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Women's Migration in Contemporary Russian Literature

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2004

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Sarsenov, K. (2004). *Women's Migration in Contemporary Russian Literature*. (CFE Working Paper Series ; 29). <http://www.cfe.lu.se/CFEWP/CFEPaper29.pdf>

Total number of authors:

1

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Women's Migration in Contemporary Russian Literature

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CFE Working paper series is published by
Centre for European Studies at Lund University

© 2004 Karin Sarsenov, and CFE
Editor: Magnus Jerneck
Layout: Mikael Sundström
ISSN: 1403-6754

This paper is also available in pdf-format at CFE's web site: www.cfe.lu.se

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Abstract

This article takes as its starting point previous research that reveals the cultural construction of the journey to be imbedded in a narrative of masculine self-identity. This poses problems for the conceptualization of the female traveler in general, and of the Russian woman migrant in particular. In Western media, the conceptualization of the female traveler as a 'woman out of place' has generated an abundance of sexualized images of Russian women as easily available mail-order brides and deplorable victims of trafficking. The Russian patriotic discourse historically entertains suspicion about anyone who leaves the country. To this adds a tendency towards a feminization of the motherland that precludes a female patriotic subject: patriotism troped as heterosexual love for a woman favors male subjects and does not serve to enhance the status of the Russian woman migrant. My reading of three woman-authored contemporary prose pieces that thematically deal with women's migration shows an involvement in the above-mentioned discourses. In subtle and often sophisticated ways, they play with the stigmatization of Russian women as prostitutes, radically destabilizing the patriotic discourse that outlaws women's movement.

Introduction

In numerous studies, feminist geographers have explored how the so-called “friction of distance” influences people differently depending on gender. Long term structures in human history restrain women’s movement and impart to the myth of the “wide open” an inherently masculine tint. Eric J. Leed posits “the sessility of women and the mobility of men” as one of “certain realities in the history of travel” (1991, 113). Cultural obstacles that delayed the acceptance of women’s unaccompanied travel, horse-riding, bicycling, driving and flying on the one hand, and endorsement of foot-binding, high heels and tight skirts on the other have served to fix women both metaphorically and materially to one spot. But, as any ethnographer or historian would object, there are plenty of long term structures that instead stimulate women’s travelling. Patri-lineal living arrangements make the bride move to her husband’s village or country; during times of rapid urbanization women without male protection have moved into towns to make their living, and today the global “maid-trade” is estimated to comprise between 1-1.7 million women at any one time (Domosh & Seager, 130). However, these structures are not reflected in the cultural construction of travel. Although a myriad of women have indeed set out on dangerous and distant journeys, few stories have been told about them. In the grand narratives of Western Culture, beginning with the Odyssey, male heroes explore and conquer space, in order to return to a home that in every aspect is coded feminine; as motherland; maternal, fertile soil; inhabited by the custodian of the hearth. The image of the waiting, passive Penelope and her repetitious, fruitless labor at the loom has molded the conception of proper women’s work for centuries.

In literary genres with formulaic plots, such as fairy-tales, modern popular fiction and Soviet socialist realism, the types that include travel as a device to advance action tend to favor male heroes. In *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* Vladimir Propp (1968) discerned components that recurred within his corpus of Russian wondertales, which he termed functions. The functions connected to movement – departure, transference, pursuit and return – are almost invariably represented by a prince, a fool, or the youngest son and rarely by a princess or a dim-witted girl.¹ The princess is instead tellingly equated to “a sought for person” (79), i.e. a person that inhabits the object position in relation to the predicate of travel. Jack V. Haney notes that “In

nearly all [Russian] tales where the central figure is a female teenager, the departure is less than voluntary and usually is in the form of banishment.” (1999, 97). Propp suggested a connection between the Russian wonder tale and ancient male initiation rites, a hypothesis that remains unsupported, but enjoys a high degree of plausibility. This hypothesis would explain the overwhelming predominance of male heroes, and the peripheral roles female characters play.

When Russian writers in the 19th century used the fairy-tale genre as an acceptable way of expressing social critique, the gendered structures from the oral tales persisted. One of the few literary fairy-tales featuring a female hero is Vsevolod Garshin’s “The Frog Went Travelling” from 1887.² The animal’s female gender is derived from the grammatical gender of the word “frog” in Russian (*liagushka*), but her femaleness is further emphasized by the mention of her “girlfriends” (*podrugii*). The fable is a variation on the theme “the dangers of self-conceit” most famously expressed in La Fontaine’s fable “The Crow and the Fox,” adapted to the Russian by Ivan Krylov in the beginning of the 19th century. The frog’s yearning for distant lands is crudely discouraged by the morale, when her attempt to receive a lift from a flight of ducks ends in her inglorious tumble to the ground. The animated film from 1965 has made the story part of contemporary children’s culture in Russia, and the poor frog remains one of very few prototypes for Russian female travelling.

Within Western popular fiction, the genre most tightly linked to travel is adventure fiction, founded on Daniel Defoe’s archetypal imperial voyage plot.³ Its deep involvement with the subjugation and exploitation of virgin lands, coded in unmistakably sexual terms, makes the presence of female protagonists difficult here. In romance, the popular genre exclusively devoted to women’s concerns, the prototypical feminine plot does not involve independent movement. Instead, suspense is created by the heroine’s *emotional*, rather than spatial, conquering of her mysterious male vis-à-vis.⁴ Likewise, in Jeffrey Brooks’ (1985) investigation of popular Russian fiction of late imperial Russia, women protagonists are mentioned almost exclusively in connection with the genre he labels “the success-story,” which features upward *social* mobility, rather than geographical transit. The latter is reserved for the most prominent hero of the installment novels, the bandit (*razboinik*), whose movement out from the social order into lawlessness and

eventual return to the community created the drama of sin and repentance, so central to popular culture of that time.⁵

Mobility is an essential part of modernity, the utopian projects of which were stimulated by the breath-taking speed of trains, cars and airplanes. Baudelaire's restless hero of modernity, the disengaged, unfettered flâneur, profited from the democratization of urban public space and made his observations unbound by previous social restrictions. This democratization did not equally affect women though: a woman of honor could not without sanction visit the sites of urban pleasure and degeneration, so central to the decadent aesthetics, and the *flâneuse* became unthinkable (Wolff, 1985).

