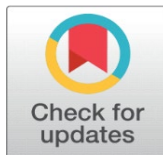


A COMPARISON OF “THE BLACK COAT” AND “THE OVERCOAT”: SIGNIFYING THE PRIMAL ROLE OF WOMEN WRITERS IN THE RUSSIAN SHORT STORY TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradigm shift in the genre of Russian horror short stories, and this tectonic shift is exemplified by a parallel reading of Nikolai Gogol’s “The Overcoat” and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya’s “The Black Coat”. The juxtaposition of these two stories exposes how male writers have always been placed on a pedestal in the Russian literary canon. In contrast, this paper highlights how the contributions of their female counterparts have been constantly sidelined, though both streams of works enriched the vast field of the Russian literary empire. Narratology theory is used to highlight the narrative techniques of both authors since it examines what narratives share and what makes them unique. This is illustrated by demonstrating how writers like Petrushevskaya have dismantled the common notion that only male writers contribute to the technical aspects of a genre. Using the comparative methodology, this paper also traces the tradition of this genre and the holistic perspective towards the Russian women writers who outpoured their creative capacity, good enough to be recognised and appreciated. The conclusion of the paper discusses the way Ludmilla Petrushevskaya broke the former institution of short stories with a touch of psychic horror (female psyche) by going along with the characteristic features of Russian literature: the inner world of characters.

Keywords: Paradigm Shift, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, Nikolai Gogol, Russian Short Story Tradition, Narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

Fundamental transformations in many facets of life and society occurred between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, especially in literature. The world order that had been formed during the comparatively 19th century was altered by the crisis of the rationalist positivist ideology, the discovery of the mystical and unconscious universe, and the resurgence of the mythical model of life. Not only did social life become more complicated and dramatic, but so did the individual's inner life, which was regarded as a multilevel cognitive structure where conscious and

subconscious components combined. Russian literature, known for its impact on the world literature for its irony and satire, has its roots in chivalric romance and epics. Though Russian literature has come a long way from its classics with powerful contemporary creations, the world has not seen Russian literature beyond its classics, let alone the works of contemporary Russian women writers. [Books \(2022\)](#)

2. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER

The major objective of this paper is to explore the differences between male and female writing in a large subset of the Russian short story genre. This paper also looks into the technical attributions of the women writers by placing Ludmilla Petrushevskaya as a representation while examining what set women writers apart from male writers in the Russian context, and how their situation differed from that of their successful male counterparts. [Choules \(2013\)](#)

3. THE UNIQUENESS OF THIS PAPER

While some other researches and findings focus on the Russian short story tradition, this paper acknowledges the research gap and highlights the technical contribution of Russian women writers to the short story genre. By incorporating the comparative methodology, this paper also provides insight into the paradigm shift brought into this genre by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, an unexplored writer. [Dimov \(2020\)](#)

4. THE RUSSIAN SHORT STORY LEGACY

When Russian literary tradition is considered for its rich literary heritage, one would first think of novels before short stories, but all great Russian novelists have written unparalleled short stories as well. These short stories have a profound influence on Russian novels and operas, yet they are sometimes unfairly ignored. Although we do not expect to find in-depth discussions on the meaning of existence in them, for instance, Anton Chekhov's works are indeed top-notch. He restricted and dedicated himself to writing only short stories. His subversive writing style is so simple and realistic, as it could be evidently seen in many of his short stories. For example, in one of his first published stories, "The Death of a Government Clerk", the story focuses on Chervyakov, a civil servant who mistakenly sneezes on a general and is humiliated when he is unable to seek the general's forgiveness. He surrenders to defeat, lies down, and dies. Unpardoned, he has no reason to live because his sense of self-worth is tied to his subservient position. He challenged the tradition by asking questions instead of providing answers. If Chekhov could break and rewrite the rule book to write a short story, it would be a credit to all the Russian writers who inspired him previously with their works. [Eliot \(2010\)](#)

During the first two decades of the 19th century, fable writing was in vogue in Russia. Evidently, the most widely read stories were Ivan Krylov's. His fables, "The Quartet", "The Wolf In The Kennels", for instance, draw heavily on Aesop (Greek fabulist), La Fontaine (French fabulist), and various Germanic sources. If Krylov's stories familiarized short stories in Russia, then the fables of one of the respected poets Alexander Pushkin have received great attention for their form. However, the person who tops the list of Russian short stories is Nikolai Gogol. Uniquely, Gogol developed the Impressionist methods (instead of focusing on the objective reality of events, impressionist stories examine the effects that events have on characters' minds) in Russia concurrently with the American short story master Edgar Allan

