deal with the 'real' experiences of people, or, in the postmodernist turn of 'alternative' prose, questioned the possibility of representing the 'real' in the first place.

This article deals with women-centred prose texts of the 1990s and 2000s in Russia written by women, and focuses especially on generation narratives. By this term I mean fictional texts that explore generational relations within families, from the perspective of repressed experiences, feelings and views in the Soviet period. I shall interpret the selected texts as narrating and conceptualizing the consequences of patriarchal ideolo-

¹ Cf. SAVKINA 1996; GABRIELIAN 1996; GOSCILO 1996; ROVENSKAIA 2000; ZHEREBKINA 2003; TIMINA 2007; ROSENHOLM and RYTKÖNEN 2012.

² All translations in this paper from Russian into English are done by Marja Rytönen unless otherwise is indicated.

gy for relations between mothers and daughters and for reconstructing connections between the Soviet and post-Soviet by revisiting and remembering especially the gaps and discontinuities between (female) generations.³ The cases discussed in detail in this chapter are Liudmila Petrushevskaia's 'povest' *The Time: Night* (*Vremia noch*, 1991), Liudmila Ulitskaia's novel *Medeia i ee deti* [Medea and her Children] (1996) and Elena Chizhova's novel *Vremia zhenshchin* [The Time of Women] (2009). These novels, in my opinion, reflect on the one hand the woman-centeredness and novelty of representation in women's prose writing in the post-Soviet period.⁴ On the other hand, I suggest that they reflect the diversity of dimensions in representing the Soviet era and experience through generation narratives. Petrushevskaia's text represents a gloomy picture of the family and women's experiences from the late Soviet time through an intimate narrative of the main character. The text is a concentration of women's everyday experiences in a highly condensed narrative of intergenerational affects and emotions. Ulitskaia's text is lighter in tone, and looks at the Soviet experience and Soviet family from a greater distance. It also covers a longer period of Russian history than Petrushevskaia's text: from the beginning of the 20th century to the late Soviet period. The third text, Chizhova's prize-winning novel, is almost nostalgic in its attitude to the past, although it depicts the culture of silencing and trauma in the post-war period.

First, I will briefly return to the concept of new women's prose of the 1980s–90s, because the texts I deal with are closely related to the themes and questions raised in it, and deal with them further. The writer and leader of the new women writers' group the New Amazons (*Novye amazonki*), Svetlana Vasilenko (2000) writes that her and many other women writers' texts were rejected by publishers and editors of literary journals in the 1970s–80s, and were mocked as 'menstrual' prose which would never be published in Russia. The women writers' group, *Novye amazonki*, emerged as and from resistance towards derogatory notions about women's writing and sought to represent women's perspective on the world.⁵ This perspective — according to the 'manifest' in one of the

³ The theme of Soviet generations is familiar also from works by well-known contemporary male writers, e.g. Vasili Aksionov (*Moskovskaia saga*, 1993–1994 [*Generations of Winter*, 1994]) and Viktor Erofeev (*Khoroshii Stalin* [The Good Stalin], 2004). On the metaphor of family bonds in contemporary Russian cultural imagery see OUSHAKINE 2007.

⁴ Cf. GOSCILO 1996; ZHEREBKINA 2003.

⁵ *Novye amazonki* included, in addition to Vasilenko, such writers as Larisa Vaneeva, Elena Tarasova, Nina Gorlanova, Irina Polianskaia, Marina Palei, Valeria Narbikova, and Nina Sadur.

anthologies the group published — differed from that of men (VASILENKO 2000: 33; ZHEREBKINA 2003: 61). Vasilenko notes that women writers claimed their place in literature as ‘writing women’, promoting their own ways of expressing themselves, and seeking a connection with their female predecessors.⁶ The New Amazons published two anthologies of women’s prose in 1990 *Nepomniashchaia zla* [She Who Bears No Grudge] and 1991 *Novye amazonki* [The New Amazons] which found an interested readership in Russia. Thus, in the twenty years following the first publications of new women’s prose, it appears today that the women writers gained what they wanted: their new women’s prose is not considered second-rate anymore and it is being published by prestigious publishing houses (VASILENKO 2002). In addition, women’s writing in contemporary Russia has become more diverse in its aesthetic and artistic forms and purposes than the new women’s prose of the 1980s–90s. It encompasses a variety of genres from high brow poetry and prose to popular literature (e.g. women’s detectives, romantic novels).

