

TATIANA OSIPOVICH

“THE NEW WOMAN” IN EARLY SOVIET FICTION: BOLSHEVIK IDEOLOGY AND POPULAR MYTHOLOGY

Nationalism was alien to the Bolsheviks who seized power in October 1917, and the pre-Revolutionary mythopoetic image of woman as Nation and Motherland was replaced with the image of the New Revolutionary State as masculine, collectivist and international. (“Communism is masculinity”, said the young proletarian writer Andrei Platonov, summing up the new sentiment.)¹ However, without the support of women the Bolsheviks would not be able to win over Russia’s rural majority. Thus, they launched a political campaign to attract conservative *babas* to their cause. One of the most important areas for their propaganda was literature. This paper analyses the image of the New Woman in early Soviet fiction, paying special attention to the revolutionary ideology and popular mythology that authors invested in her. On the one hand, they portrayed the new heroine according to Bolshevik demands – she belonged to the working class, embraced socialist ideology and served the Revolution. On the other hand, they saw in her a type that was long known in traditional patriarchal culture – that of the strong and defiant woman. In other words, the early Soviet heroine represented both a rebel within the larger society (peasant communities, Tsarist Russia) and an obedient servant to her new comrades, the Bolsheviks. She was, therefore, a strange conglomerate that combined the Bolshevik vision of women with the traditional view of the defiant female. For the latter, the favourite sources for Soviet fiction writers were the Greek myth of the Amazons, the “bad wife” of Russian folk tales and the rebellious female character of Romantic literature. Like her predecessors, the new Soviet heroine revealed society’s ambiguous attitude towards the non-conforming woman. While not without virtues (strength, courage, intellect and progressive ideology), the early Soviet heroine was portrayed as dangerous or even

¹ ANDREI PLATONOV, *Budushchii Oktiabr*, in: Voronezhskaia kommuna, 1920.

murderous (Lavrenev's "The Forty-First"², Tolstoy's "Viper"³), mannish and ridiculous (Neverov's "Marya the Bolshevik")⁴, unruly and promiscuous (Seifullina's "Virineya"⁵), and most likely dead by the end of the narrative. These features of the defiant female stereotype, which were carried over into the new heroine, not only made the early revolutionary narratives very popular among the general reading public, but also helped the texts live long into Soviet history, unlike their prematurely perished female characters.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, the party numbered no more than 350,000 members in a country of some 140 million. Transformed overnight from a revolutionary party into a ruling party, the Bolsheviks needed to establish the legitimacy of their new state and win popular support. Consequently, they launched a political campaign that was supposed to attract the working-class masses to their cause and raise the level of people's consciousness. Accomplishing these goals among rural women was a particular challenge: they were perceived as the most conservative part of the population and labelled *otstalye baby*, which means backward peasant women. Lenin emphasized the importance of the political campaign among women by stating:

"We cannot establish proletarian dictatorship without millions of women. We cannot build Communism without them. We must find our way to them, we must learn and try many things in order to find this way."⁶

Considering themselves Marxists in their view on the "woman question", the Bolsheviks declared complete gender equality in the first days of the Revolution, and a year later, in October 1918, they enacted a new marriage and family code that provided equal rights to husbands and wives. The new law substituted civil for religious marriages, established divorce at the request of either spouse (no grounds were necessary) and extended the same guarantees of alimony to both men and women. For the first time, the law allowed a wife to keep her maiden name after marriage, to reside separately from her husband if she wanted to and to be equally entitled to family property in the case of a divorce. Furthermore, the new family code abol-

² BORIS LAVRENEV, Sorok pervy, in: Zvezda 6, 1924.

³ ALEXEI TOLSTOY, Gaduka (povest' ob odnoi devushke) [Viper. (A story about one girl)], in: Krasnaia nov' 7, 1928.

⁴ ALEXANDR NEVEROV, Marya-bol'shevichka, in: Rasskazy, Izdadelstvo. Proletkul't, 1921.

⁵ LIDIA SEIFULLINA, Virineya, in: Krasnaia nov' 4, 1924.

⁶ KLARA ZETKIN, Vospominaniia o Lenine, Moskva 1959, p. 54.

ished the notion of illegitimate children – those born within marriage and out of wedlock were granted the same social and economic rights.⁷

Although the Soviet family code of 1918 was immediately proclaimed the most progressive in the world, it remained unknown and inaccessible to millions of Russian women, most of whom were illiterate, poorly informed, politically conservative and largely uninterested in changing their private lives. Recognizing the "backwardness" of Russian working women, the Bolsheviks, under the pressure of female members like Alexandra Kollontai and Inessa Armand, established the Women's Section of the Bolshevik party (Zhenotdel) which became responsible for informing, educating and mobilizing women for their new role in society. In numerous publications, the Zhenotdel advocated the image of the new Soviet woman as an assertive and bold political fighter, dedicated to the cause of advancing communism.

