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*Politics and Literature in Russia: Recent Trends**

Rashmi Doraiswamy

This article deals with the literature of perestroika and focuses on the post-Soviet period. From the period of perestroika onwards, Russian literature, in its three avatars as official Soviet literature, dissident literature in the samizdat and Russian literature published abroad, came under the single category of 'Russian Literature'. However, many diverse voices continue to exist in this now 'unified' literary scenario. The article identifies major movements, themes, critical positions and styles in contemporary Russian literature. It analyses works by major contemporary writers and also examines critical voices in the contemporary literary scene.

Sometimes the end of a century is also the end of the epoch. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European socialist bloc in 1991 changed the political face of the world as it had been known for the better part of the last century. A large part of the Second World disappeared and the countries that now formed part of the Commonwealth of Independent States were no longer seen as partaking of a supranational Soviet identity. The independent countries had to transit to market economy and become part of the processes of globalization. Some of the former Soviet states became part of the First World clubs of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union,¹ while some slid into Third World status.

To understand recent trends in Russian literature we have to look back to the period of perestroika.

The post-Second World War period during the period of the three Thaws saw the publication of many banned books, or books that critiqued the system. The Thaws lasted for short periods, but nevertheless ensured that a literature which could boast of depicting 'socialism with a human face' could be published. The

¹ Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia entered the EU and NATO in 2004.

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first period of Thaw (1953–1954) saw the publication of Ilya Ehrenburg's novel, *Thaw*; the second period after the XX Party Congress in 1956 saw the publication of Dudinstev's *Not by Bread Alone*; it came to an end with the Hungarian Uprising. The third in 1961 after the XXII Party Congress saw the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. This period was halted with Khrushchev's attack on modernism in the Manezh Gallery.

All this is not to say that the literature that had official sanction was of no value. Socialist realism produced works of immense power that in their own way continued the Russian tradition of the artist as the keeper of the nation's conscience. There were also many critical insiders who critiqued the negative aspects of the socialist system. Those who found it difficult to work within the parameters of realism of the socialist kind developed what was called Aesopian language, a fable mode of telling stories, or allegorical narratives. Thus there was no paucity of diverse styles within the official realm of socialist aesthetics. It was only the Cold War propaganda machinery of the West that valorized the works of the dissidents and derided literature within the Soviet Union, as if everything under official sanction was necessarily of inferior aesthetic standard, or in some way reflected the artist's compromises with the State.

The post-War period saw the development of Village Prose, War Prose, Urban Prose and even Women's Literature with the publication of works such as N. Baranskaya's *A Week Like Any Other*. Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich* also inaugurated the theme of the concentration camp in literature—*lagernaya proza*—which was to pick up tempo in the years of perestroika and glasnost. The 1960s also saw the birth of *samizdat*, from the word *samsebyaizdat* coined by the poet Nikolai Ivanovich Glazkov. This underground movement was well-organized and even managed to run its own journals such as *Sphinx*, *Sintaksis* and *Severnaya Pochta*. The publication of *Metropol'* and the controversy that followed in 1979 saw the emigration of some of its writers and the 'political downgrading' in the Soviet Union of others.

With perestroika and the restructuring of the Soviet economy, which was seen to be stagnating, came glasnost, an openness in the media and the cultural sphere that was to help this restructuring of not just the economy but society as a whole. Stalinism and the cult of personality were fully criticized, and the discovery of mass graves in Kuropaty, Kiev, Tomsk, outside Leningrad, led to a questioning of state power and control over the fate of individuals. The effects of collectivization were also critiqued openly. Several campaigns were launched by the Soviet state at this time against burning issues such as alcoholism and corruption. The war in Afghanistan also came in for critical assessment and Chernobyl became a flash-point for environmental issues. Many of those in internal exile were released, prominent among them being Andrei Sakharov.

