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The Women's Decameron as a Legitimation of Women's Authorship

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Introduction

Status Questionis

This dissertation describes *The Women's Decameron* by Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a legitimation of women's authorship. My interpretation of *The Women's Decameron* partially deviates from the author's statements on the book presenting it entirely as a deterrent to the application of Soviet emancipatory policy in Western countries and as a piece of anticommunist satire. The author, under the appearance of social commentary literature, "concealed" a celebration of women's right to authorship, of which women were often deprived either by the regime or by the subsidiary role imposed on women in Soviet official literature and samizdat literary circles. The concept of authorship must be intended as strictly linked with that of self-determination in view that through the access to the written word women can be able to reconceptualize femininity in their own terms, as the characters do by telling each other stories. Voznesenskaia achieves this goal through the creation of a communal narrative act springing from women's nature-given generative force. The analysis of the narrative voice implemented in *The Women's Decameron* follows Susan Lanser's studies of focalization belonging to the branch of feminist narratology¹. The mentioned call for women's right to authorship is embodied in the author's implementation of the communal voice as the privileged type of narration, which implies the regression of the authorial voice and the presence of ten female voices in the front row.

My interest in Vonzenskaia's *Decameron* was stimulated by the baffling absence of women authors in Italian anthologies of Russian literature and Voznesenskaia's interesting choice of the Italian classic as the primary reference for her book. This dissertation, in fact, was initially meant to investigate the intertextual links between Boccaccio's and Voznesenskaia's book. However, the pandemic and the current political situation in Russia prevented me from accessing the primary sources required and from studying the text within this critical framework; for these reasons, the focus of the dissertation shifted to a close reading of *The Women's Decameron* describing the book as a legitimation of women's creativity and authorship.

The Women's Decameron is set in a maternity ward put into quarantine for a skin infection affecting the patients, ten women from utterly different social strata of 1980s Soviet society. Following the example of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the patients unanimously decided to comfort each

¹ Lanser, Susan, "Toward a Feminist Narratology." *Style*, N. 20, 1986, 341–63

other through storytelling and to set the time of their quarantine by sorting their tales according to specific daily themes. While addressing topics relevant to their daily life, the characters paint a gloomy picture of the society they live in, especially by addressing the issue of sexual discrimination.

Western literary criticism briefly studied *The Women's Decameron* to find the possible links between Voznesenskaia's and Boccaccio's Decameron², but also analyzed the book with the aid of feminist literary criticism. Elena Furman underlined the importance of corporeality in *The Women's Decameron* through the application of French feminist theory: the textualization of the body allows the characters to challenge the traditional representation of femininity in Russian literature associated with passivity and lack of agency³. The importance of female corporeality in the text allows Furman to place *The Women's Decameron* within the framework of new women's prose and not as a sample of pre-glasnost Russian women's writing. The scholar briefly comments on the construction of the narrative voice in the text, which put the characters' accounts in the front row and rejects the traditional prominence of the omniscient narrator⁴. Furman's analysis of *The Women's Decameron*, however, does not take into consideration the influence of the movement *Mariia* on the author's ideological mindset and, consequently, in the creation of *The Women's Decameron*. This dissertation expands Furman's analysis of the trope of the female body through the aid of French feminist theory to identify female corporeality as the catalyst of a narrative act which allows the characters to get in touch with their "lost" femininity. So far, no research or textual analysis has considered the impact of the almanac *Mariia* on *The Women's Decameron*, which lies in the link between creativity and authorship and in the need to reconceptualize femininity to restore it from the removal of sexual difference carried out by Soviet emancipatory policy.

Helena Goscilo mentions *The Women's Decameron* in her description of the maternity ward as a frequent setting of new women's prose⁵, but doesn't link the author's choice of this narrative space with the Voznesenskaia's conception of maternity as the finest expression of women's

² Curtis Julie, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia: a Fragmentary Vision", In *Women and Russian Culture. Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New-YorkOxford, 1998, 173–187; Kolodziej Jerzy, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Women: With Love and Squalor". In *Fruits of her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Woman's Culture*, edited by Helena Goscilo, New York-London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993; Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8. Chapel Hill: NC, 2006; Denissova Galina, *LEI: racconti russi al femminile*. Edited by Galina Denissova, Gabriella Imposti, Natalia Fateeva, Giulia Marcucci, Pisa, Plus, 2008; Smarr Janet, "Women Rewrite Griselda: From Christinede Pizan to Julia Voznesenskaya", *Heliotropia*, N.15,2018, 205-229

³ Furman Yelena, "'We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose", and French Feminist Theory, *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 95-114
Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004

⁴ Furman, 2004, 102

⁵ Goscilo, Helena, "Women's Wards and Wardens. The Hospital in Contemporary Russian Women's Fiction.", *Canadian Women Studies*, Vol. 10, N° 4, 1989, 83–86;

creativity. This idea is supported in this dissertation by the documents from Iuliia Voznesenskaia's private fund accessed at the at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, which, so far, no study on *The Women's Decameron* has included. This dissertation also explores the uneven self-definition of Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a woman-author in her public statements, which wasn't considered so far in commenting the her literary production. This study, furthermore, links the irregular identification of Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a woman writer with the construction of the narrative voice in the text, which mitigates the author's expression of her ideological stance in the book. Said mitigation could be identified in the editing on the text carried out from its typewritten version of 1984 to its latest one (2013), in which the author added an explanatory preface framing *The Women's Decameron* as a piece of anticommunist literature.

By studying the prominence and characterization of the female body in *The Women's Decameron*, Elena Furman describes Iuliia Voznesenskaia's literary work as a forerunner of new women's prose⁶. *The Women's Decameron*, according to the scholar, was not extensively analyzed through the category of Russian women's prose or in that of new women's prose, due to the identification of Voznesenskaia as a religious prose writer⁷. However, the lack of extensive critical works on the book can also be attributed to its negative reviews by Anglo-American feminist literary criticism.

The book was criticized by some reviewers in the U.S. because the majority of the individual tales seem to support the patriarchal ideology of the society to which the character/narrators belong, but the interplay between the frame story and the ten character/narrators' stories points toward the possibility of rupture in the social system⁸.

By the evidence gathered in the present research, however, Iuliia Voznesenskaia's entire literary production has been partially⁹ investigated by western and Russian literary criticism. The author's poetry¹⁰ is yet to be thoroughly examined within the framework of Leningrad's underground poetical circles; Voznesenskaia's tales and accounts about women's prison camps are similarly

⁶ Furman Yelena, "'We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose", and French Feminist Theory, *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 95-114

⁷ Ibidem

⁸ Henry Kathryn, "Yuliya Voznesenskaya", In *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, edited by Ledkovsky Marina, Rosenthal Charlotte, Zirin Mary, Westport :Greenwood Press,1994, 734

⁹ So far, no extensive critical work was devoted to the author's literary production, which western and Russian criticism addressed mainly in encyclopedic entries.

¹⁰ Voznesenskaia's poetry was originally published in samizdat and tamizdat journals, to be extensively published in: Kovalev, Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, *Antologiiia noveishei russkoi poezii u Goluboi laguny v 5 tomakh*, Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, Tom 5 B, 2006-2008, ([Accessed](#) October 11th, 2021) and in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga,2017.

untended by western literary criticism focusing on the genre of *lagernaia literarura*. Her works¹¹ of in-between prose¹² shared the same fate. Voznesenskaia is usually known for her participation in Russian dissident women's movements and political dissent rather than for her literary production.

Furthermore, Voznesenskaia's affiliation with the movement *Mariia* and the scarcity of studies focusing on Mariia's ideological background, generally and problematically addressed as feminist, might have as well discouraged a thorough feminist reading of *The Women's Decameron* and its inclusion in the category of Russian women's prose. The author's religious, literary "turn" might have equally disfavored its investigation in the western context from a feminist standpoint. Voznesenskaia's focus on religious-oriented texts after her monastic withdrawal in the first half of the 90s is equally in line with the absence of archival documents concerning *The Women's Decameron*, despite the book's significant fame and the editing endured by *The Women's Decameron* in its fourth Russian edition (2013). That being said, this research aligns with Furman's identification of *The Women's Decameron* as a forerunner of new women's prose, therefore, included in the critical category of Russian women's writing.

¹¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Pis'ma o liubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh*, typewritten text, München, 1987; Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zvezda Chernobyl'*, New York: Liberty Publishing House, 1987; Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Was Russen über Deutsche denken*, München: Roitman-Verlag, 1988; Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *Letters of Love: Women Political Prisoners in Exile and the Camps*, translated by Roger Keys, New York: Quartet Books, 1989.

¹² In-between prose (promezhutochnaia proza) was invented by Lidiya Ginzburg to describe a literary form combining fiction and non-fiction and blurring the boundaries of fact and art. A thorough description of in-between prose is included Khan Andrew, Mark Lipovedsky, Reyfman Irina, Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, part V, 704

Methodological frameworks

Rosalind Marsh¹³ identifies Russian women's writing as a new field in Russian literary criticism, which stimulated in the west by feminist literary criticism. When applying feminist literary criticism to Russian literature, scholars aim to discover previously neglected women authors, which were systematically excluded from publishing history and canon, to not reduce women writers to a "small band of the great" and to stimulate an academic interest in the matter. Scholars interested in Russian women's writing encourage a systematic investigation of the phenomenon and the discovery of previously neglected literary works by combining the authors' biographical research and close readings of their texts. This dissertation fits in the same pattern since, to this day, no research was devoted to a close reading of *The Women's Decameron* from an entirely feminist perspective supported by archival materials and by the investigation of Voznesenskaia's involvement in Russian dissident feminism.

This dissertation fits in the critical mindset of Russian women's writing since its primary aim is to analyze *The Women's Decameron* also as a generally forgotten text, respectively untended and marginalized by Italian and Anglo-American Slavistics¹⁴. The book clearly lends itself to a feminist interpretation: *The Women's Decameron* is set in a maternity ward, where ten ordinary women create a separated female community through the narrative process. The characters are yet protagonists, narrators, and audience of their accounts, which focus on issues that question the subsidiary role of women in Soviet Russia. In this regard, Chapter I consists of a substantial overview of the critical category of Russian women's writing, an overview which takes into consideration the problematic, yet necessary¹⁵, application of Anglo-American feminist literary criticism to the field of Russian literary studies. This is also true given the divergencies among the stages of Russian women's writing and the Anglo-American one, summarized in chapter I through Rosalind Marsh's application of Elaine Showalter's historical categories of women's writing. To identify *The Women's Decameron* as a literary piece of new women's prose, Chapter I also introduces its features and themes.

The importance given to women's creativity in the book is shown also by the centrality of female corporeality, which has been examined through the studies of Helena Goscilo on new women's prose (chapter I) and the theories of sexual difference by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray (chapter II). Within this framework, the dissertation highlights the role of the female body as the

¹³ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996,3

¹⁴ The text was briefly mentioned in this study: Longo Pessina, Imposti Gabriella, Possamai Donatella, *Amore ed eros nella letteratura russa del Novecento*, Bologna CLUEB, 2004

¹⁵ The absence of local feminist literary theories requires the application of foreign analytical tools. (see chapter I)

catalysts of the narrative process and shows how the textualization of women's pleasure, within the text, metaphorically reverses the logic of male-centered culture. Chapter IV analyzes the reconceptualization of female corporeality through the deconstruction of female sexuality as a passive corollary of romantic love. In this regard, women in *The Women's Decameron* actively express their sexuality and their sexual appetites are described as fully legitimate. This libidinal force finds its way into language, guides and prompts the narrative process, which attempts to undermine the traditional conceptualization of femininity, viewing women as passive objects of male pleasure, and that prescribed by the Soviet regime and embodied in the type of the stern of the Soviet woman (*femina sovietica*). The interplay between the narrative process and the reconceptualization of femininity clears the characters' path to self-determination and, consequently, prompts a radical transformation concerning their life choices and beliefs. The reformulation of femininity through literature, described by French feminist theorists as *écriture féminine* and *parler femme*, is therefore included of the dissertation methodological apparatus (Chapter I).

This research reads *The Women's Decameron* as a book legitimating women's authorship through the application of Lanser's narratological study of the female voice since, in Voznesenskaia's literary work, the characters engage in ideological debates, in which the author reluctantly takes part to not undermine her literary authority (chapter V). The narrative voice in *The Women's Decameron* consists of ten homodiegetic narrators and one heterodiegetic narrator, respectively defined through Lanser's categories of the personal and authorial voice. These homodiegetic voices are built to mitigate what Lanser defines as "the audacity of opposition", meaning the author's degree of conformity or non-conformity with the dominant social power. In this regard, Voznesenskaia strategically assigns the most controversial topics to homodiegetic narrators, which at times assume conflicting points of view on the same matter. This prevents the reader from overlapping the author's opinion with those expressed by the characters, which allows her to preserve her literary authority, meaning the credibility she built in respect to her receiving community, and to express her ideological stance at the same time.

The movement Mariia and its influence on Voznesenskaia's *Decameron*

The link between femininity and creativity is to be found in the feminist or quasi-feminist background Voznesenskaia referred to. To understand Voznesenskaia's idea of feminism I devoted the second chapter of the following dissertation to Russian dissident feminism, which includes the groups and homonymous almanacs *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Mariia*. Iuliia Voznesenskaia participated in both of the mentioned journals, however, was more prominently involved in *Maria* as editor-in-chief in Soviet Russia and during her exile in Germany¹⁶. For this reason, the introduction to Russian dissident feminism provided in chapter II mainly focuses on Maria and its controversial feminist background, which was equally labeled as feminist, non-feminist, or quasi-feminist due to its strong ties with religion and its essentialist undertone. As also stated by Alexandra Talaver¹⁷, western scholars equally applied to the almanacs *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Mariia* the label of dissident feminist movements, failing to adequately stress the differences between them.

Zhenshchina i Rossiia follows the steps of Western feminism by owning its terminology and positively evaluates Bolshevik emancipatory policy. *Mariia*, on the other hand, promotes a controversial idea of women's emancipation, which first and foremost is intended as a liberation from the Soviet emancipatory policy and the idea of femininity it promoted, which robbed women of their "true" feminine essence. To restore this lost femininity women must restore their natural bond with spirituality and embrace their "natural" proneness to martyrdom, self-sacrifice, and creativity, which makes them emissaries of God's will on earth. Tatiana Goricheva, philosopher and creator of the group's ideological position, developed these ideas in her article *Ved'my v kosmose*¹⁸, where she argues against Soviet emancipatory policy and Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gender theory. According to Goricheva, there is no distinction between anatomy (sex) and those features and behaviors society associates to being male, female, or other identities (gender): anatomy is destiny. Soviet emancipatory policy, in her view, prevented the "natural" development of femininity and masculinity by imposing on citizens roles, behaviors and living conditions suppressing their natural inclinations, among which Goricheva includes maternity and creativity. *Mariia*, as anticipated, promotes an essentialist idea of femininity which prompted reasonable doubts about its definition of feminist or nonfeminist movement.

¹⁶ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Correspondence with Alla Sariban*, 1981-1982, FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982 (accessed on October 21th 2022)

¹⁷ Talaver Alexandra, "Samizdat magazines of the soviet dissident women's group 1978-1982: a critical analysis" ,Master's Degree Dissertation, Budapest Central European University,2017,48

¹⁸ Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v kosmose", *Mariia*, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Majne, N.1,198, 9-13

Textual analysis suggests that this is the ideological background *The Women's Decameron* refers to. Iuliia Voznesenskaia directly quotes in her book a passage of the *Mariia* describing the rape of a child, a fact that further shows the ties between her book and the almanac.

«как мне рассказывали, женщина, муж которого был арестован за изнасилование их шестимесячной дочери, в результате чего последовала смерть ребёнка, буквально через несколько дней начала хлопотать об освобождении мужа. И обязала это как: - я потеряла ребенка. Так вы хотите у меня и мужа лишить?¹⁹... (Mariia, N.1, 1981)

В нашем районе как-то судили отца, изнасиловавшего по пьянке свою двухмесячную дочь. Женщины ахнули. – И что же с ним сделали? Расстреляли? – Нет. только посадили, хотя прокурор требовал расстрела. Но самое поразительное то, как вела себя его жена. Она кричала и на судью и на прокурора: “Я дочь потеряла, так вы меня и без мужа оставить хотите?²⁰” (Zhenskii Dekameron, 2013)

This further encourages the identification of *Maria* as a reference in the creation of *The Women's Decameron* and additionally clarify the feminist or quasi-feminist ideological background Iuliia Voznesenskaia referred to, which cannot generally be assimilated to a western idea of feminism. Not only Voznesenskaia directly quotes an anecdote published in the third number of *Mariia*, but she also makes concepts such as that of the masculinization of women and feminization of men part of the characters' mindset. The strongest link with *Mariia* is, nonetheless, the identification of women as naturally bearing the gift of creativity, which they express through childbearing and literature. The space of the maternity ward as the setting of *The Women's Decameron*, analyzed in chapter V, enforces this analogy.

¹⁹ Mariia, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Majne, N.1,1981, 42

²⁰ See the narrative frame following the third tale of the third day.

Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

Corpus of the Editions Analyzed

The Women's Decameron was published for the first time in 1985 in its German translation²¹, to which followed an English²², an Italian²³ and French²⁴ one. The book was also extensively staged in Europe²⁵; however, in the author's private fund, which has been catalogued in the appendix, there's almost no mention of the book. When considering the author's commitment to entirely religious oriented books²⁶ and her recantation of her dissident past, the author's silence on her feminist past and on *The Women's Decameron* is not surprising.

This is also in line with the presence of textual variants present between the typewritten 1984 text, the 1987, 1991 and 2013 edition, which can also be linked to the author's intent to mask the ideological stance of the book. This dissertation takes into consideration the textual variants present in the 1984 typewritten copy of *The Women's Decameron* and not included in the other versions of the text. The typewritten version²⁷, received by the Italian translator of *The Women's Decameron* Bruno Osimo, presents some portion of the book not included in its first 1985 German edition or in any other printed edition presented in this dissertation. This dissertation considers the 1987 Russian edition published by Zerkalo in Tel Aviv²⁸, the 1991 Russian edition published by Thomas s.n. in Tallin²⁹ and 2013 Russian edition published from Lepta Kniga in Saint-Petersburg³⁰. The edition of 1992³¹ and that of 2019³² are not included in this dissertation due to their unavailability.

The printed versions taken into account through the analysis of textual variants were similarly edited to take up a more careful ideological stance, which stresses the author's attempt to preserve her literary authority, especially after the consecration of her literary work to religion in the 90s. Not casually Voznesenskaia adds an explanatory preface to 2013 Russian edition which aims at framing *The Women's Decameron* entirely as a piece of social commentary literature about women's

²¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Das Frauen Dekameron*, translated by Marlene Milack, München: Roitman-Verlag, 1985

²² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *The Women's Decameron*, translated by W.B. Linton, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986

²³ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Il Decamerone delle donne*, translated by Bruno Osimo, Milano: Rizzoli, 1988

²⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Le décaméron des femmes*, translated by Danielle Chinsky, Actes Sud, Arles 1988

²⁵ *Kvinnornas Decamerone*, directed by Lars Rudolfsson, Orienteatern, Stockholm, December, 31th 1988; *Il decamerone delle donne*, directed by Donatella Massimilla, Teatro Verdi: Milano, December 1th, 1989; *Le décaméron des femmes*, directed by Brochen Julie, Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe, Paris, January 26th – February 19th, 2000; *Shisgara*, directed by Roman Smirnov, Sankt-Peterburgskii Akademicheskii dramaticheskii teatr imeni V.F. Komissarzhevskoi, Sankt-Peterburg, December, 21th 2013.

²⁶ Pavlikova, "Yuliia Voznesenskaia." Accessed July 5th, 2021. [Вознесенская Юлия Николаевна \(lavkapisateley.spb.ru\)](http://voznescenskaja.yuliia.ru)

²⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Damskij Dekameron*, Typewritten text, 1984, received by Bruno Osimo on November 18th, 2019.

²⁸ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Tel Aviv: Zerkalo, 1987

²⁹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Tallin :Tomas s.m., 1991

³⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

³¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zenskij Dekameron*, Moskva : Мр Vernisaz, 1992

³² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2019

oppression in the Soviet Union with no specific reference to the issue of authorship or to referencing the importance of female corporeality in the book. This is in line with Voznesenskaia's latest statements recanting the author's involvement in samizdat dissident circles and political opposition.

Iuliia Voznesenskaia: biography and literary works

Iuliia Nikolaevna Voznesenskaia (Leningrad 1940, Berlin 2015), also known as Tarapovskaia and Okulova, was a Leningrad poet, prose writer, and human rights activist. The author was well-known in Europe and in the United States during the late 80s for her participation in the dissident feminist movements *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Maria*, and for the book *The Women's Decameron*, while in Russia she's mostly renowned for her religious literature.

Her verses were published for the first time in *Smena* in 1964 and gained the attention of Tat'iana Gnedich, of whom, soon enough, Voznesenskaia will become a pupil. Due to her political activism, which included the participation to demonstrations against the Soviet Union's invasion of former Czechoslovakia³³, Voznesenskaia was banned from Leningrad's Academy of Performative Arts. She was a prominent figure of Leningrad's second culture, or, as the author would prefer it to be called, alternative culture. Konstantin Kuz'minskii, the author of the monumental *Blue lagoon anthology of Russian poetry*³⁴, identifies Voznesenskaia as the mother of alternative culture (mat' poetov), not only for her active participation in underground literary circles but also for her activity as a typewriter and keeper of unauthorized poetry. In this regard, Voznesenskaia's earliest literary activity went along with the organization of poetical readings and exhibitions in her apartment at the apartment 19th of Zhukovskii street. Her husband, Vladimir Sergeevich Okulov³⁵, documented with photographs these events and provided, Kuz'minskii maintains³⁶, portraits of poets, who would otherwise be forgotten. The poets of Leningrad underground literary circles did not gain any official recognition from the Writers' Union, and, therefore, they were not officially considered as writers and poets. For this reason, Voznesenskaia and her fellow poets worked in 1974 to a poetry almanac with the symbolic title *Lepta*³⁷, which also is the main topic of the American movie *Yulia's Diary*³⁸.

³³ The author wrote about it in her poem *Vtorzhenie-68*, listed among her literary works. The poem is mentioned in: Pavlikova, Elena, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia.", In *Enciklopedicheskii slovar' "Literaturny Sankt-Peterburga. XX vek."*, edited by Olga Vladimirovna Bogdanova, Aleksei Markovich Liubomudrov, Boris Vladimirovich Ostanin, Sankt-Peterburg: Lavka Pisatelei 2019. ([Accessed](#) July 5th, 2021). The poem was probably confiscated, since it has not yet been found.

³⁴ Kovalev, Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, *Antologiya noveishei russkoi poezii u Goluboi laguny v 5 tomakh*, Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, Tom 5 B, 2006-2008, ([Accessed](#) October 11th, 2021)

³⁵ Part of Vladimir Okulov's photographs are held in the fund FSO-01-056.09 of Forschungsstelle Osteuropa's archive.

³⁶ Kovalev, Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, *Antologiya noveishei russkoi poezii u Goluboi laguny v 5 tomakh*, Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, Tom 5 B, 2006-2008, 9-10 ([Accessed](#) October 11th, 2021)

³⁷ The title refers to the expression «внести всюю лету»; in other words, to contribute, to be included, in this case, to Russian literary discourse, from which poets not willing to conform to socialist realism were excluded.

³⁸ Cram William, *Yuliia's Diary*, Ford Foundation: USA, 1980, ([Accessed](#) January 29, 2020).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ct22Ytnp86U&t=586s&ab_channel=SaLachman

In spite of almanac's rejection by the Writers' Union and the forced emigration of her fellow poets³⁹, Voznesenskaia persisted in creating alternative literature and to carve herself out a space of expression and recognition.

Voznesenskaia was arrested on December 21st, 1976, and accused of the diffusion of defamatory information on the Soviet Union⁴⁰ according to section 190.1 of Soviet Russia's penal code. The author's work on the poetical almanac *Mera Vremeni* and her interview with Andrei Siniavin⁴¹, were used as evidence during the trial. Henceforth, Voznesenskaia was sentenced to five years of political confinement in Vorkuta, which were changed, in response of the author's violation of said confinement, into two years of force labor in the Siberian Bazoi prison camp from 1977 to 1979⁴². Nonetheless, the author managed to write and publish in samizdat and tamizdat journals poems⁴³ which focused on the separation from her loved ones, loneliness, and religion.

³⁹ This is the main topic of her poem *Kniga razluk*. See, Voznesenskaia Yuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017, 137

⁴⁰ "Sud nad Voznesenskoj", khronike tekushchikh sobytij, Vol. 43, 1977, 34-41, Elektronnyi Arkhiv Fonda Iofe, Fond B-2/Opis 1/Delo Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, ([Accessed](#) April 12, 2022); *Protokol sudebnogo zasedania Leningradskogo gorsuda ot 30.12.1976 po slushaniiu dela Voznesenskoj Okulovoi Yu.*, Elektronnyi Arkhiv Fonda Iofe, Fond B-2/Opis 1/Delo Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, ([Accessed](#) April 12, 2022) <https://arch2.iofe.center/person/8239#document-9789>

⁴¹ Sinjavina Igor, "«Chotite li vy takoj zisni dlja vaši detej i vnukov?»", otvety Ju. Voznesenskoj na 37 voprosov I. Sinjavina", *Posev*, N.3, (mart 1977), 14-18

⁴² Pavlikova, Elena, "Yuliya Voznesenskaya.", In *Enciklopedicheskij slovar' "Literatory Sankt-Peterburga. XX vek."*, edited by Olga Vladimirovna Bogdanova, Aleksej Markovich Lyubomudrov, Boris Vladimirovich Ostanin, Sankt-Peterburg: Lavka Pisatelej, 2019. Accessed July 5th, 2021. [Вознесенская Юлия Николаевна \(lavkapisateley.spb.ru\)](#)

⁴³ Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Son Ptitsy", in Grani, N. 108, 1978, 31. Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006; Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Novyi Voron – on tozhe staryi", in Grani, N. 108, 32. Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, Stichtvorenje napisannoe 14 dekabria 1975 goda vpereryve mezhdudoprosami, in Grani, N. 108, 1978, 33; Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006, with the title "derev'ia stroiatsia v kare"; Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "K Natalii", in Grani, N. 108, 33, 1978; Also in Russkaia Mysl', N.3290, 10.1.1980, 6, and Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006; Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Kryl'ia moi...", in Grani, N. 108, 34, 1978; Also in Russkaia Mysl' N.3290, 10.1.1980, 6. Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Ia letaiu na spine", in Grani, N. 108, 34, 1978. Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006, as "Golubinaia Robota". Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "poliubil ty rasluku", in Grani, N. 108, 34-35, 1978. Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006, with the title "Posle cvetaevoi". Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Stichtvorenje napisannoe 11 sentiabria 1976 goda na stantsii nebel' dva", in Grani, N. 108, 35-36, 1978. Later published as "Gorod Nevel'" in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "ne odinochestvo, no prosto – odinochka", in Grani, N. 108, 36-37, 1978. Also in 37, N.18, mai 1979, FSO 01-075; Later published in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Tost poslanie druz'iam k novomu godu", in Grani, N. 108, 37, 1978. Also in 37, n.18, mai 1979, FSO 01-075 and in Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "chto-to mne segodnia odinoko", in Grani, N. 108, 37-38, 1978; Also in 37, N.18, mai 1979, FSO 01-075; Later published in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017 with the title "odinochestvo v odinochke". Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, "Moi bednyi izlogavshiitsia narod", *Tret'ia Volna*, N.6, 35-36, 1979, Later published in: Kovalev Grigorii, Konstantin Kuz'minskii, Tom 5 B, 2006. Voznesenskaia Iuliia Nikolaevna, K. Kuz'minskomu, *Tret'ia Volna*, N.6, 38-39, 1979. Later published as "Ty ne pervyi, idi" in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017

Voznesenskaia officially converted to orthodox Christianity in 1974⁴⁴, when she was baptized, a fact that discourages from reading her proneness to spiritual literature in the 90s as an unexpected religious turn.

While imprisoned in Bazoi camp, the author also wrote pieces of documentary prose, equally smuggled and published in tamizat journals, concerning the condition of women in camps. Voznesenskaia's interest in women's condition in Soviet Russia was stimulated by her incarceration, was confirmed by her public statements⁴⁵ on the issue and by the great number of texts devoted to the topic⁴⁶. This foreshadows the author's future inclination for documentary prose, in which is conflated her political activism: she actively supported the families of political prisoners and tried to shed light on the condition of women in prison camps also as a speaker of Radio Liberty. The author builds these works through the opposition of individual personal accounts, whether fictional or not, and Soviet regime's narrative on political matters. This is shown, for example, in *The Star Chernobyl*⁴⁷, in which the tragedy, described through the characters' dialogue and focalization, is put in contrast with pieces of Russian magazines, which dangerously understated the scope of the disaster⁴⁸.

Iuliia Voznesenskaia participated to the groups and homonymous dissident almanacs *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, close to western feminism, and *Mariia*, an antimarxist, religious, feminist movement. Due to her participation in the almanac *Mariia*, the author was exiled on the eve of 1980 Moscow Olympics (May 11th 1980) along with other founders of the groups such as Tat'iana Goricheva and Nataliia Malakhovskaia. The author initially settled in Frankfurt am Meine, where she worked for the International Society for Human Rights and as a human rights activists: she was

⁴⁴ Pavlikova, Elena, "Yuliya Voznesenskaya.", 2019.

⁴⁵ Morgan Robin, "First Feminists Exiles from the USSR.", Ms., November 1980, 53. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Rossii", *Posev*, N.4, 1981, 41-45

⁴⁶ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Pis'mo iz Novosibirska.", *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Vol.1, 1980, 73–80. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zhenskii lager' v SSSR.", *Grani*, Vol. 17, 1980, 204–231. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Romashka belaia, chast' pervaiia", *Poiski*, Vol. 4, 1982, 152–188. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Romashka belaia, chast' vtoraiia", *Poiski*, Vol. 5-6, 1983, 303–335. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Pis'ma o liubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh*, typewritten text, München, 1987. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zapiski iz rukava: chast' pervaiia", *Yunost*, N. 3, 1991, 45-48 ([Accessed](#) April 12, 2022) Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zapiski iz rukava", *Yunost*, N. 1, 1991, 80-88 ([Accessed](#) April 12, 2022). Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zapiski iz rukava", *Yunost*, N. 2, 1991, 65-69 ([Accessed](#) April 12, 2022)

⁴⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zvezda Chernobyl'*, New York: Liberty Publishing House, 1987

⁴⁸ This contrast between individual accounts and the official narrative of historical facts is also present in the works of the Nobel prize winner Sviatlana Aleksievich. Voznesenskaia and Aleksievich were acquaintances and had correspondence. In a letter written on November, 11th 1990, Aleksievich asks Voznesenskaia about her books and manuscripts and to inform her about her latest literary work "Zinky boys". This might overshadow the authors' reciprocal influence in using individual accounts to document controversial historical facts. For more, see: Aleksievich Sviatlana Aliksandrouna, *Letter to Yuliia Nikolaevna Voznesenskaia*. Letter.19.9.1990, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021).

a speaker for Radio Liberty⁴⁹ and the editor-in-chief of the first and second issue of *Mariia*. As a human rights activist, the author organized fundraisings for Soviet political prisoners and their families and plead for their freedom. Voznesenskaia was also concerned with the living conditions of Soviet citizens, to which she devoted a considerable amount of her contributions; the author pointed out the precarious conditions of Russian women by critically describing their working and living conditions, the problems they encountered in the domestic sphere and in healthcare. She remarked this unsound state of Soviet women during conferences she held around Europe to show the deficiency of Soviet emancipatory policy and ultimately discourage the emulation of said policy in Europe.

She moved to Munich in 1984. In line with the author's anticommunist principles, Voznesenskaia collaborated with the Posev publishing house and gravitated towards the NTS movement (Narodnoe-Trudovoi soiuz rossiiskikh solidaristov), an anticommunist organization founded in 1930 which dated back the first wave of Russian emigration⁵⁰. Iuliia Voznesenskaia was an active member of the NTS association and published numerous texts after her emigration to Germany in magazines related to the NTS movement, such as the magazine Posev and Grani; furthermore, the author's private fund, kept in the Forschungsstelle Osteruropa archive in Bremen, holds a collection of pamphlets of the NTS organization. In this period of time, the author devotes her attention to documentary prose, of which the collection of interviews *Was Russen über Deutschen denken*⁵¹, the collection of letters of female prison camp prisoners *Pis'ma o ljubvi*⁵² and the novel *Zvezda Černobyl'* are an example. In 1985 Voznesenskaia published the first edition of Women's Decameron, which came out in its German translation with the title *Das Frauen Dekameron*.

After her husband death and the relocation of Radio Liberty to Prague, the author started a monastic retreat in the Lesninskii monastery in Normandy. Along with this decision, Voznesenskaia decided to give up her literary career and disavow her dissident activity to fully focus on spirituality. Encouraged by her Egumenia Afanasiia (the equivalent of the catholic mother superior), Voznesenskaia turned back on her decision to devote her literary work entirely to religious literature,

⁴⁹ Some recordings of Iuliia Voznesenskaia's contributions to Radio Liberty are held at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archive (OSA) at the Central European University of Budapest.

⁵⁰ The NTS movement owned the Posev publishing house and, through it, published tamizdat magazines such as *Grani* and *Posev*, in which Voznesenskaia frequently published her poems and articles. For more on the Posev publishing house see: Ilaria Sicari, "Posev", In *Voci libere in URSS. Letteratura, pensiero, arti indipendenti in Unione Sovietica e gli echi in Occidente* (1953-1991), Edited by C. Pieralli, M. Sabbatini, Firenze University Press, Firenze 2021 (accessed on July, 12 2023)

⁵¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Was Russen über Deutsche denken*, München: Roitman-Verlag, 1988

⁵² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Pis'ma o ljubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh*, typewritten text, München, 1987, received by Bruno Osimo on November 15th, 2021

for which she's mostly renowned in Russia. The novel *Moi Posmertnie Priklucheniia*⁵³, the tale *Put' Kassandry ili Priklucheniia s Makaronami*⁵⁴, a Christian anti-utopia, the novel *Palomnichestvo Lanselota*⁵⁵ and the tales for children *Iulianna ili Igra v Kidnapping*⁵⁶ and *Iulianna ili Opasnie Igry*⁵⁷ are an instance of her "religious turn". In working to her latest literary works, Voznesenskaia created a new genre, namely the christian-ortodox fantasy (pravoslavnoi fantasy) or else called anti-potter, with which she gained public recognition. In this regard, she was awarded as author of the year in the literary contest Pravoslavnaia Kniga⁵⁸. She died in Berlin in 2015.

⁵³ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Moi Posmertnie Priklucheniia*, Moskva: Veche, 2001

⁵⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Put' Kassandry ili Priklucheniia s Makaronami*, Moskva: Veche, 2002

⁵⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Palomnichestvo Lanselota*, Moskva: Veche, 2004

⁵⁶ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Iulianna ili Igra v Kidnapping*, Moskva: Veche, 2004

⁵⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Iulianna ili Opasnie Igry*, Moskva: Veche, 2005

⁵⁸ Pavlikova, Elena, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia.", In *Enciklopedicheskii slovar' "Literatory Sankt-Peterburga. XX vek."*, edited by Olga Vladimirovna Bogdanova, Aleksei Markovich Lyubomudrov, Boris Vladimirovich Ostanin, Sankt-Peterburg: Lavka Pisatelej, 2019. Accessed July 5th, 2021. Вознесенская Юлия Николаевна (lavkapisateley.spb.ru)

Part I

Methodology and Context

Chapter I

A feminist critical approach to *The Women's Decameron*

1.1 Russian Women's Writing

1.1.1 *Zhenskaia proza*: Segregation or Legitimacy?

Russian women's prose or else called *zhenskaia proza* was challenged by Russian female critics, female authors and male critics as an irrelevant literary phenomenon⁵⁹. The act of devoting a special place in Russian literary discourse to women's writing has been sometimes interpreted as patronizing and diminishing, however necessary in the early stages of the inclusion of forgotten and unknown texts in Russian literary canon. In this regard, the identification of women's literature as an independent phenomenon is legitimated by the systematic exclusion of women's prose from the "great parade of culture". Through the application of feminist literary criticism, scholars gave recognition to forgotten female texts capable of enriching and redefining Russian literary canon, and therefore necessary for a thorough description of Russian literary heritage.

In the collective introduction to the anthology *Ne pomniashchaia zla. Novaia Zhenskaia proza*⁶⁰ the authors see the phenomenon of Russian women's writing as a symptom of women's subsidiary role in the literary field and in society. As long as women will be considered as other, they will produce literature from a different perspective which deftly renders their sexual difference and marginality.

«Отвечая на вопрос скептиков, в том числе и противоположного пола, мы говорим вполне утвердительно, женская проза есть. Она существует не как прихоть... Она существует как неизбежность, продиктованная временем и пространством. Женская проза есть – поскольку есть мир женщины, отличный от мира мужчины. Мы вовсе не намерены открещиваться от своего пола, а тем более извиняться за его „слабости“. Делать это так же глупо и безнадежно, как отказываться от

⁵⁹ Kubínyiová Júlia, "Osmyslenie kritikai fenomena sovremmennoj russkoi zhenskoi prosy kontsa XX veka.", *Novaia Rusistika*, Vol.4, N.1, 2011, 37-49

⁶⁰ Ryl'nikova N.A., Vaneeva L.L., Vasil'eva Svetlana, *Ne pomniashchaia zla : novaia zhenskaia proza*, Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990

наследственности, исторической почвы или судьбы. Свое достоинство надо сохранять, хотя бы и через принадлежность к определенному полу (а может быть, прежде всего именно через нее).⁶¹

Rosalind Marsh⁶² comments on the obscurity of Russian female authors by problematizing their subsidiary role in Russian histories of Russian literature and, conversely, in Anglo-American ones⁶³. The exclusion of women writers from the anthologies is imputable to Russian literary criticism's double standards on women's literary production and, ultimately, to the adverse social condition preventing female authors from devoting their time to literary production. It can be argued that in Imperial and Soviet Russia men writers equally experienced adversities and struggled against political persecution as much as women did; nonetheless, they were not excluded by the literary and political scene on the ground of gender discrimination. Rosalind Marsh maintains that women writers were excluded from the male literary canon due to literary criticism's biases and the creation of literary theories eventually excluding women writers from the literary field⁶⁴.