One of the first artistic developments designed to reach the illiterate or semi-literate masses became visual art, especially through the production of political posters. A foreign visitor to Soviet Russia in the mid-1920s wrote:

"Banners and above all posters in vast numbers provided visual information with a minimum of words for illiterates and the newly literate. Walls, vehicles, shop-windows covered with them made the streets a kind of semi-literate's library."⁸

The images of female workers in these new political "texts" were placed next to their male counterparts, and both sexes were represented as displaying similar class attributes and demonstrating the same political purpose, symbolizing the proclaimed gender equality. However, as Victoria Bonnell rightly observes in her article "The Representation of Women in Early Soviet Political Art", there was an important difference in the symbolic roles assigned to the new man and the new woman. According to Bonnell, the woman-worker occupied a distinctly secondary position in relation to her male counterpart. While he was depicted as a god-like blacksmith who "hammers out" a new life, she was presented as his helper and "a reflection of his radiant aura."⁹

The image of the peasant woman in political art was even more ambiguous, since it was used not only in positive, but negative contexts as well. In a famous poster by the satirist M. Cheremnykh, "The Story of the Bublik and the Baba", a fat peasant woman refuses to give a *bublik* (bagel) to a

⁷ WENDY GOLDMAN, *Women, the State and Revolution. Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*, Cambridge 1993, pp. 51-52.

⁸ Quoted from VICTORIA BONNELL, *Iconography of Power. Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley, CA 1997, p. 84.

⁹ VICTORIA BONNELL, *The Representation of Women in Early Soviet Political Art*, in: *The Russian Review* 50 (1991), pp. 267-288, here p. 280.

hungry Red Army soldier. Soon she and her *bubliki* are “eaten up” by the enemies, who do not ask, but take everything by force. The image of this village woman and similar images exemplify many of the negative characteristics that the Bolsheviks attributed to the Russian peasantry – ignorance, political stupidity, self-interest and petty greed. However, even in the supposedly positive representations of the peasant masses, the village woman was not given the same level of importance as the woman-worker. Rather, she was allowed to have only a small poster space next to her victorious male counterpart.¹⁰

As Soviet Russia continued to implement the large-scale liquidation of illiteracy campaign in the first half of the 1920s, literature began to play a more important role in political propaganda. The Bolsheviks called upon writers to create new role models for Russian men and women. They especially needed new inspiring images of working-class women, as pre-Revolutionary literature paid little attention to this social group, never actually portraying it as progressive or politically active. The unprecedented social demand to create a New Woman type out of the backward *baba* required early Soviet writers to have strong “revolutionary consciousness” and artistic inventiveness, but nonetheless, larger-than-life heroines did come into existence. In fact, they not only occupied a prominent position in revolutionary literature, but they also became very popular among the general reading public and inspired the creation of highly successful Soviet theatre and film productions. The popularity and longevity of revolutionary heroines of the 1920s was due not so much to their progressive ideology, but instead to their archetypal nature. In creating these heroines, early Soviet fiction writers combined Bolshevik ideology with popular mythology, borrowing extensively from patriarchal stereotypes of the strong and defiant woman. The most common sources for their creation were the “bad wife” type of Russian folk tales, the Amazon of Greek mythology, and the rebellious female character of Romantic literature.

Before examining the cultural stereotypes in fictional models of the new Bolshevik woman, one needs to ask a simple question, namely: why didn’t early Soviet writers draw their new heroines from real life? Why didn’t they use the personal experiences of such well-known revolutionaries as Nadezhda Krupskaya, Inessa Armand, Alexandra Kollontai, and others? In the author’s opinion, the reasons that prevented writers from writing fictionalized biographies of these remarkable women lay in the Bolshevik vision of the New Woman and in the purposes of their political propaganda. The overwhelming majority of real-life female revolutionaries belonged to the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 288.

Russian aristocracy or upper middle class; they were well-educated, financially independent, politically conscious and socially active. Their experiences reflected little of the downtrodden lives of Russian peasant or working-class women, whom the Bolsheviks needed to attract to their side, educate and transform into new citizens. Women who played an active role in the Revolution not only belonged to the "wrong class", but were also objects of popular discontent, envy or hate.

All this tended to rule them out as potential role models. Rather than heroizing real female revolutionaries, Soviet writers created their own heroines in a way designed to appeal to popular taste, filling traditional Russian folk tales with revolutionary content. One of the first Soviet fiction writers, Alexandr Neverov, who was of peasant origin himself, realized the importance of folk tradition in creating a new literary heroine. His very short story "Marya the Bolshevik"¹¹ inaugurated the creation of a large pantheon of new Soviet heroines and created a model for the portrayal of the female peasant leader.