Poe. To talk about the short story masters, Ivan Turgenev and Gogol, they both are opposites. In "A Sportsman's Sketches" (1852), Turgenev's simple use of language, calm pace, and restraint set him apart from Gogol. Like Gogol, Turgenev was more interested in capturing the qualities of people and places than in constructing elaborate plots. [Hong \(n.d.\)](#)

Meanwhile, Fyodor Dostoevsky experimented with the impressionist story, pursuing some of Gogol's concerns. For example, one of his stories, "White Nights" (1848) which is subtitled "A Tale of Love from the Reminiscence of a Dreamer", and the title of one of his last pieces, "The Dream of the Ridiculous Man" (1877), echo Poe and Gogol. However, the master of the objective short story is Anton Chekov, who is much more interested in describing the qualities of his characters than constructing an interesting plotline or story [Hansen \(1999\)](#).

Significantly, the short story tradition runs in Russian literature. Among the short story genres that have evolved to date, the horror genre holds a special place due to the legacy left behind by many classic writers. When talking about Russian literature wholly, there is a visible lack of equivalent female writers among these Russian male literary giants, in the 19th and 20th centuries. But the contemporary Russian literature is greatly influenced by women writers who have revolutionized the literary world by creating works with the same potency as their male counterparts. But the works of such women writers are still unsung, and do not receive as much crowning as the works of male writers. [Mambrol \(2019\)](#)

5. THE COMPARISON

To substantiate this statement, this paper compares and analyses two horror short stories in Russian literature: Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat", and Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's "The Black Coat". The latter is from her short story collection *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbour's Baby*.

Though the legacy of the Russian horror short story tradition has been carried forward majorly by male writers, until not more than two decades ago, Russian women writers such as Tatyana Tolstaya, Ludmila Ulitskaya, Dina Rubina, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, and some others have also joined the trail by publishing some significant stories. With many women writers in the chase and depraving Russian writing styles, Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat" could no more exclusively relish the accolades. It would be striking to know that the concrete Russian custom of touchstone works coming from male writers is passing off when one stumbles upon Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's "The Black Coat" – a strikingly dark scary story. [Nikolai \(2023\)](#)

Before we look into this short story, firstly, there is a strong reason why Gogol's "The Overcoat" constantly holds the spotlight when one talks about Russian literature. Gogol's story of a government clerk Akaky Akakiyevich Bashmachkin combines intricate details with biting social satire on the insipid evil of bureaucracy. After a lot of contemplation, the unhandsome, underpaid, and inconspicuous Akakiyevich makes up his mind that he must replace his old, worn-out overcoat. After skimping with his allowance for months, with the help of a tailor, Petrovich, Akakiyevich fashions a beautiful new coat. Akakiyevich enjoys his fellow human beings' attention for the first time in his life because of his new coat. One night, on his way back home from a party, Akakiyevich is assailed by two goons, who then disappear with his coat. The least cooperation from the police and the profanity of an Important Personage (whose identity is not certain) towards Akakiyevich, leaves him numb. Without the coat, Akakiyevich catches a cold and dies later. As soon as

he dies, rumors start spreading about a ghost that stripped coats from pedestrians, including the Important Personage. He gets seized by the collar and relieved of his overcoat. The satisfied ghost never returns thereafter. [Norton \(2015\)](#)

This short story is not only a chef-d'oeuvre of Russian Naturalism (a movement that reigned Russia's literature for ages, where the environment might control the characters, or they might fight for survival) but a progenitor of the modern short story kind itself. As an indication of the extensive significance of this short story, Dostoevsky remarks, "We all came out from under Gogol's 'Overcoat'" (qtd.in - litcharts).

Of the many impressive characteristics of this short story, the unusual narrative style has a huge influence on the readers' experience to date. By withholding a lot of details about the narrative, the narrator draws attention to himself such as the name of Akaky Akakiyevich's department and the identity of the important personage. The bird's-eye view of the narrator gives the readers a feeling that the narrator is inside the same system as Akaky Akakiyevich. [Schwartz \(2015\)](#)