In combination with the Western colonial project, modernity nevertheless opened up the doors for the lady travelers, and their recorded impressions constitute a corpus of travel literature, unprecedented in extent. Sidone Smith's investigation of this corpus prompts her to put the emphasis on the context of negotiation in which it was created: "[...] the meanings women make of travel are inflected with the protocols of gender out of which, through which, and against which they negotiate their movement from sessility to mobility" (2001, 11). Even such modernist myths as the woman/airplane, embodied by Amelia Earhart, the first woman to cross the Atlantic, was compromised by the low status of stunt performances, defined as "abnormal" in respect to commercial use of airplanes in the early 1900s (Mary Russo 1995).

The Soviet Union, one of modernity's hyperutopias, produced a self-representation that was deeply engaged in modernist dreams of effortless movement and conquering of unknown territories. In 1931 the IX Komsomol congress formulated the command "Komsomol member – to the aircraft!," illustrated by a poster featuring a smiling couple in flying gear, looking at the sky.⁶ This was part of the grand project of creating the new Soviet (wo)man and prompted thousands of women to join the new air clubs, and subsequently to enroll as pilots in the armed forces during WWII. The female pilot was one of the Soviet icons of modernization, together with other pioneers in male professions, for instance the tractor driver, *traktoristka* (Bridger, 2001). In spite of their important symbolic role in propaganda, the honor bestowed female mobility heroines in public was seldom reflected in the attitude they confronted in everyday life, and especially not after the war, when they were expected to resign their places to

returning men.⁷ This conflict is dramatized in Larisa Shepit'ko's film "Wings" ("Kryl'ia," 1966), but it was considered to portray the life of war veterans in too gloomy colors and was not widely distributed.

The master plot of the Soviet production novel, as investigated by Katerina Clark (1981), is propelled by the hero's initial movement into the unknown microcosm of a factory or a collective farm. In spite of the early Soviet zeal for equality, that prompted a portrayal of women in the roles of committed soldiers, workers and komsomol activists, the central plot line typically concerns a male hero.⁸ This is the case in the socialist realist novel that most prominently deals with travel, Aleksandr Serafimovich's *The Iron Flood* (*Zheleznyi potok*, 1924). The most widely known work featuring a woman in the central lead is Vsevolod Vishnevskii's play "An Optimistic Tragedy" ("Optimisticheskaia tragedia") from 1933, based on the life of Larisa Reisner, a renowned commissar during the Civil War. The film adaptation from 1963 received an enormous audience and was commonly broadcast on television during the October holidays. Here, the initial movement out to the microcosm of action, in this case a battleship, is downplayed to a minimum: the first shot of the female commissar shows her already at the destination, suitcase in hand. The culturally unsuitable image of a travelling woman is thereby conveniently avoided.⁹

Janet Wolff (1993, 234) summarizes this tendency: "The ideological construction of 'woman's place' works to render invisible, problematic, and in some cases impossible, women 'out of place'." What Irina Sandomirskaia (2001, 57) terms "one of the basic metaphors of European culture," the so-called "myth of the journey," central to our conception of home, nation and belonging, ends up being essentially gendered.

Most factors that historically have limited women's mobility have been abolished by now, at least in the parts of the world touched by industrialization, democratization and other facets of modernity. Today, the most mobile segments of any population are the ones whose resources either are substantial enough to allow for the additional effort of travel, or scanty enough to make movement the only possible means of survival. But in spite of glamorous images of travelling businesswomen and assertive backpackers, residues from older conceptions of women's mobility are not difficult to detect. Domosh & Seager (2001, 118) remark: "Women on the loose are almost never valorized – in any culture. Indeed, geographical "looseness" in women is assumed to be a universal marker for sexual wan-

tonness – or at least cause for concern about their respectability.” Sandomirskaia (2001, 60) makes an analogous observation, founded on traces in the Russian lexicon: In Russian, as in English, words for *movement* are used to denote the quality that separates a prostitute from a virtuous woman, cf. the Russian *shliukha*, from *shliat'sia* (to loaf about), *guliashchaia zhenshchina* (woman who passes from hand to hand) and the English *streetwalker*.

The vestiges of the gendered myth of the journey materialize in the multiple shapes in which contemporary Russian women's migration is conceptualized. Migration as such carries a heavy symbolic load in Russian history. During the Soviet period, the rigid state control created a situation when emigration could take place only in extraordinary circumstances. The relatively few people that did leave are usually thought of as belonging to one of three “waves,” all of them at least officially politically motivated. The first one was prompted by the Civil War 1917-18, the second by World War II, and the third consisted of the repatriation of Jews and deportation of dissidents in the 1960-1970s. Beginning 1987 exit visas became increasingly easy to obtain, and the legislation of 1993 granted all citizens' the right to leave and return to their homeland.¹⁰ This gave way to a fourth wave, prompted by the different push- and pull factors that determine global migration in general: prospects for work, safety and family reunification on the pull side, and unemployment, poverty and persecutions on the push side. Although post-Soviet migration is dominated by flows within the territory of the former Soviet Union, a large increase in external migration has been observed.

Emigration from Russia to countries outside the Former USSR began sky-rocketing in 1987: at the onset of Perestroika, the rate of emigration was approximately 3 000 per annum, rising to 9 700 in 1987 and reached 103 600 in 1990. Since then the level of emigration has been approximately 100 000 people a year, and shows a declining tendency: in 2001 only 75 000 people immigrated to countries outside CIS and the Baltic States (*Rossiiskii statesticheskii ezhegodnik*, 2002). Although these official statistics do not include people that avoid registering their departure with the Russian Ministry of the Interior, the estimated total number is nevertheless modest, considered as a proportion of the total population. The major restraining factor is now the reluctance of receiving countries to permit entry.