Vasilenko and her colleagues were representatives of ‘new women’s prose’, which was seen as ‘new’ in comparison with earlier women’s prose of the 1960s–70s (by Natalia Baranskaia, Irina Grekova and others) both in terms of content and form (HOLMGREN 2002). The content of the new women’s prose represented previously repressed issues of women’s lives, as Helena Gosciolo points out in her study of new women’s prose:

Female bodies ‘document’ their owners’ suffering and degradation: they bruise, hemorrhage, and break; they endure rape, childbirth, abortion, beating, and disease; they succumb to substance addiction, incontinence, and sundry dehumanizing processes — all painstakingly detailed in slow motion (GOSCILO 1996: 88–89).

A rather symptomatic text of the 1990s was written by the feminist writer Mariia Arbatova. It is the title story from the collection of her short stories *Menia zovut zhenshchina* [My name is woman / I’m called a woman] (1997). In this highly ironic autobiographical narrative the narrator-protagonist is portrayed as an eighteen-year-old young woman who has her first abortion. The protagonist becomes pregnant, but her mother sees no reason why she should have a child at such a young age, so the protagonist is taken to a women’s clinic by her mother to have an abortion. The experience is devastating, mainly because of the way how

⁶ Cf. Vasilenko’s story about the formation of the first Russian women’s collective effort at publishing (2000). See also, for instance, GABRIELIAN 1996: 42; ROVENSKAIA 2000; ZHEREBKINA 2003: 61.

women, young and old, are treated there: mercilessly and with despise. After a few months the protagonist is pregnant again (there was a chronic lack of contraceptives for women in the Soviet Union) — and ends up at the same clinic. This time, however, she decides to keep the child despite her mother's and the doctor's recommendations. In the course of the pregnancy it turns out that she is going to have twins, which makes her situation more complicated and she has to stay at the clinic longer than for a 'normal' pregnancy. At the clinic the protagonist finds herself in the position of being the one who seems to have the least control over her own body. It is described how she 'leaves' her body and looks at the situation from outside: she does not 'feel' her body, she does not know her body and she does not own it, as shown in the following quotation:

All this reminded me of a space ship, cruelly neglected with women inside. They did not have the possibility to call for help, nor were they able to help themselves. The power of pain twisting and twisting into the crater pushed this ship towards catastrophe. I regained my consciousness to a deep howl and steaming forehead, realizing afterwards, that these two were related to me. Unsuccessfully trying to control the next howl, I forced myself not to wind the dial to maximum during the contractions; the lower half of my body separated from me and drifted below the ceiling, swinging sheets like wings, and the upper half, clinging to the bed, tried to think between the cries (ARBATOVA 1997: 57).

The text and the citation above are symptomatic of the representations of female bodily experiences in the new women's prose. The narratives describe the experiences as seen 'from the outside', their bodies taken by some outside force. At the clinic the protagonist is constantly referred to by the staff as the 'woman' (*zhenshchina*). The moment she gets pregnant she seems to lose her individuality, subjectivity and agency. She becomes a 'woman', a bearer of female physiology, capable of producing offspring. The theme of the humiliation, degradation and shame of the female body is described in numerous texts by women in the 1990s.⁷ As the Russian literary scholar Tatiana Rovenskaia (1999: 217) states,⁸ new women's prose represents the female body going through the most humiliating, painful, agonizing experiences, in addition to the humiliation of the main character, in Soviet institutions: hospitals, gynaecological clinics and schools, where this social practice was a norm.