Secondly, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's *There Once Lived A Woman Who Killed Her Neighbour's Baby* is a literary thriller, comprising nineteen short stories which are cruel, with a world set in nowhere – a dream world. "The Black Coat" is the last short story in this collection. Filled with horror, darkness, and mystery, Ludmilla's story starts off with a girl (throughout the story she is mentioned as 'the girl') unexpectedly waking up lost in the woods wearing a strange black coat. The one-night short journey of the girl seems so nightmarish, that the reader will feel trapped, severely overwhelmed, and choking. The girl moves, strides, and runs but with no idea of her identity. With a gradual disclosure of bizarre events, the girl, to escape from two men who are chasing her, runs into a strange woman wearing the same black coat, just like the girl. Both of them have ten matchsticks each in their coat pockets along with a scrap of paper. They check on their scraps of paper and share the content as the woman vaguely narrated her story. When the girl asks the woman the way to escape, she says, "You can wake up, but not always" (267). Just about when their last flames were dying, an obscure realization surrounds them as the room vanishes, and the girl knocks into a blurry reality. A gloomy return to her reality could be witnessed: a shabby room, a caring mother, a sick grandfather, and an unplanned pregnancy after her lover's betrayal. [Woolf \(2003\)](#)

Though both these writers are unparalleled in their own ways, "The Black Coat" did not enjoy enough limelight as "The Overcoat", until Petrushevskaya's potency struck the readers' community with an intense reality. The literary history of Russia holds witness to how only male writers are traced throughout, and some efficacious female writers have been overlooked. The male writers have constituted a drawn-out canon for the horror genre and Petrushevskaya has challenged that established canon with her unusual style. While talking through the Russian literature, not just Petrushevskaya, but the late 21st century delineates the advent of masterly women writers who confronted the orthodox norms of the male writers. Petrushevskaya is among the female writers who carved a niche for themselves in Russian literature with their works.

6. THE PARADIGM SHIFT BROUGHT IN THE GENRE

Both these writers have been an epicenter of the paradigm shift in the short story genre. To elaborate, Gogol and Petrushevskaya have followed the conventional tradition of the genre, but they deviated a bit and created their own pattern which made them stand out.

For instance, Petrushevskaya aims to convey the essence of Russian reality in all of its frequently gloomy yet oddly alluring detail in her stories, mainly with a touch of the female psyche. She also seeks to record the voices of her countrymen as they discuss their own particular realities with others. Gogol on the other hand focuses on his own psyche which reflects in all his writings. Reece Choules states “*the Overcoat* is a testament to the idea that when Gogol freed himself from the constraints of the realist literature he was celebrated for founding, and explored the dark obsessive nature of his own psyche, he produced truly original work that took him to a level without peers.” For what was considered the genre’s tradition, writers like Gogol and Petrushevskaya have deviated from normalcy and set different criteria through their atypical writing styles and narration. But Petrushevskaya and the likes of her still remain unrecognised and unpopular.

Both Gogol and Petrushevskaya are renowned and celebrated for their relentless realism in their stories that the readers could associate with. “The Overcoat” has been a symbol in Russian literature ever since it hit hard with the raw symbolism of the coat representing a touchstone standard of living that is strenuous for low-level bureaucrats like Akaky Akakievich to obtain. Likewise, the symbolism in “The Overcoat” and the Overcoat as a symbol is being used and debated in literature ever since Gogol penned this masterpiece.

Petrushevskaya has spoken about the same subject with striking feminist issues and heavy symbolism in her “The Black Coat” and in the whole short story collection, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried To Kill Her Neighbour’s Baby* per se, because all her stories revolve around women characters and their ambiguous personalities. She has also portrayed the strenuous efforts of the common people to live, just like the characteristics of “The Overcoat”. Just like Gogol’s, Petrushevskaya’s tale features nameless characters. These unidentified characters and places enhance the narrative in portraying the hardship to a collective degree, which widens the chronotope (the representation of time and spatial elements) adversities.

For instance, the short story “The Black Coat” is not just about one girl, trying to commit suicide; there are many more like her, abandoned, divorced, depressed, who are not able to accept the harsh reality of life. In the end of the tale the writer comments “On the other side of the city a woman vomited up a handful of pills and washed her mouth thoroughly.” [Pal \(2016\)](#).

Petrushevskaya has talked about the same commoner issues as Gogol, but nothing restricted to bureaucratic issues as such. She has portrayed the downcast, pathetic, and chaotic sides of life to which every reader could relate. Illusions and magic spells come about in the world of Petrushevskaya’s characters, but their intentions are never overstated. Each can be seen as a fast one used by human imagination as the last resource to escape the brutal realities of life. This could be related to the characteristics of “The Black Coat” where the girl struggles to identify herself in the dream world, only to return to her traumatic, agonized reality towards the end. Both stories address the issues of ordinary people, except that Petrushevskaya’s story focuses more on the feminist phase with a touch of magic and overlapping of the real and dream worlds, with few or no instructions to the readers.