During the 1990s, ethnic migration has dominated: repatriation policies in Germany and Israel, combined with favorable rules for Jewish refugees

in the US under the Jackson-Vanik amendment has made ethnic Jews and Germans the dominant groups within the total foreign migration stock, app. 14 % and 50% respectively (Zayonchkovskaya 1996). The ethnic Russian group shows tendencies to growth (Id., 133), but Germany, Israel and the U.S. remain the most popular destination countries. In 2001 Germany received 68 %, Israel 14 % and the U.S. 12 % of the Russian emigration stock outside CIS and Baltic states, leaving only 6 % to other countries (*Rossiiskii statisticheskii ezhegodnik* 2002). The gender distribution of the overall external migration from Russia is almost equal proportions: in 1996, 51 000 women and 50 000 men left Russia for countries outside CIS (*Zhenshchiny i muzhchiny Rossii* 1997:23). However, there is a noticeable difference between “ethnic destination countries” and others. Statistics from 1994 show that in all countries that do not allow ethnic migration, women dominate the Russian migration: from a staggering 95 % in Italy to 58 % in Canada (Tiurukanova 1996, 85). The gender asymmetry may imply a predominance of marital migration to these countries.¹¹

The influx of people from the former Soviet Union to Western Europe, North America and Israel has generated a new set of stereotypes. Although Russian external migration typically involves entire families that move to countries of their own ancestry, the images of Russian immigrants most frequently encountered are those of Russian Mafia thugs, gorgeous mail-order brides and destitute prostitutes. Dafna Lemish’s (2000) examination of Israeli newspapers shows a close association between Russian women and prostitution, although the overwhelming majority of the Russian female immigrants in Israel are highly educated professionals.

Restrictive immigration laws that make marriage to a foreigner one of few accessible technologies of migration, paired with the introduction of a market economy in Russia have opened the door to a dream factory of enormous dimensions. Dating agencies flood the market with digital catalogues, presenting top model photos of marriageable Russian women. As a topic, this kind of migration appeals to audience tastes: it is slightly sensational as it challenges the contemporary norm of marriage as based on equality and romance. It also provokes discussion about national identity and gender. The mail-order bride as a cultural construct functions as a hyperbole of conventional femininity, as positioned within the frames of heterosexual, patriarchal marriage. This norm relies on a construction of woman as dependant, family-oriented and vulnerable, to be cared for by a

male breadwinner. The mail-order bride takes this conception of femininity to its logical extreme by ignoring (or trying unconvincingly to evoke) the flowery cover of romance and exposing the strategies of socioeconomic advancement inherent in the feminine marriage plot. In numerous articles in newspapers, women's magazines, in documentaries and feature films, the love story between the unfortunate woman from the former Soviet Union and the wealthy Westerner has been acted out, displaying a multitude of alternative plot lines and serving various political agendas.

In Scandinavian newspaper material investigated by Leontieva & Sarsenov (2003), a majority of the articles devoted to Russian women in Sweden and Norway was concerned either with Russians married to / aspiring to marry Scandinavian men or with prostitution. The attitude was generally negative, portraying women largely in roles of victims, and the Scandinavian men as in some way lacking – backward, rural and/or emotionally underdeveloped. In the documentary genre, the topic of “the mail-order bride” has been treated in a series of independent films that reproduce a common script: a film team accompanies a couple of western men to Russia in their search for partners through an Internet agency. The men are interviewed before leaving about their hopes and fears, and by the end of the film the viewers know how each man's sexual biography has developed. This type of documentary has strong commercial ties: in spite of the often critical journalistic treatment, the agencies profit from the fact that “any publicity is good publicity”.¹² Feature films on the subject include “Intergirl” (1989, Russia/Sweden); “Birthday girl” (2001, US/UK), “The Russian Bride” (2001, Television series, UK), “The Polish Bride (1998, Netherlands), “Last Resort”, (2000 UK), “Seeking Temporary Wife” (2003, Sweden).

Common to all the material listed above is a sexualization of the Russian female immigrant, and a nebulous understanding of “prostitution,” which tends to include all kind of sexual relations between partners with different socioeconomic status. The readiness with which Russian migrants are labeled prostitutes tells of the persistence of the cultural restrictions on women's travel.

In Russian public discourse, the relationship to migrating women is no less strained. The act of migration is understood within the frames of the subject's relationship to the homeland (*Rodina*) and for historical reasons often provokes moral/political judgements. Irina Sandomirskaja (2001) has investigated the “archaeology” of the concept *Rodina* (native land). Draw-

ing on a material consisting of postwar Soviet political phraseologisms, she enumerates narratives that together form a more or less coherent patriotic discourse. It borders on the nationalistic discourse Benedict Anderson investigated in his *Imagined Communities*, but as the Soviet rhetoric was based on the idea of a multinational (however imagined) community, Sandomirskaia for obvious reasons refrains from using this term. One group of narratives bases the plot on the trope of the journey. Due to the stigmatized combination of the qualities “woman” and “(untargeted) movement,” women seldom retain a position as the subject in these stories. Instead, the feminine part is played by the abstract *Rodina* herself, as the object of the male subject’s love and/or deception.

Sandomirskaia pays special attention to the geometrical form of the journey (2001, 59f). The circle-shaped trajectory describes the utopian return to the lost native land and serves as an affirmation of the concept of *Rodina*. This trajectory is typical of Soviet village prose, which celebrated the so-called “little native land” (*malaia rodina*) at the expense of the great, anonymous and degenerated city. The one-way journey, on the other hand, is characteristic of negative narratives about *Rodina*, such as those about the traitor and exile. The only narrative featuring a female protagonist belongs to this group; a girl is married off to distant lands and longs for her home (*dalekii zamuzh*). This prompts Sandomirskaia to state that “the only role *Rodina* attributes to her daughter is the one of the outcast.” (60).

This patriotic discourse never reigned supreme over the Russian mind, forming a part of the much detested Sovietese during the Soviet period, and now being invoked by the no more confidence-inspiring state elite. However, the way it has entered into the very structure of Russian language makes it difficult to detect, and thereby powerful, corresponding to the Foucauldian concept of ideology. In Russian women’s prose about women emigrants, these discourses could be resisted or reinforced, but due to their great influence, they have to be responded to. I will here investigate texts by Liudmila Ulitskaia, Nina Sadur and Mariia Rybakova that deal with women’s migration, with the aim of extracting these responses.