Catriona Kelly⁶⁵ exemplifies the impact of the nineteenth century's category of committed literature by mentioning Belinsky's review of Elena Gan's prose, which consists of the first publication in Russian literary criticism devoted to Russian women's writing. In its review, Vissarion Belinsky framed Elena Gan's prose as an initial stage towards the construction of social-oriented literature concerned with the women question instead of that of "poetic ramblings" and of "graceful depiction of feelings"⁶⁶. Hereof, Belinsky influenced the development of a "committed tradition" within nineteenth-century women's writing⁶⁷, while also narrowing women's prose to the display of women's segregation in society and in the private sphere. Catriona Kelly equally describes the marginalizing effect of the Romantic concept of genius and talent on nineteenth-century's women's literary production⁶⁸. The identification of Russian women's writing as a separated literary category is also supported by its evolution in time, which diverges from that of Russian literary canon.

⁶¹ Ryl'nikova N.A., Vaneeva L.L., Vasil'eva Svetlana, *Ne pomniashchaia zla : novaia zhenskaia proza*, Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1990, 3.

⁶² Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 5

⁶³ A chapter on women's writing was recently included in Khan Andrew, Mark Lipovedsky, Reyfman Irina, Stephanie Sandler, *A History of Russian Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018; In the Italian histories of Russian literature, the topic is still excluded, see for example Guido Carpi, *Storia della letteratura russa: dalla Rivoluzione d'Ottobre a oggi*, Roma, Carrocci, 2020.

⁶⁴ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 7

⁶⁵ Kelly Catriona, *History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 24-25

⁶⁶ Ibidem

⁶⁷ Ibidem, 25

⁶⁸ Kelly Catriona, *History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994

1.1.2 Historical Phases of Russian Women's Writing

Russian women's writing does not follow the canonical male-centered periodization of Russian literature, which has been thoroughly established by Catriona Kelly in her *History of Russian Women's Writing*. Charlotte Rosenthal similarly addresses the issue by identifying women's literary works traditionally inscribed within the Silver Age as the Golden Age of Russian women's writing⁶⁹. In the same fashion, Rosalind Marsh⁷⁰ recommends a different periodization by adapting Elaine Showalter's categories of Anglo-American women's writing's historical periods⁷¹ to the Russian literary context. Elaine Showalter posits three historical categories concerning the historical evolution of women's literature, which she developed by investigating the reasons pushing women to pursue a literary career, the reception of their literary works and the impact of criticism on them. Showalter also considered the different experience of the authors, how their experience as women influenced their works and if and how the access to the profession of writers changed their status⁷².

In looking at literary subcultures, such as black, Jewish, Canadian, Anglo-Indian, or even American, we can see that they all go through three major phases. First, there is a prolonged phase of *imitation* of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and the *internalization* of its standards of art and its views on social roles. Second, there is a phase of *protest* against these standards and values, and *advocacy* of minority rights and values, including a demand of autonomy. Finally, there is a phase of *self-discovery*, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity. An appropriate terminology for women writers is to call these stages, *Feminine*, *Feminist* and *Female*⁷³.

Said historical approach places the Feminine stage from 1840 (when women authors initially resorted to male pseudonyms) to the death of George Eliot in 1880, the Feminist phase from 1880 to 1920 (the acquisition of women's suffrage), and the Female phase from 1920 to the present day. Nonetheless, Showalter states how the aforementioned stages must not be intended as rigidly separated, for they might overlap and coexist within an author literary production⁷⁴. Toril Moi⁷⁵ positively commented Showalter's periodization and underlined its ability to rediscover forgotten texts. Even so, he extensively critiqued Showalter's approach due to its proneness in establishing a

⁶⁹ Rosenthal Charlotte, 'Achievement and obscurity', In *Women writers in Russian Culture*, edited by Clyman Toby and Green Diana, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994, 164-165.

⁷⁰ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 17

⁷¹ Showalter, Elaine. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. Princeton University Press, 1977

⁷² *Ibidem*, 13

⁷³ *Ibidem*

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*

⁷⁵ Moi, Toril, *Sexual/textual politics. Feminist literary theory*, London, Routledge, 2002, 56, 75-80; quote from Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, 35

separated women's canon instead of undermining the very concept of canonical literature. That being said, Marsh identifies Showalter's historical approach as an insightful tool to spot the historical evolution of patriarchal discourse's influence on women-authors.

Rosalind Marsh pinpoints the Feminine phase of Russian women's writing between the eighteenth and early twentieth century, in which women authors attempted to fit in the canon either through the imitation of male literary production or fitting in a stereotyped feminine genre. In this regard, the researcher underlines the obstacles which prevented female⁷⁶ authors from entering the literary arena, such as the stereotyped notion of femininity embraced by the critics, the lack of proper education, and their social status. The issue of women's participation in the literary field in the Feminine phase is exemplified by Anna Bunina's poem *Conversation between me and the women*⁷⁷, an imaginary dialogue between the poetess and her female audience lamenting the lack of women's representation in literature: "You ought to take your themes from your own circle./'Tis only men you honor with your lays,/As if their sex alone deserved your praise./You traitress! Give our case some thought!⁷⁸". To their complaint of not being included in the poet's lines, which they assume as treason, the lyrical I answers by imputing the misrepresentation of women in poetry to the imposition of fitting in the male's literary canon, which assumes women-related issues as secondary and not pertaining to high canonical literature: "It's true, my dears, you are no less./But understand:/With men, not you, the courts of taste are manned/Where authors all must stand./And all an author's fame is in their hands./And none can help loving himself the best⁷⁹."

Barbara Heldt⁸⁰ links women's exclusion from Russian literary arena to its peculiar function of mirroring social and cultural tensions. Nonetheless, nineteenth-century Russian female writing included numerous valid literary voices, as Anna Bunina, Elizaveta Kulman, Zinaida Volkonskaia and Evdokiia Rostopchina, and focused on specific literary forms such as the society tale⁸¹.

In Marsh's view, the second stage of Russian women's writing partially matches Showalter's feminist phase; however, the scholar underlines the discrepancy between the feminist writing preceding⁸² and succeeding the Russian revolution, which consisted of a meaningful turning point in

⁷⁶ With the adjective female we refer to the author's sex, while, with the adjective feminine we refer to femininity as a social construct.

⁷⁷ Bunina Anna, "A Conversation between me and the women", translated by Kelly Catriona, In *Kelly Catriona, An Anthology of Russian Women's writing 1777-1992*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, 8-12

⁷⁸ *ibidem*

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*

⁸⁰ Heldt Barbara, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*, Bloomington -Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987

⁸¹ Kelly Catriona, *History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 19-79

⁸² For more on the matter, see: Kelly Catriona, "Configuration of authority: Feminism, Modernism and Mass Culture, 1881-1917", In *History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994; Kelly Catriona, An

terms of the women's question and, consequently, of women's literature. Russian modernist era consisted in a fertile time for women's writing, where flourished the art of Anna Akhmatova and Marina Cvetaeva; however, the presence of the feminine ideal inherited from Romanticism and the Madonna/whore dichotomy stigmatizing female sexuality in male prose and poetry demonstrates how past stereotypical versions of womanhood were still conveyed through the medium of literature. Moreover, authorship remained a male-centered prerogative; Zinaida Gippius and Nadezhda Lokhkvitaskaia used male endings on verb past forms and pseudonyms to mask their female identity. Similarly, Anna Akhmatova qualified herself with the word poet instead of the female Russian form *poetessa*⁸³.

The October revolution was a major turning point in women's rights and, consequently, in their literary production. The Bolshevik government implemented a groundbreaking⁸⁴ policy concerning women's rights, according to which the constitution granted women legal equality and suffrage in 1918 and the right to abortion in 1920. The introduction of the 1918 family code brought forth new principles of marriage freedom, state secular control over marriage and family matters, equal treatment of children regardless of their parents' marital status, emphasis on familial bonds driven by affection rather than material gain, and the right to divorce. It replaced religious ceremonies and legal proceedings with simple civil registration for marriage and divorce. The law also mandated gender equality in all aspects of family relations. However, the Bolsheviks obstructed women's advocacy for this equality by insisting that women's liberation would only be achieved through the socialist revolution and not through independent efforts of women outside the leadership of the Communist Party and the Council of People's Commissars, led by Lenin⁸⁵.

As investigated by numerous valid scholars⁸⁶, gender equality was achieved in Soviet Russia more on a theoretical rather than a cultural level; women had to carry the burden of equal duties and

anthology of Russian Women's writing 1777-1992, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; For more general information about women authors, see: Nechemias Carol, Noonan Norma Corigliano, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001; Ledkovsky Marina, Rosenthal Charlotte, Zirin Mary, *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994, 773-775

⁸³ Goscilo Helena, introduction to *Balancing Acts: Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989

⁸⁴ The scope of Bolshevik government's policy on women's rights is undeniable: Russia was the second country in the world to grant women full suffrage and the first to recognize their reproductive rights, which, for instance, in Italy were achieved by women respectively in 1945 and in 1978. Nowadays, women's right to abortion is still under question in many Western countries.

⁸⁵ Peter Juviler. *Family Protection and Women's Well-Being under Communism and Later*, In, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, edited by Nechemias Carol, Noonan Norma Corigliano, London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001, 132

⁸⁶ For more see: Wood, Elizabeth A., *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) 13-48; Goldman, Wendy Z., *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936*. (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1-13; 29-58; Gorsuch, Anne E. "'A Woman Is Not a Man': The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928."

responsibilities, such as physically demanding jobs, in addition to the everlasting bond with house chores, house management, and childcare. Soviet propaganda, on the other hand, perpetuated a distorted image of women's condition, of which the numerous *plakaty* devoted to the matter is a useful example; one, in particular, can be used as an instance of the regime's propaganda on the women's question. The *plakat* states: "down with kitchen slavery, all hail our new life"⁸⁷ and pictures a woman sitting in dark backgrounded kitchen washing dishes, while in front of her, a smiling woman in red opens the door on a bright landscaped view, showing the miracle making social structures created by the new social order, such as public canteens, public kindergartens, recreative centers and factories. However, as the aforementioned sociological studies have proved, the lack of structures and funding dramatically restricted access to those benefits, as much as beneficiaries of social security services, family allowance and health care, especially regarding abortion. The state didn't provide any sexual education, and abortion became widely used as a birth control method; pregnancy and maternity continued to be considered a women's issue to be dealt with, which radically influenced women's approach to sexuality as much as gendered double standards in judging their sexual conduct, while on the contrary men's promiscuity was encouraged to increase the low birthrate⁸⁸.

That being said, the achievement of equal rights changed the feminist perspective in women's literature; for instance, Alexandra Kollontai's essays and novels do not focus on the problem of equality itself but more on issues consequent to the acquisition of women's equal rights, such equality within intimate relationships and free love⁸⁹. Due to said discrepancy between prerevolutionary and post-revolutionary women's writing, Marsh maintains that Russian women's writing has not been through a genuinely feminist stage. The scholar identifies the Stalin era as a great retreat in the field of Russian women's prose due to the regime's antifeminist revolution, exemplified by the abrogation of the abortion law and the imposition of Socialist realism as the reigning literary method, which portrayed women by exalting their maternal, wifely, and their economically productive role in Soviet society.

Slavic Review, no. 3 (October 1, 1996) 636–60; Schrand, Thomas G. "Socialism in One Gender: Masculine Values in the Stalin Revolution." In *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, edited by Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, (Houndmills; New York, NY: Palgrave, 2002), 194–209.

⁸⁷ Shegal'Grigoryj Mikhajlovich, *Doloi kukhonnoe rabstvo! Daesh' novyi byt*. 1930-1931. Poster. Moscow History Museum, Moskow. <http://www.museum.ru/alb/image.asp?102874> (accessed on March 9th, 2022)

⁸⁸ Goldman, *The State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936*, 1993, 101-143; 296-336; Hoffmann, David L. "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context.", *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (October 1, 2000): 35–54.

⁸⁹ Kollontai Aleksandra, "Dorogu krylatomu Erosu! Pis'mo k trudiashcheisia molodezhi", *Robochaia oppoziciia*, March 9th, 1921.

In Marsh's view⁹⁰, Russian women's writing entered Schowalter's female stage during *perestroika*, which witnessed relevant examples of genuine female creativity with the implication, whether conscious or not, of a feminist standpoint. This phenomenon was defined as new women's prose (*novaia zhenskaia proza*), a literary movement named after the almanac *Ne pomniashchaia zla. Novaia zhenskaia proza*, published in 1990 as an answer to the subsidiary role imposed on women's literary production by the Russian publishing industry. Despite the lack of a unitary definition of new women's prose and the diversity among its representatives, the common denominator between new women's prose writers is the prominence of female subjects' experiences in their narrative and the undermining of traditional literary representations of femininity. Among the features of new women's prose, Helena Goshilo underlines the use of female corporeality as a rhetorical device implemented to reverse the traditional representation of femininity in literature. In new women's prose the body becomes unapologetically sexual, capable of experiencing pleasure, a pleasure which is not described as an anomaly or an excess, but as a healthy, legitimate drive. This representation of the body reverses the logic inscribed in the romantic representation of female sexuality as a corollary of romantic love and domesticated through maternity and monogamy. New women's prose, on the other hand, reverses the paradigm of women as an object of male desire: female sexuality and pleasure are foregrounded and used as a means to express female subjectivity, while male characters serve a secondary purpose⁹¹.

During *perestroika*, in which new women's prose flourished, the State promoted a more traditional image of womanhood, as noted by Helena Goscilo; in this regard, some statements by the General Secretary of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev are meaningful examples. When presenting his reforms, he declared the intention to "return women to their purely womanly mission" that is, "housework, the upbringing of children and the creation of a good family atmosphere," which have been set aside due to the desire of "mak(ing) women equal with men in everything⁹²." Similarly, women's writing has presented an image of femininity strictly connected to self-sacrifice in contrast with the masculine ideology of self-interest and competition. This image of womanhood perpetrated by the Soviet press has inevitably been internalized and expressed by women writers determined to retain their femininity.

⁹⁰ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 18-19

⁹¹ Goscilo Helena, *Balancing Acts. Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, xiv-xxvii

⁹² *Ibidem*, 17

In the mentioned period, concerning literary production and the publishing industry, Soviet Russia kept a significant gender imbalance. Women were relegated to the status of subordinates in the publishing industry as critics and members of editorial boards; in the Writer's Union, they were a minority,⁹³ and in the underground culture were often relegated to the role of *mashinistki*⁹⁴. Nevertheless, women's emancipation was a source of pride and good publicity for Soviet Russia, normally using magazines such as *Sovetskaia Zhenshchina* and *Rabotnica* as an example. The very presence of a separate category of magazines, Goscilo maintains, shows that women were considered a minority to be accorded a special interest⁹⁵. The problem of female representation in the cultural industry in the Russian context becomes more complex when also considering the presence of "official" committed literature and underground literature, producing a submerged cultural heritage in the means of *tamizdat* and *samizdat*. This "double yoke" concerning women's literary production in 1970s-1980s Soviet Russia also affected Voznesenskaia's literary production and is also a valuable interpretative tool for *The Women's Decameron's* close reading in Chapter IV.

1.1.3 The Application of Western Feminist Literary Criticism to Russian literature

Russian women authors were marginalized by Russian literary criticism. Western criticism, on the other hand, produced fruitful anthologies of Russian women's writing and works of literary criticism, which, due to the scarcity of local literary approaches on the subject matter, problematically⁹⁶ apply western feminist literary criticism to the Russian context, which nonetheless experienced a different evolution in women's literature and in feminism.

It is valuable that western gender research should express its own views on the analysis of the poetics of a literary work, creating new parameters for the theory of the literary image, the author, and the reader. Nevertheless, there are still many difficulties in this area. The shortcomings exposed in the general development of literary theory become particularly evident when the western researcher is obliged to use the tools that exist in this field to study a concrete national literature, with its specific features and peculiarities. This is where the feminist closeness to "real literature" becomes particularly valuable. However, western Slavists and Russian researchers into western literature are faced with the colossal challenge of developing a

⁹³ Ibidem

⁹⁴ Von Zitzewitz Josephine, "Manufacturers: Samizdat Typists", In *The Culture of Samizdat: Literature, Underground, Networks in the Soviet Union*, London-New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 66-92

⁹⁵ Goscilo Helena, *Balancing Acts. Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, xx

⁹⁶ Nanette Funk, 'Feminism East and West', in *Gender Politics and Post-Communism*, 319-21, quoted from Julia Heaton, "Russian Women's Writing: Problems of a Feminist Approach, with Particular Reference to the Writing of Marina Palei." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, N. 1 1997, 753

general theoretical and methodological basis and adapting it to literature in another language (even if given in translation)⁹⁷.

Julia Heaton⁹⁸ generally describes two main tendencies in the application of western feminist criticism to Russian women's writing, meaning the application of Anglo-American gynocriticism⁹⁹, concerned with the textual representation of women's socio-cultural experiences, and that of French feminist theory, concerned with the philosophical and psychoanalytical theorization of femininity and its effects on women's self-representation. In her investigation of Marina Palei's prose, Heaton wisely resorts to both approaches to focus on whether the investigated literary works lend themselves to be read from a feminist perspective¹⁰⁰.

Russian literary criticism proved to be rather hostile to the study of women's literature as a distinctive literary phenomenon, which led women authors to create a new form of criticism identified by Júlia Kubínyiová as *avtliteraturovedenie*¹⁰¹. Júlia Kubínyiová's study gives a substantial overview of Russian criticism concerning new women's prose¹⁰², shows opposing approaches to the matter, and ultimately proves that the application of western feminist criticism to the topic encouraged the study of a phenomenon otherwise neglected. Russian critics, Kubínyiová maintains, argue that women authors should be studied individually and deny the legitimacy of Russian women's writing as a separate category due to its lack of distinctive stylistic devices. On the other hand, women's writing was studied as a phenomenon creating its own cultural tradition and deconstructing individual cultural, and ideological gender stereotypes. According to Kubínyiová, both the listed approaches are understandable, being women's literature in an in-between state since, despite it became a mass culture phenomenon with time, it was not included in literary studies as a separate category, which impeded its investigation. Furthermore, Kubínyiová addresses Russian literary criticism's hostility toward the category of women's writing by making reference to Irina Sliusareva¹⁰³ and A. P.

⁹⁷ Bolshakova Alla, "To See Something completely Different... Women's Prose in Contemporary Russia", In *New women's writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe: gender, generation and identities*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New Castle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012, 93

⁹⁸ Julia Heaton. "Russian Women's Writing: Problems of a Feminist Approach, with Particular Reference to the Writing of Marina Palei." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, N. 1 1997, 75

⁹⁹ Gynocriticism was introduced by the American feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter to define critical works devoted to literature written by female authors. This critical approach aims at recovering 'neglected' women writers and understanding the distinctive traits of women's writing. The cornerstones of gynocriticism are Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977).

¹⁰⁰ Julia Heaton. "Russian Women's Writing: Problems of a Feminist Approach, with Particular Reference to the Writing of Marina Palei." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, N. 1 1997, 10

¹⁰¹ Kubínyiová Júlia, "Osmyslenie kritikai fenomena sovremennoi russkoi zhenskoi prosy konca XX veka.", *Novaia Rusistika*, Vol.4, N.1, 2011, 3.

¹⁰² Ibidem, 4-10

¹⁰³ Sliusareva Irina, "Opravdanie zHITEISKOGO: Irina Sliusareva predstavliaet 'novuiu zhenskuiu prozu', *Znamia*, 1991, № 11, 238, quoted from Kubínyiová, 2011

Basinskii¹⁰⁴ comments on the almanac *Ne pomniashchaia zla*¹⁰⁵. A. P. Basinskii finds the methodological premises in the almanac's foreword as contradictory, illogical, and unconvincing, due to the use of dubitative forms in shaping the main argument¹⁰⁶. Irina Sliusareva firstly opposes the use of labels applied to the definition of literature, which, she maintains, quality can only define. Basinskii equally contrasts the label of women's prose, which he regards as an expedient to cover up the substantial lack of quality of one's literary production¹⁰⁷.

Maria Arbatova¹⁰⁸, on the other hand, points out the main bias of Russian criticism regarding women's prose, which lies in its opposition to the creation of gender-specific categories for the study of literature. In this regard, Russian critics opposing the concept of *zhenskaia proza* argue that literature can't be sorted by gender: the creation of a separate critical category for women's literature was described by Russian mainstream critics as a measure encouraging women's segregation in literature. Arbatova, on the contrary, regards these critical remarks as supporting literary phallogentrism, as they oppose the inclusion of literary works produced from a genuine women's perspective in the canon since those literary works face women's sociological and moral issues and not men's, which are generally assumed as the only legitimate. This stereotypical misrepresentation of women's literary production is in line with its negative connotation in the Russian context, which led female writers to refuse the label of women's literature.

«Я не поэтесса, а поэт», – бесконечно уточняют Белла Ахмадулина и Юнна Мориц, демонстрируя подсознательный запрет на то, что можно быть творчески состоятельной женщиной... Асексуальная литература Людмилы Петрушевской и Татьяны Толстой, Нины Садур и Валерии Нарбиковой, написанная под страхом получить ярлык женской, дамской.¹⁰⁹

Women authors rejected to be defined along with the category of *zhenskaia proza* due to the term's negative connotation. In the Russian context, as also described by Catriona Kelly, the label of women's literature has a derogatory overtone since the term *zhenskaia proza* commonly describes bestselling, unwitty, low-quality literature; lady's prose (*damskaia proza*) is a more openly condescending term with which Russian women's writing has been identified. According to Kelly

¹⁰⁴ Basinskii Pavel, Pozabyvshchhie dobro? Zаметki na poliakh "novoi zhenskoi prozoi", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, N. 7, 1991, quoted from Kubinyiová, 2011

¹⁰⁵ Ryl'nikova N.A., Vaneeva L.L., Vasil'eva Svetlana, *Ne pomniashchaia zla : novaia zhenskaia proza*, Moskva: Moskovskij rabochij, 1990, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Basinskii Pavel, Pozabyvshchhie dobro? Zаметki na poliakh "novoi zhenskoi prozoi", *Literaturnaia gazeta*, N. 7, 1991, 10, quoted from Kubinyiová, 2011

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem

¹⁰⁸ Arbatova Maria, "Zhenskaya literatura kak fact sostoyatel'nosti otechestvennogo feminizma", *Preobrazhenie*, N. 3, 1995, quoted from Kubinyiová, 2011

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem, 27

the definition of women's writing as lady's prose refers to "demerits of sentimentality, banality, and lack of intellectual power¹¹⁰." Women's creativity is therefore connoted as the "counter-image" of male creativity/writing; Kelly links this dismissive view of women's writing to women's isolation from social and political issues, which was likewise mirrored in their literary production.

The negative connotation of women's prose as a literary category clearly explains its rejection by women authors. In this regard, the highest praise for women authors was that of having a "masculine style", meaning to mirror traits of canonical literature in their works, which eventually led them to conform to the cultural tradition they were born and educated into rather than challenging it. Rosalind Marsh discusses this issue while making reference to Marina Tsvetaeva's statement "in art, there is no woman question. There can be only women's responses to the human question", as an example of women authors' refusal to be included in a label of presumed inferiority¹¹¹. Anna Akhmatova and Lidiia Chukhovskaia likewise opposed their inclusion in the category of women's prose, even though *Rekviem* and *Sofiia Petrovna* describe in detail the tense situation of the 1930s from a genuine female perspective.

This internalization of patriarchal values and the general hostility toward the concept of feminism in Russia encourage the application of feminist literary criticism to texts produced by women authors. For this reason, Marsh maintains, is essential to distinguish the author's public persona from her literary production; authors such as Natalia Baranskaia and Tatiana Tolstaia openly rejected any connection with their literary works and feminism while, concurrently, their prose can be easily read from a feminist standpoint¹¹².

Rosalind Marsh sees Russian criticism's nonrecognition of women's prose as one of the major obstacles to a feminist reinterpretation of Russian literature and to the definition of Russian women's writing as a distinctive literary category. Maria Arbatova similarly points out the non-recognition of women's literature by Russian critics and imputes its marginalization to gender-related issues.

«Литература не делится по половому признаку!» – провозглашали фаллократы. Делится, делится в настоящем и делилась в прошлом, только с оговоркой, что мужская литература – это литература, а женская литература – это резервация... Понимание того, существует ли женская

¹¹⁰ Kelly Catriona, "Not written by a lady", In Kelly Catriona, *A History of Russian Women's Writing 1820-1992*, 1994, 2.

¹¹¹ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 33

¹¹² Ibidem, 15

литература и нужна ли она человечеству, упирается только вопрос о том, человек ли женщина и столь ли серьезны проблемы ее мира, ее духовности, сколь и проблемы мира и духовности мужчины»¹¹³.

Russian critics attempted to define women's writing by applying the category of naturalism¹¹⁴ and aggressiveness. Irina Savkina, in this regard, identifies the use of aggressiveness by women authors as a strategy to deconstruct the myth of the woman-victim, turning the victim into the aggressor¹¹⁵. Critics¹¹⁶ have also framed women's writing within early glasnost's neo-naturalism or *fenomen chernukhy*¹¹⁷, due to its display of graphic scenes of violence, which often entails corporeality. Basinskii considers naturalism as a literary device inappropriate for women's prose, confirming, again, the double standards of Russian criticism towards men and women's prose, as, according to the critic, the use of naturalism matches with "serious" literature, not to women's one.

Описание экстремальных ситуаций считается неприличным в женской прозе, хотя их немало в произведениях Горького, Довлатова, Солженицына... Элементы «натурализма» в женской прозе пока остаются «ненормальными» для русской литературы. Такое критическое мнение указывает на значительную разницу между нормами женской прозы и нормами общей русской литературы. Басинский считает, что некоторые типы описания подходят только «серьезной» литературе. В этом отношении женская проза для него – не серьезная литература¹¹⁸.

Kubinyiová's overview of Russian critical reception of Russian women's writing explains the lack of Russian critical works regarding women's prose and, therefore, the necessity of western feminist literary criticism's implementation in the study of Russian literature. Furthermore, as Goscilo maintains¹¹⁹, western criticism clearly established the influence of nationality, race, religion, and gender in literature¹²⁰ and is concerned with describing those factors in the text, while Russia is still discussing whether gender consists of a determining factor in writing.

¹¹³ Arbatova Maria, "Zhenskaia literatura kak fakt sostoiatel'nosti otchestvennogo feminizma", *Preobrazhenie*, 1995, N.3, 27. Quoted from Kubinyiová, 2011.

¹¹⁴ Kubinyiová Júlia, "Osmyslenie kritikoi fenomena sovremennoi russkoi zhenskoi prosy konca XX veka.", *Novaia Rusistika*, Vol.4, N.1, 2011, 7

¹¹⁵ Savkina, Irina, Maria Zhukova, *Episody iz zhizni zhenshchin*, Maria, literaturnyi almanakh, Vol.2, Petrosavodsk: 1995, 211, Quoted from Kubinyiová, 2011

¹¹⁶ N. L. Lejderman, M.N. Lipovedsky, *Sovremennaya russkaya literatura 1950-1990e gody v dvukh tomakh*, Moskva: Academia, Tom II, 2003

¹¹⁷ Lejderman, Lipovedsky, *Sovremennaya russkaya literatura*, 560

¹¹⁸ Kubinyiová Júlia, "Osmyslenie kritikoi fenomena sovremennoi russkoi zhenskoi prosy konca XX veka.", *Novaia Rusistika*, Vol.4, N.1, 2011, 9

¹¹⁹ Goscilo Helena, "Paradigm lost? Contemporary women's fiction", In *Women Writers in Russian literature*, edited by Clyman and Green, 205. Quote from Rosalind Marsh 1996, 33.

¹²⁰ These issues altogether are faced in the theory of intersectionality, for more see Crenshaw, Kimberle, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: a Black Feminist Critique of Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Practice,' University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989,139–167; Crenshaw, Kimberle, 'Mapping the Margins:

The hostility of Russian literary criticism towards the category of Russian women's prose and the consequent lack of Russian studies on the topic, in short, led to the application of western feminist criticism to the study of Russian women's prose. In spite of the great differences between Russian and western feminism, which shaped western feminist literary theory, western feminist criticism proved to be a valuable tool for the inclusion of Russian women's writing in the studies of Russian literary heritage. The application of this methodology, however, must consider the critical differences between western and Russian feminisms, as pointed out in commenting the historical phases of Russian women's writing.

1.1.4 Russian Women's Writing as a Distinctive Literary Category

A key issue regarding the category of Russian women's prose is the identification of its literary tradition since a reciprocal influence between Russian women authors has not yet been proved or disproved¹²¹. Rosalind Marsh imputes the lack of a distinct literary generation to women's subsidiary role in the social context and isolation in the domestic sphere, their scarce participation in Russian literary discourse, their absence from the canon, and their dismissal from the publishing industry. Charlotte Rosenthal's studies on women writers of the Silver age¹²² posit the lack of a conscious reference among Russian women's prose authors. Rosalind Marsh, on the other hand, hints at reciprocal national and international¹²³ influence among women authors. Barbara Heldt's pioneering work *Terrible Perfection*¹²⁴ studies Russian women's prose from the nineteenth century to modernism and manages to prove that, on the ground of a shared literary and sociocultural background, women and men produced literary works from a radically different perspective; furthermore, the scholar succeeds in a reconstruction of a Russian female literary tradition related to the genre of autobiography and lyric. In these genres, women writers could express their gender grammatically and project a different view of the Self, as lyric and autobiography are self-mediated. The narrative or lyric voice in those genres speaks directly to the reader and proceeds in an exploration of the Self.

Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,' *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1991, 1241–1299.

¹²¹ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press 1996, 11-12

¹²² Rosenthal Charlotte, 'Achievement and obscurity', In *Women writers in Russian Culture*, edited by Clyman Toby and Green Diana, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1994, 164-165. Quoted from Marsh, 1996, 30

¹²³ Marsh Rosalind, *Gender and Russian Literature. New Perspectives*, Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 10-11

¹²⁴ Heldt Barbara, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*, Bloomington -Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987

Helena Goscilo, however, opposes the identification of autobiography as a strictly feminine genre. In this regard, she opposes Eikhembbaum's pronouncement about women's inclination for preserving memory, that is, "it is given to the woman to preserve and transmit memory, to effect the link between generations."¹²⁵ The most impressive literary works produced by the "feminine pen", Goscilo maintains, belong to the genre of memoir, such as those from Lidia Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, Maria Ioffe, Lidia Chukhovskaia¹²⁶. Despite autobiography can't be considered a strictly feminine genre, as Goscilo maintains, Barbara Heldt observes the importance of autobiography for the process of female authorship construction, considering autobiography as a starting point in expressing the Self in a literary form; in this regard, Heldt describes how women's writing in the Soviet context flourishes on the on internal, isolated and intimate grounds opposing to the official, external and male writing in the genre of the novel. Goscilo similarly underlines the divergencies between western women authors' employment of the novel and Russian women writers' use of short prose. The novel in the West was a successful genre for moral analysis, and it has been a successful tool for women writers to analyze what society meant for women. Unfortunately, this isn't true for Russian women's writing since the novel remained a male medium, even those advocating women's emancipation¹²⁷.

The novel in Russian literature was the quintessential male medium, which women writers, due to their anxiety of authorship, avoided to favor forms of prose at the periphery of culture, such as the novella, short stories and the *povest'*. Barbara Heldt imputes this tendency of women's writing to Russia's problematic prose tradition. To clarify, women in Russian literature were mainly described through male eyes, which framed womanhood, maintains Marsh, through the image of the angel of the house and that of the *mad woman in the attic*¹²⁸. Dolly and Kitty from *Anna Karenina*, Sonia from *Crime and Punishment*, and Fenechka from *Fathers and Sons* are clear examples of characters representing desired and tamed femininity. Russian equivalent of the *mad woman* is the type of the demonic woman, of which are instances Nastas'ia Filipovna from *The Idiot*, Grushen'ka from *The Brothers Karamazov*, and *First Love's* Zinaida. Canonical Russian literature also placed women on the pedestal of morality by framing female characters as the strong woman, a character embodying

¹²⁵ Goscilo Helena, *Balancing Acts. Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989, xiv-xxvii

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*, xvii

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, xix

¹²⁸ The mad woman is a recurrent literary type identified by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in Victorian women's prose. The character is the embodiment of suppressed instincts and rage, which challenges the canonical type of woman as the angel of the house. This definition is lifted from a character of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason, Rochester's first wife imprisoned in Thornfield's attic. For more, see: Gilbert Sandra M., Gubar Susan, *The Mad Woman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000

Heldt's "terrible perfection"¹²⁹ and acting as a muse or mentor of the superfluous man. These portrayals of femininity are different facets of Russian canonical literature's sexism, to which women authors were pushed to conform in their female character's construction.

The status of women's literature in the Russian context is that of a woman author facing *the terrible perfection* of her literary tradition, which rarely included in the literary canon female voices, texts proving a genuine female perspective detached from the imposing patriarchal ideology or restraining the number of female voices to a "small band of the great", at times inserted in the canon thanks to the mediation of a distinguished male poet. For example, Rosalind Marsh mentions Joseph Brodskii's influential role in "canonizing" Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, of whom Brodsky translated¹³⁰ into English the 1916 poems by Tsvetaeva: "I will win you away from every earth, from every sky," and "To Osip Mandelstam."

As a feature of Russian women's writing, Heldt lists the distinctiveness of literature written by a woman and devoted to women, which she lifted from the preface of Ruth Zernova's *Zhenskie Rasskazy*¹³¹. Zernova lists Anna Achmatova, Elena Ginzburg, and Nadezhda Mandel'shtam as authors succeeding in describing Russian historical and social context through the prism of literature. This is meaningful not only to describe another specific trait of Russian women's prose but also to identify an embryonic development of a feminine literary tradition. In this regard, Heldt identifies a recurring citation pattern, which proves how women writers allude to and reference other women authors.

Наше время показало, что, несмотря на равноправие (кто более, кто менее равен – вопрос другой), женский душевный опыт своеобразен. И потому женская литература тоже имеет своеобразие, которого не стоит стыдиться. Прекрасные повести Лидии Чуковской – очень женские повести. Которые и есть литература – женская, женственная литература. Создаваемая женщинами и о женщинах. И поэтому я назвала свой первый бесцензурный сборник: «женские рассказы»¹³².

Helena Goscilo, in *Balancing acts*, describes Russian women's writing as a category by positing its specific stylistic features while cautiously warning the reader to avoid any generalization

¹²⁹ Heldt Barbara, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*, Bloomington -Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987

¹³⁰ Brodskii Joseph, *Collected Poems in English*, edited by Ann Kjelberg, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000, 497–8; Quoted from Marsh, 2012. For more on the issue, see Smith Alexandra, "Russian Women Poets on the death of the Poet, the Modernist Canon and the Postmodern Canon", In *New Women's Writing in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe Gender, Generation and Identities*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New Castle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012.

¹³¹ Zernova Ruth, *Zhenskie rasskazy*, Sankt-Peterburg: Ermitazh, 1981

¹³² Zernova Ruth, Preface to *Zhenskie rasskazy*, 6

during the study of a specific woman author; during textual analysis, the author's style conveyed in her literary works should be the main focus.

Given these premises, Goscilo describes late 1980s Russian women's writing (new women's prose) as a rather uniform category. According to Helena Goscilo, new women's prose enforces a trend started in 1980s Russian women's prose, which entails the female body as the site of women's experiences, which " 'documents' their owner's suffering and degradation," since " they bruise, hemorrhage and brake; they endure rape, childbirth, abortion, and beating¹³³ ." This representation of the female body maintains Goscilo, undermines its traditional representation in romantic and soviet aesthetics. Romantic aesthetics, equally embraced by women's authors, posited women's physicality as unearthly and ethereal, a "desexed" mirror of the subject's moral code. In this regard, Goscilo mentions Kitty Shcherbatskaia's truthful eyes and Anna Karenina's riotous curls as instances of the inscription of women's moral code in their physical representation. Soviet literature, according to Goscilo, similarly characterized women's bodies; however, it highlighted maternity rather than virginity as their primary feature, in line with Soviet pro-natalist policies. While the Soviet heroine fits in the traditional stereotype of femininity (emotionally fragile, tearful, and with an untold traumatic past), Soviet literature inscribes the character also as provided with superhuman resilience. In Goscilo's view, this characterization of femininity is utterly reversed in new women's prose, as it overturns the female's character representation through the trope of the sexual and grotesque body¹³⁴.

Contemporary Russian female prose generally presents a female point of view, transmitted in first-person narration or through a narrated monologue (style indirect libre). In both scenarios, the monologue is emotionally colored and distances from male insensitivity, a feature that creates intimacy and complicity with the reader. Antithetically, men are presented externally as irrelevant and background figures lacking inner motivation.¹³⁵ Goscilo further investigates contemporary Russian women's writing from a thematic perspective, which radically changed from nineteenth-century women's prose, as it formerly dwelled on themes mirroring the circumscribed experiences of their lives. On the contrary, recent women's prose reflects the real-life transformation of the woman's condition since the female protagonist fulfills the familial, social, and professional roles as much as their real counterparts. This phase of Russian female prose, in contrast with the texts of the 19th century, includes women of all ages and social backgrounds and replaced the decorative dreamer of

¹³³ Goscilo Helena, *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 95

¹³⁴ Ibidem, 89

¹³⁵ Ibidem, 107

Russian Romantic fiction, and included women of the urban intelligentsia as much as those from rural and proletarian class.

A prominent theme in contemporary Russian women's writing is love, which is described as a crucial concept in their lives; however male figures inside the text aren't idealized and romanticized, as the protagonists are usually down to heart and cynics, not willing to idolize men, their own self-image or situation. They typically marry, have children, have affairs, divorce, have children outside the marriage with no social stigma, and succumb to sexual pleasure, pragmatism, vulgarity, alcohol, and greed, distancing them from a stereotypical image of perfection. In this regard, women's prose is also devoted to the description of unappealing sicknesses other than fatal despondency, sicknesses that demystify and demythologize the female body; this is also achieved through the stylistic strategy of the gruesome, called *chernukha*, which entails the description of physiological details of birth, illnesses or episodes of violence perpetrated or endured by women.

