

## About Russian Women Writers



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The beginning of the 21st century in Russian literature can be characterized by the title of Elena Chizhova's award winning novel, *Time of Women* (????? ??????). The arrival of a new generation of talented female writers created a literary phenomenon influencing the contemporary literary landscape in Russia. Ten years ago, critics considered the "literary rebellion" of four Russian writers, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Tatiana Tolstaya, Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Nina Sadur, against male dominance in post-Soviet literature as the most significant event in the history of women's writing in Russia.

Their struggle to find a way into "serious" literature and their work changed the perception of "gender binarism." They are well known in the West, and some, such as Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, have been acclaimed by Publishers Weekly as "one of the finest living Russian writers."

Petrushevskaya continues to be the most prominent Russian woman writer to the West today. Her collection, *There Once Lived a Woman who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby*, published in the U.S. by Penguin Books, became the New York Times Book Review bestseller in December 2009. In 2010 it won the [World Fantasy Award](#) for Best Collection. Tatiana Tolstaya, who spends her yearly schedule between America and Russia, is also a popular writer in English-speaking countries. There are several selections which were published in the U.S. and recognized by critics: *White Wall*; *On the Golden Porch*, and other stories. Very well accepted was the novel in documents by Ulitskaya Daniel Stein. *The Interpreter*.

Their work should be credited as the foreword to a new period in the history of women's writing in Russia. The fascinating world of Russian urban folklore, reconstructed in the stories of Lyudmila Petrushevskaya and Nina Sadur, bore little resemblance to everyday life but still reflected the troubled women's souls in Soviet and post-Soviet reality. Many women writers of the post-Soviet era, especially Galina Sherbakova, Svetlana Vasilenko and writers from small provincial cities throughout Russia not necessarily familiar to Western readers imprinted in words the turmoil of the last decades of the 20th century and its burden on women in Russia. It was often described as "insignificant" themes or "the prose of life" (see: Sutcliffe, Benjamin. *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers from Khrushchev to Putin*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2009). It could also be portrayed, however, as a powerful testimony of the struggle of Russian women to overcome the brutality of everyday life, to keep their hopes alive, and to return to the origins of Russian spirituality. Their quiet voices should not be dismissed in the wave of bright literary talent that has appeared in Russia in the new millennium.

The new century brought forward an unprecedented event in Russian literary history; the appearance of literature written by women which was not only equal to male writers, but in some aspects overshadowed them. Their breakthrough into the mainstream of Russian literature which was always male-dominated created fiction and poetry which was acclaimed by critics and the public alike. It is difficult to predict whether this time will be called the "Women's age" in Russian literature as has happened with the "Silver Age" of Russian poetry in 20th century. It is obvious, however, that it is a flourishing time for women's literature.

After the decade characterized by popular fiction and crime fiction by Polina Dashkova, Yulia Latynina, Makanina and others, different genres in women's literature came into the spotlight. Among them are prose of Olga Slavnikova, Elena Chizhova, Elena Koliadina, recent prose of Lyudmila Ulitskaya, thrillers of Dina Rubina living in Israel, poetry of Polina Barskova, Elena Fanailova, Maria Stepanova and Linor Goralik.

When we consider the work of women writers in Russia, we should remember that they came into the professional literary world through difficulties unimaginable in the west. This generation of Russian women writers tried and successfully embodied in words their life experiences in a difficult country with numerous problems, with suffering of the poor and new richness, with the beauty and natural grace of its people, and the ugliness of poverty, unscrupulousness of the "nouveaux riches" and the authorities. They brought into light the traditional women's problems and also expressed their feelings and emotions, i.e. love, compassion, struggle to keep life going and to bring beauty into the world, which was previously described as "morally insignificant". This type of literature was often described as common ("butovaya literatura") or dismissed as "typical women's writing" or as experimental prose of the 90s. (See: Carol Adlam. *Women in Russian Literature after Glasnost*. London: Legenda, 2005, pp.16-23).