Notes on the authors: Liudmila Ulitskaia (b. 1943) is a well established author, who has been publishing since the end of the 1980s and received wide attention when she was awarded the Medici prize in 1993 for her novel *Sonechka*. Nina Sadur (b. 1950) belongs to the same generation of writers who were unable to publish before the onset of Perestroika. She is

mostly known as a dramatist, but has also published a couple of prose collections. Mariia Rybakova (b. 1973) has already appeared in “thick journals” and published two books, in spite of her modest age. Unlike the other two authors, she has spent long periods of time abroad (Germany, USA).

Decency and calculation

In Liudmila Ulitskaia's story "Zü-ürich" (2002), the plot follows a female "hunter", Lydia, whose matrimonial efforts rest on an undifferentiated desire for increased social status, intimacy and protection. She shares her ambition with many a woman in the Russian cultural imagination, from the inventive Liudmila in the film "Moscow does not believe in tears" ("Moskva slezam ne verit," 1980), the hard currency hooker Tania in "Intergirl" ("Interdevochka," 1989) who marries a customer, to Zoia in Tatiana Tolstaia's story "Hunting the Woolly Mammoth" ("Okhota na mamonta," 1997).¹³ In Ulitskaia's tale, the prey is much more exciting than Zoia's bearded engineer: as the title conveys, he is Swiss. This fact allows a multitude of national stereotypes to come into play. Lydia possesses a range of qualities that separates her favorably from her peers: she pays great attention to personal cleanliness and works meticulously and energetically to reach her goal, i.e. qualities that conventionally are attributed to foreigners, and specifically those of Germanic extraction. The narrator uses a good portion of irony in Lydia's portrait, but nevertheless the somewhat awkward girl manages to attract the reader's sympathy: the detailed descriptions of Lydia's methodical preparations appeal to any reader with a modicum of pedantic inclinations.

The pleasure of indulging in Lydia's ordered universe is soon dissipated though. Lydia's accomplishments are traced back to the efforts of her mentor, the Latvian Emilia Karlovna, in whose house Lydia worked as a servant during her teens. The "Germanic" skills and worldview inherited from Emilia come under suspicion when it is revealed that Emilia is "a little bit of an anti-Semite," that her father had participated with enthusiasm in the "Judenfrie" program during WW II, and that her husband was a captain in the NKVD. Cleanliness and good manners apparently have a seamy side.

Although Lydia's attempt to get married to a foreigner has little in common with the violent and often drugbased misery of prostitution, the shadow of stigmatized sexual licentiousness is forever present in the text:

The exhibition was international, so blackmarketeers had come from the whole city, big-bosomed sweethearts, the pioneers of international business, had brought their fresh goods in silk panties with rough elastics. Lydia didn't have to worry – it wouldn't occur to anyone that she also was out hunting. (135)¹⁴

Lydia's background in a poor, scattered rural family differs little from that of the above-mentioned "sweethearts" and to create an image of "decency," she has to borrow Emilia's silverware and entertain her guest with stock phrases learnt by heart from textbooks. That decency is a social category becomes more than evident. Lydia's future spouse, Martin, also turns out to strut in borrowed plumes: himself from likewise poor circumstances, his wealth is really his wife's, and social markers such as taste and manners are learnt from her. Furthermore, decency turns out to be if not an antonym, then at least a substitute for love. Emilia's exemplary performance as a wife to the Russian officer, whose agency was responsible for her father's death, is explained not as an act of love, but as a result of her alleged decency.

Lydia's marriage would in popular terms be labeled "marriage by calculation." But the narrator complicates this simple explanation. In a seemingly contradictory discussion of Lydia's personality, the narrator comes to the conclusion that she is cunning, insincere and simple-hearted, all at the same time. This matches Lydia's own assessment of herself as cleverer than anyone else she knows except for Emilia (139) – certainly an emphatically simple-hearted statement. Lydia's understanding of the word "clever" shows to be synonymous with "calculating". After having arrived in Zürich, she discovers that "here everybody turned out to be as clever as she was, they calculated everything in advance" (154). The age-old Russian complaint about European *petite bourgeoisie*, materialist values is recycled in this connection: "Lydia discovered that here, happiness was measured in numbers" (155). In spite of this "European" talent for calculation, she does not have to compromise with her feelings in her quest for a spouse: she finds Martin attractive, especially in comparison with the disheveled Russian men she had known. But when the narrator later explains that Martin shared all the qualities with which he had enticed Lydia with other Swiss men, the basis of her amorous fascination turns out to be closely connected to her struggle for social mobility.

In spite of the protagonists' efforts to achieve an air of decency, the essential poverty of their spiritual make-up is signaled by the dreary formulations used in the area of sexuality. Cf.: "Just the thought of it [that Lydia might be willing to sleep with him, K.S] made him excited. [...] He had to wait a little before he could urinate" (144). The story's final scenes also point to the superficial character of the protagonists' emotional life. The

external cover of manner, taste and hygiene, so important for Lydia's devotion, proves easy to remove: Emilia suffers a cerebral hemorrhage and her table manners deteriorate to the level of those of an infant. This fact deprives her of Lydia's affection, who makes no attempts to help the sick woman and her family.

To summarize: Liudmila Ulitskaia's story "Zü-ürich" posits "calculation" as a basis for understanding the phenomenon of marital migration. However, it does not resort to repeating simplified discourses that outlaw certain types of marriages in favor of other, "normal" ones. Rather, it shows the intricate connections between different types of desire: amorous, sexual, social and financial; and the impossible task of separating the one from the other. It also complicates the notion of decency: this trophy that entitles you to a place on the right side of the dividing line between the Madonna and the Whore is severely compromised by its association to anti-Semitism and superficiality. Prostitution figures as a stigma that any woman must work hard to avoid, but the story poses the question whether the alternative, external respectability, is any better. Although the story to a large extent relies on received ideas about German middle class culture, it shows the allegedly "Germanic" traits to be present among Russians as well, thus questioning the importance of nationality, and underlining the "imagined" quality of nationhood, following Benedict Anderson.