Those descriptions of graphic scenes of violence are frequently placed within narrative space of the hospital¹³⁶. Such an environment automatically excludes members of the opposite sex and becomes a segregated microcosm mirroring the isolation and indifference women encounter in everyday life, where women can rely on themselves or other members of their own sex to devise a solution to their problems.

Another frequent theme in Russian women's writing is motherhood. The idea of motherhood converges with Soviet policy as it consisted of unmediated participation in building the nation's future. A woman reluctant to have children is therefore considered unnatural. Goscilo defines the equation woman = mother as "the maternity complex", a patriarchal dogma with a strong hold in Russian culture. Kubínyiová, on the other hand, states how in Russian women's writing maternity doesn't glorify the woman, doesn't give her dignity or purpose, as it draws her into a condition of spiritual and bodily instability that is conveyed through the choice of a provisional environment such as a narrative space, such as the maternity wards, trains, planes, dormitories. Motherhood also works as the representation of the woman's body, which is strictly connected with life-changing events, such as abortion, sexual encounters, menarche, sexual violence and motherhood. In underlying the difference between the sexes and absolutizing maternity, according to Goscilo, most Russian women perpetuate the binary opposition male versus female that oppresses both sexes, which has consequences on women's everyday life.

¹³⁶ Goscilo, Helena, "Women's Wards and Wardens. The Hospital in Contemporary Russian Women's Fiction.", *Canadian Women Studies*, Vol. 10, N° 4, 1989, 83–86; Goscilo Helena, "Women's space and Women's Place" In *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996

Another frequent theme in Russian women's prose is the double-shift syndrome, as perfectly described in the tale *Nedelia kad nedelia*¹³⁷ written by Natal'ia Baranskaia. The theme of the double burden matches with the frequent description of women's everyday life, or as well defines as *byt*. Women's participation in domestic and professional life, however, allows the writers to depict their personal experiences and social issues with the aid of details from everyday life. In this regard, Goscilo attributes to Russian women's writing the virtue of the "solidity of specification¹³⁸", as women's writers in their works provide a recollection of Soviet *byt* and realia, adding details about shopping, living quarters, childcare centers, and medical services¹³⁹.

While new women's prose literary works consist of a uniform category on a thematical level, they present substantial differences when analyzed from a stylistic angle. Nonetheless, Goscilo identifies some distinctive stylistic devices to which new women's prose writers resort. In the corpus analyzed by Helena Goscilo, which goes up to the 90s, women writers privilege the tale, *povest'*, or novella as a literary form, which is in line with Russian women's prose's tendency to avoid large-scale narrative.

This is also in line with new women's prose lack of stylistic experimentation, which fits it the pattern of mainstream Soviet literature. Nonetheless, critics have accused Russian women's prose of interchangeability and anonymity. Moreover, most of the text belonging to the category adheres to narrative principles that agree with nineteenth-century realism. In this regard, Heldt identifies as a common feature of Russian women's prose the usage of irony towards "social confinement and spiritual resignation of women" inherited from Nineteenth century's society tale¹⁴⁰.

In the few existing works of criticism devoted to Iuliia Voznesenskaia, most scholars regard *The Women's Decameron* as pertaining to the pre-glasnost generation of Soviet women writers¹⁴¹. Her name is, therefore, not included in the critical framework of new women's prose. Elena Furman, on the other hand, listed it as a forerunner of new women's prose¹⁴², which is in line with the role of corporeality in *The Women's Decameron*. The role of female body and pleasure in the book be studied through the application of French feminist theory to textual analysis.

¹³⁷ Baranskaia Natal'ia, "Nedelia kak nedel'ia", *Novyi Mir*, №11, 1969.

¹³⁸ Goscilo, introduction to *Balancing Acts: Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, 1991, xxiii

¹³⁹ Ibidem

¹⁴⁰ Heldt Barbara, *Terrible Perfection: Women and Russian Literature*, (Bloomington -Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 150.

¹⁴¹ Furman Elena, Furman Yelena, "We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?": Iuliia Voznesenskaia's *Zhenskii Dekameron*, *New Women's Prose and French Feminist Theory*", *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 96

¹⁴² Ibidem

1.2 French Feminist Theory and Female Corporeality

1.2.1 Context

1.2.1.1 Against Binarism

The term French feminist theory incapsulates a wide range of thinkers¹⁴³ concerned with the repression of women's experience in Western philosophical tradition and the possible strategies to undermine male-centered thought affecting the development and manifestations of female subjectivity. This introduction is intended as a tool to better grasp the theories of French feminist theory included in the present research and to clarify the context in which they developed. Among the numerous contributions of French feminist philosophers, the research will consider those works of criticism from Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, which already proved to be valuable tools in reading Russian women's prose. However, to understand the concept of *écriture féminine* and *parler femme* respectively developed by Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray it is necessary to clarify the psychoanalytic and philosophical theories they applied in their attempt to undermine the definition of femininity inscribed in Western culture.

Their primary aim is the deconstruction of "femininity" as a cultural construct used in women's suppression, which dates to Western philosophy's binary opposition of man and woman. This opposition is inscribed in language which is intended as a system of signs able to predetermine the subject's mindset and imposing on it structures of thought and expression going beyond its control. It is precisely on language French feminist theorists focus on to describe it as intrinsically patriarchal and to find the means to bypass this patriarchal predetermination of the subject. Said opposition is not entirely neutral, since it implicitly evaluates the features included in the concept of man (logic, mind) as positive to the detriment of the concept of female (emotion, body), its opposite¹⁴⁴. To expose the fallacy of this conceptualization of femininity, French feminist theory attempt to deconstruct it by showing the intrinsic hierarchical opposition inscribed in this binarism.

¹⁴³ The term French feminist theory works as a convenient umbrella term which, however, doesn't spot the heterogeneity of French feminist thinkers. For a more comprehensive knowledge on this issue see: Marks Eleine, De Courtivron Isabelle, *New French Feminisms. An anthology*, Amherst, the University of Massachusetts Press, 1980; Humm Maggie, *A Readers Guide to Contemporary Feminist Criticism*, New York-London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, 93-110; Oliver Kelly, *French Feminist Reader*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

¹⁴⁴ Weil Karil, "French feminism's *écriture féminine*", In Rooney Ellen, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory. Cambridge Companions to Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 153

French feminist theory lifts this logic of deconstruction from the critic to logocentrism¹⁴⁵ carried out by Jacques Derrida; this binary oppositions entail the supremacy of a concept to the expense of its opposite (e.g. mind – body), which shapes the hierarchical nature of the system of thought. The process of deconstruction aims at showing how said concepts are not intended as oppositional but strictly correlated. Each term of the couple does not exist in itself, but only when related to its opposite. To summarize, the relational nature of meanings brought about by deconstruction is expressed with that of *différance*¹⁴⁶ which characterizes identity as an illusory notion: a concept can be defined only in negative terms (what it is not)¹⁴⁷.

French feminist theory employ deconstruction to subvert the logic of phallogentrism to undermine the characterization of femininity inscribed in Western philosophical tradition and to later attempt to define¹⁴⁸ a different definition of femininity able to cross the boundaries of patriarchal language. In this regard, they call for a cultural and linguistic transformation aiming to undermine the socio-economic foundations of phallogocracy and, consequently, to carve out a space for women's self-representation and self-definition¹⁴⁹. They pursue this intent by also contesting the characterization of femininity and female sexuality in modern psychoanalysis.

1.2.1.2 Female Sexuality in Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is the primary target of Cixous's and Irigaray's criticism, since they trace back the theorization of women's suppression to the Freud's and Lacan's theories of psychosexual development. The description of femininity in psychoanalysis assumes the masculine as the norm and the feminine as its deviation. In this regard, Freud's theory of sexual development describes female sexuality as something mysterious, a dark, unexplored, mysterious continent. The main argument of the French philosophers against the theorization of the feminine subject in psychoanalysis is what

¹⁴⁵ The term logocentrism express the primacy of the logos (speech) over writing in Western philosophical tradition. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida shows the hierarchical opposition between speech and writing by articulating his theory of deconstruction. For an introduction to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida see: Eco Umberto, Fedriga Riccardo, *Storia della Filosofia. Ottocento e Novecento*, Vol. III, Milano-Roma, Editori Laterza – Em Publishers, 441-443.

¹⁴⁶ *Différance* is a Derridean neologism created to mark its dissimilarity from the French term *difference*. The term *différance* is shaped as a French gerund to encapsulate both a sense of deferral (in space and time) and that of difference.

¹⁴⁷ Weil Karil, "French feminism's écriture féminine", In Rooney Ellen, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 159

¹⁴⁸ The very concept of definition is untenable within the process of Derridean deconstruction. Here French feminist theory moves forward in their attempt to define femininity in different terms.

¹⁴⁹ Weil Karil, "French feminism's écriture féminine", In Rooney Ellen, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Cambridge Companions to Literature. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 159-160

Luce Irigaray describes as an anatomical bias, namely the definition of the female subject by theories claiming the centrality of the masculine subject.

The father of psychoanalysis references male sexuality to frame the female one: he describes the girl in its pre-Oedipus stage actively exhibiting her pleasure as a “little man”, an idea that identifies man’s sexuality as active and female’s as passive. In the Oedipal phase¹⁵⁰, sexual differentiation is acknowledged by the male subject through the castration complex, triggered by the sight of the female body, which mirrors men’s castration anxiety. The lack of the phallus, according to Freud’s theory, shapes the female body as intrinsically lacking. In acknowledging her lack, the female subject initially goes through a denial stage to later conform to Freud’s normative idea of femininity, which entails the renounce of clitoral activity (the clitoris here is considered as the penis equivalent) to embrace passive/vaginal sexuality. The deficiency of the female subject stimulates the penis envy, compensated through pregnancy¹⁵¹.

The lacanian theory of subject follows Freud’s steps and applies Ferdinand De Saussure’s linguistic theory to the analysis of the unconscious, which is intended as a language. Lacan’s theory matches the process of sexual differentiation with the first contact with language, which the psychoanalyst identifies as the site of the development of the subject. In other words, the subject is born and develops in a social order made up of a system of signs and linguistic symbols by which he/she is determined, and on which has no control. This idea equally questions the status of the subject as agent and as the origin of meaning, or in other words, the access of the subject to self-definition and to the definition of the world¹⁵².

In said theory, the path toward sexual differentiation starts in the pre-linguistic Imaginary, in which the child has a privileged relationship with the mother. By experiencing the Oedipus complex, the child moves from the comforting Imaginary¹⁵³ to the realm of language, the Symbolic, characterized by a set of laws defined as “the Name of the father”, and as in opposition to the biological, prelinguistic, and maternal Imaginary. The child accesses the realm of language through “the privileged signifier” of the phallus, which, in Lacan’s theory, stands for the feeling of loss generated by the detachment from the mother and the lack of the previous feeling of plenitude. Once accessed the Symbolic order, the child, regardless of his/her sex, needs to accept societal laws (“the name of the father”). In contrast with Freud’s theory, the phallus here works as a symbolical concept;

¹⁵⁰ Valls Luis Josè, *Freudian Dictionary. A Comprehensive Guide to Freudian Concepts*, translated by Susan H. Rogers, London and New York, Routledge, 2019, 210 -214

¹⁵¹ Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004, 42-45

¹⁵² Ibidem, 158

¹⁵³ Evans Dylan, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 84-85

nonetheless, the phallus, intended in its anatomical meaning, also works as an important element in the male subject's development of the castration complex, an important challenge the subject overcomes to later accept "The-Name-of-the-Father" (societal rules and conventions). The female subject, on the other hand, doesn't experience the castration complex lacking the phallus by nature, a feature which determines, in Lacan's view, different socialization of women and their status as intrinsically lacking. In this regard, Lacan identifies in the female subject a symbolic dissymmetry: due to the absence of a female equivalent of the "privileged signifier", namely the phallus, the woman needs to identify, in the process of her sexual development, with members of the other sex. This further marks the woman as other not just to the male sex, but also to herself¹⁵⁴.

The otherness of the female subject is also remarked during Lacan's description of the pleasure principle, namely the boundaries of pleasure the subject mustn't cross during the Oedipal phase (incest taboo). In this regard, Lacan makes a distinction between the concepts of pleasure (plaisir) and enjoyment¹⁵⁵ (jouissance), which represents the transgression of the pleasure principle paradoxically turning into pain once satisfied. The primary condition upon which the subject enters in the Symbolic, the domain of language, is to renounce this transgression (jouissance) since it is forbidden to "him who speaks, as such"¹⁵⁶. Initially, Lacan describes the concept of jouissance as pertaining to the male subject, to later define a specific female enjoyment, a "jouissance of the Other". He identifies it as "beyond the Phallus", a sort of mystic ecstasy which women might experience, yet not knowing anything about it. Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous lift this concept from Lacanian psychoanalysis and use it as a tool against phallogocentric oppression by asserting and recognizing the specificity of women's pleasure.

1.2. 2 Rephrasing Femininity: Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray

French feminists criticism strongly criticize said psychoanalytical approaches by imputing them the intrinsic bias of assuming masculinity as a paradigm and femininity as its deviation; this tendency foreshadows the main distortion of phallogocentric tradition, meaning cultural inequity on the grounds of anatomical differences. Hélène Cixous equally identifies the concept of femininity and masculinity as put in a hierarchical order, where femininity is usually overlooked and tied to a passive demeanor of the subject.

¹⁵⁴ Evans Dylan, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, 222

¹⁵⁵ The term "jouissance" has a sexual connotation, so it can also be translated as "orgasm". See: Evans Dylan, *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996,93

¹⁵⁶ Ibidem

Organization by hierarchy makes all conceptual organization subject to man. Male privilege, shown in the opposition between activity and passivity, which he uses to sustain himself. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is treated by coupling it with the opposition: activity/passivity. [...] Moreover, woman is always associated with passivity in philosophy. Whenever it is a question of woman, when one examines kinship structures, when a family model is brought into play. In fact, as soon as the question of ontology raises its head, as soon as one asks oneself “what is it?” as soon as there is intended meaning. Intention: desire, authority – examine them and you are led back... to the father. It is even possible not to notice that there is no place whatsoever for woman in the calculation¹⁵⁷.

This hierarchy finds its foundation in biological essentialism, which confirms the psychoanalytical assumption lining up femininity with passivity and masculinity with activity; in this regard, Freud described “proper” female sexuality as intrinsically passive, vaginal, while active, clitoral sexuality was regarded as an anomaly crossing the boundary between femininity and masculinity. Luce Irigaray imputes this male-centric viewpoint to the development of said theories from an entirely masculine perspective, which, consequently, shapes them through an “anatomical bias”, rather than considering the social, cultural, and historical context leading to a dismissive connotation of femininity¹⁵⁸.

Femininity has been theorized from an entirely male perspective, which prevented women to describe femininity in their own terms; the first step to undermine the male centric definition of femininity, associated with negativity and lack, is the reconceptualization of femininity from a female perspective. To discuss the formulation of femininity inscribed in culture, French feminist thinkers, such as Julia Kristeva¹⁵⁹, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, focused their attention on language, which they intended, in line with the theory of Jacques Lacan, as something subjecting the individual to structures of thought and expression beyond the subject’s control and yet intrinsically patriarchal, or, in other terms, phallogocentric. Man occupies a central position in the universe, which allows him to define the world in its image and likeness and, consequently, to apparently dominate it through verbal mastery. This claim to universality can be summarized as follows: “-I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe. The rest of the world, which I define as the Other, has meaning only in relation

¹⁵⁷ Cixous Hélène, “Sorties Out”, In *The Newly Born Woman*, translated by Betsy Wing, London, I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1986, 64

¹⁵⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985

¹⁵⁹ Julia Kristeva investigates the potential of the semiotic as a way to resist the impact of the signifying process carried out by language. In general terms, with the term semiotic Kristeva describes a language assimilable to instinctual drives shared by the infant and the mother preceding the advent of the symbolic. For more on this issue see: Féral, Josette, Alice Jardine, and Tom Gora. “Review of *Antigone or The Irony of the Tribe*, by Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva”, In *Diacritics* N.3, 1978: 2–14; Linda M. G. Zerilli. “A Process without a Subject: Simone de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva on Maternity.” *Signs*, 18, N. 1, 1992: 111–35. Kristeva, Julia, and Arthur Goldhammer. “Stabat Mater.” *Poetics Today*, 6, N.1-2, 1985, 133–52; Fanny Söderbäck, “Motherhood According to Kristeva. On Time and Matter in Plato and Kristeva”, *philoSOPHIA*, I, N. I, 2011, 65-87

to me, as man/father, possessor of the phallus -.”¹⁶⁰ In spite of the intrinsically patriarchal nature of language, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous equally considered language, in written and oral form, as a possible means to represent female subjectivity. If language, intrinsically patriarchal, precedes and influences the development of subjectivity, then it is precisely on language and its manifestations, such as culture and literature, that the effort of criticism needs to focus on.

In order to find a solution to women’s unsolvable muteness, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous come up with two different strategies equally stressing the potential of female bodily instinctual drives in producing an alternative discourse, respectively that of *parler femme* and *écriture féminine*. The resistance to male dominated discourse takes place in the form of *jouissance*, namely the physical enjoyment experienced during childhood and later sexuality repressed by the law of the father to enter the Symbolic¹⁶¹. To turn pleasure into language is an attempt to develop a different point of view from which is possible to formulate an alternative discourse asserting sexual difference. The expression of female sexuality ,therefore, works as an emancipatory element, being it systematically misrepresented in western cultural tradition.

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*¹⁶² Luce Irigaray discusses the universality of “man” as a metaphysical concept applied for human beings by developing a strong criticism towards western philosophical tradition. In this regard, Irigaray pictures western philosophical canon as a mirror (*speculum mundi*) created to reinforce through theoretical speculation the image of man as an unified subject, master of the universe created in the image and likeness of God¹⁶³. Woman, on the other hand, works a specular image of man, which characterizes her as an undefined subject merely serving as mirror for man’s self-definition¹⁶⁴, hence – assumes Irigaray- “any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine’. When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being ‘female’”¹⁶⁵.

Irigaray address the marginalization of femininity in western canon through the strategy of mimicry, intended as mocking imitation of the arguments presented in western philosophical

¹⁶⁰ Jones Anne Rosalind, “Writing The Body: Toward an Understanding of l’Ecriture Feminine”, *Feminist Studies*, N.2, 1981, 248

¹⁶¹ Ibidem

¹⁶² Irigaray Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gil, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985

¹⁶³ Oliver Kelly, *French Feminist Reader*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000, 203

¹⁶⁴ Irigaray Luce, “Any Theory of the “Subject” Has Always Been Appropriated by the Masculine”, In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gil, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 133

¹⁶⁵ Irigaray Luce, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gil, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 133

tradition. Mimicry, on the other hand, is also a clinical manifestation of hysteria, as hysterics attempt to repress their impulsive and erotic drives by fitting in the normative notion of femininity. In other words, they resort to imitation to fit in society and resist their inscription in the symbolic order. Said imitation, when deliberate and not pathological, allows women to turn subordination into affirmation since it implies the subject “otherness” to the very norm they mimic¹⁶⁶. In resorting to mimicry, Irigaray places herself in the role of the philosopher conceptualizing femininity and reverses the “anatomical bias” implicit in western cultural canon, which allows her to point at the logical blind spots within its notion of femininity.

The image of speculum also refers to the medical tool used by gynecologists to view the inside of women’s sexual organs during medical examination, which anticipates Irigaray’s effort to describe femininity to later affirm the importance of sexual difference. This difference lies in the existence of a specific and repressed female libido, which women experience with multiple erogenous zones in contrast with male libidinal economy as “women have sexual organs more or less everywhere”¹⁶⁷. This fluidity of women’s sexuality is strictly linked with the deferral of women’s identity. In this regard, Irigaray argues that the female sex rejects the notion of identity since it simultaneously shapes itself as self and other. This characterizes femininity as a concept exceeding a stable definition: female sexuality, as mentioned, does not revolve around the possession or lack of a specific sexual organ, namely the paradigm according to which male centered thought describes sexual difference¹⁶⁸. The multiplicity of female sexuality, therefore, makes it *a sex which is not one*.

The specificity of women’s pleasure and sexuality, its multiplicity and fluidity carries the potential to undermine the male centered monolithic discourse: Irigaray describe this process as *parler femme*, an experimental practice which requires to go “back through the dominant discourse. By interrogating men’s ‘mastery’. By speaking to women. And among women.”¹⁶⁹ This practice, therefore, calls into question the presumed mastery over speech declared by male centered discourse by enabling a clear separation between object and subject, the disruption of syntax and the teleological nature of discourse, of which *Speculum the Other Women* is an example.

¹⁶⁶ Weil Karil, “French feminism’s écriture féminine”, In Rooney Ellen, *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory. Cambridge Companions to Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 162-163

¹⁶⁷ Irigaray Luce, *This sex which is not one*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985,28

¹⁶⁸ Jones Anne Rosalind, “Writing The Body: Toward an Understanding of l’Ecriture Feminine”, *Feminist Studies*, N.2, 1981, 250

¹⁶⁹ Irigaray Luce, *This sex which is not one*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985,119

On similar premises, Hélène Cixous produces the concept of *écriture féminine* by acknowledging the intrinsic difference of female jouissance and its potential to express in writing that sexual difference. She advocates the creation of texts which express that sexual difference to contrast the repression of the femininity in dominant discourse; Cixous addresses this issue and works for reconceptualization of femininity in her revision of Freud's castration complex *Castration or Decapitation*¹⁷⁰ and in *The Laugh of the Medusa*¹⁷¹. In said essay, Hélène Cixous turns the horrific and threatening image of Medusa's head¹⁷² into a joyful and positive presence, which women and men mustn't be afraid of. In this fashion, the author urges women to embrace their femininity regardless of the misconception they've interiorized through their upbringing in phallocracy.

Too bad for them if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing¹⁷³.

Furthermore, women are deterred from identifying themselves in the idea of femininity promoted by phallogentric culture and encouraged to rephrase femininity anew through self-expression, of which Hélène Cixous's essay works as an example; Medusa's head, which traditionally refers to femininity envisioned in negative terms, is therefore portrayed positively and as a paradigm to identify with. In this reconceptualization of Medusa's head also lies the incentive for the female reader to take the word, since Cixous's essay implies a woman reader, which she frequently addresses throughout the text, and calls for women's agency (writing) to deconstruct the dogma of female's passivity.

The traditional conceptualization of passivity contributed to frame the female body as a commodity available for male entertainment and to distance the female subject from its own corporeality; in this regard, according to Hélène Cixous, women do not own their bodies, which she describes in referencing and rephrasing Freud through the metaphor of a colonized "dark continent", unexplored, rejected by its owners and yet exploited by the dominant sex for their own needs¹⁷⁴. To reclaim it, women are urged to challenge phallocracy by subverting the representation of the female

¹⁷⁰ Cixous, Hélène, "Castration or Decapitation?", *Signs* 7, N.1, 1981: 41–55.

¹⁷¹ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, In *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976

¹⁷² Freud used Medusa's head as a metaphor for female genitalia, at which the male subject gazes in horror since it stands for the embodiment of their castration complex. See, Furman, 2004, 53-54

¹⁷³ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, In *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 885

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 884-885

body in literary culture since its ostensibly lacking and negative connotation led to the exclusion of femininity from the cultural canon, which greatly impeded women's self-representation. Women need to "hurry and invent their own phrases" to challenge the system with their voice by reshaping dominant discourse in their own terms. Hélène Cixous describes the female body as a rallying point for women, the outsiders of phallocracy, to question their subalternity which dates back to the aforementioned conceptualization of femininity as horrific, negative and lacking in psychoanalysis.

The Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable.-It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed.

By placing the female body as the cornerstone of the *écriture féminine*, Cixous does not "confuse the biological and the cultural"¹⁷⁵ but rather aims to contrast the body/mind binarism, which posits the body as a material entity in contrast with the spirituality of the mind, to later conceptualize it as the privileged site of experience and as a driving force to self-representation. The undertaking of writing the female body consists of an act of reclamation of the body itself since, Furman maintains, "the body generates writing, writing gives the body a voice"¹⁷⁶. In this regard, women's self-expression is described as a continuum of women's bodily drives, whose specificity carries the potential of disrupting phallogocentric order.

Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray conceptualize *écriture féminine* and *parler femme* in experimental literary works, which implement said practices on a theoretical and stylistic level and, therefore, consist of an instance of their theory. Their theoretical works, furthermore, are gynocentric, written by a woman for women to read, which is clarified by the authors' references to the female reader: "And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you: your body is yours, take it. [...] You see? No? Wait, you'll have everything explained to you"¹⁷⁷. By appealing directly to a female reader, Cixous reverses the canonic male-centered hierarchy, which assumes a male reader as the implicit book's recipient. However, by privileging the female reader, Cixous and Irigaray do not aim at reversing the hierarchy between femininity and masculinity at the expense of the latter, which would eventually end in the suppression of the male subject. On the contrary, by endorsing women's writing or speaking (as) woman, they aim at altering the unequal relationship between the female and male subject as intended in phallogocentrism, and to shape it as one among equal independent

¹⁷⁵ Ibidem, 875

¹⁷⁶ Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004, 160

¹⁷⁷ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, In *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 876

individuals. The undermining of phallogentrism is therefore regarded as an equally liberating purpose for women and men to achieve. Furthermore, women's subalternity qualifies them as peripheral figures in male-centered culture, as an "outside" less subjected to the phallogentrism's charm, as maintained by Irigaray: "[i]t is not a matter of toppling [the phallogentric] order so as to replace it - that amounts to the same thing in the end - but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an 'outside' that is exempt, in part, from phallogentric law.¹⁷⁸"

The revolutionary act of writing the body aims at seizing a space of expression for women through the manipulation of syntax and the deviation from traditional stylistic norms. Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray convey this idea through a large use of neologisms and puns in their experimental critical works; said transformation of language on a lexical and syntactic level serves as a subversive tool, which intends to distance women's writing from the dominant male-centered discourse and to replace it. This detachment from the phallogentric order is additionally achieved with the intrinsic undermining playfulness of women writing, to which Cixous symbolically refers when turning the threatening mythical character of Medusa into a lively and positive one. In laughter lie the means of female disobedience since:

Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once tears are shed, there will be endless laughter instead. Laughter that breaks out, overflows, a humor no one would expect to find in women – which is nonetheless surely their greatest strength because it's a humor that sees man much more further away than he has never been seen¹⁷⁹.

The centrality of the female body in Cixous's theoretical approach must frame it in an essentialist framework. Elena Furman¹⁸⁰ reports the controversy between French feminists and American feminists¹⁸¹, in which the latter identified Cixous's ideas, however insightful, as harmful in the struggle for women's equality. According to American feminist critics, the notion of writing the body enforced the oppressive binomial association of woman/body and man/mind, which encouraged the idea of man's superiority in western philosophical tradition and culture¹⁸². Elaine Showalter, for instance, listed French feminist theory as a branch of biological criticism, which she

¹⁷⁸ Irigaray Luce, *This sex which is not one*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, 84; quoted from Furman, 2004, 63

¹⁷⁹ Helene Cixous, Castration and decapitation, In Oliver Kelly, *French Feminism Reader*, New York-Oxford: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2002, 89

¹⁸⁰ Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles:ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004, 62-75

¹⁸¹ Italian feminism had a positive reception of French feminist theory, specifically of the philosophy of difference promoted by Luce Irigaray. This is the case of Luisa Muraro, the Italian translator of the work of Luce Irigaray, philosopher, co-founder of the Library of Women (Milan) and the philosophical community "Diotima", and that of Adriana Cavarero, philosopher and co-founder of the philosophical community "Diotima".

¹⁸² Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles:ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004, 42-45

defined as encouraging harmful biological reductionism and determinism¹⁸³. While acknowledging how Cixous theory borders on essentialism, Elena Furman regards American feminist criticism's anti-anatomy argument against French feminist theory as an oversimplification. In this regard, she proves how French feminists' appeal to anatomy functions as a way to break the oppressive mind/body dualism since women's subalternity is strictly connected to the suppression of their bodies. In this regard, French feminist theory gives importance to the body to undermine the conceptualization of femininity as lacking and passive in psychoanalysis; precisely through their bodies, women experience their subalternity in phallogocry since biology creates men and women different, culture, on the other hand, creates sexual discrimination.

Furthermore, the label of women's writing does not simplistically refer to the writer's sex but rather to the ability of that writer to question the phallogocratic order; the female point of view is a successful starting point to achieve this goal since in a phallogocratic order women are generally considered as outsiders, therefore benefiting from an extra-local perspective on the dominant culture. In this regard, Helene Cixous advocates the inclusion of male writers within the boundaries of women's writing when able to question their phallogocentric upbringing and lists among the examples of *écriture féminine* Jean Genette's prose¹⁸⁴. In this regard, Cixous and Irigaray posit the body as the site of the development of the subject, whereby subjectivity in its fluidity is constructed through signification (language). While Cixous apparently refers to women as a universal subject, she describes the extensive concept of feminine essence as reductive.

I write this as a woman, toward women. When I say "woman," I'm speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first, it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the "dark"-that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute- there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can't talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes-any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another¹⁸⁵.

The application of the theories of Cixous and Irigaray to the textual analysis of *The Women's Decameron* opens a wide range of possibilities. Female corporeality has a crucial role in the text, since the address to female sexuality prompts the narrative process and allows the characters to

¹⁸³ Ibidem

¹⁸⁴ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, In *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 879

¹⁸⁵ Ibidem, 875-76.

identify themselves in a community which doesn't simply share the same physiological traits, but also the cultural and social consequences they imply. The characters, in other words, build a community on the grounds of mutual understanding starting from the assumption that they share the same destiny of oppression, which in Voznesenskaia's context is sexual and political at the same time. In speaking-among-women they attempt to speak (as) women, or, in other words, to find the linguistic means to rephrase femininity. The reference to sexual pleasure is crucial for this purpose as it allows to develop a different point of view able to challenge normative femininity and the social order which builds it.

Telling each other stories prompted by sexual difference and able to rephrase femininity, if read along with the concept of *écriture féminine*, consists of an important act of agency carried out by the characters and, through them, by the author herself, an act which supports the identification of *The Women's Decameron* as a legitimation of women's agency and authorship.

Chapter II

Russian Dissident Feminism

2.1 Russian Women's Dissident Movements: an Overview

The Russian dissident women's movements *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Mariia* and the homonymous almanacs are usually included in studies concerned with of Russian dissent or the phenomenon of samizdat and tamizdat journals. Recently academia showed a rising interest in the matter, an interest also demonstrated, for example, by the creation of the *Leningradskii feminism 1979*¹⁸⁶, a touring exhibition organized by the Leibniz institute of history and culture of central and eastern Europe, the association Memorial and the Iofe Center of Saint-Petersburg. An investigation of the aforementioned movements will, hopefully, stimulate further research on them from a literary, cultural, and historical perspective. An overview to this movements is essential for the present the dissertation, as it clarifies the feminist mindset Voznesenskaia referred to when writing *The Women's Decameron*.

While Voznesenskaia's participation to *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* solely consisted of publishing the piece *Pism'o iz Novosibirska*, she was the coordinator of *Mariia*'s club and later the editor-in-chief of *Mariia*'s second issue during her stay in Frankfurt¹⁸⁷. According to the archival documents kept in the author's fund as part of the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa institute's archive, the author established ties between *Mariia* as a journal and as a club and the Frankfurt's International Human Rights Organization, from which the editorial staff received funding¹⁸⁸. Through said institution, the club provided significant humanitarian support to political prisoners and the families of political prisoners in Russia; not only did Iuliia Voznesenskaia manage the club's activities, but she also mirrored its views in her literary production.

Despite the different ideas implemented by *Mariia* and *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* to address the issue of women's right and emancipation, the movements shared significant similarities. The editorial staffs of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and the club *Mariia* firstly acted as dissident circles in Leningrad. They started as samizdat journals for internal distribution to be later distributed in the West as

¹⁸⁶“Leningradskii feminism. Vystavka v Moskve”, Moskovskii Zhenskii Muzei, accessed on September 5th 2020, <https://www.wmmsk.com/2020/02/leningradskij-feminizm-1979-vystavka-v-moskve/>

¹⁸⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Correspondence with Alla Sariban*, 1981-1982, FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982 (accessed on October 21th 2022)

¹⁸⁸ Ibidem

tamizdat journals and in Russia as samizdat almanacs. Furthermore, *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Mariia* shared the same editorial policy concerning the organization of contents: both included texts shifting from personal accounts to articles devoted to specific social topics concerning women's conditions in the Soviet Union. The aforementioned movements challenged the myth of women's equal rights and emancipation promoted by the Soviet Union, by opposing the regime's propaganda with their criticism and combining the action of a women's movement with that of an anti-Soviet one. They strongly opposed not only the Soviet Union's idea of emancipation but also its totalitarian nature; in this regard, they devoted special attention to women's prison camps and supported those persecuted for their beliefs by including, in the journals, pieces concerning the accounts of former prisoners, their appeals and their pleas.

As in *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, *Mariia* kept a section devoted to literary texts, such as poems, novellas, and short stories; the members of these women's movements were also part of the dissident intelligentsia, therefore they were concerned with producing literary texts that went beyond the Union of Writers' ideological boundaries and the limits of male writing. Anna Nizhnik interprets the prominence of literary texts in *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* as an act of women's literature by describing it as in opposition to male dissident literary discourse, which she describes as male-centered and misogynistic¹⁸⁹. Oksana Vasiakina, poet and author of the almanac's reprint in 2020, similarly identifies the importance of women's writing in *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and stresses how it validated women's creativity in an unwelcoming environment. *Mariia*'s space devoted to literary texts follows the same pattern.

Когда я встретила с текстом альманаха, для меня все встало на свои места. С одной стороны, в нем было все, с чем сталкиваются женщины в своей бытовой повседневности до сих пор — насилие, двойная нагрузка, чудовищное отношение в учреждениях. А с другой, я нашла в этом альманахе то, что я давно искала, — подтверждение того, что женщина, которая занимается творчеством, неважно каким, в интеллектуальной среде занимает не равное с мужчинами место. Женщина живет в своем гетто. Но самое страшное заключается в том, что это гетто — пространство, устроенное в сообществе изгнанников. То есть писательницы и художницы — изгнанницы из сообщества изгнанников¹⁹⁰.

Zhenshchina i Rossiia and *Mariia* challenged the unnecessary of a women's activism by creating a separate, underground movement devoted to the condition of women in the Soviet Union and addressing the problem of women's emancipation on a theoretical and concrete level, despite

¹⁸⁹ Nizhnik Anna, "Pravo golosa/pravo govorit'", In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver Moskva: Common place, 2020, 34

¹⁹⁰ Vasiakina Oksana, "Ubrat' grabli s puti" In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver Moskva: Common place, 2020, 9-10

from utterly different perspectives. In this regard, these movements mirror the dominant ideological tendencies among Thaw's dissident circles, meaning the liberal westernizer movement and the religious-national one, also defined by Elena Vassilieva as neoslavophile¹⁹¹.

By referring to the almanac *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Alexandra Talaver¹⁹² underlines the importance of local feminist history, meaning the research of feminist movements understood in relation to the context in which they developed and not necessarily as fitting into the categories of first-world theories. Said attention to local feminist history, Talaver maintains, is a suitable solution to the exclusion of the previously socialist bloc from feminist theory and women's history, an exclusion that the scholar identifies as the consequence of the predominance of first-world feminist theories. By paying attention to said issues, this chapter similarly encourages a transnational approach to the definition of Russian dissident feminism by including the movement Mariia in the process since, as also commented by Rochelle Ruthchild, "a proper transnational approach, one that does not privilege first-world experiences and narratives, can make more visible this pioneering autonomous feminist resistance in the second-world socialist space."¹⁹³

To better clarify the ideological background of the movement Mariia, the chapter introduces the problematic aspects of its ideological mindset and its fluctuating identification with the notion of feminism. In this regard, Alexandra Talaver maintains that the group's members used the feminist label cynically to gain international support¹⁹⁴. The scholar also disputes Alix Holt's definition of the movements *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and Mariia as the "first soviet feminists"¹⁹⁵ and identifies the magazine *Rabotnitsa* as a censored but still productive arena for a Soviet feminist discourse¹⁹⁶. Talaver rejects the label of "first soviet feminists" as equally applied to the movement Mariia and *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* since it merges the two different groups under the same label, fails to spot the differences among them, and ultimately identifies Mariia as a feminist movement. Despite the exclusion of Mariia from the label of feminism might be debatable, a distinction between the groups and an attention to their specificities is necessary.

¹⁹¹ Vassilieva, Elena, *Feminism and Eternal Feminine: The Case of a Happy Union*. MPhil thesis The Open University, 2003

¹⁹² Talaver Alexandra, "Sachem nam lokalnye feministskie istorii" In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver Moskva: Common place, 2020, 14-20

¹⁹³ Ruthchild Rochelle, "Feminist Dissidents in the "Motherland of Women's Liberation": Shattering Soviet Myths and Memory", In *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories*, edited by Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 115

¹⁹⁴ Talaver Alexandra, *Samizdat magazines of the soviet dissident women's groups, 1979-1982. A critical analysis*, M.A. thesis in Gender studies, Central European University, Budapest, 2017, 66

¹⁹⁵ Holt Alix, "The First Soviet Feminists", In *Soviet Sisterhood*, edited by Barbara Holland, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985, 237-265

¹⁹⁶ Ibidem

Concerning the application of the feminist label to *Mariia*, Anna Sidorevich reports the difference between the French translation of the subheading¹⁹⁷ of the almanac's first issue, which defined it as "journal du club féministe," and the subheading appearing in the tamizdat Russian publication by Posev publishing house¹⁹⁸, where Mariia's club defined itself as "zhurnal nezavisimogo zhenskogo religioznogo kluba." The scholar imputes said change either to a translation choice made by the French editorial staff of Des Femmes to underline the almanac's feminist background or to an actual change implemented by Mariia's staff for the Posev publication. The non-uniform identification of the group Maria within the category of feminism is also shown through the first issue of *Mariia*. In the first issue of the almanac, the group refers to feminism to mark its differences from western radical feminism, but also to describe their ideological background¹⁹⁹, which they fit in the democratic movement: "другой особенностью нашего феминистического содружества я вижу его неразрывную связь с общим демократическим движением."²⁰⁰ "Мы все считаем также, что феминизм является составной частью демократического движения, что это движение прогрессивное"²⁰¹. This uneven identification with feminism could also be explained with the traditional skepticism towards the concept of feminism within Russian culture.

