

RUSSIAN QUEENS OF CRIME NOVELS AND THEIR GENDER STEREOTYPES

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Every autumn Muscovites who like books eagerly anticipate the most important event of the year, a great international book market in Moscow where almost every publishing house in the country presents its new offerings. This event represents an occasion to look at and buy new books, and a chance to meet a favourite author and receive an autograph. It is almost certain that the most popular authors will be the well-known women writers of crime stories. While some of the male writers may feel offended, it is a well-known fact that the Russian literature of detection is dominated by women.

In the course of the past twenty years the very drastic changes which have affected the whole structure of Russian society, including its values and moral standards, have resulted in a dramatic change in literary tastes. The 1980s were characterised by the discovery and return to popularity of many literary masterpieces of Russian literature of the twentieth century which had been unavailable to the public in the Soviet period. After the enormous interest in this literature shown by all levels of society, there came a period when people did not want to read any more; their interest in the past was satiated, and there were no new literary works which could help them understand the new reality and suggest new perspectives on life. Literary critics of the 1990s could state with shock that while “serious literature had taken time-out, trying to find its course in the new reality, a new literature made its appearance on the literary scene” (Slavnikova 1998,

215). For the first time in the history of Russian literature books were considered to be merchandise. American and European crime stories and thrillers flooded the Russian book market; with their bright covers and exciting plots they gained popularity with the readers, and proved to be very profitable for the publishers. Soon afterwards new Russian authors appeared on the scene. The popularity of crime fiction with the ordinary reader can be seen as a triumph of mass culture, and sociologists explain it by referring to its “therapeutic effect”; they state that “mass culture functions as a mechanism which frees a person from the great stresses of everyday reality, from feelings of fatigue and indifference, cruelty and aggression, despair and uncertainty, humiliation and fear”(Yerasov 1997, 414).

The commercialization of literature was well established when the new Russian stories of crime and detection arrived on the market and they immediately became a success. Paradoxically enough, readers sought in these books not only entertainment, but also a kind of explanation of the new realities of life, and directions on how to live. Several of these new authors quickly became favorites with the readers.

The first name to be mentioned is that of Aleksandra Marinina. Her real name is Marina Alekseeva, and her background both as a police officer and as an author of a dissertation on the psychology of criminals (1986) makes her books both professionally and psychologically convincing. Her books are very popular due to their dynamic plots and the verisimilitude of detail. Marinina enjoys the fame of “a Russian Agatha Christie”, but she is constantly being criticised by literary critics for breaking the rules of the genre of pure entertainment with her tendency to social analysis and criticism. The tradition of Russian readers to accept every printed literary word as a higher

truth and look for both explanations of the phenomena of life and guidance has contributed to the enormous popularity of these books.

In 2001 an international conference on the theme “Aleksandra Marinina’s books as a mirror of modern Russian mentality” was organised in Paris. Characteristically enough many of the participants underlined this sociological aspect of her books, for instance, the American scholar A.Vishevski stated that “Aleksandra Marinina is very optimistic and practical in her didactics, she is answering the question ‘how to live’ and trying to help the reader to find his own way to a better life in the present world. Marinina’s detective novels are a kind of modern novel of ‘sentimental education’: the author’s main goal is to educate through entertainment” (Ivanova 2002, 199). And it really is true, that in her books she shows the reader the backstage reality of crime investigations which are constantly being hindered by the corruption of society and by the inadequacy of the police. Moreover, Marinina is very clever at unravelling the social and psychological reasons for criminal actions, so that the reader is led to think about the whole complex of social problems. Still, the novels of Marinina, where crime is always punished, thanks to the enthusiastic work of idealistic police officers, give the reader back the necessary faith in the triumph of justice. As Marinina herself says to her readers on her web site “My books are not about crimes, they are about people, about their fates and souls, thoughts and motives which lead them to commit certain actions, even if these actions are criminal”.