In his story, Neverov employed two popular forms of folk art – folk tales of everyday life and the Russian *lubok* (illustrated broadside; a precursor of the now-popular cartoon). Both the folk narrative and its visual representation in the *lubok* frequently used the comic type of the "bad wife" for the entertainment of the public. Afanasyev, the nineteenth-century folklorist, included several such stories in his famous collection of Russian fairy tales. One of the narratives tells the story of a "wicked" wife who falls for her husband's practical joke about a new Tsarist decree that supposedly grants women the right to rule over their husbands. Immediately after hearing this good "news", the wife orders her husband to wash the laundry, sweep the floor and take care of the baby, thus making his life "impossible". When the husband finally outwits his wife by sending her to hell, she makes even hell less inhabitable.¹² In another tale about the "wicked" wife, some peasants, just for the fun of it, elect a smart young woman to be head of their community. However, the woman immediately begins to abuse her power by drinking vodka and taking bribes, and when the time comes for a state inspection, she is punished with a beating and once again becomes an obedient wife.¹³

Neverov borrowed the plot lines of these tales for his story "Marya the Bolshevik". Upon hearing the Bolshevik decree about women's equality, Marya ceases to be a "good" wife and begins educating herself and getting

¹¹ NEVEROV, Marya-bol'shevichka (see note 4).

¹² Narodnye russkie skazki (Russian fairy tales), ed. by ALEKSANDR N. AFANASYEV, Moskva 1957, no. 436.

¹³ Ibid., no. 444.

involved in public affairs. At one of the community meetings, she is elected the head of the peasant council. But unlike the folk tales' "bad" wife, Marya does not abuse her power. On the contrary, she becomes a hard-working, fair and successful manager.

In addition to borrowing the plot line from folk tales, Neverov turned to the comic "bad" wife stereotype of the Russian *lubok*. In line with the depictions in this illustrated folk medium, he portrays Marya as a large, militant woman – mannish and ridiculous, taller and stronger than her husband. However, unlike the "bad" wife type in folk tales, Marya evokes admiration in the story's teller. She is not punished with beatings or hell for her appropriation of male power. Nevertheless, she symbolically "disappears" at the end of the story when, to the great relief of the male half of the population, she leaves the village with the Bolsheviks – but not without first giving a "bad" example of gender disobedience to other *babas*.

Other writers also stressed the entertaining aspects of their early Soviet heroines, but unlike Neverov, they turned for inspiration to Greek mythology. Boris Lavrenev in "The Forty-First" (1924) and Alexei Tolstoy in "Viper" (1927) modeled their heroines on the image of the militant Amazon. Just as in Greek mythology, the heroines of these stories are strong, fearless warriors, skilful horse riders and perfect shooters. According to Greek mythology, the Amazons cut off their right breasts in order to use the bow and arrow more freely; luckily, the Russian heroines didn't have to resort to such barbarity – their authors endowed them with flexible bodies and small breasts. Lavrenev and Tolstoy also portrayed their heroines as feminine and very attractive. Since they were placed in the all-male surrounding of the Red Army, this made their virginity problematic. A further complication was the fact that the Russian Amazons could love not only the Revolution, but the man of their choice as well.

The romantic conflict between love and duty is the focus of Lavrenev's novella "The Forty-First". As the novella opens, Red Army sniper Mariutka has killed forty White Army officers, but missed her last target – the "forty-first" – and now she has to deliver him to Red Army headquarters for interrogation. Due to violent weather, the two are thrown onto an uninhabited island and fall in love despite their ideological and social antagonism. However, this traditional romantic plot has a tragic ending. When Mariutka sees an approaching White Army boat, she obeys the order given to her earlier; she kills her captive, her "forty-first", her only love. Duty triumphs over love, the woman is devastated, and the story ends.

Iakov Protazanov, a popular film director at the time, saw great cinematic potential in Lavrenev's novella and took the opportunity to provide his own social commentary on woman's choice between love and duty. In his film version of "The Forty-First" (1927) he portrays Mariutka as a beautiful

maiden who suddenly discovers her "femininity" and "maternal" instincts when she cares for the wounded officer. In a more dramatic way than Lavrenev, Protazanov presented the "love-or-duty" conflict (usually an aspect of the masculine domain) as devastating for the woman. By becoming the Amazon of the Revolution, his Mariutka rejects her "feminine" nature and assumes her "masculine" duty. But she pays dearly for her "un-womanly" choice. Alone on the abandoned island, she sobs hysterically over the body of her "forty-first", the enemy who had become so dear to her.¹⁴

Even more destruction for herself and others comes from the heroine of A. Tolstoy's story "Viper". Olga Zotova, formerly a fearless Red Army soldier (now a loner and an office secretary), kills the lover of the man she is attracted to. This murder is psychologically motivated: "tormented" by the slander of philistine neighbors, Olga cannot control her anger and reacts by shooting her abusers. As one of her neighbors puts it, she is "a bitch with a cocked gun" – and she certainly deserves the derisive nickname "viper". Just a decade after the Revolution, the strong and fearless Amazon who fought so heroically on the side of the Bolsheviks became unfit for Russian life and earned the label "viper".