Tatiana Mamonova regarded Mariia as a non-feminist movement due to its ties with orthodox religion and its promotion of traditional values, which she identified as opposed to feminism and the achievement of women's emancipation. The idea of women's emancipation promoted by the club Mariia can be problematic when compared to ideas of western feminism since, for instance, it identifies itself as a religious movement, describes gender roles as natural, femininity as inscribed in specific features, and motherhood as crucial step for the affirmation of femininity. However, when defining *Mariia* as a non-feminist or a quasi-feminist²⁰² movement, scholars read the phenomenon through the lens of western feminism and omit to comment on the context in which the movement developed. To discuss whether the movement Mariia belongs to the category of feminism or not, it is necessary to focus on the following issues: is there a specific pattern that defines the concept of feminism? Is it controversial or, in a broader sense, "dangerous" to include this movement, that

¹⁹⁷ *Mariia*, journal du club féministe "Mariia" de Leningrad. Des femmes. Paris, 1981, quoted from Sidorevich Anna, "Samizdat leningradskogo zhenskogo dissidentskogo dvizheniia v Parizhe" In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver Moskva: Common place, 2020, 96

¹⁹⁸ *Mariia*, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1981, N.1, quoted from Sidorevich Anna, "Samizdat leningradskogo zhenskogo dissidentskogo dvizheniia v Parizhe" In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver Moskva: Common place, 2020, 96

¹⁹⁹ Tatiana Goricheva qualifies her essay *Vedmy v Kosmose* as setting "the spiritual premises of Russian feminism".

See: Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v Kosmose", *Maria*, N.1, 1981

²⁰⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Domashnii Konclager", *Maria* N.1, 18

²⁰¹ Klub Maria, "Otvety na Ankety Zhurnala 'Alternativy'", *Maria* N.1, 23

²⁰² Georgicheskaia Elena, "Zhurnal Mariia, ili fenomen sovetskogo kvazifeminizma", *Artikuliaciia literaturno khudozhestvennyj almanakh*, N. 1, 2018 (accessed June 10th, 2022) http://articulationproject.net/433#_ftn2

supported a traditional idea of womanhood and had its core in the knowingly patriarchal orthodox religion, in the category of feminism? Would it be fair to identify Mariia as a Russian alternative path to feminism?

This dissertation does not aim to answer all the questions above, but to encourage a future in-depth study of the movement Mariia through them. This chapter, as advocated by Sasha Talaver, summarizes the differences between Russian dissident feminist movements with a broader focus on the group Mariia useful to understand its implication on *The Women's Decameron*.

2.2 *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*

The almanac *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, edited by Tatiana Mamonova, Tatiana Goricheva and Nataliia Malakhovskaia with the participation of Natalia Mal'ceva and Sofiia Sokolova, came to light in samizdat in autumn 1979²⁰³. As described in the documentary by Des Femmes Filment²⁰⁴, some representatives of the French feminist group MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes) visited the editorial staff of the *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* in Leningrad in January 1980 and in February of the same year, encounters which ended in the samizdat publication of the almanac in Paris. The French feminists support also consisted of an act of solidarity for their Soviet sisters, who were persecuted for their ideas; in this regard, the publishing house Des femmes Hebdo stood up for Tatiana Mamonova, the almanac's editor-in-chief, by creating a worldwide appeal to support the Soviet feminist's emigration and to raise awareness on the violation of human rights endured by its members, including Mamonova²⁰⁵.

When commenting on the publishing history of the almanac in France, Anna Sidorevich stresses the attempt of French feminists to include the Russian feminist movement among western second-wave ones. Furthermore, the scholar describes French feminists' reaction to the publication of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, which included some objections to Goricheva's religious text *Raduŭsia, slez*

²⁰³ Iuliia Voznesenskaia in *Zhenskoe Dvizhenie v Rossii* claimed that the first samizdat issue of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* came out in September 1979. The study *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, on the other hand, identified December 10th, 1979 as the date of the first issue. See: Iuliia Voznesenskaia, "Zhenskoe Dvizhenie v Rossii", In *Antologiiia Samizdata. Nepodcenzurnaia literatura v SSSR. 1950e-1980e*, edited by Igrunov V.V and Barbakadze M.Sh., Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyj Institut Gumanitarno-politicheskikh Issledovanii, 2005, Tom III, 181; Oksana Vasiakina, Dmitrii Kozlov and Sasha Talaver "Tatiana Mamonova", In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina, Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver, Moskva: Common place, 2020, 261

²⁰⁴ Fouque Antoinette, *1979: Naissance en URSS d'un Mouvement de libération des femmes*, Paris: dir. Des Femmes Filment, 2019, ([Accessed](#) January 29, 2021)

²⁰⁵ For more on the relationship between the French feminist movement and Soviet feminists see: Sidorevich Anna, "L'édition des textes des femmes dissidentes de Leningrad par les féministes françaises dans les années 1970-1980", In *Des réalités intraduisibles ? La traduction au prisme des sciences sociales de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, 2019, les Éditions Nouveaux Angles, 256-263

Evinykh izbavlenie, and to those from Natalia Malakhovskaia's and Tatiana Mamonova's (in the almanac writing under the pseudonym R. Batalova), whose texts pictured female sexuality as sinful and tormented by the "illnesses" of menstruation and menopause. This dismissive description of female sexuality was considered as an aftermath of orthodox religion, which regarded women's bodies as sinful and menstruation as impure, ideas that underline the problematic nature of religion as included or at the core of a feminist movement; while the attention to religion in *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* was limited to Goricheva's article, in *Mariia* it became the idea on which the whole movement was built on.

Zhenshchina i Rossiia was also translated and disseminated by the redactors of the Italian feminist journal *Effe*²⁰⁶, a fact that testifies the transnational solidarity among the feminist groups at the time. As mentioned, the mind behind the almanac was Tatiana Mamonova, who, according to Rochelle Ruthchild²⁰⁷, was familiar with western feminism theory and terminology and introduced it to the other participants. Concepts such as patriarchy, phallocracy, and self-determination are predominant in the almanac's introduction²⁰⁸, which also refers to the issue of sexism as intrinsic to Russian culture and language. The mentioned issues were regarded as superficial by members of Leningrad's intelligentsia, who also defined a women's movement in Russia as futile and useless²⁰⁹. The said hostility to women's rights activism can also be linked, other than to misogyny, to a long tradition of skepticism of the very concept of feminism in Russia.

The term feminism wasn't positively perceived in Soviet Russia, despite the noteworthy Russian feminist tradition before and after the revolution²¹⁰ and the remarkable achievements of the Soviet state in terms of women's rights. In this regard, the feminist demonstration of 1917 pressed the provisional government to grant women the right to vote and equal rights by the constitution in 1918 and in 1920 the Bolshevik party granted women, for the first time in worldwide history, the

²⁰⁶Effe mensile femminista autogestito, Roma, Cooperativa Effe, N°1-12, 1980 (Accessed January 22, 2021) <http://efferivista.femminista.it/anno/1980/>

²⁰⁷, Ruthchild Rochelle, "Feminist Dissidents in the "Motherland of Women's Liberation": Shattering Soviet Myths and Memory", In *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories*, edited by Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 104

²⁰⁸ Redaktsiia alamakha, "Eti dobrye patriarkhal'nye ustoi" In *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, N.1, Paris, De Femmes, 1980, 11-17

²⁰⁹Morgan Robin, "First Feminists Exiles from the USSR", *Ms.*, November 1980, 83-84; Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zhenskoe dvizhenie v Rossii", *Posev*, N.4, 1981, 41-45

²¹⁰ For more on pre-revolution, revolution related and post revolution feminist movements see: Nechemias Carol, Noonan Norma Corigliano, *Encyclopedia of Russian Women's Movements*, London: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001; Pushkareva Natal'ia L'vovna, "U istokov russkogo feminizma: sokhodstva i otlichii Rossii i Zapada", In *Rossiiskie zhenshchiny i evropeiskaia kul'tura*, edited by Tishkin G.A, Sankt-Peterburg: Sankt-Peterburskoe filosofskoe obshchestvo, 2002; Pushkareva Natal'ia L'vovna, "Feminizm v Rossii: formy zhenskoj social'noi aktivnosti", In *Zhenskaia istoriia. Gendernaia istoriia. Teoriia i issledovaniia*. Uchebnoe posobie, edited by Pushkareva N.L., Kaluga, 2001. (Accessed September 5th, 2021)

right to abortion. The early Bolshevik state also fought against women's illiteracy (approximately 80% of women's population), urged the presence of women in skilled jobs, and endorsed the participation of young women in the Komsomol. However, as the historian Nataliia Pushkareva maintained, these measures didn't match a concrete improvement of women's living conditions in Russia. Pushkareva argues that these policies didn't exempt women from the responsibilities of childbearing, despite they were also expected to work exactly as men, in other words, to do physically demanding jobs.

Однако эти законодательные нормы не имели для женщин следствием равные с мужчинами возможности. Патерналистскую роль (отца, патриарха) постепенно брало на себя государство. Это иносказательно подчеркивалось активистками женского движения 20-х (И.Арманд, Н.Крупской, К.Самойловой, Н.Смидович, А.Коллонтай), заверявшими матерей в том, что социалистическое государство всегда поддержит их, независимо от наличия или отсутствия брачных уз. Материнство определялось как «социалистическая обязанность», которая должна была дополнять обязанность женщин трудиться наравне с мужчинами. Эти установки, именуемые «решением женского вопроса», в реальности не освобождали женщин, но лишь усложняли их жизнь, хотя в общественных обсуждениях того времени это не признавалось.²¹¹

Moreover, the creation of a feminist movement detached from the Bolshevik's ideological framework was considered an unnecessary threat to the ideological unity of the party, as feminism was improperly considered a movement concerned entirely with political and social rights. The state policy focused entirely on a radical transformation of women's role in society by encouraging their participation in industrial production and politics, which was essential for industrial mass production and the creation of a socialist society. Therefore, debates regarding women's sexuality were considered redundant compared with social-related issues. Due to the cultural marginalization of the feminism, contemporary Russian feminists ignore Russian autochthonous movements, including those belonging to dissent. The study *Feministskii samizdat 40 let spustiiia* addresses the issue and finds a solution in republishing the almanac *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* along with pieces of studies about its historical and cultural context while encouraging the research of local history of feminist movements²¹².

The emancipatory policy carried out from the Bolshevik government influenced the ideological mindset of editor in chief of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Tatiana Mamonova. In this regard, introduction of the almanac praises the efforts made by Lenin concerning women's emancipation and

²¹¹ Pushkareva Nataliia, "Feminizm Rossii", In *enciklopediia krugsoviet*. ([accessed](#) March 22nd, 2022)

²¹² Talaver Alexandra, "Sachem nam lokal'nye feministskie istorii" In *Feministskij samizdat. 40 let spustia*, edited by Vasiakina, Oksana, Dmitrii Kozlov, Sasha Talaver, Moskva: Common place, 2020

identifies Stalin as responsible for the interruption of the women's emancipation movement²¹³; in this alignment with Lenin's emancipatory policy lies one of the main differences between *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* and *Mariia*, seeing as the latter was anti-Marxist by definition. The almanac *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* was created as a collection of independent texts (from here, the definition of "almanac" instead of "journal"²¹⁴) examining the precarious condition of Russian women. The authors discussed the topic from different angles and in various forms. In this regard, *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* included works of poetry and prose, a translation by Elena Shvarts, accounts from women's prison camps, and articles addressing the role of patriarchy and sexism in Russian women's living conditions. Special attention is devoted to the state of maternity wards and abortion clinics, described as understaffed and unhygienic places dominated by an overwhelming bureaucracy²¹⁵.

Zhenshchina i Rossiia allowed a significant ideological pluralism when considering Tatiana Mamonova's opposition to religion and the inclusion of a piece by Tatiana Goricheva about the Virgin Mary as the embodiment of the eternal feminine and as a role model, which will be essential in the journal *Mariia*. Tat'iana Mamonova, on the other hand, discusses issues such as lesbianism, women's sexuality, and masturbation, generally regarded as inappropriate taboos, especially when discussed from a female perspective; due to Mamonova's attention to the said issues, the official press involved in women-related problems refused to publish her articles²¹⁶. Furthermore, as Mamonova denounces²¹⁷, Leningrad second culture similarly diminished her views by considering a women's movement in Russia unnecessary and accusing its participants of unprofessionalism.

While initially doubting the necessity of a women's movement in Russia, Iuliia Voznesenskaia commented on the creation of the women's almanac as follows:

When I came back to Leningrad, I refused to take part in any political circles. I thought my main task should be bring about a change in the treatment of women in labor camps. Then Natasha Malakhovskaia came to me at the right moment and proposed that I take part in this feminist magazine. At first, I wondered: what is feminism? But when *Women and Russia* was finished; I was astonished that it was more interesting than I expected²¹⁸.

²¹³ *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Paris, Des Femmes, Vol. 1, 1980, 15

²¹⁴ Fouque Antoinette, *1979: Naissance en URSS d'un Mouvement de libération des femmes*, Paris: dir. Des Femmes Filment, 2019, ([Accessed](#) January 29, 2021)

²¹⁵ "Obratnaia storona medal", In *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Paris, Des Femmes, 1980, 51

²¹⁶ Ruthchild Rochelle, "Feminist Dissidents in the "Motherland of Women's Liberation": Shattering Soviet Myths and Memory", In *Women's Activism and "Second Wave" Feminism: Transnational Histories*, edited by Barbara Molony, Jennifer Nelson, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 104

²¹⁷ Morgan Robin, "First Feminists Exiles from the USSR.", *Ms.*, November 1980, 83

²¹⁸ Morgan Robin, 1980, 53

The participation of Iuliia Voznesenskaia in the almanac was stimulated by her experience in women's prison camps, where she realized that the situation of women in that specific context required special attention. Therefore, the author's contribution to *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* consists entirely of the piece *Pism'o iz Novosibirska*²¹⁹, a personal account of the transit to the Bazoï labor camp describing the episodes of violence on the prisoners she witnessed during that time.

Что до меня лично, начало движения совпадало с моей собственной амбиции – упразднить женские лагеря. Для меня движение – это источник сил, оно же помогло мне начать публиковать мои произведения, посвященные лагерной теме. Меня это интересует²²⁰.

Before that, Voznesenskaia wasn't familiar with feminism and, until her experience in women's prison camps, maintained that a women's movement was an unnecessary threat to the unity of the Russian democratic movement²²¹. This fact links her participation in the Russian dissident women's movement to her intention to shed light on the living condition of women in Soviet prisons and prison camps and to the will to fight against a system she found oppressive and against freedom of speech.

2.3 Mariia

2.3.1 Mariia and the Religious Revival

The ideological divergencies among the members of *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* led Tatiana Goricheva, Iuliia Voznesenskaia, and Natalia Malakhovskaia to the creation of a different movement named Mariia. The newborn feminist club²²² identified the solution to women's oppression in spirituality; women's emancipatory process, they maintained, must start by rediscovering faith in orthodox Christianity, since no social change or revolution, other than a religious one, would have improved women's conditions in the Soviet Union. While *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* was partially inspired by western feminism and created to be published in Europe, the women's independent club Mariia and the homonymous almanac were created for a Russian audience²²³. The club was launched on March 1st, 1980 with a debate on feminism and marxism and a public appeal to mothers

²¹⁹ Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, "Pis'mo iz Novosibirska.", *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, Paris, Des Femmes, Vol. 1, 1980, 73–80.

²²⁰ Fouque Antoinette, 1979: Naissance en URSS d'un Mouvement de libération des femmes, Paris: dir. Des Femmes Filment, 2019, (Accessed January 29, 2021)

²²¹ Ibidem

²²² As Voznesenskaia claimed "manuscripts don't burn, but they disappear during searches". For this reason, the activists of Mariia firstly decided to create a women's club which hosted debates and discussion concerning the status of Russian women, to later create the almanac *Mariia*. See: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Zhenskoe Dvizhenie v Rossii", In *Antologïia Samizdata. Nepodcenzurnaia literatura v SSSR. 1950e-1980e*, edited by Igrunov V.V and Barbakadze M.Sh., Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyj Institut Gumanitarno-politicheskikh Issledovaniï, 2005, Tom III, 183

²²³ ibidem

(Obrashchenie k materiam) against the invasion of Afghanistan. Soon after the first samizdat issue of was confiscated by the authorities, to be later published in samizdat in May 1980. The anti-Soviet, pacifist content of the almanac its led to the exile of its editorial board in spring and summer 1980; from that moment, the exiled activists of *Mariia* and those remained in Russia kept publishing the almanac respectively in tamizdat and in samizdat²²⁴.

The movement *Mariia* held Marxism accountable for Russia's spiritual and physical annihilation, since precisely this lack of spirituality led to the construction of a social order based on atomization instead of that of community. The function of religion as a liberating force from the oppressive environment of totalitarianism fits *Mariia* in the pattern of late 1970s religious renaissance: Elena Vassilieva²²⁵ links the religious mindset of the almanac with the religious revival experienced within Leningrad Soviet dissident circles. The importance of the religious motif in underground poetic circles²²⁶ went along with an in-depth analysis of philosophical and religious concepts, an instance of which is the seminar and samizdat journal *37*²²⁷, organized by Tatiana Goricheva and Viktor Krivulin. Among the readings of the mentioned seminar, Vassilieva lists philosophers such as Nikolaï Aleksandrovich Berdiaev, Pavel Aleksandrovich Florensky, Segeï Nikolaevich Bulgakov, Semën Liudvigovich Frank, and Vladimir Sergejevich Solovëv²²⁸; these readings influenced Leningrad underground intelligentsia, especially Berdiaev's idea of the reinvigorating effect of culture on religion, also corroborated by Tatiana Goricheva, who maintained: "Culture affects religion in a sublimating way. It straightens religion up, refining it from naturalizing, magic and neurotic elements²²⁹." Alongside the idea of culture as a means to convey religious ideas went the concept of pain as a key to religious truth (*istina*), popular in dissident social commentary literature. This idea was equally prominent in *Mariia*, in which women, due to their "natural" proneness to suffering, were

²²⁴ Marco Sabbatini in *Leningrado Underground: testi, poetiche, samizdat*, 265 lists six issues of *Mariia*; for more on the issue, see: Galina Grigr'eva, "K istorii zhenskogo dvizheniia vos'midesiatykh godov. Al'manach "zhenshchina i Rossiia" "zhurnal "Mariia" In *Samizdat (po materialam konferentsii "30 let nezavisimoi pečati, 1950-1980 gody")* edited by V. Dolinin and B. Ivanov, Sankt Peterburg, Nic Memorial, 1993, 120-123. The present research considers the Russian tamizdat issues from the first to the third and includes the fifth samizdat one, available in Iuliia Voznesenskaia private fund in the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa archive.

²²⁵ Vassilieva, Elena, *Feminism and Eternal Feminine: The Case of a Happy Union*. MPhil thesis The Open University, 2003

²²⁶ Josephine von Zitzewitz, "Religious Verse in Leningrad Samizdat", *Enthymema*, XII, 2015, 80

²²⁷ On the matter see: Parisi, *Il lettore eccedente. Edizioni periodiche del samizdat sovietico, 1956-1990*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 158-170. Sabbatini Marco, *Leningrado Underground: testi, poetiche, samizdat*, Roma: Writeup, 2020, 231-238; Igrunov V.V., *Antologija Samizdata. Nepodcenzurnaia literatura v SSSR. 1950e-1980e*, edited by Igrunov V.V and Barbakadze M.Sh., Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyj Institut Gumanitarno-politicheskikh Issledovanii, 2005, Tom III, 297-302

²²⁸ Vassilieva Elena, 2003, 75. For more on the influence of this thinkers on Russian dissident circles see: Pazukhin E., "Rozhdenie v mir. O religioznoi zhizni Leningrada 70-kh godov", In *Chasy*, N.45, 1983 and Pazukhin E., "Leningradskij sintez. Religioznoe dvizhenie v srede leningradskoi tvorcheskoi intelligencii poslevoennogo pokoleniia", In "Obvodnyi kanal", N.10, 1986

²²⁹ Goricheva Tatiana, "Khristianstvo, Kul'tura, Politika", *Vol'noe slovo*, N.39, 1981. Quoted from Vassilieva Elena, 75.

described as emissaries of God on earth able to spread His message of love to contrast the violence of totalitarianism and the creation of a new social order.

The connotation of religion as a renovating and nation-building concept was part of this side of the dissidence, which included Alexandr Isaevich Solzhenicyn, acclaiming said religious revival. In this regard, the writer declared: “Russia is now undergoing a great religious revival... behind that revival stands the whole of the people that has long since shaken off even the very shade of Marxism and materialism.”²³⁰ Solzhenicyn remarks on the prominence of national spiritual life as a tool for the development of Russia, by also stressing the idea of Russia as a community built on communal religious principles (*sobornost'*), such as those regarding Russia as a nation sharing a fate of repentance and united in a community of guilt²³¹. Therefore, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's financial²³² and ideological support of Mariia's club is not casual. In this regard, he stressed the importance of religious background of Mariia, how it distanced itself from “superficial” western feminism and focused on the adversities Russian women had to face, which brought them closer to God and, consequently, to better understanding of His word²³³.

An equal insistence on the concept of a community²³⁴ (*obshchina*) built on the principle of *sobornost* is strongly present in Mariia since they define themselves as a group founded on shared religious beliefs and in strong opposition to Marxist materialism, to which was imputed the moral and cultural decline of Russia. In this regard, the term *obshchina*, also refers to a community where all members are regarded as equals, a concept in which lies striking contrast with the Communist party hierarchy (*partiinnost'*), a hierarchical order also present, according to Mariia members' view, in Leningrad's dissent circles²³⁵. The present idea is similarly conveyed through the almanac's multivocal texts and the lack of leadership in the group, which, unfortunately, didn't exclude the members from conflicts while in emigration²³⁶.

²³⁰ E. Temovskii, "Razmyshleniia o sovremennom polozenii religii i Tserkvi v SSSR", *Posev*, 12, 1979, 15. Quoted from Vassilieva Elena, 61

²³¹ Vassilieva Elena, 2003, 65

²³² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, Correspondence with Alla Sariban, 1981-1982, FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982, (accessed on October 21th 2022)

²³³ Solzhenitsyn Aleksandr Isaevich, *Letters to Iuliia Nikolaevna Voznesenskaia*. Letter. 29.5.1981-19.1.1982, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 18th, 2022).

²³⁴ Doron Elena, Kseniia Romanova, "O nashei obshchine", *Mariia* N.5, Leningrad, 1981, 7. FSO 01-143, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen (accessed on October 25th, 2021)

²³⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Domashnii kontslager", *Maria* N.1, Leningrad-Frankfurt am Maine, 1981, 18

²³⁶ Voznesenskaia reported some divergencies withing the editorial staff of *Mariia* in emigration, which might have led to the division of the group and the end of the almanac. See: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, Correspondence with Alla Sariban, 1981-1982, FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982, (accessed on October 18th, 2022)

By explaining the ties between Russian women's dissident movement and the religious revival in dissident circles, Vassilieva demonstrates that religion has become a recurring motif in their ideological mindset and that it worked as a tool to achieve a transformation that could be applied to a broader national context, rather than to a merely individual level; this also explains the group's insistence on a purely Russian path to feminism, rather than a movement inspired by western Marxist feminism.

Татьяна Мамонова и ее ближайшие единомышленницы, из которых наиболее известна Наталия Мальцева, продолжали оставаться приверженцами западной модели феминизма. Остальные редакторы и авторы альманаха искали свой особый путь, исходя из полной непохожести российского самосознания и российской ситуации. Эти женщины в основном были православными христианками и не мыслили себе никакой деятельности вне Церкви. Все они стояли на антимарксистских позициях²³⁷.

Due to their little knowledge of the different currents within it, the club *Mariia* viewed all western feminism as Marxist, ignoring the broader theoretical mindset it actually belonged to. The member of *Mariia* described Marxism as the backbone of the Soviet regime and, therefore, as a theory able to shape an oppressive, violent ideology to which they strongly opposed and which they contrasted with the non-violent nature and humanitarian ideas embraced by the group.

Человечество, устремленное на приобретение внешних благ, кончает банкротом как на Западе, так на Востоке. Но мы в России сделали еще один шаг: мы попытались ценой кровавой революции достичь справедливости на земле, мы убьли Бога, мы замучили миллионы лучших людей и вот теперь пожинаем плоды – обезображена, искромсана наша жизнь, нет в ней света, нет утешения. Но пусть наш опыт не будет недаром!²³⁸

The connection between Marxism and violence is strictly influenced by the consequences of the Russian interpretation of Marxist theory and its intrinsic concept of revolution, a fact that also shows a biased rather than incisive approach to Marxism as a philosophical theory by the members of *Mariia*; however, in *Mariia*'s multivocal text *Feminism i Marxism, Voznesenskaia*²³⁹ attempts to discriminate between Marxist theory and Bolshevism as follows: “Ленин проповедовал не марксизм а бандисткий большевизм. Я не против марксизма, но против большевизма, т.к. он – бандитизм.” Marxism is properly described by the group as a materialist theory, which defines religion as an opium of the masses and imputes to it a dulling effect able to impede the masses from

²³⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, “Zhenskoe Dvizhenie v Rossii”, In *Antologiiia Samizdata. Nepodcenzurnaia literatura v SSSR. 1950e-1980e*, edited by Igrunov V.V and Barbakadze M.Sh., Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyj Institut Gumanitarno-politicheskikh Issledovaniï, 2005, Tom III, 182

²³⁸ “К zhenshchinam Rossii”, *Mariia* N.1, 7

²³⁹ “Diskussiia na temu: feminsim i marksism”, *Mariia* N.1, 20

actively participating to the political arena; ironically, Goricheva imputes to Soviet ideology the same effects on Russian citizens and identifies religion as a key to self-determination.

The group didn't create a clear manifesto summarizing the ideological apparatus behind its idea of feminism and thoroughly clarifying how women's emancipation could coexist with a patriarchal religion such as the orthodox one. Nonetheless, from the issues of *Mariia* taken into exam, it is clear how women's emancipatory process is first and foremost connected to the discovery of women's inner femininity and in contrast to the Soviet Union's "hermaphroditic" gender policy. The latter strongly marks the movement as anti-totalitarian.

2.3.2 Against Soviet Gender Policy

Tatiana Goricheva's article *ved'my v kosmose*²⁴⁰ attempts to introduce the group's ideological background and idea of emancipation. When speaking about the women's movement in Russia, the philosopher mentions *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* as the first democratic journal in Leningrad, which succeeded in raising awareness of the violent living conditions in the country, which in turn made it possible to apply the image of the Gulag to a Soviet citizen's everyday life. In such an ominous setting, Goricheva identifies women, the meek *par excellence*, as the last defense against the dehumanization of soviet society, the exact same role they were entrusted in the Gospel, since women were standing by Christ when all others had abandoned Him; in Soviet Russia, Goricheva maintains, they likewise fill up the churches and risk their lives for human rights' sake, an idea that foreshadows the mission bestowed on women, whose self-sacrificing nature and compassion serve as a medium to redeem Russia for the spiritual decline of the Soviet Union.

In a way, Goricheva asserts the spiritual bedrock of Mariia's idea of feminism and maintains that the problem of women's liberation can't be solved with socio-political provisions but rather needs spiritual and ontological ones. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,"²⁴¹ Goricheva affirms, quoting Simone de Beauvoir's statement from *The Second Sex*²⁴², an idea that Goricheva will further adapt to her own concept of femininity. The philosopher imputes to Soviet Society a dehumanizing effect able to turn its population into hermaphroditic homunculi, deprived of anything natural or spiritual. Among what she describes as natural, Goricheva lists sex, intended not only as the anatomical structure defining male or female human beings but also including some nature-given

²⁴⁰ Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v kosmose", *Mariia*, N.1, 9-13

²⁴¹ Ibidem, 10

²⁴² De Beauvoir Simone, *The Second Sex*, translated by Borde Constance and Malovany-Chevallier Sheila, London, Vintage Books, 2010

behaviors that are necessarily linked to a specific sex; this theory opposes De Beauvoir's negation of femininity as a set of specific natural traits foretelling a woman's destiny and role in society and, furthermore, it doesn't include the concept of gender as a social construct separate from biological sex, which suggests its binary heteronormative conception of sexual identity.

In Goricheva's mindset, in order to reach self-consciousness, Soviet women and men need to be free of the eternal child condition the regime imposes on them by embracing history (age) and nature (sex). Once they acknowledge their status of confinement, women (and men) can reach a level of self-determination which enables them to interpret the reality around them and recreate it according to their needs, a reality that Goricheva describes through a kitchen metaphor by quoting Lenin's statement, "a cook (kukharka) will be able to rule the country." By addressing cooks, Lenin referred to women as bound to house chores, which he referred to as a tiring and mind-numbing burden.

А втянуть в политику массы нельзя без того, чтобы не втянуть в политику женщин. Ибо женская половина рода человеческого при капитализме угнетена вдвойне. Работница и крестьянка угнетены капиталом и сверх того они даже в самых демократических из буржуазных республик остаются, во-первых, неполноправными, ибо равенства с мужчиной закон им не дает; во-вторых, — и это главное — они остаются в «домашнем рабстве», «домашними рабынями», будучи задавлены самой мелкой, самой черной, самой тяжелой, самой отупляющей человека работой кухни и вообще одиночного домашне-семейного хозяйства²⁴³.

Goricheva addresses Lenin's idea as a starting point from which to build her criticism of the Soviet emancipatory policy, which she identifies as the source of the socioeconomic and spiritual issues faced by the country. In her view, the Soviet government consists of a quasi-matriarchal anti-utopian government, which she describes as a large kitchen, meaning an oppressive, dehumanizing environment. In this regard, Goricheva similarly quotes Simone de Beauvoir's image of the kitchen and of the boudoir as confinement areas used by the patriarchy to detain women, a confinement generating an existential paralysis and impeding self-determination. Even so, Goricheva extends this existential paralysis to all Soviet citizens, men and women, restrained by the boundaries of an oppressive State; the Soviet citizen is held captive by what Goricheva defines as state patriarchy²⁴⁴.

Within the unbounded kitchen of the Soviet Union, the citizens get in touch with reality through the pre-Christian forces of fire, water, and air, symbolically shaped as nature cyclical forces and now replacing pre-existing values and ideas. The Russian philosopher maintains how those

²⁴³ Lenin Vladimir Ilich, "Mezhdunarodnii den' rabotnits, 4.3.1921", In *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Moskva, Politizdat, V. 42, 1974, 368-370.

²⁴⁴ Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v kosmose", *Mariia*, N.1, 10-11

kitchen-made forces have become those of the Soviet state, which consequently lacks any social fabric, laws, and freedom, while instead building the society on the caducity of nature's force, fate, and contingency. These natural forces are described as replacing the spiritual values of truth and clarity, to the point of describing Soviet society as ruled by merciless forces of nature²⁴⁵.

Tatiana Goricheva claims that Soviet emancipation policy reinforced the patriarchal order since it encouraged the subordinating status of women (and men) to the State. This subordination to the state's demands allows the philosopher to extend the lack of self-determination to men and women alike, a status which Goricheva addresses as the "feminization" of men and the "masculinization" of women. However, the philosopher equally considers one of the major concerns of Mariia's movement, the liberation of women from the "female psychology" forced on women for centuries, such as passivity, silence, and complete dependency on the family and the home.²⁴⁶

The government emancipation policy, which, according to propaganda, granted women the right to have high-skilled jobs, such as being an astronaut like Valentina Tereshkova, the right to education, and the equal civil rights established by law after the revolution, are, in Goricheva's view, just an illusion. According to the philosopher, said policies are meant to gain passive obedience from its victims, who, by being a passive part of the state's order, turn into executioners, perpetrators of the state's will for self-preservation, even through violence. Citizen, in this way, lose their humanity and turn into evil forces (witches, devils). Soviet society shaped the "Femina Sovietica"²⁴⁷, a woman detached from her femininity, with wild hair and glasses, working in job positions that grant her control over other people's life (judges, prison guards, and workers in the administration).

The solution to women's emancipation in the context of the Soviet Union lies in the reconnection of the subject with nature and, therefore, with his/her sex, which will further allow them a connection with what's beyond nature. To overcome the "sickness" of hermaphroditism and underdevelopment means freeing the subject from kitchen immanentism and stimulating his/her pursuit of transcendence; this allows the subject to overcome the preeminence of natural forces and to implement spirituality as a solution to individualism and cynicism. To achieve women's emancipation, in the philosopher's view, political and social rights are essential; however, as the "resolution" to the women's question by the Soviet Union proved, she maintains that no revolution will grant women emancipation, but a spiritual one. The materialist nature of Soviet emancipatory

²⁴⁵ Ibidem

²⁴⁶ Ibidem , 11

²⁴⁷ Ibidem

policy was an obstacle to women's emancipation, as it replaced the only path to self-determination (faith) with its own mystique created on the concepts of motherland, party, and ideology,

2.3.3 The *Conception* of Womanhood in Mariia

In the article *Ved'my v kosmose* (Witches in space), Tatiana Goricheva anticipates the essentialist vision of femininity described in *Mariia*. Nonetheless, the philosopher doesn't explain in detail what's her idea of femininity, which is further described throughout the contributions of *Mariia*. The almanac takes its name from the Virgin Mary, a figure the group identifies as a role model. Hence, the idea of femininity promoted by the group is shaped by gentleness, patience, self-sacrifice, and the ability to act for humanity's best interest features allowing women to take suffering of mankind on their shoulders.

Пусть научит он нас искать спасения не во внешних реформах и изменениях, пусть обратит наши взоры в глубины сердца и откроет нам то, что дано раскрыть во всей полноте только женщине: способность любить и жертвовать всем ради любви, способность не искать в этой любви «своего» способность слушать Бога и следовать за Ним, способность жить сердцем а не рассудком.[...] Если человеком не отвратить свой взор от экспансий и войн, если оно не обратится к попыраемым ныне «женским» ценностям, его ждет неминуемый распад и гибель. В России должна родиться новая ая женщина – свободная и независимая, однако неупотребляющая свою свободу во вред ближнему, а преобразующая ее творческий порыв, женщина, поднявшаяся до понимания своей высокой задачи, оснавшая боль века как свою собственную боль, имеющая сделать чужое страдание своей судьбой²⁴⁸.

In orthodox Christianity, suffering consists of the primary step on the path of redemption; women are, therefore, emissaries of God's will on earth, martyrial figures whose suffering brings them near to God and makes them able to spread God's message of love and creation as opposed to the apocalyptic forces of the regime. The said idea of femininity consequently shaped the almanac's political activism as anti-Soviet, non-violent, and against Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan²⁴⁹. In this regard, the members of *Mariia* also contested the exportation of Soviet emancipation policy which could have undermined Afghan women's right to shape their own path to self-determination.

²⁴⁸ “К zhenshchinam Rossii”, *Mariia* N.1, 8

²⁴⁹ “Klub Mariia protiv okkupatsii Afganistana”, *Mariia* N.2, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1982, 11-13

The group Mariia likewise supported the Polish trade union Solidarity²⁵⁰ and the creation of a neo-feminist movement in Poland²⁵¹.

By addressing the status of women's rights, Goricheva refers to *Zhenshchina i Rossiia* as a starting point to discuss them and reiterates their importance, despite focusing mainly on maternity as a right denied to women by the precarious housing and labor condition in Russia. Maternity is described here as a need²⁵² (potrebnost'), a concept true to the essentialist undertone within the almanac's idea of femininity. Helena Goscilo imputes the importance of maternity in pre-glasnost' Russian women's writing to the public debate on the fertility decline experienced by the Soviet Union in the year of the Taw²⁵³. Elena Vassilieva similarly links the centrality of maternity in *Mariia* with the public debate on the fertility decline²⁵⁴, since it equally addressed the issue of men's feminization and women's masculinization and imputed low birthrates to said gender imbalance; the re-establishment of traditional gender roles was regarded as the solution to the problem and justified through pedagogical studies concerning femininity²⁵⁵. Furthermore, the public debate described the significant role covered by women in the family and in society as a "new patriarchy", while women, on the other hand, felt it as a double burden. The public opinion also stigmatized the consequences of legal equality between men and women as "the dissolution of traditional hierarchies" and the contradiction of sacred inequality within marriage²⁵⁶: as argued by Gennadii Shimanov²⁵⁷ God wasn't equal to men, men couldn't be equal to women. Equality, in a way, turned human beings into hermaphrodites and removed women's spiritual specificity. These ideas, Vassilieva²⁵⁸ maintains, merge the general anxiety for the fertility decline and for the transformation of the family.

