WOMEN’S MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Introduction

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 public imagination, which has made the already potent symbol of the prostitute even more viable for expressing masculine national anxiety.

Irina Sandomirskaia (2001) investigates the archaeology of the concept “Rodina” (native land). She enumerates narratives that together form a more or less coherent discourse, which in Western terms would be termed 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 home and hearth, 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 shliat’ sia (to loaf about), guliashchaia 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. In Vladimir Kunin’s novel Intergirl, the hard currency hooker functions as an emblem of Russian moral superiority over Western commodity fetishism (cf. Goscilo 1996a, 144). Eliot Borenstein (2003) shows how the prostitute becomes a symbol of the raped and humiliated Russia when imagined by contemporary Russian popular culture. 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 texts by Liudmila Ulitskaia, Nina Sadur and Mariia Rybakova that deals with women’s migration, with the aim of extracting these responses.

Notes on the authors: Liudmila Ulitskaia is a well established author, who has been publishing since the end of the 1980:ies 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 could begin to publish only during the Perestroika. She is mostly known a 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 the committed “hunter”, a sister of whom we met in Tatiana Tolstai’a’s “Hunting the Wooly Mammoth” (1997). But this time, the prey is much more exciting than Zoia’s bearded ingeneer: as the title conveys, he is Swiss. This fact allows for a multitude of national stereotypes to come into play. The female protagonist, Lidiia, possesses a range of qualities that separates her favorable from her peers: she is clean, clever 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 Lidia’s portrait, but nevertheless the somewhat awkward girl manages to attract the reader’s sympathy: the detailed descriptions of Lidiia’s methodical preparations appeal to any reader with some pedantic inclinations.

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

Although Lidia’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. Lidiia didn’t have to worry – it wouldn’t occur to anyone that she also was out hunting. (135)

Lidiia’s background from 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 Emiliia’s silverware and entertain her guest with stock phrases learnt by heart from textbooks. That decency is a social category becomes more than evident. Lidiia’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 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. Emiliia’s exemplary performance as a wife to the Russian officer, whose army was responsible for her father’s death, is explained not as an act of love, but as a result of her alleged decency.

Lidiia’s marriage would in popular terms be labeled “marriage by calculation”. But the narrator complicates this simple explanation. In a seemingly contradictory discussion of Lidiia’s personality, the narrator comes to the conclusion that she is both cunning, insincere and simple-hearted at the same time. This matches Lidiia’s own assessment of herself as cleverer than anyone else she knows except for Emiliia (139) – certainly an emphatically simple-hearted statement. Lidiia’s understanding of the word “clever” shows to be synonymous to “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: “Lidiia 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 attracted Lidiia with other Swiss men, the basis of her amorous fascination turns out to be closely connected to her struggle for social progression.

In spite of the protagonists’ efforts to achieve an air of decency, the essential poverty of their spiritual make-up is signalled by the dreary formulations used in the area of sexuality. Cf.: “Just the thought of it [that Lidiia 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 end also point at the superficial character of the protagonists’ emotional life. The the external cover of manner, taste and hygiene, so important for Lidiia’s devotion, proves easy to remove: Emiliia suffer a cerebral haemorrhage and her eating manners deteriorate to an infant’s level. This fact deprives her of Lidiia’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 brings you to 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 if 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 colours borrowed from the fairy-tale “The Feather of Finist, the bright Falcon”. According to Vladimir Propp, the tale traces its origins to the myth of Amor and Psyché (Trykova 1998), the tale that in Western tradition gave birth to the fairy-tale “The Beauty and the Beast”. All these tales feature mysterious, elusive grooms, and the active part is played by the heroine, who has to fulfill impossible tasks to reunite with her beloved.

“The Feather of Finist, the Bright Falcon” differs from the other two, in that the girl sets out on a journey in her quest for her groom. This enables Sadur to construe a narrative about *Rodina* with a girl in the subject position. 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.

According to Sandomirskaia (2001, 59f), this plot is not characteristic for Soviet and Post-Soviet narratives about *Rodina*. The circle-shaped trajectory is reserved for male heroes, in plots that describe the utopian return to the lost native land. The female equivalent to these plots consists of a movement in one direction: a girl is married off to distant lands and longs for her home (“dalekii zamuzh”). This narrative has its trajectory in common with negative narratives about Rodina, such as the ones about the traitor and the exile, which prompts Sandomirskaia to state that “the only role *Rodina* attributes to her daughter is the one of the outcast.” (60) In Sadur, the fairy-tale provides a possibility to engage a woman in the phallic plot of a quest, closed into the circular motif of return.

In connection to the subgroup of narratives that express “love for Rodina”, Sandomirskaia (p. 56f) mentions three fundamental “myths”: the myth about the journey, the soil and the blood. “Myth” is used interchangeably with “metaphore,” 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). 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”, who 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, whose title immediately gives rise to expectation of a national theme, all three above mentioned “myths” are employed.

The novel is made up of fragments, that only after a persistent glance 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.

This said, it is possible to discern a chronology spread out on 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. Uncles don’t walk around in plush leggings with their lips looking like arses and their eyes made up. (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 interperesed, which at a first glance does not have any connections to the other narrative streams of the novel. But as often happens in Sadur’s work, the leitmotif carries a heavy symbolic load, crucial for the over all 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 signalled when the happy fairy-tale ending does not end the novel. 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) The neat closure, so typical for the fairy-tale genre is rejected, and instead, the novel ends in what actually is a panegyric to the never-ending movement, an allusion to the fact that the Falcon’s lover keeps searching for him forever. Blatantly contradicting the heterosexual core theme of the fairy-tale - a girl’s quest for her male beloved – the subject of the tale turns out to be a male monk:
A little monk walks on [the black earth]. His hands and legs 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 grey feather; amuses himself" (270).