⁷ For instance, Olga Tatarinova's *Seksopatologiya* [Sexopathology] (1993), Marina Palei's *Otdelenie propashchikh* (1991) [*The Losers' Division*, 1995], Natalia Sukhanova's *Delos* (1988).

⁸ See also ZHEREBKINA 2003.

Christina Parnell argues that the texts of new women's prose bring out not so much a *deconstruction* of gender roles in Russian culture, but a *reconstruction* of sexual difference. Thus, the aim of the Russian women authors is the opposite of Judith Butler's arguments about the constructivity of gender. As Parnell points out, this difference does not go back to a dichotomy between male and female, man and woman, but is based on the representation of the biological and social experience of women. Parnell (2000: 160–161) suggests that contemporary Russian women writers are not apt to deconstruct the gender difference, but instead are inclined to trace what has so far, for various social, historical and cultural reasons, been suppressed or excluded as the Other, which includes the female.

The new women's prose remains one of the brightest phenomena in Russian literature of the 1980s–90s; it is linked to the questioning of the legacy of the Soviet socialist gender ideology and, by depicting women's real, everyday experiences of the late Soviet period it offers a stark criticism of the symbolic representations of idealized working women and the ideology of equality. Thus, according to Russian gender scholar Irina Zherebkina, the women writers of the 1980s–90s sought to make the private even more private, in which they saw the possibility to depict the female experience constructed in social reality.⁹ If western feminist movements and theories strove to liberate women from biological essentialism, the new women's prose seems to do the opposite: to represent the female in its biological and physiological terms (hence the clinics, hospitals, physiological details). These characteristics can be interpreted as symptoms of traumatic experience of systemic sexual violence in the totalitarian regime (CHOWANIEC, KURKIJÄRVI and RYTKÖNEN 2010: 11–12; PARNELL 2000: 159–161; ROVENSKAIA 2003: 7–15).

None of the three writers I shall discuss further in this article participated in the new women's prose 'movement'. In fact, Petrushevskaja and Chizhova are known to have rejected the label of 'woman writer' (which bears a derogatory connotation in Russia) altogether. While the concepts are problematic, discussing them falls outside the range of this article.¹⁰ Nevertheless I deem it important to discuss Petrushevskaja, Ulitskaja and Chizhova in the context of the rise of women's writing in Russia since the 1980s–90s, because their texts raise issues that are crucial in understanding both the history and the present formations of female subjectivity in contemporary Russia.

⁹ See also Havelková's (1993: 92–93) discussion of the significance of family and the private sphere for Czech women during the communist regime.

¹⁰ For a discussion on female subjectivity in the Russian literary context see RYTKÖNEN 2004: 61–72.

The humiliation of women in women's clinics by doctors representing the official Soviet health care system and by 'nature' itself is also present in the private sphere of family relations as sexual humiliation and shame passed on from one generation to another, from mothers to daughters. The degradation and shame the women protagonists have gone through in the patriarchal society is channelled into the relations of mothers with their children in the form of frustration, despotism and anger.¹¹ The relationships between mothers and daughters in these texts can be characterized through breaks and discontinuity, rather than mutual trust or solidarity. The latter is true especially in Liudmila Petrushevskaia's (b. 1938)¹² novel *The Time: Night*. It is a narrative of family tyranny, power games and emotional frustration passed on from one generation to another. It is a story of three generations of women: The mother Anna, daughter Aliona, and grandmother Sima. The main protagonist and narrator, Anna Andrianovna, writes notes about her and her family's life at night at the kitchen table. She also reads her daughter's diary of her sexual liaisons. The 'events' related in the text concentrate solely on the private, domestic lives of these women.