The Journey, the Ring, Soil and Blood

Nina Sadur's novel *The German* (2000, first published 1997) pictures a Russian woman's love for a German in colors borrowed from the fairy-tale "The Feather of Finist, the bright Falcon."¹⁵ According to Vladimir Propp, the tale traces its origins to the myth of Cupid and Psyché (Trykova 1998), the tale that in Western tradition gave birth to the fairy-tale "The Beauty and the Beast."¹⁶ All these tales feature mysterious, elusive grooms, and the active part is played by the heroine, who has to fulfil impossible tasks to reunite with her beloved.¹⁷

"The Feather of Finist, the Bright Falcon" differs from the other two tales by the emphasis it puts on the *journey*. In the tale, the girl leaves her native land, and with the help of the three sisters Baba Iaga, she reaches the Thrice-Ten Kingdom beyond Thrice-Nine Lands, to break the spell put on Finist by an evil queen. She successfully completes her task and the young man accompanies the girl to her home, thus closing the circle. When Sadur chooses to furnish her travel narrative with quotations from this tale, expectations arise about a rewriting of the heroic plot of the journey, centering on a female subject.

Apart from the folkloric references, the novel is also engaged in a dialogue with the patriotic discourse on *Rodina*. In connection to the subgroup of narratives that express "love for *Rodina*," Sandomirskaia (p. 56f) mentions four fundamental "myths": the myth about the journey, the ring, the soil and the blood. "Myth" is used interchangeably with "metaphor," and to my mind, the usage corresponds to Svetlana Boym's definition of mythologies as "cultural common places, recurrent narratives that are perceived as natural in a given culture but in fact were naturalized and their historical, political, or literary origins forgotten or disguised." (Boym 1994, 4).¹⁸ Within the complex mythology of "the journey," only the one with a trajectory that confirms the motherland in its essential feminine quality, the journey in the form of a ring, back and forth, expresses the above-mentioned "love for *Rodina*." "Soil" alludes to the fertility of the native land, and pictures its dependants as "plants," which thrive in its life-giving depths, but die when torn away from it. "Blood" pictures *Rodina* in bodily terms, creating an imagined physiological bond between all subscribers to the concept. This metaphor is the one closest to the Russian word "*Rodina*,"

as its etymology is the same as the words for “relatives” and “birth.” In Sadur’s novel *The German*, whose title immediately gives rise to expectation of a national theme, all four above-mentioned “myths” are employed.

The novel is made up of fragments that only on closer examination begin to cohere. The main character, Aleksandra, appears first as the narrator, but occasionally changes into a third person protagonist. The time/space coordinates are not plainly stated, but are given in passing, and could often only be deduced from contextual evidence. The plot is further complicated by the presence of a parallel story, based on the fairy-tale, but set in a contemporary, rural milieu. The two plots eventually merge, but in the beginning, a one-sentence quotation from the tale could suddenly interrupt the narration, leaving the reader essentially bewildered.

That said, it is possible to discern a chronology spread out over different seasons: The novel begins with a description of “spring,” characterized by a statement somewhat discouraging for anyone with a proclivity for queer criticism:

And there are no androgynes. And no homosexuals. And no other sexual minorities either. And if there are some, then only a few. And they are once again persecuted, judged, beaten, languish in prison. All are of distinctly different sexes. That makes everyone feel hot. (187)

Then comes “summer”. The narrator, “Aunt Sasha” finds herself at the Black Sea, courted by a young boy, Kirill, and a waiter with black eyes. In December she visits Berlin and meets Gottfried. Then, from January to April, she waits for him to call or write, in the company of her male friends, mostly during what seems to be drinking sessions. The novel ends in a rewriting of the fairy-tale: the narrator finds herself as a servant in the house of Frau Knut (the evil queen), also inhabited by a lodger (the beautiful young man). As in the tale, the narrator has to buy three nights from the man’s guardian, until he finally wakes up and recognizes her: “And they lived happily, and noticed neither the world, nor the time, they just kept looking [at each other]” (269).

Into this complicated structure a leitmotif is interpolated, which at a first glance does not have any connections to the other plot lines of the novel.¹⁹ But as often happens in Sadur’s work, the leitmotif carries a heavy symbolic load, crucial for the overall interpretation of the novel. This particular leitmotif,

describing a lonely monk's wandering on the outskirts of Russia, actually contradicts basic presumptions that rule the narration in which it is intermingled.

The importance of the leitmotif is signaled when the novel does not conclude with the happy fairy-tale ending. First, a new ending is attached – as the girl grows older, her groom gradually transforms back into a falcon. Then, the tale begins all over again: “He had three daughters. Two normal ones, but the youngest was a Down.” (269), i.e. a provocative reversal of the fairy-tale paradigm that allows for a male fool (Ivan-durachok), but not for a female one. The neat closure, so typical for the fairy-tale genre is rejected, and instead, the novel ends in a way that makes us suspect that the Falcon's lover keeps searching for him forever, in what actually is a panegyric to the never-ending movement. Blatantly contradicting the heterosexual core theme of the fairy-tale – a girl's quest for her male beloved – the subject of Sadur's version turns out to be a male monk:

A little monk walks on [the black earth]. His hands and feet are covered by blood. The teeth are worn down to the gums. He walks, patiently, walks around all Russia without stopping. He walks by himself, blows on the gray feather, amuses himself (270).

The monk's wounded appearance corresponds to the Bright Falcon's revenge for the injuries the girl's sisters inflicted on him in the tale:

Gnaw, gnaw a stone. Find one and gnaw it, until you wear down your teeth to the gums, until they bleed. Drag a pig-iron staff, drag with your little hands until you wear it down to the very hook, by which you hold the staff. And wear iron boots. Until you wear holes in them. And all these things – thrice! (249f)

This wandering monk is provided with ambiguous gender attributes: although he is male, we learn about his “unsexed femininity” (205), and the “womanly skirt” of his long robe (198). This indefinite creature inhabits a space where “it is always early spring” (220), which challenges the narrator's wholly certain, albeit whimsical, propositions in the beginning about the non-existence of androgynes in springtime. The novel thus rewrites one of the principal myths of heterosexual love and replaces the yearning female subject with the desexualized figure of a monk.

