

Silent Pens and Critical Voices: The Challenges of the Russian Woman Writers of 19th Century

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Abstract

The 19th century marked a transformative era in Russian society and literature. It is often termed its 'Golden Age of Russian Literature'. The literary canon of this period was dominated by the names of male authors such as Alexander Pushkin, Nikolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy etc. These well-known writers not only shaped Russian literature but also significantly influenced global literary traditions. However, amidst a pantheon of celebrated male authors, the names of women writers are conspicuously—and unjustly—absent. Even in the 21st century, absence of single female writer continues to define its legacy. Though between the 1810s and 1830s, approximately thirty women were actively writing and creating their literary works. A few of them were Zinaida Volkonskaya, Nadezhda Durova, Karolina Pavlova, and Evdokia Rostopchina. The contributions of women writers of the same period have largely been neglected, marginalized, or forgotten altogether.

This article, titled *Silent Pens and Critical Voices*, seeks to explore the multiple challenges faced by Russian women writers of 19th century. It will address the socio-cultural constraints, critical reception by male contemporaries, educational limitations, and institutional exclusions that hindered their entry and survival in the literary canon. Restoring unheard voices of Russian Women writers to the narrative of Russian literature is both an act of justice and an enrichment of the literary tradition itself.

Keywords: Silent Pen, Marginalisation, women's question, unheard voices

Introduction

The 19th century marked as 'Golden age of Russian literature', with name of famous male writers like Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841), Ivan Turgenev (1818–1883), Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) and so on. These well-known writers shaped not only the literary canon but also the moral and philosophical consciousness of their time. Literary masterpieces of these well-known writers have achieved both national reverence and global acclaim.

Despite the remarkable richness and diversity of 19th century Russian literature, one striking absence continues to define its legacy: the lack of a single widely recognized female writer among its celebrated literary giants. Even in 21st century name and works of Russian women of 19th century is not included in school and university programs on the history of Russian literature. For centuries, the absence of women writers in the Russian literary canon has often been explained by the belief that there were few talented women or that they did not take part in literary life. However, contemporary critics such as Catriona Kelly, Irina Yukina, Barbara Heldt, Rosalind Marsh etc. claim that by the beginning of the 19th century, a large number of women writers appeared in Russian literature. The presence of talented Russian women writers

is also affirmed by the contemporary historian and professor of Slavic studies Catriona Kelly. She wrote "though some late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women poets were no more than dilettante rhymesters, some, for example Urusova and Kheraskova, and later Aleksandra Murzina and Aleksandra Magnitskaia (active in the 1790s), Maria Pospelova (1780–1805) and Anna Volkova (1781–1834), were genuinely talented individuals, the best of whose work displays intelligence, wit, and technical facility.¹ Hence, there is no doubt that these women writers were contemporaries of the great writers of the 'Golden age of Russian literature'.

Emergence of Women's Creative Writings

By the late 18th century, Russian literature embraced sentimentalism, highlighting the emotions and experiences of ordinary people, including women. Karamzin's story 'Poor Liza' (1792) exemplified this shift, famously stating that "even a peasant woman knows how to love." During this period, interest in women's issues grew, and many women became involved in reading, writing, and publishing. A number of women's magazines emerged such as 'Ladies Magazine' (Damskiy zhurnal), 'Moscow Mercury' (Moskovskiy Mercuriy), 'Fashion Store' (Modni magazin), 'Rays' (Luchi), 'New Russian Bazaar' (Novi ruski bazar) etc., creating space for female voices and shaping a new female readership.²

Contemporary Russian critic Irina Yukina notes that the 'women's question' became increasingly prominent in these publications, which ranged from literature to fashion.³ Early women writers, though often marginalized, laid crucial groundwork for future generations. Despite their contributions, most have been excluded from the literary canon, overshadowed by their male counterparts of the so-called "Golden Era."