The novel is packed with descriptions of what Bahktin calls the 'low bodily stratum'. They are often connected to the daughter's, Aliona's, shame she experiences in sexual relations with men. For Aliona, the 'truth' about the bodily aspects of a relationship with a man comes as a 'shock': she feels disgusted with herself, and is disgusted by different bodily fluids and reactions. As a result of her sexual 'adventures' she becomes pregnant. Anna finds out about the relations with men and Aliona's shame when she secretly reads her diary, which she found hidden in the book shelf (the diary entries are in italics):

I beg that no one read this diary even after my death. Oh God, what filth, what utter filth have I plunged into, Lord forgive me. I've fallen so low. Yesterday I'd fallen so terribly low that I cried all morning. It's terrible when morning comes, so painful to get up for the first time in your life from someone else's bed, to put on yesterday's underwear again. I rolled my knickers into a little ball and just put on my tights and went into the bathroom. He even said 'Why so shy all of a sudden?' Why indeed. [...] I was filled with seething slime, everything was swollen and sore and burning, something was going on that needed to be nipped in the bud, stopped, crushed, or I was going to die. [We'd see all too clearly nine

¹¹ This topic is frequent in the new women's prose of the 1990s, e.g., Valentina Soloviova's *U vsekh deti kak deti* [Everyone Has Ordinary Children] (1990), Tatiana Nabatnikova's *Domokhoziaika* [The Housewife] (1990), and Svetlana Vasilenko's *Khriushcha* [Piggy] (1997), depicting the frustrating anger and helplessness of women/mothers with their small children, and/or the cruel power games when the children — often daughters (but sons too) have grown up.

¹² On Petrushevskaia see, e.g., DALTON-BROWN 2000.

months later what precisely was going on — A.A.] [...] What am I doing here? He's leaving already. To add to it all I'd phoned M. [that's me — A.A.] yesterday evening as soon as I'd got there to say I was going to stay the night at Lena's, and Mum started yelling something uplifting along the lines of 'Lena my foot, you can stay at your Lena's for good for all I care' (PETRUSHEVSKAYA 2000: 17–19).¹³

By imitating the personal notes of the writing subject, the narrative persuades the reader to identify with the position of the writing subject, as Rita Felski (1989: 97–99) has stated. What is striking in this quotation (and elsewhere in the text) is the lack of empathy and feeling of community between mothers and daughters. Anna Andrianovna does not empathize with or share the shame experienced by her daughter in her first sexual encounter, although the need to share this experience is glaringly visible in Aliona's diary. It could be suggested that the text is an exploration of the limits and possibilities of representing and constructing female subjectivity.¹⁴ As has been noted, *The Time: Night* is an encyclopaedia of a woman's life from childhood to old age (LAIRD 1999: 39), depicting especially the life of her body in all these ages, but one of the most intriguing features of this narrative is the representation of women's intergenerational experience — knowledge is not passed on from one generation to another, resulting in the reproduction of ignorance and self-denying motherhood.¹⁵ The I-narrator telling the story of her life is ignorant of how she repeats the same 'mistakes' with her daughter from which she herself suffered in relation to her own mother. This theme emerges in other texts of the 1990s: Petrushevskaja's, Arbatova's, Vasilenko's, Palei's, Tatarinova's and many other writers' texts of the 1980s and early 1990s focus on the narration of the lived experience of the Soviet female subject traumatized by the ideology of equality and ignorance related to sexuality and sexual difference.

Liudmila Ulitskaia (b. 1943) started writing in the 1980s — after working first as a biologist and researcher. Ulitskaia was first published in the West, and only after that in Russia, but since then she has been one of Russia's most popular authors. Ulitskaia's novel "Medea and her Children" (1996) tells the story of Medea Mendez, a Greek 'matriarch' living in the Crimea in a house by the sea where her relatives and their children come every year. Medea Mendez is Greek, born in Feodosiya, a former Greek colony, in 1900 to the large family of Georgi Sinopli. The

¹³ I have used here the English translation by Sally Laird. The initials (A.A.) refer to the narrator, Anna Andrianovna.