Marinina has written about thirty books where the crime is solved thanks to the analytical abilities of a special police investigator Anastasia (Nastya) Kamenskaya. She is far from being an ordinary police officer. She has a university education and knows four languages, qualifications which help her to add some income to her

meagre police earnings by translating English and French books into Russian. Anastasia Kamenskaya likes to analyse not only concrete crimes but also their social aspects. The first book about Anastasya Kamenskaya was published in 1992, and the reader has been given the opportunity of following closely both her professional and her private life. This trend to make readers interested not only in the detection of a crime but also in the personality of the detective has made itself evident in crime fiction all over the world in the last few years. Sometimes even, the personality of the investigator is much more interesting for the reader than the detection of the crime (Danielsson 2003, 129).

Anastasia Kamenskaya was a novelty for Russian readers not only because of her intellectual abilities as an investigator but also because she represented a new type of female character. When she appeared in the first novel the reader had to digest that this very clever and well-educated police officer was absolutely devoid of any feminine characteristics: she is not interested in clothes or cosmetics, she is absolutely helpless at home, and she is incapable of doing any domestic chores. It is true that she doesn't have much time for either shopping or cooking. But what was really shocking was the fact that she couldn't cook and didn't want to learn how to do all the domestic chores because of her monstrous laziness; she prefers black coffee to any food, and hates early rising. However, she is a brilliant analyst and her male colleagues respect and shield her. Her private life was also surprising to the reader accustomed to the puritan morals of Sovjet society. In fact, gender debates had never spread to the man in the street in Russia, so it was all very new and exciting for the reader.

In the first books Anastasia lives with her lover in an one-room apartment. Although they have known each other since school and have been living together for fifteen years she has no wish to register the relation. In a later book Anastasia and her lover do get to the registrar's office, but even then work intervenes as they witness a murder. Anastasya's husband Aleksey Chistyakov, a gifted physicist, is very much in love with her and is ready to carry all the domestic chores on his shoulders. It is he who does the shopping and the cooking, encourages her when she is in low spirits and even helps her with some creative idea when she is stuck in her analysis. This was a very exciting reversal of family roles and it undoubtedly added to Anastasia's popularity with the readers.

There is, however, some development in their relationship in the later books. As Kamenskaya grows older the author lets her reflect upon her family life and shows that she understands the unique qualities of her husband and values them. She even makes several attempts to learn to cook. At times she regrets that they have not married earlier, and as any woman would be, she is afraid of losing him: "Suddenly Nastya became frightened at the thought that somebody could by his own evil wish snatch Lioshka out of life. Out of life in general, and out of her, Nastya's life" (*Smert' i nemnogo ljubvi*).

There is one more thing which helps the reader to feel with Anastasia. Although she is clever when she is doing her job, she is as vulnerable and prone to accidents as any ordinary woman in the street. Anastasia can feel helpless and frightened when she discovers that somebody is trying to kill her (*Smert' radi smerti*), and feel frustration when she can't cope with the corruption in society (*Prizrak muzyki*). In these cases she gets support from her all-understanding boss, who is always reminding others of her phenomenal abilities. In a

way he treats her a bit patronizingly and calls her in their private conversations “a little girl” and “a little star”. Some critics consider that this is a relic of the patriarchal stereotype in the Russian mentality (Leontjeva 2001, 46). But it is undoubtedly true that Marinina has introduced new elements of feministic debates into her novels.

The success of the new genre with the public and the growing demand for entertainment have resulted in a profusion of books of varying literary merits written partly as tough crime stories, partly as feministic novels. One relatively new name must be mentioned when speaking about different female types in entertainment literature. Marina Serova appeared on the literary market just a few years ago. She has a degree in law, working experience from the office of Russia’s Procurator-General, and is now said to be working for one of the Secret Services. Serova has written stories about three unusual women: a secret agent Julia, a bodyguard Yeugenia and a detective Tatyana. Her books contain a lot of convincing details concerning their professional training and activity.