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

Gnag, gnag a stone. Find one and gnag it, until you wear down your teeth to the gums, until it bleeds. Drag a pig-iron staff, drag with your little hands until you wear it down to the very hook, in which you hold the staff. And wear iron boots. Until you wear out 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 “there is always early spring” (220), which challenges the narrator’s dead 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 both the mythologies 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 bewixt 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, there is always early spring. The last snow have just melt there, and the black, shining soil has not woken up yet, and on this soil, a litte 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 myself.) The cheekbones, the slanting form of the eyes. But the blood? Blood?! (No, no, here is something wrong. Not the blood and not the pauperish 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 engangled, and something brought you to me. (251)

The narrator builds her logic on a pun: “German” in Russian is phonetically close to the word “mute” (and etymologically related as well), cf. Nemets vs. nemoi. The quoted passage proves a physical resemblance between the Russian (pauperish) woman and the presumably totally different German. The question about the blood, the very essence of national belonging, provokes a forcefull 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 inhabitant, 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 nuinance, what an unprecise kind of soil. You keep living, the suddeny 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 homosexualism. Its bad, inhuman eye created the demoness Marlen Ditrich […] How I hate homosexuals! […] Then it’s the newspaper “Labour”[6] I subscribe to it, and read it every day with my morning coffea. […] The most beautiful people have begun to move out silently from my house […] And only Chenchens move in: one Tatar, manager of a vegetable shop, an icomprehensible jew from L’vov (247).

This plot is contrasted against the leifmotif of the monk, in which nationalistic symbols as the journey, the ring, the blood and the soil are deconstructed, and the elusiveness of any borders, including gender distinctions, are 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. Then, these associations recieve a vague confirmation in the accounts of the travelling 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 patriotic discourse that outlaws women’s movement receives a final blow.

The Prostitute and the Parrot

In Maria Rybakova’s novel Anna Grom and her Specter (1999, first published 1998), the plot develops in a way reminiscent of a vortex: the death of the heroine is situated in the center, and the currents of narration are efficiently drawn into it. It 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’s demise, the story of the “impossible” love affair with a graduate student in Greek and Roman languages, a certain Vilamovits, is recounted.

On an early stage, the narrator answers the question she apparently expect 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 stigmatize immigrants on the basis of their allegedly immoral incentive for moving. Although the narrator accounts for a couple of liasons of varying duration with German men, the narrator lead a life very different from the architypal Inter girl, who deliberately exchanges sexual services for a secure, prosperous life abroad. Anna Grom performs unqualified, minimal wage work during the nights and attends courses in Greek at the university during the days. Nevertheless, she finds herself persistently confronted with other people’s efforts to define her along the spectrum, ranging from madonna to whore:

How should you expain that this immigrant from the East Block, who barely pronounces two words in German, twenty years old, in a bizarre dress, with a hairdo that has run out of fashion, - how can she know Leibniz? Girls that know Leibniz speak German. Girls that know Leibniz don’t get into the car with the first one 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 still were 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 prostitutes as a metaphore of language acquisition: “It’s surprising how indifferently a parrot passes from hand to hand, exactly like a prostitute from Reperbahn.” (91f). Based on her use of this metaphore, it is possible to conclude that for her, the vice of prostitution does not consist in the commodization of sex, but rather in the repetitive, routine performance of the services provided, corresponding to the parrot’s mechanical echoing of his owner’s voice. However, this particular parrot refuses to comply to his owner’s expectations. Instead of repeating phrases of the owner’s choice, it reproduces awkward speeches from the owner’s past, which he happily had repressed but now remembers. The future is also included in the parrot’s repertoire, which makes the owner so frightened, that he finally sells the parrot.

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, also associates her with the parrot. But in the same way as the parrot (and unlike a prostitute) 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 narrator thus confronts the sexual discourses that try to marginalize her on gendered and national basis. Instead of convincing her readers of the “spiritual” character of her love, in an act of simple contradiction, she switches the emphasis from the sexual arena to the artistic. She profits from of the creative potentials embedded the liminal state between life and death (the forty days the soul travels to the land of death) to tell a story which finally dissociate her from the routine congress with reality that she seems to fear most of all.

**Conclusion**

This paper has investigated three contemporary prose pieces, in order to understand in what way discourses of national belonging and gender regulations interact in the artistic text. Although their emphasis differ, all three authors remain profoundly suspicious against the nationalistic trope of the prostitute, whose specter lingers over any woman who enters on an open-ended journey from her Rodina. 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* by Maria Rybakova charges prostitution with the sin of routine, rather than illicit sexuality, thereby dissociating herself from the omnipresent stigma.

**References**


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1 Here and elsewhere, translations are mine, K.S.  
3 Helena Goscilo (1996, 90) discusses the myth of Amor 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”  
4 Boym derives this definition from Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, see p. 293  
5 See Sarsenov (2001) for a discussion of leitmotifs in Sadur’s novel The Garden  
6 The newspaper ”Labour” (in Russian ”Trud”) was a Union paper during the Soviet period, and is now mostly read by pensioners.  
7 See Goscilo (1996, 42f, 143f) for discussions of Vladimir Kunin’s novel Intergirl (1988) and the eponymous ecranization from 1989, directed by Petr Todorovskii.