¹⁴ Cf. RYTKÖNEN 2012; MARTIN 1988.

¹⁵ Cf. ADLAM 2005.

character is described from the very beginning as a beholder and keeper of local practices and knowledge.

She was the last in the family who had kept the Greek spoken in the colony of Taurica. [...] There wasn't anyone left with whom she could talk in this old, rich language, from which derive most philosophical and religious terms. [...] Taurica Greek — Medea's contemporaries had either died or been deported. She alone stayed in the Crimea, as she thought, because of God's mercy, but also thanks to her Spanish family name, left to her by her late husband (ULITSKAIA 1996: 9).

Her birth date — the year 1900 — marks the beginning of the century which brings cataclysmic changes to the people of Russian Empire. Medea clearly stands in between the old and the new — she is a mediator. Despite her feminine, maternal role in the family, paradoxically Medea does not bear children of her own:

Over the years Medea gathered to her home in the Crimea numerous nephews and nieces with their children and grandchildren, and made her quiet non-scientific observations on them. It was presumed that she loved all of them very much. What the love for children by women who don't have any of their own is like is hard to tell, but she experienced a lively interest towards them, which became even stronger as she grew older (ULITSKAIA 1996: 13).

As a sixteen-year-old girl Medea and her twelve brothers and sisters were suddenly left orphans, as their father Georgi died when his ship crashed and her mother Mathilda died giving birth to her fourteenth child. Two of her brothers were killed, one by the Reds, the other by the Whites. Medea's aunt and older sister adopted the younger brothers and sisters, but finally two of the younger brothers and a younger sister stayed with Medea and the old family nanny, Pelageia, who promised to stay in the house.

Medea Mendez is a quiet, calm and 'saintly' character, who wishes well for all (VIALTSEV 1998). Her profession in the local hospital as a nurse reinforces her role as a healing, 'mending' character in the story. The members of her extended family respect her: they follow the rules at her house and the often curious regime of everyday life she leads. Everyone looks up to her, because of her extraordinary life and family history. She is 'different': "What does power mean to her? She is a religious person — a different power is upon her. And don't ever say that she is afraid of something" (ULITSKAIA 1996: 50). In Ulitskaia's narrative, family — Medea's home and Medea herself as the central figure in it — is a locus of healing, mending the wounds and bridging the gaps. This is a different representation in comparison to Petrushevskia's analysis. In

Petrushevskaja's text we don't find a lot of information about Anna Andrianovna's, or her family's, history or origins. In that sense, it is not a family chronicle, although it is a narrative about family life in several generations. Time is condensed in Petrushevskaja's narrative (WOLL 1993): it represents the intimate, immediate experiences. In both cases, however, the family, family relations and generational links serve the narrative in describing and representing the *c i r c u m s t a n c e s* of the subjects. For both Petrushevskaja's and Ulitskaja's female characters, genealogy and to a certain extent biology are important indicators: Anna Andrianovna is afraid that the same inheritable mental illness has been passed on to her from her mother; Medea 'observes' the inheritance of family traits in her large kin. In both cases, the narrative touches upon the untold stories of those who suffered in silence or hid the family secrets from the officials, in order to save the family.

Women-centred narratives of several generations appear also in the women's prose in the 2000s. Fiction on a similar thread has been produced by Svetlana Shenbrunn (*Rozy i khrizantemy* [Roses and Chrysanthemums], 2001), Galina Shcherbakova (*Proshlo i eto* [It's Over], 2005) Margarita Khemlin (*Klotsvog*, 2009) and others. Documentary (that is, non-fiction) prose on similar themes has been produced by Petrushevskaja (*Malen'kaia devochka iz Metropolia* [A Small Girl from Metropol], 2006), Nina Katerli (2002, 2005), Irina Denezhkina (b. 1981) (*Babulia* [Granny], 2006).