The utopian circular trajectory of *Rodina* is likewise exchanged for the

open-ended route of pilgrimage. Although the mythologies both of the ring and the soil are employed, they are forced to connote something radically different than the feminine safety of home and hearth. Instead, the ring and soil are posited betwixt and between, in the liminal space between what is, and what is not, Russia; what is, and what is not, spring:

On the outskirts of Russia. On the very very distant, narrow outskirts, where just a bit and Russia ends, where she flows over into other, foreign lands. On the patient, narrow outskirts of Russia that surrounds her all, locking her into an unbroken ring, it is always early spring. The last snow has just melted there, and the black, shining soil has not woken up yet, and on this soil, a little patient monk keeps walking. (220)

The ring is certainly “unbroken”, but the way Russia is said to “flow over” into other lands as a river, underlines the permeability of the ring. Instead of reaffirming the self-identity of the homeland, and the otherness of the foreign, the novel rather points at the continuum that unites instead of separates.

This continuum is also alluded to in the ambiguous treatment of “blood.” In the section that deals with the narrator’s visit to Berlin, her acquaintance tries to convince her about their resemblance:

He got angry, and began to point at traits of his body that resembled hers. (You look like me.) The cheekbones, the slanting form of the eyes. But the blood? Blood?! [...] No, no, there’s something wrong here. Not the blood and not the poverty-stricken signs of the face, my dear mute (you cannot speak my language, which means that you are mute). You are not mine in this life, some paths have got entangled, and something brought you to me. (251)

The narrator builds her logic on a pun: “German” in Russian (*nemets*) is phonetically close to the word “mute” (*nemoi*) and etymologically related as well. The quoted passage proves a physical resemblance between the Russian (poverty-stricken) woman and the presumably totally different German. The question about the blood, the very essence of national belonging, provokes a forceful rejection: when such a close kinship is proposed, the narrator answers by silencing the Other, into the “mute” German. But the strength of the narrator’s rejection suggests that the resemblance is greater than the difference: the blood does not matter.

The essential stability and life-giving qualities of the soil is similarly questioned: "Beyond Moscow, beyond all Russia's cities lie abandoned lands. Dying villages do not have the strength to hold on to them." (198). The soil seems to reject its inhabitants, who cannot "take root" in it, but seem to be scattered around in a centrifugal movement. In the beginning of the novel, when the narrator steps into a swampy meadow, the mortal qualities of the soil are hinted at: "Try to step in your own footsteps, think of the word 'soil'. What a nuisance, what an unprecise kind of soil. You keep living, then suddenly you get caught. The soil disappears." (190).

Nina Sadur's novel *The German*, whose title evokes associations to a range of nationalistic tropes based in WWII propaganda on *Rodina* versus "the Fascists", eventually turns out to subvert the core symbols of this rhetoric. The novel construes two ideologically conflicting plots. The first one, based on the fairy-tale, understands Germany in terms of the folkloric notion of the evil magic kingdom. This plot is adorned with xeno/homophobic and chauvinist phrases like the following:

Berlin is the capital of homosexuality. Its bad, inhuman eye created the demon Marlene Dietrich [...] How I hate homosexuals! [...] Then there's the newspaper "Labor".²⁰ I subscribe to it, and read it every day with my morning coffee. [...] The most beautiful people have begun to move out silently from my house [...] And only Chechens move in: one Tatar, manager of a vegetable shop, an incomprehensible Jew from L'vov. (247)

This plot is contrasted with the leitmotif of the monk, in which nationalistic mythologies such as the journey, the ring, the blood and the soil are deconstructed, and the indeterminate nature of any borders, including gender distinctions, is emphasized.

The hackneyed associations between women's mobility and moral corruption first seem to be deconstructed by the use of a female protagonist in a heroic, patriotic quest: a woman performs the circle-shaped journey and takes up a subject position in an affirmative tale of *Rodina*. Then, the negative associations receive a vague confirmation in the accounts of the traveling female narrator's undetermined relationships with (younger) men and the abundance of alcohol in their social life. Finally, when the leitmotif of the monk makes the core symbols of *Rodina* erode, the novel radically destabilizes the patriotic discourse that outlaws women's movement.

The Prostitute and the Parrot

Maria Rybakova's novel *Anna Grom and her Specter* (1999, first published 1998) features the old story of unrequited love, with the use of a compelling narrative device: the novel is constructed as an epistolary novel from a dead Russian woman to her German beloved. In letters, numbered from the third to the fortieth day after the narrator has committed suicide by hanging herself, the story of the one-sided love affair with a graduate student in Greek and Latin languages, a certain Vilamovits, is recounted. Travel is central to the novel: narration starts off from the point when Anna Grom leaves Moscow for Germany, and her tale about her life there is intermingled with perceptions from her own posthumous travel in the other world.

The novel is neatly structured according to the chronology of afterlife, outlined in "The revelations of the venerable Theodora to the venerable disciple of Vasili Novyi, Grigorii," a text from the Russian Orthodox hagiographic tradition.²¹ Here, Theodora recounts in detail the twenty trials taking place during three days following her death. After the trials, she was taken to Heaven, where she stayed until the ninth day. After that she descended into hell and was shown the horrors of the underworld until the 40th day, when she arrived, at last, at the site of her final rest.

In *Anna Grom and her Specter* the first period of trial is omitted, narration starts only at the third day, i.e. corresponding to the soul's visit to Heaven. During these days, in letters no. 3 to 9, narration concerns Anna's life in Russia, her travel to Berlin, and how she lived there before she ran out of money. On the 9th day, i.e. the day corresponding to the descent to hell, she depicts her struggles on the Berlin job market in clearly infernal terms:

The unqualified work that humiliated [me] and forced me to survive on an amount significantly less than the minimum wage raised the curtain over the abyss of evil. And the more this curtain was lifted, the less [evil] became connected to humiliation. Gradually, evil forced [me] to stop feeling anything, probably in order to make it impossible to recognize it against the background of this loss of consciousness and for it to lose the name of evil. (31)

The letter from the 9th day ends with a mention of her registering at the Department of Greek and Latin languages:

So, I entered into the well-kept garden of German classical philology – and I did not expect that this garden would turn into a labyrinth, at the end of which you will find not the exit, but a dark thicket of an impassable forest, that bore the same names: Latin and Greek. (33)

In this way, the time she spends as a student at this department, which will bring her and her beloved Vilamovits together, becomes equated to the soul's wandering in the abyss of hell. The fact that events in Anna's life are arranged according to Theodora's chronology of death adds a metaphysical dimension to Anna's geographical movement, which associates with a long Soviet/Russian tradition of comparing the West to the land of the dead (Borenstein, 2004). This happens for instance in the aforementioned film "Intergirl," whose marital migrant heroine ends her life tragically in a gloomy Swedish landscape.