Perestroika and glasnost thus saw the publication of works that took up taboo subjects such as drug addiction (as in Chingiz Aitmatov's *Plakha*) or criticized

the values of citizens of Soviet society (Valentin Rasputin's *Fire* and Viktor Astafiev's *Sad Detective*, for instance). It also saw the membership of the Writers' Union being returned posthumously to Boris Pasternak, whose *Dr Zhivago*, written in the 1950s, was published in 1988 in *Novy Mir*. In 1989 all honours were taken back posthumously from Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural henchman. This year also saw the publication of *Gulag Archipalego* in *Novy Mir*. Rybakov's *Children of Arbat*, a critique of Stalinism, was published twenty years after it was written. Grossman's *Forever Flowing* written in 1963 was published in *Oktyabr*. In 1987, Akhmatova's *Requiem* was published and in 1988 Zamyatin's *We* (a science-fiction novel that predates Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell), Fazil Iskander's *Sandro of Chegem* and Nadezhda Mandelshtam's memoirs.

The literature published during perestroika thus included (1) works that were classics of the twentieth century from the 1920s and 1930s but banned, such as Gorky's *Untimely Thoughts*, Platonov's *Foundation Pit* and *Chevengur*, and Bulgakov's *The Heart of a Dog*; (2) Works of the period of Thaw that had gone beyond the political framework of the Thaw, such as Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* or Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales*, written in 1966 but published in 1987, and Tvardovsky's *By the Right of Memory*; (3) works by Russian emigrants; and (4) avant garde, experimental works that followed modernist aesthetics banned since the early 1930s. Boris Lanin (1998: 55) points out that:

With the onset of glasnost in 1987 all the various strands of Russian literature—Soviet literature, Socialist Realism, the literature of emigration, *tamizdat* and *samizdat*—came together, enabling the whole of the twentieth century Russian literature to be studied as an integrated whole, regardless of where a particular writer lived. Nevertheless, if in the Soviet Union émigré literature was always regarded as self-enclosed and inward-looking, the emigres themselves always emphasised the unity of Russian literature.

A.V. Shubin points out that in the 1980s there were once again three main ideas in the social sphere: Slavophiles, Westerners and Socialists. The difference, according to him, was that in the nineteenth century socialism was the product of the Slavophile–Westernizers debate whereas in the twentieth century, the debate itself grew out of Marxism–Leninism and socialism (Shubin 2001: 336–37). There were also interesting combinations of liberal westernizers, conservative-patriots and socialist-narodniks. This debate came into the fore in the 1970s, particularly in the work of the Village Prose writers. Shubin points out that

The works of the village prose writers at the end of the 1970s were increasingly critical. They show moral deterioration that reigned in the society of developed socialism, the destructive machinery of industrialisation—of 'technical progress'—on man and nature. The hope for being saved according to the village prose writers is in the preservation of traditions and not in the victorious

march of 'progress'. But these writers did not draw political conclusions. The authors of *Metropol'* who were writers who thought differently, also walked the same path, more decisively but less successfully. On the whole, the Slavophiles of the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s were careful not to lose their mass audience, but at the same time were sufficiently critical to attract attention (Shubin 2001: 342).

Solzhenitsyn provided another take on this debate, being an émigré but also closer to Slavophilian ideas rather than to Western liberal democracy.

Post-Soviet Russia

The dividing line between the literature of the period of perestroika and the present literature is August 1991 when the attempt at a coup failed. Some welcomed the crisis, while for others this was the Great Fall. Chingiz Aitmatov reflects self-critically:

Yes. There has been a change of epochs, change of systems, and we writers have found ourselves in a new social and creative situation. The Soviet Atlantis with all its cultural and spiritual heritage, with all its contradictions sank into the ocean. And writers also landed in this non-cultural space, along with Atlantis. We ourselves wanted this and helped it along in many ways. But as it always happens, you expect one thing and another happens (Aitmatov 1998: 531).