The prize for the best Russian novel of the year 2009 was awarded to Elena Chizhova (b. 1957), for her novel "The Time of Women" (2009). The novel tells the story of women living in a communal apartment in Leningrad of the late 1960s. The main character is Antonina, who gives birth to an illegitimate child, a daughter, as a result of a one-night stand. The father of the child is either not aware of or does not care about the daughter. Thus Antonina earns her and her daughter's living in a factory as a single-mother. The daughter is often ill and it causes difficulties for Antonina at her work place. Another cause of worry for Antonina is that the girl does not speak at all. She understands talk, draws and reads, but does not utter a word. Antonina's neighbours, three old retired women — referred to as 'babushkas' — who live in the same communal apartment, come to her rescue. They agree to look after the girl while Antonina goes to work. They also think that it is better to look after the child at home so as not to reveal the girl's 'anomaly', which might cause her to be treated in a Soviet institution and be separated from her family. The three old women, however, have their own agenda and own goals in taking care of the child. In the mother's absence, they let the girl be bap-

tized in a church, and they choose for her the traditional name of an Orthodox saint — Sofia — rather than the name given to her by mother (Susannah). A religious world view and spirituality are important for Ulitskaia's Medea as well, although she does not, for obvious reasons, promote her religious views, as neither do Chizhova's babushkas. Religion and spirituality are something that prevail under the surface, within these characters, because of the outer constraints and prohibitions. They are also part of the repressed memory and values that are passed on from the previous female generation (the grandmothers) to the next (granddaughters) as a shared secret, as in the case of Chizhova's narrative.

The novel consists largely of the three babushkas' — Glikeria, Ariadna, Evdokia — conversations about their past: the revolution, wars, the Leningrad Blockade and family members each of them has lost. Once, after the daily walk with Sofia in the parks and streets of Leningrad, Ariadna is overwhelmed by memories of the Leningrad Blockade, and how her husband died in the army:

He wrote often. And then the letters stopped. The last one came in February: the youngest had already died. The oldest lived a bit longer — they died with his fiancée the following year (CHIZHOVA 2010: 37).

Ariadna's telling of the story is rather confusing, because it is not quite clear to whom the pronouns refer. This is characteristic of the novel's narrative: it is formed of bits and pieces overheard by the small girl, of her own imaginations and thoughts, and of her mother's thoughts. The other two companions listen sympathetically to the story they have heard a dozen times. They cherish the memory of those left in the dark past, and they want that memory to live on after they have died. So they tell Sofia the names of their lost ones: "When you grow up, you have to remember about him. When I die, no one is left to remember him: only you" (CHIZHOVA 2010: 37). The conversations take place in the middle of their everyday lives, the routines, the usual household chores, and meals. The narrative voice of the novel shifts focus during the different stages of the story: it moves between Antonina's, the old women's and the small girl's and then the already grown-up woman's perspective. This technique allows the author to portray the different spheres of reality in the communal and community's life. The three old women, representatives of the pre-revolutionary generations, epitomize the experience and perspective of the repressed past (revolution and wars), and the loss connected to this repression. Antonina represents the new, Soviet generation, taking part in the production and consumption of new Soviet real-

ities. The repressed experiences are, nevertheless, present, as if silently, in the ‘new’ experiences of reality in the form of the old women’s conversations among themselves. The duality of Antonina’s daughter’s name reflects these two spheres: the secret, i.e., the old, repressed sphere (Sofia) and the official sphere, i.e., the new, Soviet (Susannah), the latter of which seeks to cut off the old values (religion, old ways, conservatism). The novel’s narrative is a representation of how the memory of the past could and must be passed on and constructed, despite the gaps, silences and repression. At the end of the novel, Sofia/Susannah, who has grown up and become an artist, thinks about her three grandmothers and her mother who are already dead:

Now I’m always with them, even if they don’t see me, as if there was a solid wall between us. [...] I sit down a while, get up again, and go to the easel in order to change into the other girl with a good memory (*pamiatlivaia devochka*), and listen to their voice (CHIZHOVA 2010: 190).

