ABSTRACT

WOMEN’S MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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The 1990ies witnessed an unforeseen wave of emigration in Russian history: for the first time, people have been leaving the country in large quantities not for political, but economical reasons. Marital migration and trafficking has led to a feminization of the migration in the public imagination, which has made the already potent symbol of the prostitute even more viable for expressing masculine national anxiety.

In Irina Sandomirskaya’s book *The Book about Rodina. An Analysis of Discursive Practices* (2001), she investigates the archaeology of the concept *Rodina* (native land). She enumerates narratives that together form a more or less coherent discourse, that in Western terms would be called nationalistic, but does not completely fit into this category. The plot in these narratives centres around the trope of the journey. This is probably the reason why their heroes are almost exclusively male: in patriarchal ideology, “woman” associates with the home, and a travelling woman breaks this norm. 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 *shliať’sia* (to loaf about), *guliashchaja zhenshchina* (woman who passes from hand to hand) and the English streetwalker. Due to the stigmatized combination of the qualities “woman” and “(untargeted) movement” the female immigrant is disqualified from keeping up a subject position in the formulaic plots of Rodina. Instead, the feminine part is played by the abstract Rodina herself, as the object of the male subject’s love and/or deception. A woman’s claim on the subject position in this plot is fraught with danger: instead of performing a role in the elevated patriotic drama, she risks being dismissed as a prostitute.

But the prostitute figures not only as the deplorable result of excessive pretensions – she has a plot of her own. Eliot Bernstein shows in his recent article “Selling Russia: Prostitution, Masculinity, and Metaphors of Nationalism after Perestroika” how the prostitute also can become a symbol of the raped and humiliated Russia. When imagined by contemporary Russian popular culture she becomes a redeemer, spiritually superior her invaders. Narratives of the whore with the golden heart soothe wounded patriotic feelings in times when economical, political and cultural influences of foreign extraction invade Russia’s public arena.

In Russian women’s prose about women immigrants, these discourses could be resisted or reinforced, but due to their great influence, they have to be responded to. This paper investigates a corpus of women authored texts that deals with women’s migration, with the aim of extracting these responses.