The biggest change that has come about is that literature is no longer seen as the conscience keeper of the nation. Says Kholmogorov (1996) of the writer in the new Russia: '...he has still not lost respect for himself and is still habituated to the belief that a "poet in Russia is more than a poet". But now he better get used to the fact that the poet in Russia is only a poet and nothing more'. Aleksei Varlamov, the well-known writer, on the other hand, feels that the poet has ceased to matter. He reasons as follows: 'Since writers are no longer shot, or killed, or put behind bars for political reasons—we are just not recognised. Write whatever you want, do whatever you know. All the same you are not needed by anyone' (Varlamov 1996). Others like Makanin welcome the new social position of the writer as just himself, nothing more, nothing less:

Catholics gathered together to pray; then came the Protestants, who said we all had our individual God, that we may separately speak to our God, and there is not necessarily a need for a church. That is what more or less happened in our country. Before, we were all together in Soviet society, and now we are all on our own. Before a personality would realise itself only through the collective, like through the Church among Catholics. Now our individuality is like that of the Protestants; it realises itself through itself (Makanin 1995: 97).

The other important change that has occurred is that there is no unified 'literary process', cemented by an ideological and aesthetic programme, as there was under the regime of socialist realism. This has brought to the fore many groups called *tusovki*. Tatyana Tolstaya explains the term in the following way:

This is a word that came up about ten to fifteen years ago. It means a group that is unified by common interests. A sort of club that is not formal, with no pronouncements. There has been a lot of discussion about this word and the root of the word was found in Pushkin. It comes from card games: *tusovat'*, *tasavat'sa*, which has the meaning of turning around.

A lot of our new lexicon is derived from a semi-criminal repertoire of words and insofar cards are also part of the criminal world, this word too belongs there. But today it is an accepted literary word in Russian. It is a living word that can be conjugated according to the rules of Russian grammar unlike many of the other new words.

So there are many *tusovki* and the internet also plays a role here. There was the 'Peterskaya tusovka' that revolved around Elena Shwartz, who is a very good poetess. This cult of Elena Shwartz, however, is limited to a small territory, among poets and the Petersburg litterateurs and is not pan-Russian. Petrushevskaya was also a cult writer for a time, but it passed. The internet also facilitates fan clubs. Akunin, for instance, has a very big fan club (Doraiswamy 2005).

Previously, the literary process, whether official or unofficial, had seemed unitary. The post-Soviet period has made it clear that there were many divisions among the seemingly monolithic processes and these are all out in the open. There is not one culture but many subcultures. Today, when all the walls between dissident, émigré and Russian literature have crumbled, the opposite wave of Russian writers who live abroad getting their works first published in Russia is happening: in 1991 Gorenstein's novel *Place* was published here, so was Aksyonov's *Moscow Saga*.

Even during Soviet times, much before perestroika, many genres of writing had existed, many of them from the realm of popular culture. Among these were the Author's Songs (the songs of Vysotsky and Bulat Akudzhava belonged here), Rock poetry, fantasies (including science-fiction), detective and spy novels. The popular genres are more in demand today. Perestroika quenched the thirst of the Soviet people for all kinds of banned and censored literature. Today, it is the turn of popular literature. Among the most popular books of the 1990s are Eduard Limonov's *Eto Ya, Edichka*, *The Confession of Beria's Lover* and *Kremlin Wives*. There is also a turn towards non-literary language and many writers have abandoned the 'modesty trope'. There is also the attempt to bring down literary works from the shelf of high classicity and to quote them easily and lightly. Pushkin, Lermontov, Dostoevsky and others get quoted not just in the texts of writers, but

also in the titles. This is particularly true of Makanin (*Underground—or Hero of Our Time*) and Bitov (*Pushkin's House*).

Like Dostoevsky who used the form of the boulevard novel and the crime novel to raise complex ethical and philosophical questions, Akunin's detective novels occupy a special place in this pantheon of popular writers. Tatyana Tolstaya says:

Akunin is a special phenomenon. He was a philologist and worked in the journal '*Innostrannaya Literatura*' (Foreign Literature). He decided to write detective novels and went against the dominant trend, which was to write commercial novels as primitively as possible. These novels were written by rewriters, not the authors themselves. This was done without love and in a great hurry, particularly the commercial women's romances. Akunin writes excellent Russian and he quotes classics in a very light way. Those who do not get the quotes, enjoy his novel at one level; those who do, are interested in figuring out whom he is quoting. His detective plot is well laid. With his works the prestige of the Russian literary word went up. Everybody woke up and started paying attention once again to well-written literature. Akunin is a big cultural event (Doraiswamy 2005: 22).