As both stories haunt us with the vicious side of human lives, Gogol’s way of haunting is external with the surface factors like societal class and insensitiveness of humans towards their fellow beings. On the contrary, Petrushevskaya’s haunting is internal by capturing the inner realities of characters, which has most to do with the effect of the innermost vulnerabilities and insecurities of people. Nevertheless,

the approach and writing techniques of both stories are almost unvaried. But the reception that both works received is varied. The symbolism in both stories is strong enough for readers to interpret by drawing over their imagination. Since both stories are open-ended, the writers have left it to the readers to arrive at all the possible closures.

In Russian literature, the short story genre as form and the horror genre as content could be traced only through the works of male writers. The contribution of women writers to the development of genres is either silenced or ignored, due to the paramountcy of male writers. This is not just restricted to Russian, almost all pieces of literature around the world will share the same history of women's writing. The reason for Petrushevskaya's short story, "The Black Coat" being overlooked could be attributed to the reasons stated by Showalter in her essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" as, "A cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers: class, race, nationality, and history are literary determinants as significant as gender" (197). This statement emphasizes the fact that Petrushevskaya struggled to publish her first work for over twenty years.

In research by Elena Dimov, "Petrushevskaya continues to be the most prominent Russian woman writer to the West today. Her collection, *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby*, published in the U.S. by Penguin Books, became the *New York Times Book Review* bestseller in December 2009. [Petrushevskaya et al. \(2009\)](#) In 2010 it won the World Fantasy Award for Best Collection." There are many notable women writers, including Lyudmila Ulitskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, and Marina Palei, who have contributed to the Russian short story tradition besides Petrushevskaya. Elena Dimov adds, "Their work should be credited as the foreword to a new period in the history of women's writing in Russia. The fascinating world of Russian urban folklore, reconstructed in the stories of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and Nina Sadur, bore little resemblance to everyday life but still reflected the troubled women's souls in Soviet and post-Soviet reality." (2020)

By rooting back to Virginia Woolf's "Women and Writing", Woolf elucidates why it might have been that women writers found it hard to set a benchmark in the canon, not even close to the standard of male writers. After posing this question, Woolf speculates that the alleged failure of women to hold a place for themselves in the literary dais could be due to various reasons like lack of social rights, the negation of financial liberty, and inefficacy to fully use the external world experience.

Woolf then delves into how literary history is traced by men's domination, who have set various aesthetic and quality standards. Some of the female writers who dealt their way through the mainstream canon did so by adapting themselves to those manful standards. George Eliot, Emily Brontë, and a few famous writers had to use pseudonyms to write like men. Woolf states that Jane Austen was the only female author who did not have to conform to the norms set by men, as she accomplishes the masterstroke of writing wholly as a woman.

Though the literary tradition has come a long way from the times of Virginia Woolf, it could be seen how some of the arguments are still relevant and valid to date when debating women's writing. When Woolf chews over the contemporary situation, she arrives at a conclusion that the risks pertaining to writing come from a consciousness of gender and sex that never existed before. Thus, Woolf argues that an artist must take on an androgynous verdict, i.e., the combined elements of the

feminine and masculine, to attain outstanding grades of quality. If Virginia Woolf were writing now, she would have mentioned Petrushevskaya in her essays.

Likewise, Elaine Showalter in her "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" comments that "the ongoing history of women's writing has been suppressed, leaving large and mysterious gaps in accounts of the development of the genre. Gynocentric criticism is already well on the way to providing us with another perspective on literary history" (203).

7. FURTHER SCOPE OF EXTENSION

This paper restricts itself to exploring Ludmilla Petrushevskaya in the Russian short story genre. There are other notable women writers like Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Tatyana Tolstaya whose works bear equal significance in creating a paradigm shift. There are also different genres to be explored in Russian literature like novels, and poetry where the contribution of women writers went unnoticed. In this regard, this thesis states the further scope of research in examining the other women writers and genres in this area of study.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has established the analysis that as far as Russian literature is concerned, unlike in former times, the contribution of women writers to the development of literary genres is surging. Though Gogol and Petrushevskaya excel individually through the various intricacies of their writing, the latter never made it to the list. By comparing their short stories "The Black Coat" and "The Overcoat", this paper has shown how a lot of similar works by women writers have never seen the limelight while the writing technique and style are finer than or on par with the works of male writers.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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