The public debate on the fertility decline impacted on the group Mariia: according to Tatiana Goricheva, Soviet Union turned citizens into sexless alienated homunculi, while Soviet emancipatory policy imposed on women and created in the image and likeness of men, which prevented them from

²⁵⁰Klub Mariia, "Soldinarnost' s solidarnosti", *Mariia* N.2, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1982, 3-9

²⁵¹Gveiman Sabina, "O polskom neofeminisme", *Mariia* N.3, Leningrad-Parizh, N.3, 1983, 92-96

²⁵²Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v kosmose", *Mariia*, N.1. Leningrad-Frankfurt na Majne, 1981, 12

²⁵³Goscilo Helena, "Introduction", In *Balancing Acts. Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989

²⁵⁴ Vassilieva, Elena, *Feminism and Eternal Feminine: The Case of a Happy Union*. MPhil thesis The Open University, 2003, 77-90

²⁵⁵ Ibidem, 80

²⁵⁶ Ibidem

²⁵⁷ Gennadii Shimanov (1937-2013) was a publicist and thinker of 1970s Russian nationalism. For more this topic see: Alekseeva, L. M., *Istoriia Inakomyслиi v SSSR: Noveishii Period*, Moskva: Moskovskaia Khel'sinskakaia gruppy, 2012

²⁵⁸ Vassilieva, Elena, *Feminism and Eternal Feminine: The Case of a Happy Union*. MPhil thesis The Open University, 2003

fully expressing their femininity²⁵⁹. The club Mariia links said suppression of femininity to that of female creative drive, which is expressed equally through literary production and maternity. While the precarious housing and working condition in the Soviet Union made childbearing a hazardous choice, the policy of parasitism greatly affected women authors and pushed them to identify work as a curse²⁶⁰, namely an obstacle to literary creation. Alexandra Talaver maintains that their status as members of Leningrad intelligentsia, impeded in expressing themselves in the literary forms and contents that better suited them and not formally acknowledged the status of writers and poets, prompted this negative connotation of nonliterary work. In this framework lies a problematic statement by Galina Khamova, which Aleksandra Talaver defined as the incarnation of Betty Friedan's nightmare²⁶¹ and as an idea unanimously accepted by the members of the group.

«тунеянец»- то есть тот, кто есть «туне», даром, сходное слово «дормоед». В отношении мужчины это еще может иметь смысл, Апостол Павел сказал: «Трудящийся достоин пропитания», «Неработающий да не есть». Но женщина? Две знакомые мне молодые женщины (22 и 32 года) отсидели сроки за тунеядство, собственного полгода и год. Не вдаваясь и подробности, скажу, что жизнь их действительно сложилась неблагополучно. Но среди багополучных женщин все чаще и чаще слышишь мнение: «Мы не хотим быть функционерками, роботами, рабынями. МЫ ХОТИМ БЫТЬ МАТЕРЯМИ, ЖЕНАМИ, ХОЗЯЙКАМИ – ЖЕНЩИНАМИ, НАКОНЕЦ!»²⁶²

The mentioned statement, however, didn't agree with all the member's ideas and status. Iuliia Voznesenskaia, for example, willingly worked as a writer and human rights activist, Nataliia Malakhovskaia similarly worked as a writer, and Tatiana Goricheva was a philosopher and a theology scholar. Therefore, they didn't maintain that all women necessarily needed to be housewives to embrace their "true" essence, but rather that they should have the right to choose to be one. They regarded Soviet emancipation as mandatory and as dismissing the natural evolution of society towards a more sustainable model of emancipation, an idea also mentioned by the collective when questioning the policy of Soviet Union concerning Afghan women's emancipation²⁶³. Nonetheless, the promotion of a woman's image as the angel of the hearth²⁶⁴ and the advice to answer with humility to gender discrimination, more than Khamova's statement, could be, if not properly stigmatized and applied to

²⁵⁹ This insistence on the specificities of femininity might link the group Mariia with prerevolutionary Russian feminism, namely *feminizm razlichii* (feminism of difference). For more on this issue see: Pushkareva Nataliia, "Feminizm Rossii", In *enciklopediia krugsoviet*. (accessed March 22nd, 2022)

²⁶⁰ Malachovskaia Nataliia, "Zazhivo pogrebionnyi", *Mariia* N.1, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1981, 15

²⁶¹ Talaver Alexandra, *Samizdat magazines of the soviet dissident women's groups, 1979-1982. A critical analysis*, M.A. thesis in Gender studies, Central European University, Budapest, 2017, 58

²⁶² Khamova Galina, "Reskie repliki", *Maria* N.3, Leningrad-Parizh, 1983, 55

²⁶³ Klub Mariia, "Polozhenie zhenshchin v Afganistane", *Mariia* N.2, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1982, 23-25; Klub Mariia, "Kommunisticheskoe «Osvobozhdenie» afganskoi zhenshchiny", *Maria* N.2, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1982, 21-13

²⁶⁴ Klub Maria, "Otvety na anketu zhurnal «Al'ternativy»", *Maria* N.1, Leningrad-Frankfurt na Maine, 1981, 23

the context, used to legitimize a reactionary turn to essentialist gender roles in the society by future formulation of a purely local feminist ideological mindset in Russia.

In having the Virgin Mary as a role model, the club *Mariia* identifies maternity as a crucial part of womanhood; this link between women's biological ability to generate life and the creative literary process prompted some interesting reflections about women's literature (*zhenskoe tvorchestvo*), which they described as a "particular kind of literature opposing the regime"²⁶⁵. The members of *Mariia* describe their idea of female literary production by identifying it as goal-oriented and not as a form of art for art's sake, which excludes literary experimentation from their works and devotes art to a specific goal. They furthermore encourage the creation of a women's way to the creation of the literary text by opposing to the legitimation of women's creativity based on men's canon.

Многие из нас долгое время с большим или меньшим успехом следовали мужскому идеалу литератора, деятеля удостаивались порой сомнительных похвал вроде «у нее мужскому ум» или «она пишет мужские стихи». Но теперь мы очень ради нашему объединению: в общении женщин гораздо меньше тщеславия и глухоты, которые можно наблюдать в работе мужские и «смешанных» самиздатных группировок. Активные участницы движения – Вознесенская, Малаховская, Горичева – уже имеют достаточный опыт в работе самиздата, поэтому их привлекает в специфической женской форме общения большая ответственность, преданность к делу, стремление к высоким ценностям любви и отвержение себя во всем²⁶⁶.

The group, therefore, seemed to encourage an autonomous female literary production, of which the literary texts included in *Mariia* and the attempt to publish the *Anthology of Women's Poetry*²⁶⁷ are an instance. This parallel drawn between literary creativity and birth is also present in *The Women's Decameron*: not casually the book is set in a maternity ward in which women participate to a collective narrative act.

²⁶⁵ Klub *Mariia*, "Zhenskii samizdat v Sovetskom Soiuzе", Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021), 1. The article was probably intended as a part of the fifth samizdat version of *Mariia*, since it is located in the same folder with "kto my?", the first article of the fifth samizdat issue of *Mariia*, which is also part of Iuliia Voznesenskaia private fund at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen.

²⁶⁶ Klub *Mariia*, "Otvety na anketu zhurnal'a 'Al'ternativy'", In *Mariia*, N.1, 25

²⁶⁷ *The Anthology of Women's Poetry* (Antologiiia zhenskoi poezii) was written by Galina Grigorevna, Saiaia Magai and Renata Sychevaia in 1980. Unfortunately, this anthology was confiscated by KGB and never published. See: Dolinin Viacheslav, Severiokhin Dmitrii, *Preodolenie Nemoty. Leningradskii samizdat v kontekste nezavisimogo kul'turnogo dvizheniia. 1953-199*, Sankt-Peterburg: Izatel'stvo imeni N.I. Novikova, 2003, 81

Part II: Textual Analysis

Chapter III

The Women's Decameron

3.1 Voznesenskaia's Statements on *The Women's Decameron*

The Women's Decameron was published in German in 1985 by the Roitman Verlag publishing house and was later translated from the Russian version into several languages²⁶⁸. According to the preface to the text published in 2013²⁶⁹ and to Julie Curtis²⁷⁰, *The Women's Decameron* circulated in the Soviet Union in the form of samizdat before its official Russian publication in Tel Aviv (1987) and Moscow (1992). To clarify the aim of the writer and the literary reference used by the author, the textual analysis starts by commenting on the preface to the Russian edition of 2013, which wasn't included in the 1987 edition or in any other. The text was apparently written for a western audience; Iuliia Voznesenskaia stated in an interview with the Italian magazine *L'Unità* that the text qualified her as a "European writer writing in Russian about Russia,²⁷¹" and, in the preface to the Russian edition of 2013, she also clarified how the text was intended to raise awareness of women's condition in the Soviet Union. This choice aimed at discouraging the Western public praise of the Soviet Union's achievements in equal rights, which is in line with the author's political activism²⁷². In this regard, the text systematically criticizes Soviet propaganda on women's emancipation by exposing the harshness of Soviet *byt* from the point of view of female narrators.

²⁶⁸ The first edition of *The Women's Decameron*, originally written in Russian, was translated into German by Marlene Milack Verheiden in 1985 under the title *Das Frauen Decameron* and published by Roitman-Verlag. The first English edition translated from Russian by W.B. Linton for Quartet publishers came out in 1986. The book reached the United States in 1986 through the independent Boston publisher Atlantic Monthly Press and was then reprinted by the New York publisher Owl in 1987 based on the previous year's edition. *The Women's Decameron* was first published in Italian in 1988, translated by Bruno Osimo and published by Rizzoli Publishers. The text was also translated and published in Swedish in 1987 by Alba Publishers, in 1988 in France by Actes Sud.

²⁶⁹ Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*. Sankt-Peterburg: Lepta Kniga. Kindle edition, 2013

²⁷⁰ Curtis, Julie, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia: a Fragmentary Vision", In *Women and Russian Culture. Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New-YorkOxford, 1998, 173–187

²⁷¹ Spindel Giovanna, "La Voznesenskaja parla della sua riscrittura del «Decamerone»", *l'Unità*, Venerdì 1 dicembre 1989, 21

²⁷² The participation of Iuliia Voznesenskaia in the Russian dissident women's movement *Mariia* was described in chapter II. The author was engaged in political and women-oriented activism also during her permanence in Germany exile: she was the editor-in-chief of the first two samizdat issues of *Mariia* and devoted her radiophonic talks to the condition of

To achieve this goal, the author implements a stylistic strategy lifted from the Italian Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio, namely the use of fiction to reshape reality. Barbara Zaczek demonstrates that by creating and recreating reality with words²⁷³, namely by resorting to their personal accounts, the characters of *The Women's Decameron* undermine the narrative promoted by the Soviet regime. As stated in the preface, Voznesenskaia published the text in Russia and in Russian in 2013 to discourage Russian people's yearning for their Soviet past; younger Russian generations couldn't know how people actually lived during the Soviet Union, and the older generation, which struggled after the fall of the regime and the difficult times of the 90s, drowned in nostalgic thoughts about their communist past.

Время шло, прошло... и дошло до того, что в России появилось новое поколение людей, которые искренне не знают о реальном положении женщины в СССР, – это молодые. А старики, пережившие общенациональную депрессию, вдруг кинулись вспоминать, какими счастливыми они были... нет, не в молодости, а при советской власти! И тут я поняла, что теперь уже в самой России у меня появился потенциальный читатель, которого, как когда-то западного читателя, никакими историческими фактами, выкладками и статистикой не проймешь и не убедишь в том, что в СССР жить было не так уж беззаботно, легко и спокойно, как говорят некоторые. Словом, неожиданно для меня самой пришло время издания «Женского Декамерона» на русском языке²⁷⁴.

In the preface Voznesenskaia maintains that Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn inspired her²⁷⁵ to write *The Women's Decameron*, which she links to his appreciation of the almanac *Mariia*²⁷⁶. As also mentioned by Voznesenskaia, one of the major concerns of the group Mariia after the forced exile of its members, was to inform the West about the real condition of women in the Soviet Union and to discourage the application of Soviet emancipatory policy in the western countries²⁷⁷. In a passage taken from their correspondence and reported in the preface, Solzhenitsyn praised the religious background of the movement, especially for their commitment to Russia's spiritual renaissance. As described in chapter II, Voznesenskaia endorsed the ideas of the group Mariia, which

Soviet women. See for example: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Prava rozhenicy*, text for the radiophonic rubric Prava Cheloveka n.675, January 10/11, 1984, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022); Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Akushersko-ginekologicheskaia sluzhba v SSSR*. Radio Script. Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv, [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021).

²⁷³ Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8. Chapel Hill: NC, 2006, 236-248

²⁷⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Predislovie avtora", In *Zhenskii Dekameron*, kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

²⁷⁵ Ibidem

²⁷⁶ Ibidem

²⁷⁷ For this reason members of the group Mariia went on tour to give lecture on the matter. Voznesenskaia mentions these activities in: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Correspondence with Alla Sariban*, 1981-1982, FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982 (accessed on October 21th 2022); Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Dlia r/zh "prava cheloveka": dlia vzgliada na prava i polozhenie sovetskoi zhenshchiny*, n.d., Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen] FSO 01-143 Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen. 1981-1982 (accessed on October 21th, 2021).

regarded a religious revival more than a social or political change as the source of women's emancipatory process. Furthermore, Mariia qualified as an anti-Soviet group, not only opposing to Soviet model of emancipation, but also to the regime. Said movement ideologically distanced itself from western Marxist and non-religious feminist groups²⁷⁸, to which the members of Mariia, including Voznesenskaia devoted their lessons concerning the real living condition of Soviet women.

In this regard, Voznesenskaia recounts how she wasn't taken seriously when, during her lectures, she commented on the living condition of Soviet women by presenting statistics, as the western public believed the fabricated image of equality spread by soviet propaganda, going so far as to see it as an example of the solution of the woman question. In the preface, Voznesenskaia recalls how the western public's understanding of women's rights in the Soviet Union changed when she started using anecdotes and humor in her texts, which seemed to break through people's perception of women's conditions within the Soviet Union. That's when she understood that the most successful means to make the West aware of the real condition of Soviet women was an entertaining book, not complex in its style, yet providing a reconstruction of the Soviet *byt*. In this regard the author comments in the interview for the magazine *l'Unità*:

Ciò che mi meravigliò più di ogni altra cosa era l'assoluta non conoscenza della vita russa da parte dell'Occidente che ha dimostrato tanta partecipazione al nostro destino, così ho deciso di scrivere un libro sulla nostra vita quotidiana, in particolare sulla vita delle nostre donne. Ci sono molti scrittori di alto livello letterario e teorico, ma nessuno di loro descrive la vita semplice e banale ho assunto io questo compito che mi ha dato anche la possibilità di trasformarmi in una scrittrice europea che scrive in russo della Russia²⁷⁹.

Throughout the preface, the author illustrates her search for a proper genre and plot to write a book about Soviet women; the Italian *Decameron*, which she describes as “a constellation of colorful candies with a strong filling of truth”²⁸⁰, turned out to be the most appropriate reference. The choice

²⁷⁸ Voznesenskaia in her correspondence mentions her contacts with French feminist movement, despite she does not specify the group or organization she was referring to. Other sources, show how the group *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, and later Mariia, met with the French feminist movement MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes). It might be possible that in the context of their debate, French feminists could have shared their philosophy of sexual difference with their soviet sisters. The group *Psychnalyse et politique*, included in the Movement de Liberation de Femmes (MLF), published the works of Héléne Cixous. Despite the lack of explicit proof of a direct influence of French feminist theory on the author's literary work, French feminist literary criticism has been identified as a successful methodological approach in previous research on the matter (see chapter II).

²⁷⁹ If not explicitly stated otherwise, the translations from Italian are my own.

What struck me most was the total lack of knowledge of Russian life by the West, which showed so much interest in our fate. For this reason, I decided to write a book about our daily life, especially about the lives of our women. There are many writers of great literary and theoretical value, but none of them describes simple and mundane life. I took on this task, which also gave me the opportunity to turn myself into a European writer who writes in Russian about Russia. Spindel Giovanna, “La Voznesenskaja parla della sua riscrittura del ‘Decamerone’. Dieci piccole donne sovietiche”, *L'Unità*, December 1th, 1989, 21

²⁸⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, “Predislovie avtora”, In *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Sankt-Peterburg: Lepta Kniga. Kindle edition, 2013

to use the Italian *Decameron* as a source, which will be briefly addressed, works as an interesting perspective for the text's close reading as it has been identified as a forerunner of socialist realism. In this regard, Iginio De Luca²⁸¹ identified Boccaccio as the most studied and read Italian writer in the Soviet Union after Dante and Goldoni. Soviet literary criticism read the Italian Renaissance as a purely democratic and popular phenomenon since, in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Soviet scholars found harmony between popular and intellectual elements. As De Luca maintains²⁸², Boccaccio's *Decameron* was largely disseminated and read in the Soviet Union not only due to its intrinsic literary value but also to the label literary criticism put on it, meaning that of secular realism; the realism of the *Decameron* was therefore intended as one of the examples to follow in the construction of socialist realism. De Luca provides a thorough bibliography²⁸³ of Soviet studies devoted to the *Decameron* in the Soviet Union, especially those published between 1977 and 1979, and refers to Engels's praise to Dante as an argument to support his thesis.

Knowing Voznesenskaia's struggle to establish her literary authority in the context of the Soviet Union²⁸⁴, firstly as an unofficial writer and poet, the act of turning what was considered by the Soviet dominant literary discourse an example (Boccaccio's *Decameron*) in a book praising dissident and female literary activity hints at another layer of meaning of *The Women's Decameron*. This suggests that the book doesn't simply display the conditions of Soviet women to discourage the implementation of Soviet emancipatory policy in the West: it reverses the implicit logic of power of committed literature and that of male-centered literature.

3.2 Structure and Links to Boccaccio's *Decameron*

The structure of the book is explicitly inspired by Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, mentioned not only in the title but also in the introduction to the text as the reference taken into account by the characters when recreating the *Decameron* in a context of their own. As in

²⁸¹ De Luca Iginio, "Rassegna della letteratura italiana in Urss: studi e traduzioni 1917-1975", *Lettere italiane*, Firenze: Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki, N°32, 1980, 87-98. For some preliminary studies on the Russian reception of Boccaccio's *Decameron* see: Andreev M.L., Balashov N. I., Grashchenkov V.N., Mikhajlov A.D., Saprykina E. Yu., Khlodovskij R. I., *Istoriia Literaturny Italii*, Moskva: Nasledie, 2000; Khlodovskij R.I., *Dekameron poetika i stil'*, Moskva: Nauka, 1982; Molchanova V. V., "Russkaia recepcia Dekameronu Bokkachcho", In *Italiia i slavianskii mir: Sovetsko-Ital'ianskii simposium in honorem Professore Ettore Lo Gatto*, Moskva, 1990, 46-49. Potapova Slata, "Boccaccio nella cultura russa e sovietica", In *Il Boccaccio nelle culture e letterature nazionali : Atti del Congresso: "La fortuna del Boccaccio nelle culture e nelle letterature nazionali"*, edited by Francesco Mazzoni, Firenze: Ente Nazionale Boccaccio, 1978

²⁸² De Luca Iginio, "Studi sulle traduzioni di Boccaccio in URSS (1919-1978)", *Studi sul Boccaccio*, N° 13, 1981-1982, 381-38

²⁸³ Ibidem.

²⁸⁴ The documentary "Yulia's Diary" touches this issue. See: Cram William, *Yuliya's Diary*, Ford Foundation: USA, 1980, (Accessed January 29, 2020).

Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the text presents a narrative frame where the characters interact with each other and comment on the short stories of the day. The frame includes a hundred short stories told by ten different characters in ten days, following specific, non-rigid, themes described as "matters that can be considered important to any ordinary woman", such as: first love (day first), tales about seduced and abandoned men and women (day second), sex in farcical situations (day third), evil women, otherwise called bitches (day fourth), infidelity and jealousy (day fifth), rapists and their victims (day sixth), money (day seventh), revenge (day eighth), noble deeds by women and men (day ninth) and happiness (day tenth).

As in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the author introduces every short story with a small summary, or more precisely a rubric, which she uses to briefly comment on the matter discussed in the short story, while rarely taking the floor herself extensively within the tales or the narrative frame. The narrative frame precedes and follows the tales, introduces each day, and ultimately consists of a narrative space, in which the characters discuss the stories and interact with each other, allowing the author to better trace their characterization and evolution.

Day one starts with an opening monologue, described as *vystuplenie eksposiciia*. The author's naming of this introduction relates to theater and public speaking, a feature that foreshadows *The Women's Decameron's* theatrical subtext, which similarly transpires from the premise. The theatrical subtext represents another link with the Italian *Decameron* since Nino Borsellino²⁸⁵, and Antonio Stäuble²⁸⁶ proved the theatrical structure of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Additionally, *The Women's Decameron* has been staged in France, Greece, Sweden, Russia and Italy²⁸⁷, where it was performed in 2019 and 2021 by the company Cetec Dentro-Fuori San Vittore with Donatella Massimilla as the director. The text is suitable for a theater transposition since it lifts its theatrical subtext from its Italian counterpart and presents elements that evoke said subtext. This interpretation has also been validated by an interview with Voznesenskaia by Donatella Massimilla.

²⁸⁵ Borsellino Nino, "Decameron come teatro", in *Rozzi e Intronati. Esperienze e forme del teatro dal "Decameron" al "Candelaio"*, Bulzoni, Roma 1974

²⁸⁶ Stäuble Antonio, "La brigata del "Decameron" come pubblico teatrale", *Studi sul Boccaccio*, Firenze, Sansoni editore, 1975-1976, 104-117

²⁸⁷ *Kvinnornas Decamerone*, directed by Lars Rudolfsson, Orionteatern, Stockholm, December, 31th 1988; *Il decamerone delle donne*, directed by Donatella Massimilla, Teatro Verdi: Milano, December 1th, 1989; *Le décameron des femmes*, directed by Brochen Julie, Odéon - Théâtre de l'Europe, Paris, January 26th – February 19th, 2000; *Shisgara*, directed by Roman Smirnov, Sankt-Peterburgskii Akademicheskii dramaticheskii teatr imeni V.F. Komissarzhevskoi, Sankt-Peterburg, December, 21th 2013.

Domanda. Il Decameron delle donne sembra richiamare nei suoi processi narrativi una struttura di tipo teatrale. Quello che riteniamo sia anche teatrale è fare un'esperienza e vedere noi quest'esperienza come spettatori, al di fuori di noi²⁸⁸.

Risposta. È vero, ho una visione della vita che è anche teatrale. A volte siedo al tavolino di un caffè e mi metto a guardare la gente che passa; vedo un volto interessante ed immediatamente parto con la fantasia. Mi chiedo chi è quella persona, quale ruolo interpreta sul palcoscenico della vita. Questo modo di osservare la realtà viene assunto nel romanzo dal personaggio di Emma, la regista teatrale. È lei ad "aprire il sipario" all'inizio del Decameron²⁸⁹.

The premise is indeed told from the point of view of Emma, a theater director and one of the women quarantined in the maternity ward. The character is caught by the reader in the act of reading Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in order to find some inspiration for her theatrical transposition of the text, while surrounded by the howling women around her, upset because of the recently imposed quarantine. Emma pictures the scenography, the lights, and the sounds in her mind, focusing especially on the sound of a bell tolling; the bell in her imagination must remind the audience that everyone is doomed to die, an idea she further develops by also introducing on stage the character of the corpse collector, a figure present in Boccaccio's prologue to his *Decameron*. Here, Voznesenskaia, through Emma's point of view, aims at creating an atmosphere of death, also referencing Boccaccio's *orrìdo cominciamento* (dreadful beginning); while Boccaccio describes in detail the difficulties and consequences of the plague²⁹⁰, Emma doesn't indulge in bodily details regarding the skin infection affecting the hospital or in the consequences of it in terms of social order. However, the skin infection is implemented as a plot device leading to the isolation of the characters and the creation of a separated social order.

The author guides the reader inside the narrative frame, shifting from Emma's first-person narrative monologue to an external narrator through the narrative device of distraction. This shift in the narrative voice is also marked, in the 2013 edition, with italics. The premise, told from Emma's point of view, further shapes her as the author's alter-ego, especially when considering the metanarrative inner monologue in the introduction. Moreover, Emma will later suggest to the other

²⁸⁸ *Question*. The Women's Decameron presents narrative processes typical of a theatrical text. What is also theatrical to us, is to have an experience and to see this experience ourselves as an audience, from an external point of view.

Answer. It's true, I picture life also as a stage. Sometimes I sit at a bar and look at people passing by; when I see an interesting person I immediately let my imagination run wild. I wonder who that person is, what kind of role he or she plays on the stage of life. In the text, Emma, the theater director, similarly observes the reality around her. She's the one "raising the curtain" at the beginning of the *Decameron*.

²⁸⁹ Massimilla Donatella, "Il Decameron delle donne di Julija Voznesenskaja: incontro con l'autrice", *Lapis: percorso della riflessione femminile*, Firenze, N.4, (June 1989), 83-88

²⁹⁰ Giovanni Boccaccio, "Proemio", *Decameron*, Milano, Bur, 2018, 1

suffering women that they ease their pain by telling each other entertaining stories, answering Irina's request for something that will distract her from bad thoughts. Irina's request and Emma's response evoke the act of "pitying the afflicted" and the healing effect of literature, which are, again, plot devices lifted from Boccaccio. Emma is, by all means, the narrative's initiator and consists of the author's alter-ego, since, as Voznesenskaia, she also mentions being part of the "second culture", she studied in the theater academy and wrote in a satirical journal *The Red Dissent* as the author did²⁹¹. As the author's alter-ego, Emma frequently encourages the proceeding of the narrative, a fact that further associates her with the author: for instance, in the narrative frame following the first novella, Emma suggests to Neliia to tell a traumatic event of her childhood. Then, a few paragraphs ahead, Emma worries about the possibility of an interruption of the narrative as Neliia rejects her invitation to speak about herself. Furthermore, Emma's tale of first love will inspire the second day's theme, that is, tales concerning the seduced and abandoned women and men, which again proves Emma's role in organizing and stimulating the narrative flow. In the fourth day's narrative frame, Emma establishes the parameters to follow when discussing the daily theme, which is to tell personal stories of infidelity. These elements further encourage the identification of Emma as a possible alter-ego of the author.

3.3 Characters

Emma, previously identified as the author's alter-ego, decides to take inspiration from the Italian Decameron and entertain the group through storytelling. The theater director then summarizes the content and context of the Italian Decameron to her fellow inmates, even though some of them have already read the text, a fact that hints at the diffusion of the Italian Decameron throughout Soviet Russia. The characters hosted in the maternity ward are ten women coming from different social strata, therefore with different education, jobs, personality and experiences. The differences among them stimulate the discussion after the tales, as the character's social background, personal history and personality influence their views on the daily themes. Furthermore, the characters are initially identified in terms of their profession²⁹², meaning the function they were assigned as members of Soviet society, and not as actual individuals; however, the act of telling stories will reunite them with

²⁹¹ Kolidziej Jerzy, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Women: With Love and Squalor", *Fruits of her Plume: Essays On Contemporary Russian Woman's Culture*, edited by Helena Goscilo, New York-London, M.E. Sharpe, 1993, 228

²⁹² Zaczek Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8. Chapel Hill: NC, 2006.

their Self and shape them accordingly. This section describes to describes the role and evolution of the characters which will be more frequently addressed during textual analysis.

Zina, the “with no fixed abode”, sometimes referred to as a tramp is , above all, a former gulag prisoner. In the text, Zina has the function of describing the life, consequences, and realia of women prison camps, prisons, and the transit of prisoners (etapirovanie), as eight out of ten of her tales describe her fellow inmates’ crimes²⁹³, life inside women prison camps²⁹⁴ or her personal experience in prison camps²⁹⁵. Moreover, Zina embodies the culture of women prison camps, by referencing songs and through her discourse, which can be placed in the category of *skaz*; to clarify, Zina’s speech is characterized by the use of gulag argot²⁹⁶, which, like Zina’s accounts, has the documentary function of shedding light on women prison camps. The attention given by the author to gulag argot also emerges from the typewritten text, in which Voznesenskaia adds little clarifying notes to the words belonging to said jargon, for translation purposes. The importance given to women prison camps in the text is in line with the author’s participation to Russian women dissident movements and her intent to document the living condition of women in prison camps; as the author declared in the documentary by MLF²⁹⁷, her participation to the Russian feminist movement, starting with *Zhenshchina i Rossiia*, was stimulated by her will to abolish women prison camps in the Soviet Union.

Zina’s character is also described as an outcast: she lives at the margins of society and doesn’t have a job or a family, a status which doesn’t require her to keep appearances and allows her to speak freely by also resorting to a vulgar register. However, her storyline is the only one where a tale leads to radical character development within the narrative frame, a story that speaks about providence. On the third day²⁹⁸, Zina’s tale doesn’t actually focus on sex in farcical situations as planned. After being released from the prison camp, Zina doesn’t have anywhere to go and ends up wandering along Saint Peterburg’s canals; she’s about to throw herself in a frozen river, out of despair, when she hears the sound of a church bell. The scene takes place during the Holy Thursday, therefore it is remindful of

²⁹³ Day seventh, tale second

²⁹⁴ See day fourth, tale second; day fifth, tale second; day sixth, tale second; day eighth, tale second; day ninth, tale second

²⁹⁵ See day third, tale second; day tenth, tale second.

²⁹⁶ For more context and examples see : Bagozzi Valentina, “Gulag Argot as a Site of Memory in Iuliia Voznesenskaia’s The Women’s Decameron”, *Academic Journal of Modern Philology: special issue*, Vol.12, 2021, 7-15

²⁹⁷ Fouque Antoinette, 1979: *Naissance en URSS d’un Mouvement de libération des femmes*, Paris: dir. Des Femmes Filment, 2019, (Accessed January 29, 2021)

²⁹⁸ Day third, tale tenth

a folktale according to which, during the Holy Thursday, the dead, called by the sound of the church bell, rise from the grave to witness the liturgical rite.²⁹⁹

Similarly, the church bell acts as the hand of God, as it relieves the pain inside Zina and leads the character to the holy mass; there she is forgiven of all her sins and allowed to take Holy Communion since, according to the words of an old woman who came to assist her, all human beings are equal before God. The warm feeling coming from the Holy Communion drives Zina to kneel in front of the Virgin Mary's icon and to ask her: "Why doesn't your Son give me any sort of life, a woman's life or any other?". Zina's prayers are soon answered. Providence places a kind man on her path, one able to understand her tribulations and sad life story and yet still willing to marry her. Yet, she decides to leave the man in an act of self-abasement; Zina consequently describes the tale as a funny one, since she left her future husband unexpectedly to be a wanderer again, without even saying goodbye. However, God still has a plan for Zina. In the narrative frame, following Zina's tale, Galina admits that she knows the man, and later contacts him in secret to happily reunite him with Zina and their son³⁰⁰.

Galina also has strong ties with religion, dissidence and prison camps; in tale six of day six she recounts her dissident roots, which date back to the Russian Revolution. She is a dissident wife described as a thin, four-eyed woman with a boyish hairstyle. Galia also represents another autobiographical character, as she carefully listens to her fellow inmates telling their stories while taking notes in a journal; according to Donatella Massimilla, the theater director of the Italian theater transposition of *The Women's Decameron*, Voznesenskaia wrote the text inspired by the stories she heard from her inmates during her stay in the Bazoi prison camp³⁰¹. Furthermore, Voznesenskaia in *Romashka belaja* declares how she used to take notes while or after speaking with her cellmates, before being transferred to Siberia³⁰²; therefore, Galina, as Emma possesses a metanarrative connotation. The character's metanarrative aspect is in line with the autobiographical one, which is strongly present in the book, though not in an explicit form. As Jerzy Kolizey pointed out:

A reader with even a superficial acquaintance with the facts of Voznesenskaia's life quickly sees that much of the raw material of experience that informs the women's stories belong to Voznesenskaia herself. Many of the women in the novel are engaged in occupations that Voznesenskaia had engaged in and share

²⁹⁹ Platonov Oleg "velikii chetverg" in *Russkaia tsivilizatsiia. Istoriia i ideologiya russkogo naroda*, Moskva: Algoritm, 2011, ([accessed](#) on October 1th 2022)

³⁰⁰ See Narrative frame, day ninth

³⁰¹ During my interview on June 25th, 2020, Donatella Massimilla claimed that Voznesenskaia created *The Women's Decameron* from the stories she heard during her stay at the Bazoi prison camp.

³⁰² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Romashka belaja", In *Poiski*, Vol. 4, 152–188

experiences that Voznesenskaia reports elsewhere as her own. Many reflect facets of Voznesenskaia's own personality, her ideas and preoccupations³⁰³.

This is also true in regard to Larisa, the biologist, a character who draws the attention of the other women because of her composure, independence, and her lack of visitors. She is described as a fully emancipated woman who could be part of any western feminist society since, as the author reminds the reader, there is no feminist movement in Soviet Russia but one that was declared illegal³⁰⁴. The author's comment represents the first mention of the Soviet women's movement *Mariia*, which the author was a part of while in Soviet Russia and after her migration to western Germany. The author's biography is strongly present in the book; the second story of day one openly introduces this motif in the text, as Larisa's story matches with an episode from Voznesenskaia's childhood. Iuliia Nikolaevna Voznesenskaia was born in Leningrad on September 9th 1940, during the Leningrad siege, and her parents, like Larisa's parents, were a military doctor and an aviation engineer. To fulfill their duties during the war, Voznesenskaia's family moved to Eastern Germany at the end of the Siege, where they lived from 1945 to 1949. Iuliia Voznesenskaia writes about the part of her childhood spent in Germany in *Interv'iu s samoi soboi – vmesto poslesloviia*³⁰⁵, the afterword of *Was Russen über Deutsche denken*, in which she recalls how her parents brought her in secret to Germany, since they were afraid to lose her among the chaos following the war. She maintains that she grew as a “war child” and shares with the reader vivid images of the destruction that followed the bombing of Warsaw and Berlin; Iuliia's childhood memories also include her life in the military airport of Schenefeld and matches the details of Larisa's tale.

Larisa's tales usually consist of cheerful, short funny stories based on the daily themes up until day six, which is devoted to tales about rape. Her status of fully emancipated woman, however, doesn't provide a “westerner” outlook within the book's feminist standpoint, since the character's emancipation consists entirely of her choice to live without a husband and to be a single mother.

Albina, the flight attendant, is a complex character who experiences significant development through the narrative process. Albina's characterization, as shown in the paragraph devoted to textual variants, slightly changed between the earliest version of the text and the latest one taken into exam³⁰⁶.

³⁰³ Kolodziej Jerzy, “Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Women: With Love and Squalor”. In *Fruits of her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Woman's Culture*, edited by Helena Goszilo, New York-London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993, 228

³⁰⁴ Day first, tale second

³⁰⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, “Interv'iu s samoi soboi – vmesto poslesloviia”, In *Chto russkie dumaiut o nemcakh*, edited by Iuliia Voznesenskaia, typewritten version, Forschungstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021), 1-17.

³⁰⁶ See textual variants.

She boldly debuts by describing the game of the daisy, which consists of a direct address of sex and female pleasure, which is a distinguishing feature of her character³⁰⁷. Furthermore, Albina also encourages the other characters to speak freely about their bodies by calling out their prudishness and openly talking about her numerous sexual experiences. This is possible due to her status of outcast, which is also evident in her perfect understanding with Zina, marked by their mutual support and, at times, using the same lexicon, defined as *blatnoi iazyk*³⁰⁸ or *Gulag argot*³⁰⁹. In fact, Albina needs to explain the terms she sometimes uses in her discourse to her fellow inmates, as these are words pertaining to a specific register and social environment.

Albina is introduced as a *эффективная блондинка*, as a blonde beauty concerned about her appearance and makeup even during her stay in the maternity ward, however she describes her beauty as a curse when discussing the important theme of the brutalized body; this relates to her storyline, which includes prostitution, rape, and child abuse. Nonetheless, Albina's body is also described as capable of experiencing the joys of pleasure, which she often playfully addresses to provoke and involve the characters in the discussion; it is, therefore, possible to identify her as belonging to the category of the hormoned heroine³¹⁰, a character typology meaningful when discussing *The Women's Decameron* from a feminist standpoint.

Helena Goscilo describes the character of the hormoned heroine as productive character typology in new women's prose, which attempted to reverse the connotation of femininity in literature. Soviet mass culture, Goscilo maintains, produced a fabricated and hormoneless image of women, which Goscilo exemplifies by quoting the famous statement “у нас нет секса и мы категорический против этого. У нас есть любовь,” uttered by the head of the Soviet Women's Committee Liudmila Nikolaevna Ivanova on the TV show *Leningrad-Boston*³¹¹. The scholar identifies the hormoned heroine as a dramatized rehabilitation of female sexuality since this character typology entails women's pleasure as an active and legitimate physical appetite; this contrasts the traditional idea of female sexuality perpetrated by Russian literature, where it is merely a corollary of romantic love. Through the hormoned heroine, female pleasure is described from a woman's

³⁰⁷ The description of the daisy is not included in 2013 edition of the book. This issue will be discussed in the section devoted to textual variants.

³⁰⁸ For more, see: “Vvedenie”, In *Tolkovyi slovar' ugovolnykh zhargonov*, Iu. P. Dubiagin, A. G. Bronnikova, Moskva, Inter-Omnis, 1991, 3; Gorodin, Leonid Moiseevich, *Slovar' russkikh argotizmov. Leksikon katorgi i lagerej imperatorskoi i sovetskoi Rossii*. Moskva: Muzej istorij GULAGa, Fond Pamjati, 2021

³⁰⁹ For more, see: Bagozzi Valentina, “Gulag Argot as a Site of Memory in Yuliia Voznesenskaia's *The Women's Decameron*”, *Academic Journal of Modern Philology: special issue*, Vol.12, 2021, 7-15

³¹⁰ Goscilo Helena, “The Pleasure of Lipped Subjectivity or the Hormoned Heroine”, In *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 104-110

³¹¹ Iulii Gusman, Joseph Goldin, *Telemost Leningrad- Boston*, July 17th, 1986, ([accessed](#) on November 15th, 2022).

perspective and diverging from its canonical portrayal, which must entail female modesty and monogamy; Albina's tales mirror these concepts. Furthermore, Albina's sexual energy encourages the characters to dive into accounts of their intimate lives, which aligns with their evolution throughout the narrative process. Valentina, the party bigwig, gradually becomes a loving member of the group by sharing tales regarding sexuality and rediscovering her femininity.

Valentina is defined as a stern party bigwig devoted to the cause of communism; she speaks by slogans in stark, straightforward language, at times including bureaucratic words, and she responds to the first anti-Soviet tales by rustling her copy of the *Pravda*³¹². Valentina embodies Goricheva's idea of "femina sovietica," a de-womanized human being complying with Soviet social order and serving as its tool. To name the character starting off as the villain "Valentina" deliberately links the party bigwig to the first "witch" who flew to space, Valentina Tereshkova, listed by Tatiana Goricheva as the primary example of "femina sovietica"³¹³. In this regard, Voznesenskaia shapes the character as a cynical member of the party; when speaking about first love, Valentina describes the family from a materialist point of view, which sees it as nothing more than the basic social unity of the State. Feelings, individuality, and comedy are excluded from Valentina's early narrative, as she insists on spreading party-related slogans or propagandistic views by creating conflict with the characters. Valentina's ideas often clash with those of the other characters, who respond to propagandist fabricated ideas about women's condition in Soviet society with the reality of their own personal experiences³¹⁴. While gradually deconstructing her status of "femina sovietica", Valentina eventually becomes a cheerful member of the group, with which she shares accounts that are not exactly consistent with Soviet ideology.