Movements

The three main movements in contemporary Russian literature are realism, post-realism and postmodernism. Each of these can be divided into several sub-groups. Realist works are those that, according to Leiderman and Lipovetsky, exhibit a nostalgia for realism. Among these are works that are labelled *Chernukhi* which deal with the theme of the 'small man' in the present context. Viktor Astafiev's works fall into this category. Postrealism dialogues with chaos, and differs from postmodernism in that it does not question reality or negate it. If Aitmatov's *The Mark of Cassandra* (1995) lies between realism and postrealism, Makenin's works lie definitely between postrealism and postmodernism. The works of Tatyana Tolstaya, Andrei Bitov, Timur Kibirov, among others, are widely classified as postmodernist. Tatyana Tolstaya herself classifies her work as 'Fantastic Realism', which she sees as the dominant style (*ibid.*). Viktor Erofeev's 'Memorium to Russian Literature' in 1990 pointed out that while the Soviet literature had seen its last days, the new literature already existed and could be traced back to Venedikt Erofeev's *Moskva-Petushki*, written in 1969.

While the definitions and the classification of writers in these movements is quite often fluid, it is generally held that socialist realism is no longer operative as an aesthetic framework. Chingiz Aitmatov presents a very balanced critique of this collapse of socialist realism:

As it had existed, when literature was subordinated to ideological tasks, socialist realism does not exist. But at the same time other complications have risen. As it is said, everything was flung from one extreme to another. Now the representation of man in the most shameful form is considered normal and beautiful.

Notwithstanding these complicated matters, I would not want to negate socialist realism completely. This method had its achievements, for example, in the realm of the realistic representation of people's life. Secondly, it played a positive role in the development of many national literatures. Now these literatures are on their own, and have to now live in the universal conditions of development in the world. But they have gathered some kind of experience (Aitmatov 1998: 536).

Themes

Tatyana Tolstaya points out that a new sentimentalism is the hallmark of contemporary literature:

This is not in the sense of being sentimental, but in the sense of representing feelings and emotions. A psychological approach, a softening of method is in evidence, with more attention being paid to anxieties of the soul. But there are not too many examples of this genre (Doraiswamy 2005: 21).

One of the works that sums up this approach is Aleksei Varlamov's *The Birth*. A couple who have drawn apart in their marriage and are almost indifferent to each other, come together again after the wife, who has been barren for long, gets pregnant. The plot develops through the visits to the thoughtful or indifferent doctors and hospitals, the feelings of the woman, the man and even of the growing child in the belly, and the fear that the child may not be normal. The man realizes that no social movement can ever occupy his attention; he now is only bothered about the birth of his child. The story may seem trite, but its significance derives from its context, that of the end of the doctrine of socialist realism, where every individual was first a citizen serving the high ideals of the State. The delineation of emotions of man, woman and child makes this work a representative of the new sentimentalism that Tolstaya talks of.

Women's literature also came into its own in the 1990s with as many as nine anthologies of their writings being published. The most prominent among these were *The New Amazons* and *She Who Remembers No Evil*. The road for women writers is, however, still not easy. Svetlana Vasilenko succinctly sums up the pre-perestroika and post-perestroika problems that women writers face: 'If before perestroika they did not publish me for reasons of censorship (and this turned out to be a temporary phenomenon), then now they do not publish me because I am a

woman (and this is a permanent phenomenon)' (Svetlana Vasilenko, quoted in Saxena 2004, p. 34). This literature is engaged with a variety of themes that range from the destruction of the myth of femininity to issues of the woman's body, particularly abortion and the suffering under the cult of personality. It is very often confessional in tone. Lyudmila Petrushevskaya's short story *Ditya* deconstructs the myth of the Soviet woman as mother and nurturer. The protagonist who is a woman of no great means, plans to kill her child as soon as it is born. When caught, she refuses to feed it. The short story, shocking in itself, does not either justify or criticize the woman's behaviour. It just presents facts and allows the reader to ponder over the despair or spiritual deadness of the woman who, as the advocate puts it, could have as well aborted the foetus, but chose instead to carry it for nine months, before attempting to kill it. As such, this short story by a woman writer, in its brutality is completely contrary to the 'new sentimentalism' of Varlamov's *The Birth*.