A dubious attitude towards the new Soviet heroine is evident in the portrayal and subsequent perceptions of the major character of Lidia Seifullina's short novel "Virineya". Right after the publication of the novel in 1924, Bolshevik critics praised Seifullina's strong-willed heroine, Virineya, for being the first literary New Woman of the Russian countryside. Voronsky, the editor of the journal "Red Virgin Soil" which published the novel, wrote:

"For whole generations of intelligentsia, Tolstoy's Natasha and Turgenev's female protagonists, etc. personified the image of love and inspired its pursuit in real life. For the new generation, their place is taken by Virineya ... Virineya is a new type of woman in Russia. She has become possible only in our time. Her image bears witness to mighty personal growth among working class people, particularly among peasant women."¹⁵

A writer Ol'ga Forsh confirmed this opinion later by stating:

"Virineya was the first New Woman in all her freshness and persuasiveness. After her, other New Women (progressive collective farmers, members of

¹⁴ LYNNE ATTWOOD/MAYA TUROVSKAYA et al., *Red Women on the Silver Screen. Soviet women and cinema from the beginning to the end of the Communist era*, London 1993, p. 59.

¹⁵ ALEKSANDR VORONSKY, *Literaturnye siluety (Literary silhouettes)*, in: *Krasnaia nov'*, 1924, no. 5, p. 297.

government, people's representatives, peace activists) came easily into existence, but Virineya was the first."¹⁶

Received with great enthusiasm, the novel presents the life story of a rebellious young peasant woman, who after an initial hesitation becomes an active supporter of the Bolsheviks and eventually dies at the hands of the enemy. However, Virineya's road to a new level of political consciousness is facilitated by her romantic involvement with a local Bolshevik leader, Pavel, and her death results when Virineya goes to a village occupied by the enemy to feed her new-born infant. Both Virineya's romantic love and her maternal feelings bothered some Soviet critics. They thought that Virineya supported the Bolsheviks not because of the positive influence of the Revolution, but because she was in love with Pavel, who "tames" the stubborn and free-spirited village beauty. "Had Virineya survived the partisan phase of the Revolutionary struggle", wrote one critic, "she would probably have dedicated herself to raising babies rather than the Zhenotdel."¹⁷

It is significant that Virineya's death at the end of the novel, the death of the politically "enlightened" peasant woman who also found happiness in love and motherhood, was perceived as the only possible closure for this kind of heroine. The novel's author later confessed about her agonizing decision to "kill" her favorite character:

"I wanted to conclude my novel with Virineya being a real Revolutionary, a political instructor of the Red Army. But when I thought my character through, I realized that she could not be a political instructor. The only possible end for this rebellious woman would have been to die honestly and be remembered well, because, if placed in an organized social environment, she would bring anarchy and discord to it... In order not to ruin my favorite protagonist this way, I had to kill her; there was no other choice."¹⁸

"There was no other choice" for the first Soviet heroine but to perish at the end of the narrative. Constructed by the authors according to the defiant female types of popular mythology, the new Revolutionary heroine revealed early Soviet society's ambiguous attitude towards the non-conforming woman. Just like her predecessors, she was portrayed as threatening ("The Forty-First" and "Viper"), mannish and laughable ("Marya the Bolshevik"), unruly and rebellious ("Virineya"), and most likely dead by the end of the story. These characteristics of the defiant female stereotype not only made

¹⁶ OL'GA FORSH, "Virineya". Seifullina v vospominaniakh sovremennikov (Seifullina in reminiscences of her contemporaries), Moskva 1961, p. 111.

¹⁷ XENIA GASIOROWSKA, *Women in Soviet Fiction. 1917-1964*, Wisconsin 1968, p. 39.

¹⁸ LIDIA SEIFULLINA, *O literature. Stat'i, zametki, vospominaniya* (About literature. Articles, commentaries, reminiscences), Moskva 1958, p. 90.

the early revolutionary narratives very popular, but they helped the texts endure long into Soviet history, unlike their prematurely deceased female protagonists.