³¹² Narrative frame, Day first, tale seventh

³¹³ Goricheva Tatiana, "Vedmy v kosmose", *Mariia*, N.1, 1981, 11

³¹⁴ Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8. Chapel Hill: NC, 2006.

Chapter IV

The Female Body as a Rhetorical Device

4.1 The Female body as a Rhetorical Device

4.1.1 The Female Body as the Trigger of the Narrative Process

This research work identifies the trope of the female body in *The Women's Decameron* as a rhetorical device implemented by the author to reconceptualize normative femininity to ultimately legitimate women's agency, which finds its finest expression in authorship. The ideological mindset belonging to the group Mariia foreshadows the crucial function of corporeality in Voznesenskaia's book, since the deconstruction of Soviet normative femininity, according to the group's philosophy, must start with the rediscovery of femininity and work against the "masculinization" of women forced by soviet society. To undermine the notion of femininity imposed by the regime, however, Voznesenskaia makes reference to female sexuality. Voznesenskaia's consideration of female sexuality as part of the women's essence in her *Decameron* partially distances her from the idea of womanhood described in the almanac *Mariia*, which regards the Virgin Mary as a role model and does not consider women's sexuality as a topic relevant to women's emancipatory process. Not only sexuality, and women's sexuality in particular, was generally regarded as a taboo topic, but Tatiana Goricheva also advocated women's chastity³¹⁵.

The trope of the female body will be analyzed through the methodological apparatus of French feminist theory by taking into consideration the works by Hélène Cixous and those from Luce Irigaray. Cixous and Irigaray describe the female body as a dark unexplored continent³¹⁶ colonized by the opposite sex and reformulated in men's terms, which prevented women from describing femininity in their own words and, consequently, hindered their path towards self-determination. In order to undermine the semantic oppression carried out by the dominant culture, they encourage women to reshape the meaning of femininity through language, by resorting to self-expression, which

³¹⁵ Vassilieva Elena, *Feminism and Eternal Feminine: The Case of a Happy Union*. (MPhil thesis) The Open University, 2003, 101

³¹⁶ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, N. 4, 1976, 875-893

also take the shape of literature. To write about the body, therefore, is to write about the Self and to express female subjectivity, since women's oppression is integrally connected to the suppression of their bodies. To quote Helene Cixous³¹⁷: "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time." The frequent address to corporeality in *The Women's Decameron* supports a new possible interpretation of the text, which goes beyond the label of anti-communist satire: the female body and pleasure become a crucial rhetorical device through which the characters attempt to reshape the image of femininity provided by soviet emancipatory policy and, to a greater degree, the patriarchal structure of Russian culture. The characters' initial reflections about the female body prompt the narrative process, which must be intended as an act of agency undermining the atavistic association between femininity and passivity.

The narrative process begins with the theme of first love, which is far from the description of Russian literature's traditional virginal and platonic love, as it widely includes the address to the female body and pleasure in its description; moreover, the address to sex, body parts and the use of graphic language reverse the logic of describing sex as a taboo in the Soviet Union, especially from a female point of view. In the 1984 typewritten version, the author introduces the theme of first love by presenting it in contrast with manufacturing success women would be supposed to discuss as part of Soviet society, or rather the character of a piece of Soviet literature.³¹⁸

In said deleted version, the author ironically declares that no matter how "uncomfortable" she will be in addressing the matter, she can't turn her back to truth and silence the women's voices, which seems to go beyond the control of her pen. This, along with other deleted parts of the book described in the section devoted to textual variants, displays a new possible interpretation of the book which doesn't entirely fit with the author's statements about it. In this regard, the book, even in its most redacted version, can be identified as legitimation of women's literature, which starts off in day first with the theme of first love.

Women love through their bodies, an approach distancing from a spiritual, traditional, and romantic image of love, firmly excluding female physicality. Through the character's narrative, nonetheless, the author deconstructs this image of romantic love and starts giving prominence to female corporeality, which is strongly tied to her validation of women's creativity and reconceptualization of femininity. Initially, the characters discuss the importance of first love as a daily theme, which is intended as a beginning, an important and intimate step of their life until Zina

³¹⁷ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", 880

³¹⁸ See textual variants section

takes the word. The woman with no fixed abode straightforwardly connects love to sexuality which she characterizes as an unthreatening topic, especially when discussed between women.

– А чего стесняться-то? Аль мы все не бабы, не одним местом любим? – засмеялась Зина. – А ты какое место имеешь в виду? – прищурившись, спросила ее эффектная блондинка с заграничным именем Алина. – Она имеет в виду сердце! – на всякий случай поторопилась ответить за Зину Валентина, как позже выяснилось, «дама из номенклатуры»³¹⁹.

This address to female corporeality identifies the characters, no matter how diverse, as part of a community sharing the same anatomy, which recalls H el ene Cixous' preamble in *Laugh of the Medusa*³²⁰; despite stressing the “infinite richness” of any individual and the absence of a given norm of femininity, Cixous focuses on what women have in common, namely their sex and how the traditional conceptualization of femininity affected them. In the passage above, femininity is connotated in the same way: in spite of the ideological and social differences between the characters, they are part of the same marginalized community. French feminist theory sees female corporeality as the starting point to question the definition of femininity provided by western philosophical thought, which systematically shaped women as lacking, deficient castrated men³²¹. The references to female physicality in *The Women's Decameron*, therefore, must be intended as the starting point for female self-consciousness and for an emancipatory reformulation of femininity, of which language, and to a greater extent writing, works as its tool.

Female sexuality is initially presented as a taboo subject, inappropriate for respectable women. It is not by chance that tales including bodily details, violence, or explicit scenes regarding sex are initially told by characters playing the role of outcasts, such as Albina and Zina, respectively, an Aeroflot flight attendant occasionally working as a prostitute³²², and a tramp former prisoner of camps, since their status of outcasts allows them to do so. The prospect of telling tales addressing the female body and sexuality, furthermore, initially triggers the remaining characters' embarrassment, which nonetheless does not interrupt the regular flowing of the narrative and won't discourage the women's participation in the narrative process. The theme of first love, whether intended as romantic or physical, prompts, in day first, the character's narration, which allows them to reshape the relationship they have with their bodies and to partially reconceptualize corporeality through the

³¹⁹ Narrative frame, introduction to the first day

³²⁰ Cixous H el ene, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, 875-876

³²¹ On this topic see: Irigaray Luce, “The Girl Little is (Only) a Little Boy”, In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gil, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 25-32

³²² Prostitution was widely, but unofficially, practiced in the Soviet Union and, at the same time, was considered a taboo. Albina's tale of day eight describes different kinds of prostitution practiced during the Glasnost and pre-Glasnost period.

narrative process. This address to female physicality works as a transformative force, which will have a strong impact on the characters in terms of characterization, moral code, and future choices.

Valentina, the party big wig, initially attempts to bring the discussion back to a more practical vision of love, which distances the group from a more bodily vision of the daily theme. As a matter of fact, Valentina immediately describes what she means by love, which is certainly not a topic supposed to arouse “unhealthy” amusement. In her view, love is a crucial element for the correct functioning of Soviet society since it forms the bases of society, that is, families. Said point of view is mirrored by Valentina’s first tale³²³, in which marriage and love serve an ideological purpose. Valentina’s lecture, as the authorial voice defines it in the first lines of the narrative frame³²⁴, is an instruction manual which describes how a family should be built on solid rational grounds by programming every step and every child. Valentina’s tale implicitly describes female sexuality entirely as a tool for childbearing, which, furthermore, shows the importance of motherhood to the state: “ Не понимаю, почему слово «любовь» у некоторых вызывает нездоровые смешки? Любовь в нашей стране дело государственной важности, потому что на основе любви создается семья, а семья – это ячейка государства³²⁵.”

This lecture on the importance of childbearing for the sake of the regime triggers the reaction of Albina, who shortly after shares her point of view in matters of love, which utterly deviates from that of Valentina. Albina’s speech, winking to Zina, opens with a playful proverb, which describes the good functionality of a man’s member as an essential quality as much as his ability to provide for his partner. In this way, Albina restores the centrality of women’s pleasure in discussing love, remarks on the connection between love and corporeality, and hints at female atavistic separation from their bodies by addressing the taboo of women’s sexuality.

[...] а вот я считаю, что тот мужик пригож, у которого... хорош! Так в народе говорят, верно, Зина? А еще настоящий мужчина должен обеспечить женщину комфортом. Но в одном я с вами согласна, что все беды наши женские – от фантазий. А фантазии откуда берутся, спрошу я вас? Исключительно от сексуальной необеспеченности³²⁶.

Albina also underlines how often women, as much as Valentina, don’t express their sexual drive for a need of conformity and prudery, they identify their own sexuality as a taboo. This implies that women are disconnected from their bodies, which affects their access to self-determination; not

³²³ first day, tale fifth.

³²⁴ first day, tale fifth’s rubric.

³²⁵ Narrative frame, introduction to the first day

³²⁶ first day, tale fifth’s narrative frame.

casually, the more the characters discuss their sexuality through the narrative process, the more they recover that repressed femininity of which they were robbed by Soviet emancipatory policy, which obliterated sexual difference. Furthermore, the characters progressively develop those features Voznesenskaia identifies as feminine, namely the proneness to self-sacrifice, kindness, and the ability to create a community refusing any kind of leadership. By addressing sexuality in their tales, the characters both gain access to self-representation and reverse the marginality of their sex, now put in the front row. In their attempt to rephrase femininity, the narrators of *The Women's Decameron* also deconstruct the image of women's pleasure as corollary of romantic love³²⁷.

4.1.2 Beyond romantic love: a Legitimation of Women's Sexuality

Through the characters' accounts, Voznesenskaia disputes the domestication of women's bodies and the status of women's pleasure as a corollary of romantic love. The story of Albina³²⁸ embodies her beliefs concerning love and, as the authorial voice ironically states in the rubric³²⁹, informs the reader about the sexual revolution in Soviet Russia among what is defined as *zolotaia molodezh'*, the most privileged strata of Soviet society. Albina recounts how she participated in a New Year's Eve party and there she met the man that actually changed her life. Albina describes the party as something transgressive by listing the presence of light drugs, alcohol, rare food products (deficitnye), and ultimately group sex. The description of the daisy³³⁰, a creative form of group sex that mimics the shape of the flower, has not been included in the 2013 edition of *The Women's Decameron*, which adds up with other details that have been changed in the last and non-posthumous edition of the text.

Albina's first love is an older man, a hotel manager involved with wealthy foreigners. For Albina this represents a possible source of income, an opportunity to get married and leave the country. In fact, Albina is attracted to the man's wealth, valuable foreign clothes and the objects he possesses; Albina doesn't describe his appearance, he is not even mentioned by name, as her real aim is the immense opportunity he represents. She describes the man in terms of the objects he can import, while she shows off her body for him: these are terms of a deal that seals their relationship in the future, Albina's young body is offered in exchange for the man's wealth. Due to its cynical undertone,

³²⁷Helena Goscilo identifies the deconstruction of romantic love as one of the stylistic strategies of new women's prose. See Goscilo Helena, Goscilo Helena, "ona-nism Despecularized: the Grammar of Womanhood as Revisioned by the New Grammarians", In *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 57-87

³²⁸ Day first, tale sixth

³²⁹ Ibidem, rubric

³³⁰ See textual variants section.

this novella is met with mocking surprise by everybody in the narrative frame but Zina, the other outcast of the group, who angrily tells them not to judge Albina's choices, as they were made in a time of need, a need that might change even the perspective of a "clean Komsomol girl."

Zina's tale also gives a picture of first love, which has nothing to do with the traditional representation of first love. In this regard, her tale describes a single sexual encounter with a soldier, which took place in a bush after they had been to the movies. Zina describes the encounter with down-to-heart language and makes references to the soldier's "sturdiness".

У меня, девки, первая любовь тоже военная была. Рядом с нашей деревней часть стояла стройбатовская. Солдаты в клуб ходили, за нашими девками бегали. Раз пошел меня солдат после кина провожать, затащил в кусты да и трахнул. Сильный был, зараза. [...] Засмеялись женщины: – Зин! Какая же это любовь? – Чего там «какая»! Самая в натуре и есть. Будь вон Лариска годков на десять постарше, неужто б ее Володька не трахнул? В пятнадцать лет она б по кустам не кузнечика с ним словила, а чего покрупней! Вас, девки, видно, папы-мамы берегли пуце глаза да жареный петух в жопу не клевал, вот вы и верите сказкам про любовь³³¹.

Zina depicts sex as the most natural form of love and objects the traditional de-fleshed representation of love. For this reason, Zina's earthy conception of love is also conveyed by a vulgar register, swear words concerning the semantic area of sex. She even makes a hilarious comparison with Larissa's tale³³², ultimately destroying the fairytale-like picture of her childhood love. The present deconstruction of romantic love and the presence of a more down-to-earth cynic approach to it is confirmed by harsh comment from the authorial voice defining Natasha's tale³³³ "such a stereotypical first love, that the author herself is not interested in writing the summary³³⁴".

Voznesenskaia, through the accounts of her characters, keeps dismantling romantic love by creating a parody of *Romeo and Juliet*, the quintessential of romantic love. The Shakespearean tragedy is parodically subverted in the ninth tale of the first day, in which Emma describes her husband's affair and her consequent retaliation. When her husband asks for separation to marry a young actress, Emma quickly finds a shoulder to cry on. Her affair with the scenographer leads to a parodic address to romantic love in the sketch of *Romeo and Juliet*.

³³¹ Day first, tale third

³³² This tale describes Larissa's childhood love. When she was just a child fell madly for an eighteen-year-old pilot. Due to the age gap, the relationship between her and Volodia was entirely platonic. Day first, tale eighth

³³³ Day first, tale fourth

³³⁴ Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *The Women's Decameron*, translated by W.B. Linton, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986, 1

С горя я отправилась после банкета с Алешей гулять по городу, а потом пошла к нему в его комнатенку, которая у него была при театре, да и осталась до утра. А утром, как только я глаза открыла, он и спрашивает: «Когда мы с тобой поженимся?» Я на него удивленно поглядела и отвечаю, что это невозможно. – Ты не смеешь мной играть, – вспыхнул он. – Это тебе не театр! Если ты сегодня не останешься со мной навсегда, я покончу с собой. Я плечами пожала. – Из бутафорского пистолета застрелишься? В добрый час. И ушла³³⁵.

In the passage, Emma isn't looking for any romance or drama, but rather a one-night stand; the young Alesha theatrically reacts to Emma's refusal to maintain a stable relationship with him, by using *cliches* typically associated to theater itself. Emma cynically uses images borrowed from literature to mock Alesha's theatrical reaction and, at the same time, deconstructs the myth of love at first sight.

И началось что-то вовсе кошмарное: работы у него в Ленинграде нет, жить ему нигде, скитается невесть где и каждый день звонит мне по телефону. Как-то я ему говорю: «Алеша! Ведь ты не девушка, которую я соблазнила и с ребенком бросила. Как тебе не стыдно, будь же ты мужчиной!». Не понимает, дурачок. Говорит: «Если бы у нас был ребенок, я бы взял его себе и мне бы легче было»³³⁶.

As a parody of the Shakespearean tragedy, the gender roles here are dramatically reversed and played on: Alesha figuratively plays the role of Juliet, since he poisons himself as Juliet in the play and waits to encounter his first love, Emma, on his deathbed. The role of the seduced and abandoned Juliet, his emotional and financial dependence on Emma, and ultimately his status of seduced and abandoned, qualify Alesha as “feminine” since the book connects and identifies the mentioned features as more prominent among women. On the other hand, Emma's frustrated by Alesha's “femininity”, since it embodies passiveness, and lack of initiative and doesn't match with the stereotype of the “real man” otherwise present also in other tales³³⁷. The tale also displays female sexuality as active and reverses the paradigm of women passivity. Emma doesn't act as an object of male desire, but as a subject of her own. In such wise, the affirmation of women's pleasure carries the potential of reversing the logic of power implicit in male centered culture. The tale told by Olga³³⁸ exemplifies this idea; an older man courts and marries a coworker, who he assumes to be a simple-minded young girl from the countryside. However, Raika turns out to be not simple minded at all and,

³³⁵ Day first, tale ninth

³³⁶ Day first, tale ninth

³³⁷ This idea of masculinity as a set of prescribed features is also present in the Maria movement's ideological background. Soviet Union, the group maintained, “feminized” men, made them passive, unable to protect and provide for themselves and their families. This is also the perspective of Natasha, who mentions this issue in the narrative frame succeeding the second tale of the first day.

³³⁸ Day fifth, tale seventh

once married, continuously cheats on him, to the point of openly declaring her unfaithfulness from beneath the man she's cheating her husband with.

Однажды до того дошло, что застукал он свою Раечку в столярке в перерыве между сменами прямо на куче стружек под Женькой, бригадиром столяров. У них там возня вовсю, а он подходит и тихо так, вежливо спрашивает: «А что это вы тут делаете?» Райка, видно, в азарт вошла, она зыркнула на него из-под Женьки и отвечает: «Ты что, не видишь? Е...ся!» Повернулся бедный Антон Семеныч и побрел в свою конторку³³⁹.

The deconstruction of romantic love during the first day moves the focus of the narrative from a platonic to a bodily perspective of love by introducing the theme of the female body and of female pleasure in the text. Addressing pleasure instead of feelings, even in the most stereotypical tales about love³⁴⁰, qualifies the female body as an agent for the deconstruction of a pre-existing order and for the recreation of another, an order where women can reshape their identities and femininity. As proved by Furman³⁴¹, through its textualization of the female body in the characters' accounts *The Women's Decameron* redefines women's sexuality in women's terms. The book also features an all-female authorship, whether internal or external, and a female audience, since, from an internal and external perspective, the text is written by a female author and performed by female characters for an all-female audience, an act capable of reversing women's marginality and of legitimizing women's authorship.

4.1.3 The Destructive Power of Female Pleasure

The works of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray describe pleasure as a means to assert female subjectivity: they maintain that resistance does indeed manifest itself through the concept of *jouissance*, which refers to the direct reencounter with the physical pleasures experienced during infancy and later sexual experiences. These pleasures may be repressed, but they are not completely eradicated. The expression of sexual difference, they argue, start with the manifestation of women's sexual drives in language; to give a different picture of female sexuality, women should shape it in their own words through the manipulation of language. Here the concept of female pleasure is conveyed in textual form: the topic is frequently addressed in *The Women's Decameron*, however, day fifth, devoted to infidelity and jealousy, and day third, about sex in farcical situations, are more

³³⁹ Ibidem

³⁴⁰ See, for example, tale fourth from day first by Natasha discussed further

³⁴¹ Furman Yelena, “‘We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose, and French Feminist Theory”, *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N.1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 95-114

explicitly devoted to this issue. The third day's theme is suggested by Albina, who performs her role of hormonized heroine, and, in this fashion, challenges her fellow inmates' prudish attitude towards sex.

Natasha's tale³⁴² embodies the transformative potential of female pleasure. The female protagonists are described as successful students and good-mannered teenagers from the privileged strata of Soviet Russia's society. Once left their domestic environment, the girls attempt to break free from the unspoken standard that society demands from them. They normally wear their hair in braids, however, as soon as they get off the train to Sukhum, they trim them in a boyish way. A simple haircut, despite symbolizing transgression and freedom, doesn't free them from the strict surveillance of their aunt. The girls are forced to act as perfect nieces, interested in nothing but duty and manners, in order to silently get out of their golden cage. Unexpectedly, one day the girls get stuck in the rough sea and are saved by two local boys; soon enough the youngsters fall in love with each other, are separated into couples, and find a way to bypass the aunt's surveillance.

The Natasha and her cousin gradually escape the golden cage of perfection pushed by their formerly repressed impulses, despite their strict education implies the dismissal and fear of their sexual drive; Natasha describes how she screamed when Amiran kissed her on her cheek for the first time, which however did not prevent her from further enjoying his lips. Interestingly, the expression of the character's sexuality matches the flourishing of her body: "расцветала с каждым днем, за лето лифчик пришлось два раза сменить – мал становился". Furthermore, Amiran's memory is conveyed by Natasha through sensorial details, such as the sound of the waves, the smell of magnolias, and ultimately the sense of taste, as Natasha gets into the habit of licking her own lips to taste Amiran's salty kisses. Again, Natasha breaks the habit of being a good girl entangled in a golden prison of safety and stereotypes when experiencing pleasure and when getting in touch with her own body.

Natasha's tale³⁴³ about infidelity is introduced in the rubric by a playful remark, which blames Natasha's husband's jealousy for her affair: "история третья, рассказанная инженером Наташей, искренне уверенной в том, что к измене ее принудил муж своей неумной ревностью, а сама она ни за что бы на это не пошла, ни за что!³⁴⁴" The rubric's irony sounds sympathetic rather than judgmental; in a sense, women's desire is presented as legitimate, even outside marriage. When Natasha describes her affair, on the other hand, gives a sordid picture of the

³⁴² Day first, tale fourth

³⁴³ Day fifth, tale third

³⁴⁴ Rubric, day fifth, tale third

hotel room, characterized by the smells of cigarettes' smoke and a yellowish light, and in line with the uncomfortable feeling Natasha experiences in touching the men she shares the room with. This a feeling disappears along with her guilt, which prevented her from embracing pleasure. In this guise, the book legitimizes female pleasure, which is described as essential for women's wellbeing.

Valentina's tale³⁴⁵ links her sexual drive and her mental health: she obsesses over one of her husband's friends, Kostia, a mysterious man she's never met, whom she pictures in her mind as a handsome, mysterious man with sad eyes. After finally meeting the man she fancied for so long, she hosts him in her house and starts to be consumed by her desire.

Он мне не пара, да и дружба у них с Павликом настоящая, не станет он другу подлость делать... И все же чувствовала я, что и Костю тянет ко мне, тайно тянет, но мощно! Может, он и сам не догадывался или виду не подавал, но я-то всё замечала. Выхожу из комнаты на кухню, а взгляд его на моей спине так и горит. Чувствуем мы это, бабы, всей кожей чувствуем ведь. И стало со мной такое твориться, что и вспомнить страшно. За месяц до Костиного приезда я ни одной ночи спокойно не сплю, думаю о нем непрерывно, извожусь прямо сказать нельзя как.

Valentina was initially reluctant to openly speak about sex, a topic which, in her view, must be discussed as a political matter rather than on an individual level. Nonetheless, her accounts gradually reconnect her with her femininity by telling tales about her intimate life and, consequently, by reconnecting with her body. This also creates a bond between her and her fellow inmates, despite the ideological differences between them. Valentina's tale about sex in farcical situations, which is her first tale explicitly about sex, fits in the mentioned pattern and undermines Valentina's characterization as "femina sovietica"; in this regard, Valentina makes a premise on how being affiliated to the communist party doesn't make her less of a woman³⁴⁶. On the third day the character takes an interesting turn by distancing herself from her fellow inmates' image of her: she's not the skirted version of the communist manifesto, but a woman as much as them.

Tale third from day third doesn't only dwell into details regarding her sex life since it's wittingly linked with satire. To clarify, the tale ironically associates the removal of Khrushchev³⁴⁷, with the fall of a picture of Khrushchev on Valentina's husband back while she's having sex with her husband in a party facility. Originally the association between the energy of the sexual act and the fall of the Party Secretary was more convincing since the typewritten version referred to Brezhnev's

³⁴⁵ Day fifth, tale fourth

³⁴⁶ The presence of a party representative in the text despite the author's undeniable anticommunist position, demonstrates Vozsenskaia's intent to include in it women from all social strata of Soviet Russia's society.

³⁴⁷ In Russian this historic event is described with the expression *padenie Khrushcheva*, which literally means "Khrushchev's fall."

death instead of Krushchev's removal³⁴⁸. In this regard, reading the text with Brezhnev's name sounds even more desecrating (and hilarious), since Valentina's husband connects Brezhnev's death with Valentina's sexual drive: "Валентина! А если это генсек скончался после того, как с тобой дело поимел, а? Ты ведь у нас баба горячая, а он уже в преклонных годах³⁴⁹...". In the typewritten version, Valentina's sexual drive kills the head of the communist party, which symbolically hints at female pleasure's undermining effect in deconstructing a phallogentric and, here, Soviet social order.

When commenting on Valentina's tale mentioned above, the other women in the narrative frame reference its comedic effect and the comedic effect that sex can have, which allows them to overcome the harshness of their life and, again, reminds the reader of the soothing effect of telling tales during a difficult time, be it a simple skin infection or the plague of Soviet totalitarianism. In this regard, Olga describes Soviet everyday life as living inside of a joke: "– Ну и жизнь у нас, бабоньки! – воскликнула Ольга после рассказа Иришки. – Не жизнь, а сплошной анекдот! Ну, а ежели не смеяться, так, поди, и не выживешь, а?³⁵⁰"

Voznesenskaia, through her characters, resorts to irony and humor to deconstruct the Soviet/phallogentric order outside the walls of the maternity ward; this is compatible with Helene Cixous's ideas, which see female laughter as a revolutionary act capable of keeping the patriarchal conceptualization of womanhood at a distance³⁵¹. Voznesenskaia's irony, in this regard, is also created through word play, as seen in tale first of day first; the tale by Olga, as the authorial voice comments on in the rubric, ends with an abortion, "хотя этой любовью и занимались органы двух государств³⁵²". Here Voznesenskaia plays with the expression *liubov'iu zanimat'sia*, meaning to have sex, and the word *organy*, which in association with the word *gosudarstvo* takes on the meaning of organ of state; however, typically, when associated to the semantic area of the body and sexuality, the noun *organy* is a call back to the compositional phraseme *polevye organy*, which means genitalia. In the tale Olga describes how she was stuck in Soviet bureaucracy when trying to marry a man from Eastern Germany and comically expresses her disappointment by distorting, through the use of an anaphora, several words bureaucratic terms, ultimately turning them into a swear word: "Сняли меня с танкера и на партком, на местком, на растудыегоком.³⁵³" Emma likewise distorts Lenin's

³⁴⁸ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Damskij Dekameron*, Typewritten text, received by Bruno Osimo on November 18, 2019, 68

³⁴⁹ Day third, tale third

³⁵⁰ Narrative frame, day third, tale ninth

³⁵¹ Cixous Hélène, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, 888

³⁵² Rubric, day first, tale first

³⁵³ Day first, tale first

famous slogan concerning electrification and uses it to mockingly raise awareness about the problem of alcoholism: “Коммунизм есть советская власть плюс алкоголизация³⁵⁴.”

4.2 Women as Victims

The issue of equality in the text is more explicitly addressed by exposing the presence of rape culture in Soviet patriarchal society, meaning a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. In this regard, in tale eight from day two Neliiia directly addresses the problem by raising her concern for her daughter’s wellbeing in a phallogentric society when made aware by the women about the dangers that await her; she acknowledges the unequal destiny of a woman in a men’s world, which doesn’t identify her as a human being, but rather a man’s prey.

И не рада я, что у меня девочка родилась. Как ее уберечь от опасности, ума не приложу. И какая это несправедливость, что девочку растить все равно что через джунгли с ней идти, ни на секунду нельзя из рук выпустить – разорвут! Говорят о каком-то равноправии мужчин и женщин. Какое равноправие?! Человек ты или приманка для хищника, не поймешь³⁵⁵.

According to rape culture, a woman’s body is therefore maintained as a commodity subdued to the control of men; the present idea has been stigmatized through the text, especially regarding abortion, which in *The Women’s Decameron* is presented as the primary birth control method usually imposed by the male on the female partner. For instance, Neliiia describes a conservatory director’s ploy to force an abortion on his student without her consent; he uses the girl’s body for sex and uses his position of power to control the consequences of their affair on the girl’s body. Similarly, the first tale by Olga on day one shows in detail the State’s influence in matters of love and family, an influence that doesn’t work in the citizen’s best interest but more in the state’s one. Olga describes how her boss deliberately sabotaged her relationship, denying her the permission to marry her fiancée to ultimately prevent her from leaving the country. The emotional abuse eventually drives her to abortion. The events told by Olga deconstruct Soviet propagandistic image of women’s equality by showing the lack of empathy, of social structures to support motherhood, and ultimately, the lack of women’s control over their own body and destiny: “Срамят меня и прямо приказывают: ‘Делай

³⁵⁴ Narrative frame, day seventh, tale second

³⁵⁵ Day second, tale eighth

аборт! Все равно не выпустим! Или уговаривай своего фрица в Советский Союз переселяться³⁵⁶”.

In addition, rape culture links women's sexuality to the satisfaction of men's pleasures rather than women's; since a woman's body is conceived as an instrument to male pleasure, it can't experience pleasure by its own rules. Albina's tale describes how she took revenge on her lover, who enjoyed Albina sexually liberated attitude and at the same time attempted to teach her modesty. The man attempts to frame Albina according to his needs.

– Если ты такой правильный скромник, – говорю я ему однажды, – так что же ты, брюковка такая, не делаешь мне предложение, а нескромными делами со мной занимаешься? И чем они нескромнее, тем с большим удовольствием ты это делаешь, между прочим. Вертлявая у тебя скромность какая-то, Гришенька!³⁵⁷

Similarly, Galina addresses this double standard in tale six of day four, which describes how Tonia, Galina's friend, when aware of her husband's infidelity, decides to look for a lover. The nonjudgmental attitude towards sex out of marriage in the tale and in the narrative, frame contrasts with the furious reaction of Tonia's husband when aware of her affair. In this regard, the characters comment on the reaction of Tonya's husband by describing the double moral towards men and women's sexual conduct as follows: “– Да, у мужиков для нас вторая мораль имеется, особая, – усмехнулась Эмма. – Они действуют по логике: «Тебе дала? – Нет, а тебе? – Тоже нет. Вот б...!»³⁵⁸”

Ultimately, the text devotes an entire day to the most tragic consequences of rape culture, meaning sexual violence against women. Albina's stories are more stimulating for this prospect in textual analysis, seeing that she implicitly worked as a prostitute and was a rape victim during her childhood, as described in the second tale of the fifth day; interestingly, the tale is also identified in the rubric and through the narrative as a soviet adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita*, a fact which requires to comment Albina's address to the Nabokovian text and the presence of rape culture in it. In the narrative frame, Albina debates with Galina about the legitimacy of a text, which the narrator, Albina, accuses of describing in poetical terms the violence committed by a man against a twelve-year-old child.

³⁵⁶ Day first, tale first

³⁵⁷ Day fourth, tale fifth

³⁵⁸ Narrative frame, day fourth, tale sixth

It's clear that *Lolita* triggers memories of the traumatic event Albina, which experienced in her childhood. The tale has been listed by Valeria Invernizzi³⁵⁹ among the numerous rewritings of the Nabokovian book, seeing that it presents analogies with it, while changing the narrative's perspective; Albina's account is told from the point of view of the abused child and follows *Lolita*'s fabula. Like Dolores, the protagonist is taken away from her mother and raped by her ice-skating trainer for three years, a series of tragic events which end with her mother's suicide. Moreover, the tale directly references Nabokov's text, since the description of the first episode of abuse, when her ice-skating trainer makes Albina sit on his lap to rub her body against his member, clearly reminds the masturbation scene in Haze's living room couch³⁶⁰. Furthermore, as much as Dolores complains of the pain following her rape, Albina describes how her insights were torn due to her childhood violence³⁶¹.

Albina pours out the anger connected to those memories by using graphic terms concerning sexual violence and its consequences on female anatomy; she describes in detail how her torturer touches her vagina and later describes her pain and blood while she's been raped. The mentioned description matches the concept of *chernukha*, which has been identified as a frequent trope in new women's prose as explained in chapter I.

[...] один держит и целует, вроде бы успокаивает, а другой шурует там, выворачивает наизнанку. По очереди. Кровью стол залило, на пол течет. Я реву, но терплю, только за руки хватаюсь да к ним же, фашистам, жмусь, чтоб не так больно было. Один терзает, другой целует, слюнявит, гладит. Сделали они свое дело не знаю по скольку раз, я уж стала сознание терять – тогда только прекратили. Каюр меня в ванну снес, вымыл, потом в кровать уложил³⁶².

As previously anticipated, Albina questions *Lolita*'s positive critical reception due to its controversial content. To clarify, Albina questions the text's legitimacy by reading it as a perpetrator of rape culture. As widely known, Nabokov's text encountered a wide range of criticism³⁶³, which has labeled the text as pornography and led the readers to conflicting works of criticism, some of them sympathizing with the rapist³⁶⁴. As underlined by Julian W. Connolly³⁶⁵, Nabokov's genius lies

³⁵⁹ Invernizzi, Valeria. "The Representation of Trauma in *Lolita*'s hypertexts. The case of Pia Pera's *Diario di Lo*." *Enthymema*, n. XXVI, 2020, 233

³⁶⁰ Day second, tale fifth

³⁶¹ *Ibidem*

³⁶² Day second, tale fifth

³⁶³ Connolly, Julian W., "Lolita's Afterlife: Critical and Cultural Responses" In *A reader's guide to Nabokov's Lolita*, Brighton, Academic Studies Press, 2009

³⁶⁴ Connolly, Julian W., "Approaching *Lolita*" In *A reader's guide to Nabokov's Lolita*, Brighton, Academic Studies Press, 2009, 30

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

in his ability to create a negative character, flagrantly guilty of rape and child abuse and yet able to manipulate the readers' perception of him through irony, self-pity, witty literary references, and his language mastery. As mentioned, critics fell into Humbert's trap and identified him as man seduced by a twelve-year-old child, a definition which, for instance, is also mirrored by the very entry of the Italian encyclopedia Treccani³⁶⁶, which describes the abused child as a seducer and not the other way around, making the abuser's perspective their own.

Feminist criticism has devoted some attention to *Lolita* to underline its misogynistic subtext and to restore the voice of Dolores; on the one hand, however, feminist criticism mistakenly identified the character of Humbert Humbert as the author's alter ego, a fact widely disproved by many critics,³⁶⁷ while on the other succeeded in stigmatizing the problem of rape culture and misogyny inside the text and in its critical reception. In this regard, the op-ed by Rebecca Solnit³⁶⁸ ironically comments on the presence of *Lolita* in Esquire's list "the 80 books every man should read"; Rebecca Solnit, on the other hand, jokingly describes *Lolita* as a book no woman should read, discusses the impact of art, here literature, on its audience and whether art can reinforce rape culture. In a sense, *Lolita*, and not Dolores³⁶⁹, has become part of mass culture as "precociously seductive girl³⁷⁰", also through the movies by Kubrick and Adrian Lyne. In this guise, mass culture identifies in *Lolita* a sexual underaged girl instead of a child victim of rape, a concept which is in line with Humbert Humbert's description of his victim. Albina stigmatizes this approach to the text and identifies with Dolores by making her story her own and reversing the logic of power inside the text; the victim here is the narrative voice, therefore, has the chance to speak up and elaborate her trauma by silencing and stigmatizing the action of the rapist. The character reads *Lolita*'s text literally and doesn't separate the author's figure from Humbert Humbert's by describing the act of writing *Lolita* as follows.

– А то, что если бы вас с десяти лет толкли толстой вонючей палкой, все бы вам внутри перекорежили, так вы бы так легко не отделались. Из меня мою девку трое суток тащили, уже хотели кесарево делать.[...]Этот Набоков деньги, видно, зашибить хотел покрупней, вот и рассолил пакости свои на целую книжку, **размазал сопли по страницам**. А вы, интеллектующие дурочки, вздыхаете, будто там медом намазано³⁷¹.

³⁶⁶ "[Lolita](#)", Treccani, accessed on August 2nd, 2022

³⁶⁷ Connolly, Julian W., "Approaching *Lolita*" In *A reader's guide to Nabokov's Lolita*, Brighton, Academic Studies Press, 2009

³⁶⁸ Solnit Rebecca, "Man explaining *Lolita* to me", literary hub, accessed August 2nd, 2022 <https://lithub.com/men-explain-lolita-to-me/>

³⁶⁹ Humbert Humbert, *Lolita*'s protagonist, renames Dolores Haze as *Lolita*.

³⁷⁰ "[Lolita](#)", Meriam-webster dictionary, accessed on August 2nd, 2022

³⁷¹ Day second, tale fifth

Albina describes the text as smeared with sperm, a powerful image when addressing the issue of authorship and gender as described by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar³⁷²; male seed has been identified as a symbol of male generative power pouring from the male's pen. The male author is, therefore, the text's father, creator, an alter ego of God in the textual universe he created, the possessor of the text and those acting in it. The present idea of authorship contrasts the legitimacy of female authorship, which appears from a patriarchal standpoint to be anomalous and opposed to the very concept of femininity. On the contrary, the article *Ozhenskom tvorchestve*³⁷³ maintains how women's creative drive is strictly connected to the concept of motherhood, therefore the ability to generate life through her body.

³⁷² Gilbert Sandra M., Gubar Susan, *The Mad Woman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000

³⁷³ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Ozhenskom tvorchestve*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv, [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01 -143, (accessed October 22th, 2022).

Chapter V

Legitimizing Women's Authorship

5.1 The Maternity Ward as a Setting for Women's Authorship

The legitimation of female authorship carried out in *The Women's Decameron* is enforced by the setting of the maternity ward and the construction of the narrative voice. The maternity ward in the context of Soviet Russia consisted of an isolated space, seeing as it separated the patients from the outside world; as described by Helena Goscilo³⁷⁴, women in maternity wards usually gave birth alone and only interacted with other patients or, in rare cases, with medical personnel, since visitors and fathers were not allowed by law. Goscilo identifies the hospital as a recurring setting in new women's prose which works as a tool to *gender* space since it favors the creation of an all-female space due to the medical decorum rule of hospitalization. This is also true for *The Women's Decameron*, in which hospitalization and quarantine force the coexistence of utterly different women in terms of moral code, ideology and social status, such as Albina and the timid Irina, or the dissident Galina and Valentina, a devoted member of the party.