According to Aleksei Varlamov, apocalypse is the 'architheme' or main theme of the post-Soviet period. The end of the Soviet Union was seen as the end of the world. Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Mark of Cassandra*, Astafiev's *Proklyatiye i Ubityiye*, Petrushevskaya's *New Robinsons* all deal with this theme. Varlamov points out that this is a new theme in Russian literature and was in fact characteristic of the Silver Age of Russian literature in the works of Bely, Bryusov and Platonov. He, however, points out that 'At the threshold of centuries, the architheme of apocalypse disappears from literature as suddenly as it appears, and a new theme comes in its stead. The theme of murder as the final and only means of struggle with evil' (Varlamov 2005: 23).

Aitmatov's *The Mark of Cassandra* has a scientist, who has participated in unethical scientific practices in the Soviet Union, go up into space and refuse to come down. From space he rejects both the political systems the twentieth century threw up—socialism and capitalism. He discovers in space that human foetuses sometimes do not want to take birth. This discovery creates a furore on Earth. He finally commits suicide by stepping out of the space station. Thus, if in previous works, the critique of the system is counter-balanced with an optimistic ending, either voluntarily (as in *Farewell, Gulsary!*) or through censorship (as in *The White Ship*), *The Mark of Cassandra* is marked by a strong suicidal impulse as a protest against a world in which ethics are absent. This is a new take on the theme of the superfluous man (*lishny chelovek*). Whether it is the whales, or the unborn foetus or the main protagonist, Filofei, all will themselves to death and take the step to self-annihilation voluntarily. This call of death was present in an ambivalent form in *The White Ship*; in *The Mark of Cassandra*, it is the main theme. Both focus on fragile beings—a child in *The White Ship* and unborn foetuses in *The Mark of Cassandra*—and their being animated with the desire to die for they cannot accept the imperfection of the world they live in. Aitmatov's *The White*

Cloud of Genghis Khan and *The Mark of Cassandra* are marked by some of the characteristic features of postrealism: ambivalent imagery and the dialogue of distanced cultural voices. In *The White Cloud of Genghis Khan*, published in the early 1990s, the distant times of legend (of Genghis Khan) and contemporary repression (under Stalinism) are brought together and in *The Mark of Cassandra*, the two important political systems of the twentieth century—socialism and capitalism—are relativized.

Aitmatov's *The Mark of Cassandra* and Vladimir Makanin's *Escape Hatch* are both fantastic works. Makanin splits his world into two: there is the above ground world, which is animated by mobs and people who seem to be in hiding, and the world below ground where people are forever in restaurants, talking philosophy and culture. The connecting link between the two worlds is a hole in the ground, through which the hero Klyuchurov passes, constantly scraping and hurting himself. The protagonist, whose aim in life is to create a cave in which he can hide, seems to inhabit a world which is dark and gloomy and irrational. It is as if the end of the world is near and humans have to hide in the earth like animals to save themselves. What *The Mark of Cassandra* and *Escape Hatch* share are the images of masses that have turned into mobs at the end of the twentieth century. Masses are organized, have an aim and political will. Mobs are aimless and are given to irrational emotions. These images of the breakdown of all political systems and the unruliness of humans are compelling and speak of dystopic visions of society at the end of the century.