Hence, it is important to remember that women writers did exist in 18th – 19th century Russia. Among the earliest women to make a mark on Russian literary culture were Ekaterina II (1729-1796), Ekaterina Dashkova (1743-1810), Ekaterina Aleksandrovna Sumarkova (1746-1797) Anna Bunina (1774–1829), Elizaveta Vasilevna Kheraskova (1737-1809), Ekaterina Sergeevna Urusova (1747- after 1817) and so on. Later appeared names of Nadezhda Durova (1783–1866), Zinaida Volkonskaya (1789–1862), Evdokia Rostopchina (1811–1858), Elena Gan (1814–1842), Elizaveta Kologrivova (1809–1884), Evgenia Tur (1815-1892), Sofia Soboleva (1840–1884), Sofia Khvoshchinskaya (1828–1865), Sofia Kovalevskaya (1850–1891), Olga Shapir (1850–1916), Nadezhda Teplova (1814–1848), Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya (1824–1889), Maria Zhukova (1804–1855), Maria Tsebrikova (1835–1917), Karolina Pavlova (1807–1893) and the list is endless. Many of these women either remained in obscurity or were silenced altogether, their works neglected by critics, scholars, and readers alike. These pioneering figures emerged during the period when female intellectual and literary pursuits were not only rare but often actively discouraged and criticised. These women were largely excluded from the dominant literary canon and their writings, thoughts and feelings remained silent since centuries.

Challenges of the Russian Women Writers

The fact is certain that that a significant number of gifted women writers emerged in 19th century, striving

¹ Kelly C. Women's writing in Russia // The Routledge companion to Russian Literature, edited by Neil Cornwell, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2001. Pg. 151.

² See Lotman Y. M. 'Russkaya literatura na frantsuzskom yazyke', in Y. M. Lotman, *Izbrannie stati v trekh tomakh*, 3 volume, (Tallinn: Aleksandra, 1992), II, Pg. 360.

³ See Yukina I. Diskurs zhenskoi pryessi XIX v. // Zhenskiye i gendernye issledovaniya. № 5 - SPb, 2000. Pg. 32. https://a-z.ru/women_cd1/html/diskurs_zhensk_press_19v_1.htm (Accessed on 26-12-2019)

to assert their voices, demonstrating notable intelligence and creative talent within a literary culture shaped by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Despite their active participation in the literary sphere—publishing in newspapers and journals, and engaging in intellectual discourse through salons—their works were largely marginalized and, over time, forgotten. Thus, the ‘silent pen’ went unrecognized by their contemporaries. This silence was not due to a lack of talent, but rather the result of deeply rooted gender biases that denied women equal space in the literary canon. As a result, their voices remained unheard, their pens unnoticed, and their literary achievements largely forgotten by their own generation.

The creative journey of women writers was fraught with challenges, largely due to inadequate educational opportunities. Contemporary Russian philologist and journalist M. Nesterenko underscores the contribution of early women writers in literary canon and difficulties encountered by them in establishing their presence within the literary canon. She wrote that “the initial conditions for women to enter in literature were different from those of men. At the beginning of the 19th century, they declared themselves as translators (noblewomen had a good command of foreign languages) and children's authors (it was believed that since women were engaged in education, they should be encouraged to write for children). The entry of women into literature was influenced by the fact that they could not serve and receive more specific education. Even in institutes for noble maidens, serious attention was paid only to languages. Therefore, the initial capital with which women entered literature was lower than that of men”.⁴

Socio-Cultural Constraints and Gender Roles

In 19th century Russia, the roles of women were clearly demarcated by patriarchal ideology. A woman's primary identity was rooted in her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. The domestic sphere was considered her rightful place, and any attempt to step into the public or intellectual arena was often met with skepticism or outright hostility. Prominent male critics and philosophers of the 19th century such as Vissarion Belinsky (1811–1848), Nikolai Verevkin (1813–1838), Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–1889) reinforced these gender norms on creative writing of women.