The maternity ward setting also dismantles the binomial relation between womanhood and passivity which usually bonds female subjects to the domestic and private sphere in contrast to male characters, active in the public sphere³⁷⁵. Goscilo also identifies the hospital ward as the female counterpart of the predominantly male prison camp chronotope, since it is primarily conceptualized as a carceral space. Patients, like prisoners, are similarly under someone else's control, namely medical personnel. As mentioned, the hospital setting implies the character's confinement, physical incapacity and the separation from the external world, which restrains customary movement and generates stasis. These elements inevitably cause a deceleration of the narrative time and allow the author to emphasize the characters' inner world, or in other terms, to build the action entirely on their reflections. In this regard, the narrative focuses on philosophical exchanges and psychological analysis, a feature that makes the hospital ward a fitting setting for crucial turning points and accessing self-knowledge.

³⁷⁴Goscilo Helena, "Women's space and Women's Place" In *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 117-135

³⁷⁵ Ibidem, 122

Hospital confinement also entails a distance from women's domestic and professional duties and, more importantly, from the highly regularized time of Soviet society, in opposition to which the patients bend time to their own needs through the creation of new daily rituals. The characters' narrative act in *The Women's Decameron* functions as said ritual and acts as a recreation of a female society within the hospital walls. Furthermore, Goscilo describes the hospital ward as an "emphatically female sphere³⁷⁶" as it forces representatives of all social backgrounds to coexist in a state of confinement, which acts as a metaphorical microcosm of the female segment of society. Voznesenskaia's book, therefore, exploits the potential of the hospital chronotope and succeeds in recreating a female spectrum of Soviet society, thereby resulting in cross-class gender solidarity among intelligentsia women and proletarian women³⁷⁷.

The hardships endured by expectant mothers further reinforce the prison analogy; *The Women's Decameron* harshly criticizes the condition of Soviet maternity wards by describing the skin infection affecting the characters as a common occurrence, the hospital food as insufficient for a breastfeeding mother³⁷⁸, and the interaction among the mothers and medical personnel in a rather negative light. The dialogue between the characters and quirky Fedosiia Polikarpovna³⁷⁹, the hospital's cleaning lady, as well as interaction between a nurse and Zina³⁸⁰ during day tenth, show the indifference of medical personnel to the patients' well-being. Said negligence, Goscilo maintains, stimulates solidarity among the inmates and stimulates female bonding, which encourages women to recount experiences connected to the hardships endemic to their gender, such as birthing, abortion and rape³⁸¹. However, in said context the characters usually find a solution to their issues through masculine figures of authority; this also applies to Voznesenskaia's characters: Zina's pursuit of happiness, for instance, ends with a caring husband and a child.

From a feminist standpoint, Goscilo maintains, the hospital chronotope in Russian women's writing reveals the subordination of women's self-fulfillment to gendered moral imperatives. For example, in male prison camp literature, confinement leads the characters to spiritual enrichment, which provides a solution to dehumanization, while female confinement in Russian women's

³⁷⁶ Ibidem, 127

³⁷⁷ Catriona Kelly, "Who wants to be a man? De-Stalinizing Gender 1954-1992", In *History of Russian women's writing*, 367

³⁷⁸ Day ninth, narrative frame

³⁷⁹ The citations included in the textual analysis, if not indicated otherwise, are from Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Kindle Edition, SPB, Lepta kniga, 2013.

Introduction to day fourth day, narrative frame

³⁸⁰ Introduction to day tenth, narrative frame

³⁸¹ Goscilo Helena, "Women's space and Women's Place" In *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 127

literature provides “physical” rather than spiritual rewards for the characters; women leaving the hospital recover from illnesses, succeed in getting an abortion or give birth to a healthy child, while they don’t engage in a moral or psychological struggle against the repressive constraints of totalitarianism that would lead them to spiritual elevation³⁸².

This doesn’t entirely apply to *The Women’s Decameron*. By appealing to their feminine essence and generative power, the characters create a narrative in strong opposition to the regime, a narrative able to heal them of the sickness of ideology and to change them from within; for instance, Valentina evolves from a stereotypical party bigwig into a well-rounded character who doesn’t speak in slogans, Zina goes from being a self-abased outcast to finding her own place in society, and Albina’s loveless fate as a traumatized child finds a happy ending in her relationship with Fediiia.

With these premises, the choice of the maternity ward setting hints at a more realistic interpretation of the book in line with Voznesenskaia’s idea of femininity and women’s literature. As mentioned in chapter II, Voznesenskaia embraced the essentialist approach belonging to the group Mariia, which envisions femininity not as a social construct but as nature given status. Soviet Union’s “hermaphroditic” approach to the women question, according to the movement, suppressed women true essence by forcing on them an emancipation policy, which shaped women in the image and likeness of men. Among the suppressed naturally given features of femininity, Maria’s members insist on that of women’s creativity, in other words, motherhood and literary practice³⁸³. In the same guise, Voznesenskaia, while already in exile, devotes to the issue of women’s creativity (*Zhenskoe tvorchestvo*) an article to be sent for the Russian samizdat version of Maria³⁸⁴.

Есть однако особенности женского творчество, безотносительно степени признания и успеха о которых стоит говорить всерьез. Это отношение к миру, которое характерно для творчества всех женщин о чем бы они не писали. Проще всего определить словом «материнством». Как не может не один мужчина создать из своего тела, из своей нервной ткани, из своей крови – а так же из своей души и духовной энергии - нового человеческого существа, так не может и это не нести в искусство. Часто не совершившееся в земной материнство еще с большей силой взрывается в поэзии – Эмили Дикинсон, Елена Шварц. Поэтому, я в этом убеждена, высоко подняться в искусстве может женщина только под Покровом Божьей Матери³⁸⁵.

³⁸² Ibidem

³⁸³ *Mariia*, N.1, Leningrad-Frankfurt am Maine, 1981, 15-17

³⁸⁴ After the exile of Voznesenskaia, Tatiana Goricheva and Natalia Malakhovskaia, the movement didn’t cease to exist as a dissident underground group in Russia.

³⁸⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *O zhenskom tvorchestve*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01 -143, (accessed October 22th, 2022), 2

Once aware of the present association between motherhood and authorship, the maternity ward setting shouldn't come as a surprise: all characters from *The Women's Decameron* are mothers and the authors of their own stories. Helena Goscilo imputes the prominence of the maternity ward in new women's prose to Russian women's internalization of a patriarchal tenet, which identifies maternity as a crucial step to fulfill female biological destiny and to contribute to the construction of the bright future of socialism.

According to state ideology and popular belief, through exercising her childbearing capabilities, a woman not only realizes her "natural (biologic)function," but simultaneously forges links with the mythical socialist future, a feature that Soviets invariably posit in the optimistic belief that whatever lies ahead by definition *must* be better than the dismal present. [...] The "maternity complex" has the tenacious hold of a boa constrictor on women's thinking, prompting categorical assertions that reinforce patriarchal dogma even by self-proclaimed feminists³⁸⁶.

The choice of the maternity ward as the setting of *The Women's Decameron*, however, mustn't be entirely imputed to the phenomenon described by Goscilo as the "maternity complex"³⁸⁷, since it makes a clear point about Voznesenskaia's concept of women's writing and authorship. Firstly, as also pointed out by Furman³⁸⁸ and Kolidzej³⁸⁹, motherhood in *The Women's Decameron* deviates from its traditional conception; Larisa and Emma, for example, willingly choose to be single mothers with the support of the remaining characters. Moreover, mothers' bodies are described as sexual, capable of giving and experiencing pleasure, and far from Holy Mary's virginal motherhood. This partially distances the idea of femininity conveyed in *The Women's Decameron* from that promoted in *Maria*, which saw in the Mother of Christ as a role model, and puts *The Women's Decameron* in line with French feminist criticism's deconstruction of Freud's theory of sexuality. Freudian psychoanalysis considered motherhood as the capstone of women's sexuality, since through childbearing women could overcome their "intrinsic" lacking nature which they dramatically experienced with the "penis envy". Within this framework, female pleasure was considered legitimate only when vaginal and passive, in contrast with the active clitoral one, regarded as a deviation from normative femininity. French feminists dispute this idea and the idea of mothers' bodies being chaste, which is similarly challenged in *The Women's Decameron*.

³⁸⁶ Goscilo Helena, Introduction to *Balancing Acts: Contemporary Stories by Russian Women*, edited by Helena Goscilo, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, xx-xxi

³⁸⁷ Ibidem

³⁸⁸ Furman Yelena, "'We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose, and French Feminist Theory", 2009, 104-108

³⁸⁹ Kolodziej Jerzy, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Women: With Love and Squalor", 1993, 235

Thus, with regard “to the development of a normal woman,” we learn, through Freud, that there is and can be only one single motivating factor behind it: “penis envy,” that is, the desire to appropriate for oneself the genital organ that has a cultural monopoly on value. Since women don’t have it, they can only seek to find equivalents for it. Furthermore, they can find fulfillment only in motherhood, by bringing a child, a “penis substitute,” into the world. [...] The perfect achievement for the feminine destiny, according to Freud, lies in reproducing the male sex, at the expense of the woman’s own³⁹⁰.

Furthermore, the author, through the characters, describes motherhood in less than idealistic tones. In the premise, Emma, the author’s alter-ego, makes an ironic comparison between the women’s reaction to the news of a ten-day quarantine and the merry atmosphere of Boccaccio’s brigade. The characters’ despair at the prospect of quarantine prompts a scathing comment from Emma:

А все же трудно поверить, что так оно и было: кругом чума, смерть, горе, а посреди всего этого – изящные женщины и галантные мужчины ублажают друг друга романтическими и озорными байками. Вот у нас и не чума, а простая кожная инфекция, какие то идело вспыхивают в родильных домах, – а слез, а истерик!.. Или так измелечал народ? И что им, глупым бабам, не лежит ся? Не терпится за пеленки приняться? Господи, как представишь себе, так руки опускаются: тридцать подгузников, тридцать тонких пеленок, столько же байковых – зима³⁹¹.

Emma harshly comments on the women’s desire to leave quarantine and reconnect with the an outside world expecting them to be productive members of society while being the only caregivers of their children. Emma does not describe maternity as a woman’s mission or fate, but as a demanding task, so difficult and tiring that “the very thought [of it]was enough to make you want to give up”³⁹². This passage partially challenges the view of motherhood as a woman’s mission and ultimate desire and that of the sacred and mythologized³⁹³ image of motherhood. In this regard, some mothers are also described as villains; in Irina’s tale³⁹⁴, cohabitation goes against a couple sex life, since Alla’s mother out of jealousy doesn’t understand her daughter needs. In a sense, Alla’s mother represses her daughter sexual needs, as she did with her own. She insists on comparing her abstinences to her daughter’s one: “Я пятнадцать лет без мужика живу, мне твоих забот не понять³⁹⁵!” In the end,

³⁹⁰ Irigaray Luce, “ Così fan tutti,” In *This sex which is not one*, translated by Catherine Porter, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985, 84

³⁹¹ Prologue, day First

³⁹² Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *The Women’s Decameron*, translated by W.B. Linton, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986, 1

³⁹³ Goscilo Helena, “The Gendered Trinity of Russian Cultural Rhetoric”, In Goscilo Helena, *Dehexing Sex: Russian Womanhood During and After Glasnost*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996, 31-57

³⁹⁴ Day fourth, tale tenth

³⁹⁵ Day fourth, tale tenth

the mother intentionally sleeps with her drunk son in law, who eventually decides to leave the house out of shame and to consequently abandon his wife and child.

Similarly, Olga's tale³⁹⁶ describes a mother she once knew as the most cruel of human beings, deconstructing the angel-like image of motherhood; Masha sacrifices everything for her son, even her own food, to give him the best life possible, but this tragically turns her into her son's main source of pain. When he decides to marry a modest and less educated woman, Masha sabotages their marriage with cruelty; she takes advantage of Soviet Union laws and tips off the authorities to get rid of her daughter in law. The events drive the young woman to kill her newborn child and to commit suicide. From Olga's point of view, these tragic events are the symptom of Soviet Russia's challenging living conditions, which fits the description of the outside world as a place contaminated by an unavoidable sickness.

Motherhood in its biological sense is hardly the main topic of the book in view of the fact that the characters spend a very little time with their newborns and motherhood isn't discussed as a daily theme. On the contrary, the choice of the maternity ward as a setting hints at women's generative power, which can be expressed biologically through motherhood or literary creation. The characters of *The Women's Decameron*, whether belonging to different social strata or having utterly different values and beliefs, are mothers and storytellers. *Voznesenskaia* describes birth as the highest act of creation³⁹⁷

Furthermore, in her article on the violation of pregnant women's rights in the Soviet Union, she describes the maternity ward as the place where women are mostly at the mercy of the regime and deprived of their voice and rights.

Некогда в своей сознательной жизни советская женщина не бывает настолько **лишена голоса** и прав, как во время родов. Она беспомощна, она целиком в это время зависит от ополитизированной и бездушной бюрократий, которая именуется советское общество.³⁹⁸

This also qualifies the maternity ward as a place where women's voices are silenced, and their integrity is at risk. This idea further enforces Emma prologue's metanarrative function since the

³⁹⁶ Day fourth, tale seventh

³⁹⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Materinskie prava na Zapade", text for the radiophonic rubric *Prava Cheloveka* n.675, January 12/13, 1984, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022)

³⁹⁸ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Prava rozhenicy", text for the radiophonic rubric *Prava Cheloveka* n.677, January 10/11, 1984, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022)

collective narrative act of *The Women's Decameron* works as an answer to those unheard women's voices.

The narrative device of the quarantine reinforces the segregation of the patients in an enclosed space and shields them from the interference of the outside world. As stated above, the external world is characterized as being affected by a raging sickness, threatening to infect *The Women's Decameron's* protagonists. The skin infection here acquires a symbolic meaning, as the women finally manage to heal while being detached from the sick society they lived in, a healing stimulated by the narrative process and by the creation of a female community within the segregating space of the hospital. The interpretation above can be inferred from the function of space in Voznesenskaia's *Decameron*, supported by the author's description of Soviet society in her article devoted to the poet Irina Ratushinskaia.

Россия сегодня больна. Болен каждый русский человек, каждый русский литератор, каждый русский поэт. Все мы больны духовно и нравственно, весь народ. Разница лишь в том, что у одних болезнь зашла уже так далеко, что они этого не чувствуют. У литераторов поэтов, это выражается в довольстве равнодушии слова, полном отказе от правды и страдания. У тех, кто сознает свою и страны болезнь это проявляется в творчестве. В прозе это, может быть, всего сильнее выражено у писателей, которых принято назвать "деревенщиками", а также неофициальных, самиздатских авторов, особенно авторов религиозных. Боль за родной народ и страстное чувство желание видеть их излечившимся - вот признаки такой литературы³⁹⁹.

Here, poetry, and in a broader sense, literature, is addressed as a medium to describe the symptoms of the sickness which contaminated all Russian people and, at the same time, serves as medicine. In this regard, Voznesenskaia maintains that: "Русская поэзия изначально, может быть, со 'Слова о полку Игореве', никогда не была РАЗВЛЕКАТЕЛЬНОЙ, но всегда была ВРАЧЕВАТЕЛЬНОЙ"⁴⁰⁰.

According to the author, Russian poetry wasn't meant to be entertaining but rather a means to heal ever since the dawn of Russian literature, a concept mirrored in *The Women's Decameron*. In this regard, the ominous beginning of the book, marked by the inmates' sadness and gloom, is healed through the narrative, and it is no coincidence that it ends with tales of happiness and a cheerful ending for all. The aforementioned concept is conveyed in the text also through the reference to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which, in its premise, characterizes literature as the medicine for the

³⁹⁹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, Ocherk o Irine Ratushinskoi, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022), 2

⁴⁰⁰ Ibidem, 1

torments of women; furthermore, Boccaccio declares that his novellas are meant to ease the suffering of women and writes: “Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti: e come che a ciascuna persona stea bene, a coloro è massimamente richiesto li quali già hanno di conforto avuto mestiere e hannol trovato in alcuni⁴⁰¹.” The virtue of compassion is likewise considered by Voznesenskaia as the feature that gives literature its healing function, as she declares: “сострадание, жестокая правда и огромная живая любовь - признаки того лекарства, которая наша подневольная литература создает, копит и передает из рук в руки народу.⁴⁰²”

The concepts of love, compassion, and truth brought up here are concepts that belong to the author’s Christian-orthodox faith, which also shapes her idea of female authorship and, partially, of womanhood. As mentioned in chapter II, women, according to the Maria group’s idea of femininity, endure an amount of pain, which brings them closer to God; they are, in a sense, living martyrs bringing God’s message on earth, a message which they deliver through pain. In *The Women’s Decameron*, literature similarly eases the character’s suffering, but, at the same time, their pain is among the agents of the narrative process. The characters are introduced as suffering women whose pain is eased through the literary process. Pain, in a sense, is a generative force pushing the narrative forward and cathartically finishing the characters’ quarantine in a happy ending. The women’s pain springs up their novellas and acts as the source of self-development and elevation: as maintained in Mariia’s journal, women bear the suffering of humanity on their shoulders; martyrdom and self-sacrifice are part of their essence.

The study of the author’s idea of authorship, like her idea of womanhood, must be understood not only in relation to the gender perspective but also by addressing the problem of author recognition in the Soviet Union. The idea of a Russian women’s movement in Voznesenskaia’s mind is necessarily intertwined with harsh and militant criticism of the Soviet regime, as also mentioned in chapter II when describing the peculiar nature of Russian dissident feminism; this idea is similarly applied to textual analysis.

Through the tales, the outside world is described as a hostile environment characterized by the lack of freedom of speech and dominated by patriarchy, while the maternity ward represents a safe space that allows the characters to speak about intimate as well as subversive matters; however, women use reticence to protect their respectability as women just as much as they ask for discretion

⁴⁰¹ Boccaccio Giovanni, *Decameron*, Milano: Bur, 2018, 22

⁴⁰² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Ocherk o Irine Ratushinskoi*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01 -143, (accessed October 22th, 2022, 3

or willingly withhold certain names or details which could lead to the political persecution of the narrator or of the tale's characters⁴⁰³.

Totalitarianism and women's oppression, in fact, are not addressed separately, as they're both included in the concept of state patriarchy. This double yoke forced onto women encapsulates the thesis expressed by Tat'iana Goricheva about seeking women's emancipation in Soviet Russia; in her article⁴⁰⁴ from the first tamizdat issue of *Maria*, *Ved'my v kosmose*, Goricheva describes the impossibility of full female emancipation without first overcoming what she defines as state patriarchy, meaning the Soviet Regime, a patriarchy that also chains the opposite gender, tamed by violence and impeded in asserting its own identity. Regarding the process of women's emancipation in Russia and the results of Soviet Russia's gender policy, another key point of Goricheva's argument is the concept of androgyny; according to the philosopher, the State's measures in terms of women's emancipation pushed the woman to recreate themselves in the image and likeness of men, losing the opportunity to define or identify themselves in their femininity and turning into an androgynous figure, or else called "femina sovietica". Therefore, while isolated from the oppressive environment of the Soviet Union, the characters of *The Women's Decameron* succeed in deconstructing its pervasive ideology through their tales, in communicating with each other, and, ultimately, to get discovering their feminine essence.

5.2 *The Women's Decameron* as a Collective Narrative Act

Another important asset implemented by this textual analysis of *The Women's Decameron* is Lanser's theory of the narrative voice, which fits in the methodological mindset of feminist narratology⁴⁰⁵, meaning the feminist branch of narratology, which examines the role of gender in the construction of the narrative theory. Feminist narratology is based on the assumption that "gender affects narrative categories, such as focalization⁴⁰⁶." Lanser's study of the narrative voice⁴⁰⁷ will be the methodology applied to the study of focalization within *The Women's Decameron* since the author's characterization of the narrative voice is a crucial element to read the book as a legitimation of women's authorship.

⁴⁰³ See, for example, day eighth, tale fourth

⁴⁰⁴ Goricheva, "Ved'my v kosmose", 1981

⁴⁰⁵ For more, see: Lanser, Susan S.: "Gender and Narrative". In: Hühn, Peter et al. (eds.): *the living handbook of narratology*. Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2014 ([accessed](#) on September 30th 2022)

⁴⁰⁶ Warhol, Robyn, and Susan S. Lanser, eds. *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*. Ohio State University Press, 2015; Lanser, Susan, "Toward a Feminist Narratology." *Style* 20, 1986, 341–63; Lanser, Susan, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.

⁴⁰⁷ Lanser, Susan Sniader. *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*. Cornell University Press, 1992

Lanser identifies the voices of the narrator and of the characters as a domain of ideological tension since they are built in relation to the author's social identity, the chosen narrative form, and its rhetorical and social features. In fact, through the narrative voice, the authors establish their discourse authority and credibility. The act of writing in order to be read is, from Lanser's point of view, an attempt to establish one's discursive authority, meaning "a quest to be heard, respected, believed, a hope of influence." Lanser describes this process as an act of self-authorization which, according to her view, is implicit in the concept of authorship.

In thus linking social identity and narrative form, I am postulating that the authority of a given voice or text is produced from a conjunction of social and rhetorical properties. Discursive authority-by, which I mean here the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value claimed by or conferred upon a work, author, narrator, character, or textual practice-is produced interactively; it must therefore be characterized with respect to specific receiving communities. In Western literary systems for the past two centuries, however, discursive authority has, with varying degrees of intensity, attached itself most readily to white, educated men of hegemonic ideology. One major constituent of narrative authority, therefore, is the extent to which a narrator's status conforms to this dominant social power.⁴⁰⁸

According to Lanser, discursive authority is created by the interaction between the reader and the author, who shapes their discourse according to the standards of the receiving community. In this regard, one of the most significant features of narrative authority is its degree of conformity or nonconformity to the dominant social power, which is a stimulating aspect of the textual analysis of writings produced by marginalized communities, who are usually excluded from literary discourse. When applying this theory to Soviet Russia's literary discourse, both the marginalization of Russian women writers and of alternative literature must be taken into account, as they are both stigmatized in *The Women's Decameron*.

Nonhegemonic writers, when asserting their narrative authority, tend to both subvert and conform to dominant rhetorical practices, since the latter are still the medium that writers must resort to in order to question the practices themselves. In other words, the author implements traditional narrative voice conventions to challenge the idea of authority itself, in order to provide an authoritative critique of said authority.

Some women writers have of course, questioned not only those who hold authority and the mechanisms by which they are authorized, but the value of authority as modern Western cultures have constructed it. I believe, however, that even novelists who challenge this authority are constrained to adopt the

⁴⁰⁸ Lanser, 1992,6

authorizing conventions of narrative voice in order, paradoxically, to mount an authoritative critique of the authority that the text, therefore, also perpetuates⁴⁰⁹.

Narrative authority is also created through textual strategies considered illegitimate by the dominant power. According to Lanser books explore the problem of authority through their production of the narrative voice, which she considers as a site of crisis that is manifested and, at times, resolved through ideologically charged technical practices. Lanser is against the theorization of an authentic female voice, which generally entailed women's language as uncertain, wordy, belittling, and the opposite of the male's, normative, assertive, direct, and rational.

This definition of women's language is rooted in an essentialist idea of femininity, which undermines women authors' attempts to establish their narrative authority. To discourage an essentialist and generalist interpretation of the female voice, she analyses a 1930s letter published in the American magazine *Atkinson's Casket* and written by a woman, wittingly resorting to said stereotypical "feminine language" to conceal from her husband the true content of the text⁴¹⁰. In other words, the employment of a stereotypical "feminine" language is not imputable to the writer's sex; it is a deliberate textual strategy that enables the narrative voice to disguise its real intent and bypass censorship, which she connects to Irigaray's concept of mimicry. The relation between the narrators and the narrates, their ideological and affective positions are dynamic and interdependent. The authorizing agent (the author's voice) utterly diverges from that of the fictional narrator, cleverly created to perform a politically motivated exercise in disguise. With this example, Lanser explains how fiction in marginalized communities works as a strategy to mitigate the "audacity of opposition", which is conveyed by mindfully building the narrative voice.

The "feminine style" of the surface text, that "powerless," nonauthoritative form called "women's language," here becomes a powerfully subversive mask for telling secrets to a woman under the watchful eyes of a man. In Irigaray's terms, the surface letter is a "disruptive excess," a "mimicry": it deliberately adopts a "feminine" position that is exaggerated into subversion by exposing the mechanisms of its own abjection (thereby revealing at the same time its dependence upon "the words of the powerful"). The female voice conforms in order to "con" form: "women's language" becomes a calculated response to alienation and censorship, an evasion of material threat⁴¹¹.

With the *Casket's* examples, Lanser introduces two crucial aspects in the construction textual authority in ideologically charged texts: the construction of the private voice and that of the public

⁴⁰⁹ Ibidem, 7

⁴¹⁰ Lanser, 1992.

⁴¹¹ Ibidem, 11

voice. The public voice is that of a heterodiegetic⁴¹² narrator directed toward a narratee generally outside the fictional world⁴¹³; Lanser describes the public voice also as *authorial*, which does not imply an equivalence between the narrator and the author, but instead suggests that the narrative voice in this case “reproduces the functional and structural situation of authorship⁴¹⁴.” The public voice, when not adequately distinguished from that of the author, induces to overlap the narrator’s and the author’s voice. This overlapping grants by convention a privileged status to the narrator, which is implicitly located outside the narrative time/space and, therefore, carries a superior narrative authority when compared with the homodiegetic narrators.

With the term “authorial voice,” Lanser refers to Franz Stanzel⁴¹⁵ distinction between the authorial narrative, which permits what Lanser calls narrative self-reference⁴¹⁶, and figural narrative, when all narration is focalized through the characters’ perspectives, and there’s no reference to the narrator or the narrative situation. Stanzel describes the figural narrative situation as one encompassing “the withdrawal of the author, the predominance of scenic presentation, the reader’s center of orientation fixed in the now-and-here of a novel figure or of an imaginary observer on the scene of the action; and the possibility of giving the epic preterite the imaginative value of the present.⁴¹⁷”

Lanser adds another distinction within the category of authorial narrative to describe those narrators engaged exclusively in acts of representation (predicate the words and actions of fictional characters) and those who undertake extra-representational acts (reflections, judgments, generalization about the world beyond the fiction addressed to the narratee, comment on the narrative process, the allusion to other writers and texts). Lanser describes authoriality or overt authoriality⁴¹⁸ as the practice through which the heterodiegetic narrator performs unrequired extra-representational acts, which make a higher claim to discursive authority than that of representational acts.

When heterodiegetic narrators engage in extra-representational narrative acts, they acquire fictional authority, and, through them, the author takes part to intellectual, cultural and social debates. At the same time, heterodiegetic narrators indulging in extra-representational acts undermine their

⁴¹² Lanser refers to Genette’s definition of the narrative voice and redefines it to assert her theory and simplify narratology’s terminology; Lanser, Susan, “Towards a Feminist Narratology.” *Style* 20, 1986 , 341–63, 158

⁴¹³ Gerard Genette’s heterodiegetic narrator

⁴¹⁴ Ibidem.

⁴¹⁵ Franz Stanzel, *Narrative situation in the novel*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1971, 25

⁴¹⁶ By self-reference, Laner means the act of devoting specific attention to the act of narration in itself.

⁴¹⁷ Franz Stanzel, *Narrative situation in the novel*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1971, 25

⁴¹⁸ Lanser, 1992, 16-17

credibility, since they precisely those judgments and comments, if diverging from that of the author, might break the illusion of their converging with the implied author⁴¹⁹.

Extra-representational acts in the prose allow the narrative voice to establish the set of values and maxims which contribute to the text's verisimilitude and plausibility and, consequently, to its reception. In ideologically minded texts, the author shapes the narrative according to its own values and beliefs, including the narrative voice; through their narrative/authorial equivalent they engage debates from which they would be otherwise excluded, or in which they wouldn't dare to take a stand. For this reason, Lanser maintains, women writers resort to overt-authoriality and shape their narrator equivalent as primary authorities, to question gendered rhetorical codes and build a mediated public voice. Women's exclusion from canonical literature⁴²⁰ forced them to employ narrative/authorial practices able to conceal the author's sex, such as the use of the heterodiegetic narrative voice and of pseudonyms. According to Lanser, gendered conventions of public voice and narrative self-reference are important in regulating women's access to discursive authority. The private voice of the letter writer becomes an enabling strategy for writing a forbidden public narrative.

Lanser's study describes women writers' constructions of the narrative voice, which oppose to normative narrative and social practices of their times. In this regard, she finds three narrative modes: the authorial, the personal, and the communal voice. The personal voice describes a narrator, which acts within the fictional world and, at the same time, self-consciously tells its own story, therefore fitting in Genette's definition of auto-diegetic narrative⁴²¹. For this reason, Lanser identifies in the personal voice a lower status of narrative authority, when compared to that of the authorial one. The use of the personal voice, on the other hand, does not permit the use of gender-neutral formulas and allows women authors to escape the limits of acceptability of the female voice as shaped by male-centric literary tradition. This narrative mode can therefore imply a struggle to female voices' authorization.

The authorial and personal voice are generally intended as opposite categories, since the first is designated as the authoritative fictional narrator's voice (heterodiegetic) and the latter as the less authoritative character's voice, therefore homodiegetic. In Lanser's theory, those narrative modes are not intended as oppositional, since they both potentially entail self-referential and public narratives.

⁴¹⁹ Ibidem

⁴²⁰ Here I'm generally referring to Anglo-American one, since it's the context Lanser refers to. Nonetheless, as mentioned in the section devoted to Russian Women's prose, it is clear how women writers have equally struggled to find proper recognition.

⁴²¹ Genette describes the autodiegetic narrative voice, as that of a fictional persona, who is the story's narrator and protagonist.

The tendency to oppose these modes also conceals similarities between them. Both forms bear the potential for public, self-referential narration and thus for enacting a relationship between "writer" and audience and indeed an entire "story" that is the story of the narration itself⁴²².

By assuming that the authorial and the personal voices are opposed concepts and that the narrative act is individual, narratology bypassed intermediated forms of the narrative voice, which are in between the personal and the authorial voice, among which Lanser lists the communal voice. In this fashion, Lanser describes the communal voice as a range of narrative acts performed by a collective narrative voice or a collective of voice sharing narrative authority. In this regard, those voices participating in the collective narrative act are those of members of a specific community, which can be either a "multiple, mutually authorizing voices" or consist of a single narrative voice authorized by a group sharing the same values and beliefs. For this reason, the communal mode is a narrative mode privileged by socially segregated communities, among which women.

According to Lanser's study, the communal mode is shaped in three different ways: the singular form (a singular narrative voice speaks for a group), a simultaneous form (a plural "we" engages in the narrative act⁴²³), and a sequential form in which individual members of a group narrate in turns. The development of a female communal voice revolves around the construction of a female community and does not imply the presence of a singular protagonist and plot, which generally framed women's writing in the label of autobiography.

Susan Lanser identifies in *The Women's Decameron* as a successful example of sequential communal voice since, she declares, it is " the contemporary work[...] that succeeds most fully in fusing a different group of female voices into a self-conscious, egalitarian narrating community⁴²⁴". Within the walls of the maternity ward, *The Women's Decameron's* characters create a female narrating community, in which the characters are protagonist and narrators of the stories. In short, they equally engage in the narrative act as heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative voices. Some characters, such as Albina, Valentina, Zina and Emma, have more marked narrative styles and functions within the text, which, however, does not characterize with a superior narrative authority. In this regard, the initial address to the female body, and its socio-political implications, draws the common ground on which the protagonists build their collective narrative act.

⁴²² Lanser, 1992, 20

⁴²³ The epistolary novel and a general narrative "we" do not stand for the simultaneous communal voice; a collective narrative act must be created by an authorizing agent, which is part of or speaks on behalf of a marginalized community.

⁴²⁴ Lanser, 1992, 265

In the preface to the 2013 Russian edition, the author describes the book as a means to challenge the myth of women's equality in the Soviet Union, in order to inscribe *The Women's Decameron* within the canon of socially minded Russian literature. However, the construction of the narrative voice as a communal narrative, the address to the female body as the trigger of the narrative process and of ideologically minded debates, the presence of homodiegetic extra-representational acts in the text, foreshadow the author's intention to discuss more ideologically problematic matters. Topics such as the legitimacy of women's writing and the broader issue of sexual discrimination are addressed respectively through the creation of the communal voice and character's extra-representational acts.

Voznesenskaia's mindful construction of the narrative voice, is, in a way, another attempt to establish the legitimacy of female authorship. The identification of Emma as the author's alter-ego, in this regard, can be read as a metanarrative reference to the author's intent: the lamenting voices of her fellow inmates push Emma to organize a collective narrative act instead of focusing on her own creative projects. Those voices are concurrently a distraction and a revelation: Emma's intention shifts from creating an individual and personal creative act, her theater transposition of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, to the organization of a collective narrative act including those women's voices that desperately needed to be heard.

The authorial voice takes the word most often in the rubrics to give short sharp comments on Soviet society or the tale she's introducing but avoids large-scale extra-representational acts. The authorial voice's introduction in the 1984 typewritten text was unfortunately not included in the other editions examined⁴²⁵, probably due to its legitimation of women's sexuality. In this guise, Voznesenskaia discusses ideologically minded topics concerning women's self-determination, sexuality and their subsidiary role in the society by shaping the characters' voices as a collective narrative act⁴²⁶.

Even among the characters there's no leading or imposing figure in *The Women's Decameron*, as the daily themes are decided collegially, and no king or queen organizes the daily activities as for instance in the Italian *Decameron*. Despite Emma is indeed the author's alter-ego, she doesn't impose any leadership on the group and restricts herself to encourage the narrative process; she, therefore, addresses the future collective narration resulting from the tales as *their own Decameron*: [...] И каждый день они по очереди рассказывали друг другу разные истории о любви, счастливой и

⁴²⁵ See textual variants section.

⁴²⁶ Lanser, 1992

трагической, о проделках ловких любовников. Вот я и думаю: а не устроить ли нам здесь свой «Декамерон»⁴²⁷?

The use of *svoi* marks the narrative as a collective process as the result of the cooperation of a collective of equals, who includes in it, no matter how different, their vulnerabilities and voices. The narrators, moreover, speak in the first person singular and in the form of narrative monologue since the character's accounts are shaped as a textual illusion of scenic presentation and orality. Clearly, the characters tell tales in turns to an audience, the other women, who interact with the narrative voice by asking questions, commenting, or reacting to the content of the tale in real-time, an interaction conveyed entirely from the characters' voice.

In this regard, the women's response to the description of the daisy serves as an example; Albina, bothered by the reaction of the inmates, threatens them to stop her tale and accuses them of being dishonestly prudish. The women's request to continue the tale afterwards, however, is an act of consent and proves Albina's point, since the group consciously accepts to listen to a sexually explicit tale. This real-time reaction to Albina's tale, hints again at *The Women's Decameron* theatrical subtext, as it mimics the audience's reaction to theatrical monologue.

Ну, что это за детский крик на полянке? Не нравится – не буду рассказывать дальше. Терпеть не могу ханжества, жизни вы настоящей не видели. Небось пусти вас в такую компанию, так еще на порожке расставили бы ножи, такие в ней крутые парни собираются... Так продолжать или нет? То-то же⁴²⁸...

Again, in a rather controversial tale, the audience shows its skepticism, which is again reported through narrator's voice: "Вот вам и 'Да ну'! Только вы, пожалуйста, если будете кому пересказывать, ни имени моего, ни должности не называйте. Договорились? Ну, слушайте⁴²⁹".

Despite being mediated by Emma, all women participate in the narrative process with their own personal experiences and knowledge. The text presents women from utterly different social strata and areas of Soviet Russia, a feature that succeeds in recreating a spectrum of Soviet society within the wall of the maternity ward. In a sense, *The Women's Decameron* presents its topics from utterly different perspectives, since the women have opposing views on the daily themes according to their personal history, social background, and personality. The non-imposing role of the heterodiegetic narrator leaves space for the characters' narrative, who are, therefore, able to be the narration's agents.

⁴²⁷ Narrative frame, introduction to day first, tale first

⁴²⁸ Day first, tale sixth

⁴²⁹ Day third, tale third

They are equally authors, audience and, at times, protagonists of their stories. In this regard, in the second tale of the third day, Natasha unsurprisingly describes the maternity ward as a society, or better their own society: “Я взвыла и бросилась с этой «кочечки», потому что они, муравьи, уже до таких мест добрались, что и называть неприлично в ином, не в нашем с вами обществе!”

The author rarely takes the floor, since she lets the characters speak without any intrusion or digression : she rarely comments on the flowing of the narrative as external observer of the narrative frame or in the rubrics; this choice enforces the interpretation of *The Women's Decameron* as a legitimation of women's authorship . In this regard, the author rejects the traditional male form of authorship, which establishes an omniscient narrative persona able to control and direct the characters, since she shapes the characters as authoritative voices; the author and the characters are part of the same collective which rejects any form of higher authority, which is, furthermore, a concept at the core of the group Mariia. In the movement Mariia there was no leading voice, either in written form or during debates.

The creation of an all-female society based on rules agreed upon by all its members it's achievable only in a context of isolation from a regime built on authoritarianism and patriarchy. The plague, as much as the skin infection presented in *The Women's Decameron*, consists of a plot device to create a moment of crisis leading to a creation of a separated social order characterized by isolation and the remodeling of social rules agreed upon by its members.

5.3 Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a Woman-Author

The present dissertation reads *The Women's Decameron* as a legitimation of women's authorship. This legitimation is carried out by the characters account's to mitigate the author's ideological stance, which could have undermined her credibility in the literary context she referred to. This idea is supported by the uneven characterization of Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a women-author in her public statements, the explanatory preface Voznesenskaia add to the 2013 edition of *The Women's Decameron* and the editing of passages which don't agree with the author's reputation as a religious writer. This might also explain the lack of archival documents about the *The Women's Decameron* in the author's private fund at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen, despite the book was translated in numerous European languages and staged all around Europe and Russia. Interestingly, pictures preserved in her private fund show how the

author participated in both the Oslo and Milan premiere of the theater adaptation⁴³⁰, even though she rarely mentions the text that gave her significant fame during the eighties throughout her memoirs, correspondence, and literary.