Journals, Unions and Awards

For over 150 years, the Russian 'thick' journals have played a very important role in the literary life of the nation. Now these journals have to learn to survive in the conditions of market economy. Today there are two kinds of journals, the serious or heavy journals and the commercial ones, which signify different kinds of literature. The schism between 'high culture' and 'popular' or 'commercial culture', which is usually wide in capitalist economies and was not as wide in the Soviet Union due to high literacy rates, is now making itself felt in Russia as well. Another interesting phenomenon is that it is not just the journals of the metropolises that are publishing interesting literature, but also from the 'provinces', such as the journals *Volga* and *Ural*.

The Writers' Union fell apart in 1992 when it got divided into the liberal Union of Russian Writers and nationalist Writers' Union of the Russian Federation. The Lenin Prize lost its value after this fall and a host of new awards came into being.

The Russian Booker award was set up by Michael Caine in 1992. An anonymous British person later set up the Small Booker Prize. In 1993 the Peterbooker award was instituted. This was later renamed the 'Northern Palm' (*Severnaya Palmyra*) Award. The Anti-Booker Award was set up in 1995 by the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*

and the first winner was Alexei Varlamov for his novella *The Birth (Rozhdenie)*. The Pushkin Prize, not for a specific work but a body of work, is awarded in Germany and offers more money (US\$ 25,000) than the Booker (US\$ 15,000). Fazil Iskander, Bella Akhmadulina and Dmitri Prigov have been recipients of this award. Similarly, the Booker, instituted in Russia may be given to a Russian living abroad. In 1995, Georgii Vadimov, for instance, won the Booker for his *The General and His Army*.

Critical Voices

It seems now in critical literature that a desire to objectively assess the Soviet period is gaining ground. The honeymoon with notions of ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’ is slowly going cold, now that realization has dawned that these are inscribed in market economy, globalization and other economic processes that have taken away many of the social security schemes of the socialist system. Yuri Polyakov, writer and chief editor of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, says that the time has probably come to observe a temporary moratorium on the effects of totalitarianism. ‘Believe me, I am not idealising the Soviet time, but I am against the “gulagisation” of this complex, bloody, heroic epoch—and this way of inculcating in the nation the complex of being deficient’ (Polyakov 2005: 11). He wonders why in:

... the many addresses of the Russian state to the people ... in the last few years, there is nothing about the country’s culture. Not a word! There is mention of the struggle against poverty, but about the struggle with spiritual impoverishment—nothing. ... I will remind you: under Soviet rule in ... Party reports there always was—true, towards the end—a section ... on the cultural front, which meant about the spiritual life of society, it goes without saying in the forms appropriate to those times... As a result one gets the impression that in today’s Russia culture is separated from the State (ibid.: 5).

He also raises the question of why certain thick journals get funds from Soros and other agencies while others do not. He replies, ‘Yes, we do not have a Party-crazy in culture now, but a grantocracy is blooming’ (ibid.: 18).

Pavel Basinsky, another well-known critic, wonders about the publication *Metropol*. This was a publication in 1979 that triggered off as much political debate as the writers Daniel-Sinyavsky trial in the 1960s and Akhsonov, who had been involved in its publication was forced to emigrate. The writers who had been associated with it too, such as Fazil Iskander, Voinovich and others were also either not published or left Russia. Looking at the publication now, Basinsky says, ‘It would have better if there hadn’t been such a text ... *Metropol*’ is of interest only as a myth or as a historical reference work’ (Quoted in Latynina and Dewhirst 1998: 65).

The realist tradition of Russian literature has also induced a healthy scepticism towards styles that claim to break with realism, or with the past.

The themes of the small man and woman (*malenkii chelovek*), the underground man (*podpolny chelovek*) and the superfluous man (*lishny chelovek*), that found expression in the works of writers such as Gogol, Dostoevsky, Goncharov and Chekhov among others in the nineteenth century, not only continued to be important themes in the Soviet period, but also in the post Soviet reality in the works of writers like Makanin, Petrushevskaya, Varlamov, Aitmatov and others. One hopes that Russia continues to provide alternative models in the cultural sphere as it has in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly today, against the homogenizing effects of globalization.

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