Chizhova’s novel forms a parallel with Ulitskaia’s “Medea and her Children” and Petrushevskaja’s *The Time: Night* in that it conveys the ‘secrets’ hidden in the midst of everyday life routines and gives voice to the often silent resistance of women towards patriarchal and repressive ideology. In a similar vein its narration delves into the different layers of experience and memory, conceptualizing them in the form of multiple narrative perspectives constructing different generations and traditions.

The author of the text, Elena Chizhova, says that the text is about her childhood when she lived with her mother and grandmother and used to listen to their stories about the traumatic events and losses which one was not really allowed to talk about. Chizhova asks what happened to the historical memory in Russia: it seems that it is always lost between the generations. She also states that in Russia the passing on of memory is the task of women, because they outlive men, they possess that memory and experience, and they are willing and capable of passing it on. The novel is dedicated by Chizhova to her grandmothers (*Moim babushkam*) and it starts with a symptomatic sentence: “My first memory” (CHIZHOVA 2010: 7).

In the more recent versions of women’s prose, the process of dealing with the legacies of the Soviet past — as for instance in Chizhova’s text, exemplifies the need to restore the emotional reality of the Soviet period, or, in other words, the emotional economy of everyday life in the context of the traumatic history. As I have argued elsewhere, this process of remembering is both nostalgic and melancholic, because it calls forth the ‘haunting’ themes of repression, terror and

loss related to that past, but it also arouses comforting feelings connected with the atmosphere of the past and with the loss of family members. It evokes the atmosphere, details of everyday life, inner feelings and thoughts which the people of that time were not allowed to discuss, but which have now become a legacy of post-Soviet memory (RYTKÖNEN 2010: 144.) This is what can be called the 'Soviet' that is present in contemporary Russian culture. In addition to post-Soviet (post-socialist, post-communist), also the concepts of post-futurism (EPSTEIN 1995) and postmodernism¹⁶ have been employed to explain the Russian cultural field after the break-up of the Soviet Union; but do they actually explain it? Julie Buckler puts forward more questions:

How do Russian studies make sense now, after the cold war, in the larger context of globalization? Does the discourse on postcolonialism apply in our case? Has the 'post-Soviet' moment come and gone? (BUCKLER 2009: 251).

The lack of new symbolic forms that would satisfy the need for creative symbolic production has been compensated for by 'recycling' old Soviet symbols (OUSHAKINE 2007). Besides the 'recycling' of Soviet symbols, the traumatic events, losses, repression and violence that happened during the Soviet period continue to 'haunt' the post-Soviet memory of the Soviet period (ETKIND 2009a; ETKIND 2009b), because they have not been discussed or worked through properly on the public, political level in Russia. The discussion of the new women's prose of the 1980s–90s and the subsequent trend of women-centred narratives and generation narratives invoke conceptual metaphors of reassessing, revisiting and remembering the cultural, experiential, and emotional aspects of the past, Soviet lives. The women-centred generation narratives discussed in this article reassess the past through intimate, tactile memories and perceptions, and their narration through generational plots draws attention to the process of working through, which needs to be done in contemporary Russia. Whether this memory-work is called post-Soviet or post-totalitarian — implying a similar mechanism of remembering as a locus for 'repressed' realities and truths as in the postcolonial discourse (STOLER and STRASSLER 2000; RYTKÖNEN 2010) — the reconstruction of memories and experiences is an ongoing process, constantly finding new dimensions and layers of memory and subjectivity, though its topic continues to be the Soviet experience narrated from the post-Soviet perspective.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g. EPSTEIN, GENIS and VLADIV-GLOVER 1999; SKOROPANOVA 2000.

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