Voznesenskaia's earliest public statements for western magazines define her as a woman-author. In the interview given in 1980 to Robin Morgan Voznesenskaia declared that male translators couldn't properly understand the subtleties of her style, which hints at a sexual specificity of the author's literary production.

One volume of my poems was called "The Book of Farewell", and another was called "Out of the Sleeve", because all these notes and poems were written on small scraps of paper and I hid them in my sleeves. That book has been published here in the West, in Russian, in the magazine, *Poiski*. I'd love it to be in English, but with a woman translator. When a man translates my work, and I translate it back, I find out it's not what I wrote. Sometimes people think it's a compliment to say that I write like a man. And I think, oh God, is that true? Am I that ugly? I don't want such a compliment⁴³¹.

In the 1981 tamizdat issue of *Mariia*, the members of the group similarly raise the issue of women's recognition as authors only when defined according to male standards: the talent of a woman-writer gains recognition only when defined as an author writing as a man⁴³². Furthermore, as also pointed out by Curtis⁴³³, Voznesenskaia identified herself as a woman author in the preface to the text *Pis'ma o liubvi*: "А я отобрала от всей груды только письма женщин. Почему? Не только потому, что после выхода на Западе моего «Женского Декамерона» мне приходит оправдывать титул «женской писательницы», и не потому, что я сама себя таковой не считаю."⁴³⁴

A few years later, Voznesenskaia disown her status as a woman-author. In an interview with the magazine *L'Unità* in 1989, Voznesenskaia acknowledges the phenomenon of new women's prose by mentioning the names of specific authors, but questions her status of woman-author since, in her view, she shapes female characters according to male standards.

[...] è comparso uno sciame di scrittrici a cominciare dalla Baranskaja, Petruševskajia, Tokareva, Tolstaja; si tratta di un fenomeno nuovo e che nasce dalla decisione delle scrittrici di rimanere donne anche

⁴³⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Photographs*, 1960-1990, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021).

⁴³¹ Morgan Robin, "First Feminists Exiles from the USSR.", *Ms.*, November 1980, 83-84. 53

⁴³² Klub Maria, *Otveti na anketu zhurnala "Alternativy"*, *Maria*, N.1, 25

⁴³³ Curtis, Julie, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia: a Fragmentary Vision", In *Women and Russian Culture. Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New-YorkOxford, 1998, 184. The studies listed here reference the English translation of the text, this research, on the other hand, use the Russian typewritten text from 1987 as a reference.

⁴³⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Ot sostavitel'nitsy", In *Pis'ma o liubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh*, typewritten text, München, 1987, received by Bruno Osimo on November 15th, 2021, 3

in letteratura e non imitare gli uomini, di scrivere delle donne in modo femminile, anche se io, forse, appartengo alla seconda categoria cioè descrivo la donna in modo maschile. La donna ha un approccio diverso alla scrittura, riesce a descrivere i sentimenti in modo più sottile, ha un legame con la natura più profondo ed è l'unica che riesca a parlare ancora con la dimensione metafisica⁴³⁵.

It is well known that authors are generally not the best judges of their works, however, this statement contrasts her previous claims as woman author. In her latest texts about the issue, such as the essay “O zhenskom tvorchestve”, the author becomes more cautious: “Иногда кто-то, желая похвалить, говорил: «Юлия, у тебя мужская конструкция стиха» - но кто же в наше время над такими заявлениями не смеется? Зато, любовь и поддержку, творческую и человеческую, я чувствовала в первую очередь со стороны мужчин⁴³⁶.” This revision of the author’s ideological stance can be linked to her gradual identification as a religious writer.

The study of *The Women’s Decameron’s* textual variant is important to analyze the text from a feminist standpoint since some edited or added chunks of text change the feminist stance implicit in it. Through the study of its publishing history and editions, it seems apparent that the text has been edited several times between 1984 and 2013. The present analysis has considered the text’s typewritten copy from 1984⁴³⁷, received by the Italian translator Bruno Osimo. The typewritten copy includes the author’s indication to German translator Malrene Milack Verheiden, lexical explanations for murky words and expressions, mostly belonging to *gulag argot* or else defined *blatnoi iazyk*⁴³⁸, deleted chunks of text, words whose semantic area shifted (especially those that include obscenities) and, finally, a different title. This version (1984) has been read alongside the 1987 Russian edition published in Tel Aviv by Zerkalo⁴³⁹, the Russian ebook edition published in 2013⁴⁴⁰ (which also

⁴³⁵ “After all, a swarm of female writers emerged in the Soviet Union, starting with Baranskaia, Petrushevskaja, Tokareva, Tolstaia. This is a new phenomenon which comes from the decision of women writers to remain true to their femininity even in literature, rather than imitating men. They write about women in a feminine way, while I may belong to the second category myself: I describe women in a masculine manner. Women have a different approach to writing. They can depict emotions more subtly, have a deeper connection with nature, and are the only ones capable of still engaging with the metaphysical dimension.”

Giovanna Spindel, La Voznesenskaja parla della sua riscrittura del «Decamerone», l’Unità, Venerdì 1 dicembre 1989, 21

⁴³⁶ This essay was probably written after 1983 since it is not part of the tamizdat issues of Maria studied in this dissertation. After Tatiana Goricheva, Natal’ia Malachovskaia and Iuliia Voznesenskaia’s exile, the journal still circulated in Russian samizdat. Voznesenskaia Iuliia, “O zhenskom tvorchestve. Dlia samizdatsoi ‘Marii’”, n.d., FSO 01-143, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen (accessed on October 21th, 2021), 2

⁴³⁷ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Damskii Dekameron*, Typewritten text, 1984, received by Bruno Osimo on November 18th, 2019

⁴³⁸ The author’s attention to *gulag argot* hints at the importance of the topic of prison camps in the text. For more on the topic, see: Bagozzi Valentina, “Gulag Argot as a Site of Memory in Yuliia Voznesenskaia’s *The Women’s Decameron*”, *Academic Journal of Modern Philology: special issue*, Vol.12, 2021, 7-15

⁴³⁹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Tel Aviv: Zerkalo, 1987

⁴⁴⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

includes an author's preface) and the 1991 Russian edition published in Tallin⁴⁴¹ and considered by the author illegal⁴⁴².

Ну, а дальше был полный и победный успех. Книгу переводили, издавали, переиздавали, несколько раз инсценировали. Иногда меня спрашивали: “А на русском языке вы издадите свой ‘Женский Декамерон’? Я удивлялась: “А это еще зачем? Советский читатель и так сам все знает, а для эмигрантов издавать – это уже роскошь несусветная...” Однажды только я сделала исключение, когда издать книгу на русском языке предложило израильское русскоязычное издательство “Зеркало”. Я согласилась. До сих пор это издание на русском языке является единственным законным – все остальные издания “Женского Декамерона” на русском языке попросту украдены, я их не разрешала и доходов с них не имела, и тем более не отвечаю за безобразное количество ошибок и опечаток в них.⁴⁴³

The 1991 edition has been included in the corpus to see whether episodes of self-censorship or other kind of textual inconsistencies meaningful to the research do appear. The German, Italian and English translations⁴⁴⁴ have also been valuable references to pinpoint the differences between the editions, as they were based on the typewritten text from 1984 and presented textual divergences when compared to the 2013 Russian edition. Due to the pandemic and the consequential difficulties in accessing local and foreign libraries, said translations were useful to notice the presence of textual variants, an understanding that extended the research of them to the 1991 and 1987 edition when available.

The book title was changed from the typewritten text⁴⁴⁵ to the printed one. The book was written in 1984 with the title *Damskii Dekameron*⁴⁴⁶, which was later changed in the Russian edition of 1987 to *Zhenskii Dekameron*. So far, no official position or archival documents motivating this choice has been found. This is not surprising, considering the very small number of personal memories referring to the text contained in the author's private fund of the Forschungsstelle Osteuropa archive. Therefore, it is necessary to give an interpretation of the author's choice by simply taking into consideration the semantic shift from the adjective *damsky* to *zhensky*. The adjective *damsky* refers to the substantive *dama*, defined in Ozhegov's dictionary of Russian language as

⁴⁴¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Tallin :Tomas s.m., 1991

⁴⁴² The 1992 first Russian edition was not included in the present dissertation due to its unavailability.

⁴⁴³ Voznesenskaia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, kindle edition, SPB, Lepta Kniga, 2013

⁴⁴⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Das Frauen Dekameron*, translated by Marlene Milack, München: Roitman-Verlag, 1985. Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *The Women's Decameron*, translated by W.B. Linton, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986. Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *Il Decamerone delle donne*, translated by Bruno Osimo, Milano: Bruno Osimo, Kindle edition, 2019

⁴⁴⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Damskii Dekameron*, Typewritten text, 1984, received by Bruno Osimo on November 18th, 2019.

⁴⁴⁶ The title “Damskii Dekameron” is also indicated as the official one in 1986 English translation by W.B. Linton

“zhenshchina iz intelligenckikh obychno obespechennykh krugov”, or else as a substantive used as courtesy in public events.

A more interesting entry regarding the adjective *damsky* refers to the meaning “empty” and “not serious”; the adjective acquires the aforementioned meaning when associated with women’s literature since “damsky Roman” usually refers to low-quality literature with a plot focused on romance, love, and feelings, supposedly more appealing to a female audience. In this regard, Catriona Kelly⁴⁴⁷ identifies the term *damskaia proza* (ladies’ prose) as generally derogatory in a Russian literary context, as it implicitly refers to unwitty, best-selling literature. Considering the polemic and ironic tone of the text, it’s possible to speculate on the first title choice of the author, which turned what should have been appealing to a stereotypical female reader into a text that allowed her to reconsider the very stereotypes she was traditionally imposed on⁴⁴⁸. In a way, the choice of the adjective *damskii* is an act of linguistic reclamation, namely the appropriation of a pejorative epithet or label applied to a marginalized community by the dominant one to its target(s). In *The Women’s Decameron* this is also clear by the character’s frequent use of the derogatory term “baba” to define themselves or women in general⁴⁴⁹. Traces of the old title are also included in the latest Russian version: in the narrative frame closing the second day, the book is addressed as *Damskii Dekameron*. Similarly, in the rubric of the tenth tale of the second day, the women are referred to as *damy*. In the narrative frame concluding the third day, the text is referred to as *Damskii Dekameron*.

In the 1984 typewritten text, the heterodiegetic narrator indulges in an extra-representational narrative act to introduce the prologue. Here, the authorial voice advocates the characters’ need to discuss topics considered irrelevant to mainstream Soviet literature. In this regard, they are not concerned about their achievement in industrial production or willing to discuss the latest party’s policies; they’ll focus on the uncomfortable topic of love. As shown throughout the textual analysis, the characters and the authorial voice do not consider love as a feeling disconnected by corporeality. Within tales about love, the characters get in touch with their bodies: through the address to their

⁴⁴⁷ Kelly Catriona, “Not written by a lady”, In *A History of Russian Women’s Writing 1820-1992*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 2

⁴⁴⁸ Julie Curtis, on the other hand, identifies this change in the title as a way to enforce the feminist stance of the book. See: Curtis, Julie, “Iuliia Voznesenskaia: a Fragmentary Vision”, In *Women and Russian Culture. Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New-YorkOxford, 1998, 186

⁴⁴⁹ The term “baba” was generally used as a derogatory term, also applied to men as an offense or to stigmatize women’s “backwardness”. See: Wood, Elizabeth A., *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, 13-48

bodies they create a transformative narrative act which allows them to get in touch with their femininity⁴⁵⁰.

О первой любви. А ведь это наши советские женщины, и они могли бы, скажем, начать с рассказов о своих производственных достижениях или, допустим, обсудить все вместе недавно введенное заботами партии и правительства единовременное пособие для родивших женщин – так нет же! Они начинают именно с этой интимной темы, чем ставят автора в крайне неловкое положение, поскольку он, вернее она, при всем желании не может отступить от правды жизни, а в жизни только так и могло быть. Уж если женщины собрались поговорить о самом сокровенном, то начать непременно с историй о первой любви, а не о производственных вопросах. Зато, иностранные читатели, если судьба и издатели подарят нам таковых, поймут, что и советское женщине ничто женское не чуждо.

Furthermore, the authorial voice here timidly comes out as female, since she refers to herself as *она*⁴⁵¹. This could be read as an attempt to reverse female marginality by shaping the authorial voice as explicitly female: Russian, as many other grammatically gender-marked languages generally treats the male gender as the default option, while the female equivalent of the word acquires negative or pejorative connotations⁴⁵². This is the case for the word *автор*, which is occasionally used by Voznesenskaia, in all the editions examined here, to refer to the authorial voice and which she declines in the conventional male form. Here, despite her native language would allow the author to conceal her gender, the authorial voice defines herself as female. This passage, however, wasn't included in any other edition of *The Women's Decameron*. Chapter I discussed the problematic position of Russian women writers in Russian literary discourse and their tendency to avoid definitions that reveal their sex, such as *poetessa*, to protect their literary authority and credibility.

⁴⁵⁰ As mentioned, the feminist or non-feminist background Voznesenskaia refers to posits femininity as a naturally given concept. Masculinity and femininity, therefore, are not described as social constructs but as innate features. *Maria* harshly criticized Soviet Russia's approach to the women question for it "masculinized" women by imposing an emancipatory policy that shaped them in the image and likeness of men. Men, on the other hand, were "feminized", in other words, they turned passive and unable to provide for their families. (see chapter II)

⁴⁵¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Damskii Dekameron*, 1984, 3

⁴⁵² Garnham Alan, Iakovlev Iurii, "The Interaction of Morphological and Stereotypical Gender Information in Russian", *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 6, 2015, 3

5.4 Textual variants

As previously anticipated, the book's content partially changed from the 1984 draft typewritten copy to the 2013 Russian edition⁴⁵³. This regards the characterization of Albina, the Aeroflot stewardess, the character performing the function of Goscilo's hormonized heroine. In the 2013 edition, Albina is called Alina⁴⁵⁴, probably to discourage the identification between the character and the author since, apparently, she used the name Albina in her correspondence to write in the third person and bypass Russian censorship⁴⁵⁵. Some passages of Albina's accounts have been equally deleted from the 2013 edition, such as the passage devoted to the description of the daisy.

<i>Zhenskii Dekameron, 2013</i>	<i>Damskii Dekameron, 1984, 24; Zhenskii Dekameron, 1987,29; Zhenskii Dekameron , 1991, 29</i>
Что такое «приход»? Ну, не поповский же приход! Кайф это по-русски. <u>В компанию, где обычно все свальным грехом кончается, мне после аборта идти не хотелось...</u> ⁴⁵⁶	Что такое «приход»? Ну, не поповский же приход! Кайф это по-русски. <u>А ромашка это игра такая молодежная. Девушки ложатся на ковре головой в центре, ножи раздвигают, как лепестки ромашки, а парни по кругу переходят с одной на другую. Фокус в том, чтобы всем одновременно кончить, по команде. Вот тогда полный кайф получается</u> ⁴⁵⁷ .

The game of the daisy is part of the typewritten version of the text, and all the editions are included in the corpus but the 2013 one. However, they all miss two lines from the typewritten version, which describe more in detail the practice of the daisy touching the theme of female pleasure: “Фокус о том, чтобы всем одновременно кончить, по команде. Вот тогда полный кайф получается⁴⁵⁸.” When taking into consideration the author's religious turn in the 90s, her private

⁴⁵³ A new edition of *The Women's Decameron* was published in 2019. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic and Russia's aggression on Ukraine, it was impossible to include the 2019 edition in the corpus.

⁴⁵⁴ Voznesenskaia, 2013

⁴⁵⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, III/87, n.d., Fs0-0143, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa am Bremen (accessed on October, 22)

Here some passages of the mentioned letter: «нет нет с Албиной все в порядке – но вы знаете, какова она на эпистолярном жанре, благородном, но забытом с тех пор, как на свете появились телефон, ТВ и КГБ. Для сохранения посильной объективности буду все писать в третьем лице»[...]«обнимаем вас всех и крепко целуем. Юлия и Альбина/ей письмо зачитывалось по мере написания – для цензуры/ храни вас всех Господь!»

⁴⁵⁶ N.6, day I, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, 2013

⁴⁵⁷ Day first, tale sixth, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, 1987, 29; *Damskii Dekameron*, 1984, 24; *Zhenskii Dekameron*, 1991, 29

⁴⁵⁸ Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *Damskii Dekameron*, Typewritten text, (received by Bruno Osimo on November 18, 2019),

correspondence describing abortion as a sin,⁴⁵⁹ and the recantation of her dissident past, mentioned in *Zapiski Gospodu Bogu*⁴⁶⁰ as a deviance from the path of God, is reasonable to believe that the this editing wasn't casual.

This is also demonstrated by the passage devoted to Saint Mary of Egypt, in which Albina's life story is compared with that of the Saint. In the typewritten version and the editions proceeding that of 2013, Mary of Egypt is described as a feminist saint, since she was despised for her sins by the men she sinned with, banned from God's temple, and yet succeeded in claiming a place among the hermits. Galina, the character interested in religious matters, summarized for the reader and for her fellow inmates the Saint's life story. In the 2013 edition, however, the address to Mary of Egypt shapes Albina simply as an easy girl in need of redemption, an idea which implies the women's moral judgement on her sexual conduct.

<i>Zhenskii Dekameron, 2013</i>	<i>Damskii Dekameron, 1984; Zhenskii Dekameron, 1987; Zhenskii Dekameron, 1991, 319</i>
<p>– <u>Я житие преподобной Марии Египетской знаю только в общих чертах. Грешила она, грешила, а потом с нею случилось чудо. Как-то плыла она на корабле с паломниками в Иерусалим, и все они с ней забавлялись. А когда прибыли на место и пошли поклоняться в храм Креста Господня, то все мужики ее отталкивали от входа: «Таким тут не место!» У мужчин, как известно, свой взгляд на распутство: они остаются чистыми, а женщин, с которыми грешат, отряхивают, как грязь с одежды. И тогда Мария ушла в пустыню и там совершала такие подвиги, так постилась, что ни один пустынный не мог с ней сравниться. Говорят, она помогает тем женщинам легкого поведения, которые хотят исправиться.</u></p> <p>– <u>Знай, Алина, кому молиться! – заметила с улыбкой Валентина.</u></p>	<p>- я ее историю знаю только в общих чертах. Надо будет спросить у нашего батюшки, когда его выпустят.</p> <p><u>-откуда выпустят? У нас что батюшка - диссидент?-</u></p> <p><u>-Даже не инакомыслящий. За проповеди взяли, которые он молодежи читал. Но, говорят, должны выпустить -шум большой.</u></p> <p><u>-Ну, чем же все-таки знаменита эта Мария Египетская?- спросила Албина.</u></p> <p>- А тем, что она плыла в корабле с паломниками в Иерусалим, и все они с ней грешились. А когда прибыли на место и пошли поклоняться в храм Кресту Господню, то все мужики ее отталкивали от входа: «Таким тут не место!» У мужчин, как известно, свой взгляд на распутство: они остаются чистыми, а женщин, с которыми</p>

⁴⁵⁹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, Private Correspondence, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 11th, 2021).

⁴⁶⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017, 210-211

<p><u>– А что? Схожу в храм, поставлю ей свечку и помолюсь – вдруг поможет? – сказала Алина.</u></p>	<p>грешат, отряхивают, как грязь с одежды. И тогда Мария ушла в пустыню и там совершала такие подвиги, так постилась, что ни один пустынный не мог с ней сравниться.</p>
<p><u>– Обязательно поможет! Очень жизненная святая! – воскликнула Зина. – Уважаю таких!⁴⁶¹</u></p>	<p>не мог с ней сравниться.</p>
<p></p>	<p><u>-очень феминистическая святая!- воскликнула Лариса, - уважаю таких!-</u> <u>- ну ну не кощунствуй,- улибнулась Галина.⁴⁶²</u></p>

The mentioned passage undermines Albina’s characterization as hormonized heroine and the book’s sex-positive tone, possibly related to Voznesenskaia’s latest “religious turn” in her life and literary production. This can explain the presence of textual variants, the change in the author’s identification as a woman-author, and the mitigation of the author’s ideological stance in the book through the construction of a sequential communal narrative voice. This, however, does not impede to read *The Women’s Decameron* as a celebration of women’s authorship, as demonstrated through textual analysis.

⁴⁶¹ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Sankt-Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

⁴⁶² Voznesenskaia, Iuliia, *Damskij Dekameron*, Typewritten text, 1984, 269-270, (received by Bruno Osimo on November 18, 2019); Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Tel’ Aviv: Zerkalo, 1987, 319; Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zhenskii Dekameron*, Tallin: Tomas s.m., 1991, 319

Conclusions

Western literary criticism briefly studied *The Women's Decameron* to find the possible links between Voznesenskaia's and Boccaccio's Decameron⁴⁶³, but also analyzed the book with the aid of feminist literary criticism. Elena Furman⁴⁶⁴ underlined the importance of corporeality in *The Women's Decameron* through the application of French feminist theory: the textualization of the body allows the characters to challenge the traditional representation of femininity in Russian literature associated with passivity and lack of agency. The importance of female corporeality in the text allows Furman to place *The Women's Decameron* within the framework of new women's prose and not as a sample of pre-glasnost Russian women's writing. Furman briefly comments on the construction of the narrative voice in the text which put the characters' accounts in the front row and rejects the traditional prominence of the omniscient narrator.

Iuliia Voznesenskaia, however, officially framed *The Women's Decameron* as an expression of her anticommunist activism within movement Mariia, in other words as a work of fiction displaying the difficult conditions of Russian women and the failure of Soviet emancipatory policy⁴⁶⁵. The book apparently focuses on the social issues experimented by Russian women, such as the need to combine maternity and physically demanding jobs, the lack of food and hygiene products, the precarious situation of communal apartments. Furthermore, the personal accounts and the reflection of the characters mockingly challenge the regime's rhetoric: through the manipulation of language, the characters succeed in deconstructing the reality as described by the world of Soviet state, as thoroughly described by Barbara Zaczek⁴⁶⁶; the manipulation of the dominant discourse to reshape

⁴⁶³ Curtis Julie, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia: a Fragmentary Vision", In *Women and Russian Culture. Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, New-YorkOxford, 1998, 173–187; Kolodziej Jerzy, "Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Women: With Love and Squalor". In *Fruits of her Plume: Essays on Contemporary Russian Woman's Culture*, edited by Helena Goscilo, New York-London: M.E. Sharpe, 1993; Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8. Chapel Hill: NC, 2006; Denissova Galina, *LEI: racconti russi al femminile*. Edited by Galina Denissova, Gabriella Imposti, Natalia Fateeva, Giulia Marcucci, Pisa, Plus, 2008; Smarr Janet, "Women Rewrite Griselda: From Christinede Pizan to Julia Voznesenskaya", *Heliotropia*, N.15,2018, 205-229

⁴⁶⁴ Furman Yelena, *Writing the body in New Women's Prose: Sexuality and textuality in contemporary Russian fiction*, Los Angeles:ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2004; Furman Yelena, "'We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose and French Feminist Theory", *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 95-114

⁴⁶⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Predislovie avtora", In *Zhenskij Dekameron*, Kindle edition, Sankt Peterburg: Lepta Kniga, 2013

⁴⁶⁶ Zaczek Barbara, "Creating and Recreating Reality with Words: The Decameron and The Women's Decameron". In *Boccaccio and Feminist Criticism*, vol. 8., 2006, 235-248

reality, according to Zaczeck, is a rhetorical device Voznesenskaia lifted from Boccaccio's Decameron⁴⁶⁷.

Voznesenskaia, for instance, applies this literary device in Valentina's tale⁴⁶⁸ about a family's plot to flee the Soviet Union; in the narrative frame following this tale Galina, the dissident, remarks that the clandestine family was forced to trick Soviet security service, since the authorities usually obstacle Soviet citizens' legal emigration for "security reasons". In this guise, Galina reverses Valentina's and the party's narrative on the matter, and uncovers the reality hidden behind the words of propaganda; this turns Valentina's tale into what can be considered, by her own description, an "anti-Soviet tale", since it exposes the inconsistencies of the regime. Similarly, after Valentina's talkfest about Soviet welfare in the narrative frame following the second tale of day one, the women contradict her by ironically listing what a mother could actually buy with the aid of Soviet allowance for mothers; again, the character's discourse is the hammer able to tear down the wall of propaganda.

The discrepancies between the interpretation of *The Women's Decameron* by western criticism, the author's statement on the topic, and the reputation of Iuliia Voznesenskaia as a writer of religious prose challenged the identification of *The Women's Decameron* as a piece of feminist fiction. When Furman declares that Voznesenskaia "openly identifies herself as feminist⁴⁶⁹" by referencing the preface to *Pis'mo o liubvi*⁴⁷⁰ and the author's activism, however, she doesn't take into consideration the philosophy of the groups Zhenshchina i Rossiia and Mariia. To clarify the feminist mindset Voznesenskaia referred to, this dissertation devoted chapter II to the description of Russian dissident feminist movements by focusing on the movement Mariia, which, as showed, can't be easily assimilated to any western notion of feminism. The movement Mariia disagreed with Soviet emancipatory policy which pursued the path of equality, instead of that of sexual difference, and, more importantly, impeded any access to self-determination due to its intrinsic totalitarian nature. As described in *Maria*, the ideology shaping the regime is compared to a contagious sickness, turning its citizens into alienated perpetrators of violence. In a sense, Voznesenskaia lifted from *Maria* Tatiana Goricheva's idea of state patriarchy in view of the fact that the author shapes the characters' existential crisis as an ontological one. The affirmation of sexual difference is intended as necessary to gain self-consciousness. The choice to devote the first day to the topic of first love, therefore, is

⁴⁶⁷ Ibidem, 246

⁴⁶⁸ Day second, tale fourth

⁴⁶⁹ Furman Yelena, "'We all love with the same part of the body, don't we?': Iuliia Voznesenskaia's Zhenskii Dekameron, New Women's Prose and French Feminist Theory", *Intertexts*, Vol. 13, N. 1-2, Spring/Fall 2009, 109

⁴⁷⁰ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, "Ot sostavitel'nitsy", In *Pis'ma o liubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh, typewritten text*, München, 1987, received by Bruno Osimo on November 15th, 2021, 3

not casual: the characters' transformation starts by appealing to their female essence, which is strictly linked with their own bodies.

For this reason, the dissertation analyzed the trope of the female body through the prism of French feminist theory to identify the female corporeality as the catalyst of the narrative process: by putting their body into words the characters deconstruct the romantic representation of womanhood, which also entails female sexuality as a corollary of romantic love. In *The Women's Decameron*, on the other hand, female pleasure is described as a legitimate appetite which does not necessarily occurs within the boundaries of marriage. Textual analysis also underlined how women's pleasure and sexuality can challenge and dismantle the dominant male-centered narrative, since it undermines the hierarchy of power imposed by the dominant discourse, which in Voznesenskaia's book must be intended as that of the state patriarchy of the Soviet Union. Valentina metaphorically kills the party secretary by expressing her sexual drives and gradually turns from a stereotypical "femina sovietica" to a member of a community characterized by mutual support and understanding. The female body, in this regard, is the catalyst of accounts narrated by women and for women to be heard, accounts that aim at undermining the conceptualization of femininity as a lacking mirror-image of masculinity. The conceptualization of womanhood in male terms leads to the identification of women as a commodity, a passive object of male desire. For this reason, *The Women's Decameron* addresses the issue of male violence against women by picturing this issue as endemic of the female sex and by adding ominous details displaying violence described through the category of the gruesome (chernukha). Voznesenskaia, however, contrasts the stereotypical image of the victim by resorting to the carnivalesque⁴⁷¹ and reverses the roles of the victim and that of the offender.

The study of the almanac *Mariia* also allowed to understand the crucial link between maternity and literary creation, which was also validated by documents⁴⁷² located in Iuliia Voznesenskaia's private fund at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen. This association between motherhood and literary creation clarifies the choice of the maternity ward as the narrative space of *The Women's Decameron*, a choice which can't be entirely imputed to what Helena Goscilo defined as the "maternity complex" or to the debate on the fertility decline addressed in Chapter II. All the characters are mothers and storytellers at the same time. The maternity ward setting

⁴⁷¹ For example, in fourth tale of the day devoted to the victims of rape, Valentina becomes the aggressor of her sexual offender. See tale fourth, day sixth.

⁴⁷² Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Ozhenskom tvorchestve*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022); Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Ocherk o Irine Ratushinskoi*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022)

is a reference to women's nature given generative power, which finds its truest expression in literary production. As the birth of a new life is entailed, in Voznesenskaia's mindset, as God-given gift, so is the creation of literature. Furthermore, the space of the maternity ward, as explained in textual analysis, is connotated as a closed space separated from the pervasive influence of totalitarianism. Here the characters are able to recreate a new social order which is marked by the flowing of their accounts. Voznesenskaia includes in *The Women's Decameron* women belonging to utterly different social strata, women, who, nonetheless, are equally authoritative narrative voices. Prude, uninhibited, religious, atheist, schooled or uneducated, the characters share an equal status within the wall of the maternity ward.

Within closed space of the maternity ward and by resorting to their inner generative power, the characters gain access to self-expression, which takes the form of fiction. In line with Maria's club rejection of the concept of leadership, *The Women's Decameron* implements a sequential communal voice, able to grant all the members of the said community, despite the ideological discrepancies, a chance of self-expression and narrative authority. In this regard, the absence of an omniscient, lumbering narrative voice grants the characters a significant space for self-expression. Susan Lanser identifies *The Women's Decameron* as the finest example of sequential communal narrative voice, a narrative structure employed by marginalized communities to gain access to self-representation in the cultural sphere. The identification of women as a marginalized community is supported by the studies presented in chapter I, which display the exclusion of Russian women's writing from Russian cultural canon and publishing industry and the dismissive connotation of this category in literary criticism. Emma, the author's alter-ego, suggests the creation of a female *Decameron* as an answer to the general despair around her at the beginning of the quarantine. This symbolically refers to the unheard women voices, willing to tell their own stories, to which Voznesenskaia gives space to. In this way, the author addresses the issue of authorship as a nonhegemonic female and dissident writer.

This research work reads *The Women's Decameron* as a book discussing women's marginality in the literary field by challenging the traditional conceptualization of womanhood and legitimating women's authorship. Voznesenskaia's legitimation of women's authorship is mitigated, within the text, by a mindful construction of the narrative voice. In this regard, the authorial voice primarily engages in extra-representational acts to comment on the hypocrisy of the regime⁴⁷³, while the characters take part in debates from which the authorial voice would otherwise be excluded or would be hesitant to take a stance. As described by Susan Lanser, female writers resort to these gendered

⁴⁷³ See, for example, the rubric of day second, tale second

conventions of the narrative voice to shape their narrator equivalent as primary authorities in order to challenge gendered rhetorical conventions and construct a mediated public voice. Similarly, Voznesenskaia's attempt to reverse women's marginality and is mediated through the character's debates and accounts.

This idea is also supported by the author's uneven statements regarding her status of woman-author and the textual variants detected from the typewritten version of *The Women's Decameron* (1984), the first Russian edition published in Tel' Aviv, the 1991 edition and 2013 edition. In the preface of *Pism'a o Liubvi* (1987)⁴⁷⁴ Voznesenskaia confirms her status of woman-author which she gained after the publication of *The Women's Decameron*. In the article *O zhenskom tvorchestve*, on the other hand, she claims that women's literary authority wasn't threatened by male-centered culture. Writers such as Elena Ignatova and Elena Shvarc didn't gain literary authority by discussing gender discrimination: “во все эти случаях право на творчество не обсуждалось и завоевывалось в дискуссиях – оно утверждалось в творчестве и только в творчестве⁴⁷⁵.” In the interview with the magazine *L'Unità* Voznesenskaia doesn't describe herself as woman-author, but as a writer having a “masculine” style⁴⁷⁶

The cultural context which Voznesenskaia referred to and her progressive identification as a religious writer might have encouraged this change in her self-perception as a woman-writer⁴⁷⁷. The author's private fund at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen holds little documents on *The Women's Decameron*, despite it granted Iuliia Voznesenskaia a significant fame during the 80s. The book was translated into numerous languages and staged multiple times, yet the author didn't store any relevant document about the book, except the theater booklet of the 1988 Swedish theater transposition of *The Women's Decameron*. This could be imputed to the association of *The Women's Decameron* and her status as a woman-author, which she further attempts to disown through the explanatory preface attached to the 2013 edition of *The Women's Decameron*. This attempt to mitigate the ideological stance of the book is also mirrored by the editing carried out from the typewritten version of the text (1984) to the latest edition of the text.

⁴⁷⁴ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, “Ot sostavitel'nitsy”, In *Pis'ma o liubvi: zhenshchiny politzakliuchennye v ssylke i lageriakh*, typewritten text, München, 1987, received by Bruno Osimo on November 15th, 2021, 3

⁴⁷⁵ Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *O zhenskom tvorchestve*, Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen], FSO 01-143, (accessed October 22th, 2022), 3

⁴⁷⁶ Spindel Giovanna, “La Voznesenskaja parla della sua riscrittura del «Decamerone»”, *l'Unità*, Venerdì 1 dicembre 1989, 21

⁴⁷⁷ Voznesenskaia also recanted her political activism in the Soviet Union, see: Voznesenskaia Iuliia, *Zapiska Gospodu Bogu*, Sankt Peterburg, Lepta Kniga, 2017

Voznesenskaia's latest rejection of her status of woman-author, nonetheless, doesn't discourage this interpretation of *The Women's Decameron* as a text which challenges women's marginalization in the literary field and legitimate women's authorship. This shows the author's attempt to mitigate her "audacity of opposition" in shaping *The Women's Decameron* as a book celebrating women's literature as an expression of their inner creative drive.

Appendix: Description of Iuliia Voznesenskaia's archival fund held at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen

This appendix lists the archival materials of the fund FSO 01-143 held at the Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen Historisches Archiv). Said material are listed by box and folders: this order of items and the classification of the boxes follows, when given, that implemented by the archival personnel. The documents present in the fund shifts from the author's private correspondence to articles to the management of Soviet farming. For this reason, the documents listed here will be those relevant to the present research. If not stated otherwise, the documents are by Iuliia Voznesenskaia. The documents often do not present a date.

First box : Family correspondence from the prison camp

Second box : Feminist movement/ human rights movement/ Samizdat Elena Shvarc

1. *Mariia*, samizdat, N.5, 1981
2. theater booklet of the Swedish theater transposition of *The Women's Decameron*
3. typewritten draft of the article "Solidarnost' s solidarnost'iu" (*Mariia* N.2,1982)
4. *Mariia* special issue N.1
5. "Zhenskii zamizdat v Sovetskom Soiuze"
6. "Obrashchenie kluba 'Mariii' k amerikanskimi zhenshchinami"
7. German translation of the poems "Kriilia Moi", "Esli ty ne zabudesh" meant for the journal *Ruskaia Mysl'* (N.3290)
8. "O zhenskom tvorchestve", Iuliia Voznesenskaia
9. "Reskie repliki" by Galina Khamova. Typewritten version of the article included *Mariia* N.3, 1983, 55
10. Samizdat poems by Elena Shvarc,
11. Pamphlets of the NTS movement
12. O Natalii Lesnichenko (Nataliia Lazareva). Essay by Iuliia Voznesenskaia about Nataliia Lazareva
13. Letters from unknown gulag prisoners

Third box

First folder: radio scripts about women in the Soviet Union

1. "Eshche raz o zhenskom alkogolisme v sovetskom soiuze"
2. "Proizvostvennyi trud materei-geroin"
3. "Mordovskii zhenskii lager"

4. "Domashnii trud- vtoraiia smena sovetsoi zhenshchiny"
5. "Bezotcovshchina"
6. "Postanovleniia ob oblecheniia zhenskogo truda i real'nost'"
7. "Akushersko-ginekologicheskaia sluzhba"
8. "Zhenshchiny sovetsoi soiuza i bor'ba za mir"

Second folder: "O Irine Ratushinskoii"

Third folder: Radio script from the program "Prava Cheloveka". The topic is childhood, children's wellbeing and the conditions of maternity wards in the Soviet Union.

1. "Pravo detei... na zhizn'" (September 12/13th,1983)
2. "Pravo na zhizn'"
3. "Prava cheloveka i zhisn' cheloveka. Rody chelovecheskie- akt prirody"
4. "Prava cheloveka i zhisn' cheloveka. Pravo rodit'siia"
5. "Prava cheloveka i zhisn' cheloveka. Rody chelovecheskie - tvorcheskii akt"

Fifth folder : about Soviet education system

Folder ten: typewritten text of *Put' Kassandry ili Prikliucheniia s makaronami*

Fourth box

First folder: radio scripts 1984-1986

Second folder: radio program "Prava cheloveka"

1. Prava cheloveka, n. 675 (January 11th, 1984): "Prava rozhenic"
2. Prava cheloveka, n. 677 (January 12/13th, 1984): "materinskie prava na Zapade"
3. Prava cheloveka n.678 (January, 12/13th, 1984): Pravo na zhizn'. Rody
4. Prava cheloveka n.680 (January, 14/15th, 1984)
5. Dlia r/zh "prava cheloveka": dlia vzgliada na prava i polozhenie sovetsoi zhenshchiny

Third folder: radio scripts from the program "dokumenty i liudi"

1. January 5/6th, 1984, "Khronika Gulaga"

Fourth folder : Russian typewritten text of *Was Russen uber Deutsche denken*

Fifth folder : religious texts

Fifth box : photographs

1. Foto in Stockholm after the premier of the theater adaptation of *The Women's Decameron* (January 1th, 1989)

Seventh box

1. Personal correspondence (Letters from Iuliia Voznesenskaia)

2. Personal correspondence (Letter to Iuliia Voznesenskaia)
 - Alla Sariban, 1981-1982
 - Bruno Osimo: July 28th, 1988; October 6th, 1989
 - Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, May 29th, 1981; January 19th, 1982
 - Sviatlana Aleksievich, September 19th, 1990

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