In 1835, Belinsky wrote a review ‘The Victim’ of the works of Madame Montborn, an unknown writer to this day. In this work, Belinsky explicitly delineated distinct roles for men and women in the society. He asserted that men are destined to pursue their passions and fulfill their ambitions, whereas women, as embodiments of beauty, grace, love, and self-sacrifice, are tasked with supporting men in the realization of their duties. He wrote that “the entire world is an open field of activity for man; the whole world is his domain. But what field, what domain has been given to woman? ... Thus, a woman's work is to excite in a man the energy of the soul, the ardor of noble passions, to support a sense of duty and aspiration, — this is the purpose of women's life, and it is both grand and sacred! On the earth she is an agent of beauty and Graces, the priestess of love and self-sacrifice”.⁵

Belinsky appreciated the feelings of love and motherhood in women, but resisted the creative talent of women. He wrote that “a woman is the guardian angel of a man at every stage of his life: her watchful, caring gaze meets him at the very moment of his birth, and as he nuzzle close to the source of love and

⁴ My translation from Nyestyeryenko M. Vsyem viyti iz tyeni: kak vyernoot pisatyelnits XIX vyeka v istoriyoo lityeratoori // Ryetsyenzia na knigoo «Klassiki i sovryemyennitsi. Gyendyerniye ryealii v istorii rooskoy lityeratoori XIX vyeka». <https://gorky.media/reviews/vsem-vyjti-iz-teni-kak-vernoot-pisatel-nits-xix-veka-v-istoriyu-literatury/> (Accessed on 26-09-2020)

⁵ My translation from Belinski V. G. Zhertva... Sochinyeniye gzhi Monborn, 1835. http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_1560.shtml (Accessed on 15-09-2020)

life, he turns to her with unconscious affection, offering his first smile”.⁶ He further asserted that while a woman may appreciate the arts, her engagement should be for personal enjoyment rather than with the intention of becoming an artist herself. In this way, Belinsky rejected artistic creation or authorship of women as writers.⁷ According to him, a woman’s mission was to inspire man’s soul and support his noble endeavors, not to pursue artistic creation herself. Such views solidified the notion that literary genius was a male attribute, and any creative expression by women was either dismissed or deemed derivative.

The involvement of women in creative work was perceived as a violation of cultural and social norms. Often, they were ridiculed or punished symbolically by their contemporaries. Russian historian and literary critic Mikhail Trofimovich Kachenovski (1775-1842) wrote that “a mother of a family who often leaves home and neglects her household, wants to shine in the republic of writers with her talents, wit and profundity, and who writes metaphysical and philosophical novels, is condemned to wash linen and rinse tableware for ⁸ months”.⁹

There is no doubt that Russian literature of the 19th century was predominantly shaped by male writers and critics, many of whom harbored dismissive attitudes toward women’s literary endeavors. Some asserted that a woman who writes could neither truly love nor fulfill the roles of wife and mother.

Educational Disparities

The educational opportunities available to women in early Russia were significantly inferior to those offered to men. Access to higher education was virtually nonexistent for women until much later in the 19th century. This profound educational disparity meant that many aspiring female writers lacked the formal training in rhetoric, classical languages, history, and philosophy that was considered essential for literary endeavors.

A significant writer of the late 18th century, Ekaterina Dashkova (1743–1810), wrote memoirs that offer valuable insight into the limited scope of formal education available to girls during her time, an education largely confined to domestic skills, religious instruction, and basic literacy. She wrote that “my uncle spared nothing to give us the best teachers; and, according to that time, we were well educated. We were taught four languages, and spoke French fluently; the Secretary of State taught us Italian, and Bekhteyev gave us lessons in Russian, however we studied it badly. We showed great success in dancing, and knew how to draw”.¹⁰

Hence, it is quiet clear that in 18th – 19th century Russia, the primary purpose of women's education was not intellectual development or personal empowerment, but rather to prepare women for their expected roles within the patriarchal social order—as obedient daughters, cultured and faithful wives, loving mothers and guardians of the family in noble or middle-class households. Given the limitations of such an

⁶ My translation from Belinski V. G. Zhertva... Sochinyeniye gzhi Monborn, 1835. http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_1560.shtml (Accessed on 15-09-2020)

⁷ See Belinski V. G. Zhertva... Sochinyeniye gzhi Monborn, 1835. http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_1560.shtml (Accessed on 15-09-2020)

⁹ Kachenovski M.T. Nachertanie ulozheniya dlya respubliki literatorov, "Vestnika Evropy", 1805. http://az.lib.ru/k/kachenowskij_m_t/text_1805_nachertanie.shtml (Accessed on 16-02-2020)

¹⁰ Dashkova E. R. Vospominaniya knyagini E. R. Dashkovoy, pisanniye yeyoo samoy. E.L. Kasprovich, Lyeyptsig, 1876. http://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_003545931/ (Accessed on 12-09-2021)

educational system, women were effectively denied the opportunity to cultivate their intellectual potential or create literary masterpieces.