I would like to dwell on certain characteristics of her books. They all have a clear patriotic message. In their work the characters risk their lives on special missions of state importance and even the detection of a trivial crime helps to avert a national tragedy (*Professional’naya intuicija*). The protagonists are well-trained professionals without any family ties, whose lives are devoid of amorous adventures. Their small human weaknesses are cooking, Chinese dice, and soft toys. These characters are clearly derived from the cinema character Nikita, and their appeal to the reader lies in their physical fitness, professional skills and patriotic motivation. Their only female characteristic is their relief at getting home after a stormy mission: “my small cosy cottage in the outskirts of Tarasov” (*Professional’naya*

intuicija). Serova's female characters are in fact very masculine not only in their professional behaviour, but also in their emotional life; for example the only personal feeling in the life of the secret agent Julia is her devotion to her boss and teacher General Surov. These feelings are absolutely without any hint of sexuality: "I consider him to be not only my higher officer, but also a teacher, who made me revise all my former beliefs and has defined and moulded me into what I'm today. He has strengthened my body and educated my soul". Elsewhere she says: "Don't think that I'm in love with him. This would be too simple. My feeling for him is greater than love" (*Veselye pominki*).

The world looks quite different in the books written by Tatyana Ustinova, another popular author of crime stories, who is presented in the blurbs as "the first among the best". Ustinova does not have any professional skills for depicting the routines of crime investigation, but she has good inside knowledge about the new Russian elite. Her books are about the crimes and mysteries which happen in the lives of prosperous Russian businessmen. Part of her appeal lies in the fact that the ordinary reader knows very little about this slice of modern Russian reality and is curious to learn what the secret of their success is, and what dangers they have encountered on their way to prosperity. Ustinova is an author with a mission which differs considerably from the social didactics of Marinina and the patriotic fervour of Serova. She clearly tries to convince her readers "that the rich are also human", and that there is still room for miracles in our new life with its stresses and failures.

We learn from the blurbs that Ustinova has worked in television for ten years, that she later worked as a specialist in public relations, and that she is now working as a press-secretary for the Chamber of Commerce. This explains her choice of themes. The author writes on

her web site: “I am not creating any ‘epic’, I am not a classic of the Russian literature and I’ll never become one. I write detective novels in order to entertain you with interesting reading and to give you a gift of a few hours of relaxation and good spirits”. In her novels she depicts a new and exciting world where television, politics and business are mixed together into a very dangerous conglomerate (*Pervoe pravilo korolevy*). She also describes the everyday problems of “smaller” entrepreneurs (*Blizkie ljudi, Odna ten’ na dvoih*). Her specific world is very concisely depicted in her novels. They describe an absolute lack of understanding between the sexes, and you may even get the impression that there have been no changes at all in the pattern of relations between men and women for the past hundred years. Her protagonists, whether male or female, have all had a traumatic experience in an earlier love affair or marriage and have lost whatever illusions they may have had about love. Her detective novels are usually about energetic and prosperous businessmen, and the conflict between success in the professional sphere and the inability to love or to recognise love in the private sphere plays a major role in her plots. The modification of this scheme concerns a successful female journalist or businesswoman who discovers suddenly that she is falling in love and panics because she has never had time to think about her private love before or because she has lost any hope of experiencing love and doesn’t trust herself and the object of her love. The crime story provides a background for the story of their mutual discovery of their feelings and their own identities. Ustinova exploits what she herself identifies as a constant public demand for love stories. In order to make her readers absolutely happy she always provides a happy end to her stories. Their plots are never very complicated, but they are

dynamic, and their appeal lies in the comforting feeling of having witnessed a fairy-tale.