Contemporary Russian women writers continued to explore the typical "female" themes but also opened up to much more complicated moral, philosophical, historical and metaphysical problems of the world. Not only had they reflected upon them, their creativity, growing literary skills and sophistication went into mainstream literature. The proof is in the Russian Booker prize in 2006, 2009 and 2010, awarded to women writers. Olga Slavnikova won Booker prize for her magnum opus "[2017](#)". Elena Chizhova received the award for her novel, *Time of Women* (2009) and Elena Koliadina for "[Cross of Flowers](#)" (2010).

The current literary landscape in Russia owes so much to these three authors. Olga Slavnikova's 2017 is the magnificent tale about turbulent times in one of the most mystic regions of Russia - Urals Mountains. It is also a dramatic story about love in the turbulent times. Olga Slavnikova's breakthrough into the mainstream of the Russian literature at the beginning of 21st century meant a radical change in Russian women's literature in general. It overcame the limits of gender conceptions and became a major event in the history of Russian literature.

Koliadina's novel *Cross of Flowers* (*Zvetochnyi Crest*) was published on-line in 2010 and immediately became a literary sensation. It is the story of a young and beautiful woman Theodosia who was sacrificed by a local priest in the city of Totma in the 17th century and burned for witchcraft. The novel is an attempt to show the fragility of beauty in the world, and about all winning Hope and Faith symbolized in the flowering of a cross made by Theodosia from the dry branches at the end of the novel. Elena Koliadina called her hero the "bright soul". The spiritual and metaphysical meaning of this work by Koliadina has yet to be analyzed by critics and researchers. In addition, it is an enchanting novel written in old-Russian language, exploring the original Russian vocabulary.

While some critics consider it an experiment without a future, it is possible to see the tendency of a return to the origins of Russian language, with followers to come.

The works of Elena Chizhova consider the difficult socio-historical problems in Soviet and Russian history. [Polukrovka](#) (Half-blood) was nominated for Booker and Time of women was awarded Booker in 2009. In the first of these novels, the writer talks about old 'wound'- the existence and spread of antisemitism in the former Soviet Union. Through the fate of a young girl ('half-blood') Masha Argo who was trying to find her identity in the hostile world of the 70s, the author shows how the victim of injustice can become the oppressor herself if the values of the generations are lost or destroyed by a tyrannical regime. 'Time of Women' is an elegant and powerful work about the remarkable ability of Russian women to resist any kind of brutality in the world. The fate of several women in St. Petersburg is the center of the novel, hence the name Time of Women. The New York Times reviewed it as 'an earthbound and frankly emotional novel, especially in a literary scene long dominated by the cerebral trickery of postmodernism'. Ms. Chizhova is hoping that Russian artists are ready - finally- to address the good and evil of the Soviet past. History repeats itself in Russia, she said, 'the same evils appear in new guises, and failing to study it means repeating terrible mistakes'(Ellen Barry. 'A Writer Invites Russia to Engage Its Painful Past" InThe New York Times, March 5, 2010).

Another important aspect of modern female literature in Russia is the existence of strong émigré literature. Writers living and creating abroad and their works translated into English and other languages influenced the quality of Russian literary work in general. Among them are Dina Rubina, living in Israel but writing in Russian, Marina Paley, and Anya Ulinich with her debut novel Petropolis written in English, Tatiana Tolstaya and other writers and poets. It is broadening the horizons of Russian literature and bringing Western democratic and emancipation traditions to Russian culture

The contemporary Russian literary process generates experimental and classical novels in stark difference to the negative emotions of the last decades and dark 'alternative writings' of the 90s due to post-Soviet traumatic experience. It is hopefully the beginning of a return to the ideals formed by great Russian thinkers, philosophers and writers at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century in their search for 'Goodness, Beauty and Truth' (see: Vladimir Soloviev about Dostoevsky).

For the first time in history Russian women writers are up to the challenge. They embody the important philosophical, moral and social questions in their works. Their answers to the demanding needs of Russian society in positive ideals is a clear and refreshing voice of hope and optimism.

By Elena Dimov