The Patriarchal Structure of the Literary Field

The Russian literary scene of the 19th century was overwhelmingly controlled by male critics, publishers, and editors. These gatekeepers played a crucial role in shaping the canon and determining which voices deserved recognition. Anna Bunina's (1774–1829) poem 'Conversation between me and women' (1818) is true example in this case, in which she openly speaks about the superiority of men and women's marginal status in literary canon. She highlighted that it was men, not women, who occupied the higher positions of authority. The recognition and reputation of an author rested entirely in male hands.¹¹

Male critics often looked down on women's writing. Even when women showed real talent, their work was often labeled as overly emotional or lacking in intellectual depth. For example, Belinsky questioned the creative capacities of women, expressing deep skepticism regarding their literary contributions. He remarked: 'Women's creations are short-lived. She can become a poet only when she loves, and not when she creates literary masterpieces. Nature sometimes gives them a spark of talent, but never gives them genius'¹²

The views of Russian writer Nikolai Verevkin (1813–1838) also revealed how society viewed women writers: not as creative minds, but as violators of their "natural" role, causing discomfort simply by thinking, writing, and expressing themselves intellectually. He wrote that "to be pleasing, a woman must remain within the boundaries of traditional femininity. However, when she takes up the pen and, driven by vanity, engages in intellectual pursuits, she is perceived as abandoning her womanhood. What emerges is viewed as unnatural and unsettling".¹³ Such attitudes discouraged women from pursuing writing seriously and often led them to publish anonymously or under male pseudonyms.

Burden of Pseudonyms

Many women writers of 19th century Russia adopted pseudonyms or published anonymously to avoid criticism or social repercussions. For example, Elena Gan wrote under the pseudonym Zeneida R-va. Avdotya Panaeva - N. N. Stanitsky, Sofia Soboleva - B. Samoilovich, Nadezhda Khvoshchinskaya used V. Krestovsky or V. Krestovsky-pseudonym, her sister Sofia Khvoshchinskaya used Vesentsev etc.

This was a period when women could not openly express their thoughts due to the patriarchal social structure, that is, the superiority of men over women. As a result, they either wrote under a pseudonym or used an indirect method in writing to express their views. Z. Volkonskaya's story 'Snovideniye' (The Dream, 1829)¹⁴ is a suitable example in this regard. The writer skillfully uses the idea of a dream to present a different, unique and bold female perspective. It contrasts the real, conscious world ruled by the thoughts and authority of the father and teacher. Zinaida Volkonskaya compares the 'female principle' with the 'male,' showing that the female way of seeing the world is just as true and meaningful.¹⁵

¹¹ See Kelly, Catriona. *An Anthology of Russian Women's Writing: 1777-1992*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1994.

¹² See Byelinskiy V. G. Zhertva... Sochinyeniye g-zhi Monborn, 1835. http://az.lib.ru/b/belinskij_w_g/text_1560.shtml (Accessed on 15-09-2020)

¹³ See Vyeryevkin N.N. Povest "Zhenshchina pisatel'nitsa" (Woman Writer)»1837. http://az.lib.ru/w/werewkin_n_n/text_1837_zhenschina_pisatel'nitsa.shtml (Accessed on 12-03-2020)

¹⁴ See Kelly C. *An Anthology of Russian Women's Writing: 1777-1992*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1994.

¹⁵ Saxena R. Ruskaya zhenskaya proza XIX veka i formirovaniye «zhenskovo mirosozertsaniya»// Slavika XLIII. Edited by Kornél Kovács. Debrecen University Press. 2014. Pg. 182-183.