Her mention of a labyrinth in connection with the Department of Greek and Roman languages, and her description of Vilamovits as "the bright fleecer who stabbed the bull" (111) brings to mind the myth Theseus and Ariadne.²² This myth involves male travelling: Theseus must venture on a journey to Crete, sacrificed by his father to king Minos as fodder to the bull Minotaurus. In one version of the myth, Ariadne hangs herself after having rescued Theseus from the labyrinth with her famous thread and subsequently having been abandoned by her beloved. Her story is one of aborted travel: she was supposed to accompany Theseus back to Athens, but his deceit made her movement stop short. In Rybakova's novel *Ariadne* is allowed to continue her journey after death, entangling her lover in the thread of her story.

At an early stage, the narrator answers the question she apparently expects the reader to find central: "You never asked me why I left Russia for Germany, probably because you suspected the most banal of all reasons: that I came here for a better life, because of the money, that is to say. Well, that's how it was; why should I conceal that?" (10). The narrator enters into a polemic with the Western nationalistic discourse that stigmatizes immigrants on the basis of their allegedly immoral incentive for moving. Although the narrator gives an account of a couple of liaisons of varying duration with German men, she leads a life very different from the archetypal *Intergirl*, who deliberately exchanges sexual services for a secure, pros-

perous life abroad. Anna Grom works at a post office by night and attends courses in Greek at the university by day. Nevertheless, she finds herself persistently confronted with other people's efforts to define her along the spectrum ranging from Madonna to Whore:

How are you to explain that this immigrant from the East Bloc, who can barely pronounce two words in German, twenty years old, in a bizarre dress, with a hairdo that is out of fashion, – how can she know Leibniz? Girls that know Leibniz speak German. Girls that know Leibniz don't get into a car with the first man that comes along. (15)

The narrator does not engage in an explicit polemic with these and similar sexualized discourses. Instead, she reformulates her understanding of the prostitute. The motif of the prostitute appears unexpectedly, after a long exposé over a rainy Hamburg: “and at night the famous Reperbahn lit up, on which prostitutes were still to be found” (91). Then follows an anecdotal account of Vilamovits' uncle and his incident with a parrot. Commenting on a parrot's ability to speak any language, the narrator then uses the prostitute as a metaphor of language acquisition: “It's surprising how indifferently a parrot passes from hand to hand, exactly like a prostitute from the Reperbahn.” (91f). However, this particular parrot refuses to comply with his owner's expectations. Instead of repeating phrases of the owner's choice, it reproduces awkward speeches from the owner's past and future. The parrot demands more than the owner's distracted attention and manages to become his sole obsession. Finally, when the news from the future grows increasingly unpleasant, the uncle sells it.

This apparently disconnected anecdote might be regarded as a *mise en abyme*; an emblematic story with significance for the interpretation of the whole novel. The metaphorical bond drawn between the prostitute and the parrot points in the direction of Anna: the discourses she confronts due to her status as a destitute immigrant from the East rapidly define her as a (potential) prostitute. Her experience of language acquisition, which she stresses was a rapid process, associates her with the parrot. But in the same way as the parrot she has a creative way of responding to her “owner,” i.e. Vilamovits, who possesses her emotionally. In her letters, Anna confronts Vilamovits with the often dreary details of her life in his shadow,

which could have much the same effect on him as had the parrot's unpleasant selection of voices from the past on his uncle.

The associative chain "prostitute" – "parrot" – "Anna" inverts the hierarchy of power relations between immigrant-resident; woman-man, on which she constantly comments. She posits herself as prostitute/parrot, a marginal, objectified creature, which is only tolerated when serving the narcissistic needs of the male subject. However, her act of posthumous narration manages to change the semantic field of this metaphor. From conveying a disengaged, mechanical mirroring of the male subject's activities (sexual or spoken), this prostitute/parrot is suddenly able to manipulate her own sexual/textual activity and thereby to require attention to herself as a person in her own right.

Anna Grom and her Specter is a multi-leveled novel, which comments on the exchange between Russian and German high culture, using a sophisticated game of riddles and puns. It frames the narrative of a travelling woman with intertextual references to journeys that were not – Theodora's incorporeal one and Ariadne's interrupted one. The narrator has ventured on a journey ending in her own suicide, i.e. a plot that differs little from well-known tragedies of misplaced women. But by letting her story start, rather than end, with this suicide, she manages to outwit the discourses that deny her the status of an autonomous subject in the narrative of travel.

Conclusion

The cultural construction of women's migration is negotiated within a space framed, on the one hand, by the nationalistic trope of the nation as woman, and on the other, by the close connection between masculinity and mobility. In the context of Post-Soviet migration, this space has generated glossy pictures and titillating narratives of vulnerable, beautiful women on the move, whose room for maneuver is limited to the choice between different men. This paper argues that artistic texts about women's travel relate to these discourses in an intricate, indirect, but nevertheless discernable manner. I have investigated three contemporary prose pieces, in order to understand in what way discourses of national belonging and gender regulations interact in the artistic texts. Although their emphases differ, all three authors remain profoundly suspicious of the nationalistic trope of the prostitute, whose specter lingers over any woman who enters on an open-ended journey from her homeland. Liudmila Ulitskaia's story "Zü-ürich" provides the alternative to prostitution, external respectability, with anti-Semitic overtones, thereby deconstructing the notion of decency. Nina Sadur's novel *The German* concentrates on core symbols of national belonging and by stating their elusiveness, any sharp national distinction is refuted. The narrator of *Anna Grom and her Specter* provides the tragic story of misguided female spatial movement with an unexpected posthumous continuation, which rearticulates the story from her own point of view.