However, Ustinova's novels also have a sociological aspect. She depicts her successful characters as positive, hard-working and clever individuals. The underlying intention of her books is to convince the reader that these new successful businessmen have worked hard to arrive where they are now. In one of her books one character argues against the wide-spread accusation that the new rich are all thieves and parasites. "Who is a parasite? Is Pasha Stepanov a parasite, he who spends his days and even nights at work, who provides jobs for two hundred people and pays out their wages regularly, who sees everything, controls everything and knows everything?" (*Blizkie ljudi*). This new type of successful businessman is very often at odds with the rest of his family who don't understand his ambition and condemn his success "It wasn't what we have taught you to be" (*Odna ten' na dvoih*). However, he himself knows very well what possibilities his money opens up for him and he doesn't understand people who do not want to learn how to work effectively: "Once he became the owner and the boss he could no longer understand why people instead of earning money doing their jobs waste their time in numerous coffee-breaks and unnecessary telephone calls. They were well paid but as soon as he was out of the office they stopped working, and this infuriated him" (*Hronika gnusnyh vremen*). Ustinova shows that the world of business is cruel, and that crimes are often committed by people who are close to you. She also shows that love is the only hope if you want to remain sane and optimistic. Her male characters, even if they are very rich and not very young any more, discover that they do not know how to deal with the situation, and

usually it is the woman who takes the decisive step (*Blizkie ljudi, Oligarh s Bol'shoj Medvedicy, Pervoe pravilo korolevy*).

But there is another scheme of events in her novels. There we meet a very active male character who is so occupied with his own problems and feelings that he doesn't even notice the woman who lives at his side and is selflessly devoted to him. This scheme is painfully well known, and the sexual roles are traditional; the man is the hero and the woman is his humble servant. It is only the shocking experience of a crime, which opens the eyes of the hero and allows him to see the virtues of his unrecognized love (*Odna ten'na dvoih, Sed'moe nebo*). In this last novel the male protagonist, a police investigator, once regrets that he can't have a dog, "something warm and grateful, who would understand my feelings and give me his love without demanding anything of me". In the long process of a crime investigation he suddenly discovers his feelings for a girl he has known for years and never noticed. After they have been happily united, he thinks on waking beside her "it was even better than having a dog". The same paradigm of undemanding female love is depicted in the novel *Odna ten'na dvoih*, where a successful architect Danilov is for many years unaware of the love of his friend Martha. She has many times helped him out of his difficulties, and he even considers her as "his other shadow". Ustinova is clearly opposed to the feministic ideas of our time and her novels therefore appeal to the most traditionally-minded readers.

In modern Russian everyday life the popularity of detective stories can not be explained only by their ability to entertain. As in many other countries detective stories have acquired a number of the characteristics of serious literature. They depict the many social aspects of our lives which can provide reasons for crimes and they do it

in a way which is artistically convincing. Marinina's novels are interesting not only because of their technical true-to-life description of police work, but also because of her analysis of the psychology of crime. Her protagonist Anastasia Kamenskaya is also a very interesting input to the feminist debate which is taking place in Russian society. Ustinova's female characters represent another type of woman and her portrayal of the relations between the sexes conforms with the more traditional conception of gender roles. However, the female authors of detective stories whose works have been analysed here have one thing in common and that is that they all provide their reader with hope and social optimism. This is something which is very important in Russia to-day.

When one thinks about the ideas and traditions of the great Russian writers of the past and their enormous impact on the cultural life of Russian society, one can wonder whether serious literature has any hope of surviving. Literature has lost its symbolic meaning and prestige and critics state that "people feel free to admit that they do not read classic literature, that they do not buy fiction" (Hazanov 2004, 178). The critics are worried that serious literature which demands from the reader a certain effort of thinking and a certain culture of reading, is being supplanted by undemanding literature which has entertainment as its primary goal. There is a suggestion that one needs some go-betweens between culture and the public. And the real hope is that these go-betweens would be professionals who have earned a reputation and who have completed projects which have achieved commercial success. The one name mentioned as a possibility is a successful author of detective novels Boris Akunin (Dubin 2002). To my mind the name next to him would be that of

Aleksandra Marinina. But would that help? Well, we shall have to wait and see.

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