Publishing Obstacles and Critical Reception

Even for those women who managed to overcome societal and educational hurdles to produce literary works, the path to publication was fraught with difficulties. The publishing industry was largely dominated by men, from editors and publishers to critics and booksellers. Bias against female authorship was prevalent, making it harder for women's manuscripts to be accepted and promoted. Publishers might be hesitant to invest in works by women, fearing a lack of public interest or critical acclaim. Such circumstances sometimes created lack of self-confidence and hesitation in publishing their own literary works. Durova's letter to Pushkin, written in 1835, confirms our opinion. With mixed feelings of humility, lack of self-confidence, fear of publication, criticism and confidence in Pushkin's skill, she wrote him "I have several sheets of my notes; I would like to sell them, preferably to you. Buy them, Alexander Sergeyevich! Your fine pen can make something very entertaining out of them for our compatriots <...> I only warn you that the notes were not written for publication and that, trusting your mind, I am giving them to you as they are, without changes or amendments".¹⁶

Once published, the critical reception of women's writing was often dismissive, condescending, or even hostile. Critics, predominantly male, frequently judged female authors not on the literary merit of their work but on their gender. Their writing was often characterized as overly emotional, domestic, or lacking in intellectual depth. Personal attacks and criticisms of their morality were common. This biased critical environment could be disheartening and discouraging, further limiting the visibility and influence of women writers. The struggle to be taken seriously as legitimate literary figures was a constant battle.

While some writers acknowledged women's creative abilities, they often maintained that women were capable only of producing low-grade literary works. It was widely believed that women's writing should be confined to lyrical genres only. Modern scholar and candidate of philological sciences, Galina Vladimirovna Efendieva, highlights limitations of women's literary participation: "For many centuries, women were simply not permitted to engage in literary activity, as it was deemed inappropriate, impossible, and morally objectionable for them. And when they eventually began to take part in the literary process, an unspoken rule dictated that only lyrical genres were considered acceptable for female authors."¹⁷

Women writers were often criticized for their perceived inability to engage in independent intellectual thought, a quality considered essential for genuine literary creativity. As a result, it was assumed that female authors could never introduce original ideas into literature, but would merely echo established notions. Their creative writing was also represented as an imitation of male literary forms and content.¹⁸ Hence, it is important to highlight that despite facing significant criticism, women writers continued to produce literary works and actively addressed issues such as the "women question," education, and emancipation—ideas that later came to be associated with feminist thought.

Conclusion

The story of early Russian women writers is one of perseverance in the face of profound societal, educati

https://dea.lib.unideb.hu/dea/bitstream/handle/2437/245734/SLA_2014_43.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y (Assessed on 13-12-2020)

¹⁶ Pismo iz perepisok N. A. Durova — A. S. Pushkinu, 5 avgusta 1835 g. Elabuga. <http://pushkin-lit.ru/pushkin/pisma/pushkinu-1084.htm> (Accessed on 26-08-2020)

¹⁷ Efendiyeva G.V. Khudozhestvennoe svoeobrazie zhenskoy liriki vostochnoi vetvi russkoy emigratsii: Rukopis dis. kand. filolog. nauk. M. – 2006. Pg 27.

¹⁸ Kazakova I. Kritika i publitsistika kontsa XIX – nachala XX vekov o tvorchestve russkikh pisatel'nykh // Preobrazhenie (Russkiy feministkiy zhurnal), 1995, № 3. Pg. 63. <https://a-z.ru/women/texts/kazakr.htm> (Accessed on 17-09-2021)

onal, and professional challenges. Their 'silent pens' often concealed critical voices that questioned gender roles, explored the complexities of female experience, and subtly, or sometimes overtly, critiqued the patriarchal structures of their time. While they may not always occupy the same prominent position in traditional literary histories as their male counterparts, their contributions were vital. They expanded the thematic scope of Russian literature, introduced new perspectives, and, most importantly, demonstrated the intellectual and creative capacity of women in a society that often denied it. These women were largely excluded from the literary canon, silenced by critical voices, and rendered invisible through pseudonymity and neglect. The absence of female names in the dominant literary narrative is not merely a result of historical accident, but reflects a broader cultural and critical marginalization. To this day, Russian women writers have yet to be accorded a central place in the dominant narratives of Russian literary history.

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