Notes

- 1 One notable exception to this rule, which will be discussed below, is the tale "The Feather of Finist, the bright Falcon."
- 2 In Russian: "Liagushka-puteshestvennitsa," Garshin (1953).
- 3 On Popular fiction and its different subgenres, see Hoppenstand (1998).
- 4 In what Fowler terms "the new, quasi-feminist romance" of the 1980s (1991, 104) this female immobility is replaced by a total omission of all constraints that women encounter in urban space. The protagonists of novels by Judith Krantz and Barbara Taylor Bradford move freely in an overheated, consumerist universe, miraculously unhampered by glass ceilings and male homosocial bonding.
- 5 Russian contemporary popular fiction is dominated by the action novel and the detective story (*boevik; detektiv*). Interestingly enough, there are very few Russian authored romance novels: the enormous range of "women's literature" available on the streets is almost exclusively of foreign extraction (Olcott 2001, 3). One can only speculate on the reason why: would a Russian context deprive the novel of the necessary element of dream and escape? Or is it impossible to imagine a Russian romantic masculinity? The same absence of "women's genres" is true within Russian produced TV serials. Elena Prokhorova (2003, 518) explains the failure of the limited numbers of Russian sitcoms and soap operas with the absence of "an established system of values, conventions and social types."
- 6 In Russian "Komsomolets – na samolet!" The closely related poster "Young people – to the aircraft!" is dated 1934. See <http://www.kprf.nsk.su/arch/grafix/plakat1/index2.shtml> for an Internet reproduction.
- 7 In her book about Soviet airwomen in WW II, Reina Pennington (2001,143) summarizes the postwar situation: "for the most part, women were discharged from the Soviet military very quickly after the war and were subsequently banned from service academies (virtually the only way to become a military pilot or officer in the Soviet Union.)" Karen Petrone (1998, 16) comments on the "uneasy fit between 'explorer' and 'woman'" in her analysis of the discursive construction of female aviation and polar heroes in the 1930s.
- 8 In her typological survey of women in Soviet socialist realism, Xenia Gasiorowska (1968) elucidates four female types of changing importance during the genre's history: the peasants, the proletarians, the amazons (i.e. revolutionaries and soldiers) and the intelligentia. In spite of the novelty of many of these characterizations, Gasiorowska professes the secondary role played by women characters, largely depending on women's connection to the world of emotions, a world that was consistently downplayed in favor of the realm of social duty. Women characters' relation to space is not transgressive: "If their small universe is rather unexciting and bare, still they keep it tidy and functional and seem to yearn for no broader vistas." (13)

- 9 Lars T. Lih (2002) views the choice of a female protagonist in the play as a standpoint in the contemporary literary debate. When the Party is embodied by a vulnerable heroine a melodramatic effect is created, appealing to protective action, and defending her / the Party's right to use violence.
- 10 See Mikhailova (1996) for an overview and discussion of this legislation.
- 11 Sweden can serve as an example: in 2003, women constituted 62% of the Russian citizens granted residence permit in Sweden. Russians enter Sweden predominantly 1) on the basis of family reunification, 2) as professional specialists, 3) as students. Women constituted the majority in the first and third group, (77% and 63% respectively), while men dominated in the second (54%). Among Russian female citizens receiving residence permits that year 76% did so on the basis of family unification (Source: Swedish Migration Board / Migrationsverket). Statistics do not give a complete picture of Russian marital migration. The "family reunification" category includes not only wives, but also daughters and mothers of Swedish residents. Lots of women enter Sweden on other types of visas, and eventually get married. But the figures presented give us reason to believe that a large proportion of the Russian women in Sweden are marital migrants, and according to Tiurukanova (1996) the same should be true for other "non-ethnic" destination countries as well.
- 12 See for instance "Seeking Russian for Wife," France 2002; "The Americans are Coming," Finland 1998; "Searching for a Russian Wife," UK. The first two films feature the same agency, "A foreign affair" (USA). This agency works intensely with the media: on its website it lists an impressive compilation of journalistic material, from newspaper articles to radio shows and feature films, in which it has been involved. See <<http://www.loveme.com/information/media.shtml>>
- 13 Elena Stishova (1997) discusses "Moscow does not believe in tears" as part of an exposé of the Cinderella-motif in Soviet/Russian film. See Goscilo (1996a, 42f, 143f) for analyzes of Vladimir Kunin's novel *Intergirl* (1988) and the eponymous film from 1989, directed by Petr Todorovskii.
- 14 Here and elsewhere, translations are mine, K.S.
- 15 Trykova (1998) analyzes *The German* from a folkloric point of view. She finds quotes from the version of the fairy-tale published in Afanasiev's collection *Narodnye russkie skazki* in Sadur's story.
- 16 Helena Goscilo (1996b, 90) discusses the myth of Cupid and Psyché in connection to Tatiana Tolstaia's story "The Poet and the Muse", which also contains fragments from "The Feather of Finist the Bright Falcon"
- 17 Joseph Campbell (1988, 97) mentions the myth of Cupid and Psyché as a reversal of the standard structure, implying the exceptional character of this woman-centered myth.
- 18 Boym derives this definition from Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, see p. 293
- 19 See Sarsenov (2001) for an investigation of leitmotifs in Sadur's novel *The Garden*

20 The newspaper "Labor" (in Russian "Trud") was a Union paper during the Soviet period, and is now mostly read by retired people and the lower strata of the working class. In the late Soviet period "Trud" was the most "yellow" of the otherwise politically oriented Soviet newspapers, publishing reports of UFOs, bigfoot, etc. It is owned by GAZPROM, i.e. a state company, and its political views conform to the government's.

21 Velikaia Cheti-Minei, 26 March

22 Nadezhda Grigor'eva mentions the intertextual references to the myth of Theseus and Ariadne, as well as to the Revelations of the venerated Theodora in her review Rybakova's book. The other such references she mentions, Vladimir Sorokin's "Hochzeitsreise" and Jaques Derrida's "Le Carte Postale" I find less relevant. See <<http://www.guelman.ru/slava/nrk/nrk3/20.html>>.

Acknowledgements

This working paper was written with the financial aid of the Centre for European Studies, Lund University.

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